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Why the flip-flop on vaccinating university students?

Priority groups must be vaccinated quickly and efficiently

On September 14, after a meeting between relevant education and health officials, students of all public and private universities were given a two-week deadline to register for Covid-19 vaccination, so that in-person classes could be resumed. At the time, we expressed our concern about how the time given was far too little, especially since only 40 percent of the country's university students had been registered by then. Exactly two weeks later, our worries have been confirmed. According to a report in this daily, more than half of tertiary-level students have failed to meet the deadline, which means that less than 10 percent of university students registered themselves for the vaccination during the specified period.

Although the University Grants Commission (UGC) chairman is now arguing that resuming in-person classes will not be a challenge, considering the downward trend of Covid-19 infection rate in recent days, we cannot help but wonder at this consistent—and by now inexcusable—tendency of the authorities announcing ambitious plans, failing to follow them through, and eventually discarding them, instead of trying to adapt and enforce them. In a similar trend, earlier in August, the authorities had also announced that all students would be vaccinated by the end of September, before backing away from that decision as well.

There are still more than 2.43 million students who have not registered for the vaccine, most of them from colleges under the National University. What will happen to them now? Will the authorities stick to their previous stance of only resuming in-person classes once all students have completed their vaccine registration? In that case, will we allow vaccine inequality to take hold of our education system, where only vaccinated students will be allowed to stay in dormitories and attend classes? Or, if classes resume anyway, will the universities with unvaccinated students be able to maintain enough social distance, and follow the health safety guidelines during classes? What will be the new deadline for registration then? Will it face the same fate?

Despite the declining Covid-19 infection rates, we cannot ignore the fact that, according to DGHS data, only 10 percent of the total population of Bangladesh have received both doses of Covid-19 vaccine. Given that the Delta variant is more contagious than the other variants—and can spread even via vaccinated people—now is not the time to let our guards down. The government must ensure that priority groups are vaccinated quickly and in an orderly manner, avoiding a repeat of the chaos that we witnessed during the special vaccination drives in August and earlier this month.

Repressive law cannot suppress the truth for long

The Digital Security Act needs to be scrapped

Every so often, we are bombarded with reports by rights watchdogs about the victims of the much-reviled Digital Security Act (DSA), a law that has been hanging like the Sword of Damocles over people's heads, particularly the media, since September 2018. Tomes have been written about the extremely harmful impacts of the act on the very fibre of the nation and the character of our society. Unfortunately, it has been used indiscriminately to curb free speech. That, given a situation where we have a command democracy and indeed a command politics—and a virtually fettered media—makes this state of affairs even more regressive.

To put the issue into perspective, we reproduce the statistics of a human rights watchdog as reported in this newspaper yesterday. According to Article 19, at least 172 cases were filed under the DSA between January and August this year. In these cases, 308 people from a variety of professions have been charged. Of them, unsurprisingly, 41 are journalists. As many as 114 of the accused were arrested immediately, many of whom are still awaiting bail. The figure is nearly as many as that of the arrested and charged in the previous 12 months, indicating a frightening increase in the use of the law.

To recount such statistics when the world is celebrating the International Day for Universal Access to Information lends a degree of poignancy to the matter. The nation has been crying foul since the very day the law was enacted. A law that creates negative consequences and becomes more oppressive than the situation it purports to address is a bad law. Democracy, in whatever form it exists, is not worth the name unless there is an unfettered and vibrant media, as well as the freedom for every citizen to vent their feelings and emotions at the authorities. But our experience in the last three years has been very painful. The Digital Security Act, 2018 has been so badly misused that it compels one to think if it is being used as a shield to prevent exposure of the iniquities, aberrations, and misdeeds of those in power.

One cannot contest the intention of the government to make legal arrangements that provide security in cyberspace. We all want that too. But in the current form, the DSA fits the definition of a bad law. And there is only one place fit for a bad law—the dustbin. That is where the DSA should be consigned to.

When development is force-fed

The misadventures of Gazipur City Corporation authorities are causing much suffering

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

A city corporation taking measures to widen roads and footpaths and improve the drainage system should ideally be good news for the locals. However, for many residents of

Gazipur City Corporation (GCC), this has become a headache, the reason being the corporation's reckless grabbing of private properties to carry out these tasks.

A report published by *The Daily Star* on September 26 elaborates the sufferings of the property owners whose lands are being encroached by the GCC authorities. To quote from the report,



Blatantly disregarding law and court order, an excavator owned by the Gazipur City Corporation demolishes homes to make space for the city corporation's development projects. The photo was taken over a month ago.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

"Aggrieved landowners allege that the city corporation employees earlier this year started either demolishing the structures or forcing the owners to knock down parts of their residential buildings and factories, shops, and boundary walls, without acquiring the lands in the first place."

And more often than not, the victims—property owners—did not receive any compensation from the city authorities. On the contrary, they had to hire cleaners to remove the rubble of the demolished structures. In the words of GCC Mayor

Mohammad Jahangir Alam himself, around 30,000 structures have been affected due to the city corporation's drive.

Many business institutions had to bear the brunt of the GCC's land-grabbing spree as well, as the latter demolished their fences and encroached their lands. One such company is Quasem Lamps Limited, whose boundary the GCC officials had knocked off, despite a High Court directive on February 1 this year to maintain the status quo over the possession of a land owned by the company for six months. This move effectively exposed the GCC authorities to the risk of contempt of court.

Consequently, on September 16, the High Court asked Mayor Jahangir Alam, along with two others, to explain within four weeks why contempt of court proceedings should not be initiated

repercussions. However, more than 100 victims have filed writ petitions with the High Court against the GCC's actions. While the GCC has paid out meagre amounts to 95 of the complainants—the court ordered for the matter to be disposed of immediately—the majority of victims are yet to get any payment from the authorities. Even those who were paid had to use their political clout to get the money.

However, a city corporation cannot just grab private property. According to the rules that exist in Bangladesh, development work in metropolitan cities cannot be undertaken without properly acquiring land. Unfortunately, land acquisition rules were completely disregarded by the GCC and its mayor, who, when pressed to explain their actions, remarked rather curtly, "If you follow the government laws, you will not

of the GCC's land encroachment misadventures, the government received no formal complaint. But since he had come to know of such allegations, why did the relevant authorities not take a closer look at the issue? Why has the misery of Gazipur residents been allowed to go unaddressed?

While it is all well and good to expand roads and improve walkways and drainage systems, it cannot be done at the cost of causing the common people suffering.

Apparently, when the two projects in question were approved, provisions for compensation and land acquisition were not taken into account. As a result, now there is no compensation for the victims. One might be pardoned for asking: In a project that entails acquisition of additional land—often private property—why were these possibilities not explored, and monetary and logistical provisions not kept? Who reviewed these projects, and who approved them?

The report by *The Daily Star* further quoted SM Tariqul Islam, deputy commissioner of Gazipur, who admitted that some local residents had discussed the matter with him. But no one filed a written complaint, and as a result, he claimed, he could not take any action. At this point, one might ask: Why are the residents of Gazipur so fearful that they refrain from taking formal steps against the land grabbers? What do they fear—and whom, for that matter?

In the case of Gazipur, while public suffering is a matter of concern, what is even more alarming is the sheer lack of responsibility of the city corporation officials. Shortage of fund or not, a city corporation cannot just knock down private property—or worse, force people to demolish their own homes and structures. The city corporation, whatever their reason may be, cannot flout the laws of the land and court directives, and be reckless about it. A city corporation is an important institution that should look after the welfare of the local residents, not cause them further sufferings.

By going against the rules and the court directives, the GCC has set a very disturbing precedent—one that sends a dangerous message to other city corporations and state institutions. The higher authorities should look into this matter with the urgency it deserves, and take remedial measures starting with compensating the victims.

This is not how community welfare projects are implemented. Such belligerent and thoughtless actions defeat the very purpose of such projects. These never yield positive results, rather only exacerbate the sufferings of the common people and spread fear and discontent among them. These misadventures must end, and the GCC should be held accountable for its illegal actions.

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A ray of hope for people and marine wildlife

Bangladesh extends legal protection to threatened sharks and rays

ELISABETH FAHRNI MANSUR, SHAMSUNNAHAR SHANTA and GM MASUM BILLAH

BANGLADESH recently took a major step towards strengthening the protection of threatened sharks and rays by updating the list of species and species groups under the country's Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012. As per the amendment, all sawfish, guitarfish, wedgefish, cownose, eagle and devil rays, thresher and mako sharks, hammerhead sharks, and another 23 shark and ray species are now strictly protected, while the landing and trading of butterfly rays and 29 other shark and ray species is permissible only if not detrimental to the wild populations.

This amendment has significantly improved legislation for sharks and rays that are at risk of extinction from overfishing and global trade demand, and is a milestone for marine conservation in Bangladesh. The upgrade reflects growing knowledge about these diverse soft-boned fish in our waters, as well as concern for their survival gained through collaborative research. The amended list also reflects commendable motivation among government officials to put international conservation and trade commitments for sharks and rays into action, which is critical to making these new regulations work.

Systematic research on sharks and rays, aimed to inform conservation management and sustainable harvesting, is relatively new in Bangladesh. Much remains to be done in order to reduce mortalities and to prevent protected species from entering markets, and to ensure that those not currently threatened do not become so.

Working for nearly two decades on advancing the protection of marine wildlife in Bangladesh has taught us that we need innovative solutions grounded in robust science, and developed jointly with the communities dependent on marine resources.



Fishermen in Bangladesh are being trained to record and safely release threatened sharks and rays.

PHOTO: WCS BANGLADESH

Like dolphins or whales, most sharks and rays grow and reproduce slowly. This makes them particularly vulnerable to overfishing. Coastal fishermen in Bangladesh generally release dolphins entangled in their nets—not only because the law requires it, but also because many of these fishermen regard marine mammals as brethren at sea.

But sharks and rays are highly valued for their fins, gill plates and skins, which can be exported to international markets and meet growing domestic demand for their meat. So, it is financially worthwhile for fishermen to retain all sharks and rays they catch. Unlike with marine mammals, we cannot count on positive cultural perceptions to reduce their mortalities.

We can, however, build on precedence. Marine turtles used to be retained for their meat. A commendable commitment, good communication, and strong enforcement

of their legal protection by the Bangladesh government resulted in fishermen fearing punishment and releasing marine turtles.

Bangladesh has transitioned into a lower middle-income country. Our country is blessed with large productive water bodies that provide vital animal protein and export revenue. But conservation management interventions are urgently required to avert economically valued fish stocks from plummeting, and globally threatened marine wildlife from going extinct.

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and the Ministry of Fisheries, there has been a noticeable shift from maximising extraction to sustaining the productivity of our natural resources. National economic growth and concerted efforts for the sustainable growth of our blue economy compel us to take a strong stand against the

consumption of threatened marine wildlife. Sharks and rays play an important role in maintaining the ecological balance in our waters. We can no longer justify eating threatened sharks or rays, for the sake of our health and that of our oceans.

While some may argue that this amendment is just words on paper, we firmly believe that it is a crucial step to improve the survival chances of globally threatened sharks and rays in our waters. This amended list brings clarity about which species we can or cannot catch or trade. It is easy to communicate. In the three-plus years that it took to prepare the amendment and get it endorsed by national and international experts, government departments and ministries, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Bangladesh has developed communication tools and training programmes to support its implementation.

The shark and ray amendment also shows our government's strong commitment to ensure that the exploitation of non-threatened shark and ray species and the trade in their body parts do not negatively impact their populations. It aligns Bangladesh's legislation with regional agreements, international conventions, and our constitution that mandates the protection of biodiversity. The Forest Department, mandated with the protection of threatened wildlife and critical habitats, is developing a national conservation strategy, with a plan of action for the conservation management of sharks and rays, in collaboration with the Department of Fisheries and with technical support from the WCS. These commendable initiatives by the government, building on the amended listing, are beacons of hope for imperilled sharks and rays in Bangladesh.

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