

Death is inevitable, but we must not get used to it

With indifference comes carelessness, which we can't afford during a pandemic

When will the communal attacks stop?

The authorities must do everything possible to prevent such attacks

We are deeply concerned by the reports of attacks on different puja mandaps, temples, and business establishments since the alleged desecration of Islamic scriptures in Cumilla on October 13. Since that incident, at least five people have reportedly been killed, and many others injured, in violent clashes that have taken place in a number of places across the country, including Chandpur's Hajiganj upazila. This prompted the prime minister to issue a stern warning on Thursday against those who carried out the attacks, as well as their instigators. They will be traced and "hunted down," she said, and appropriate punishment will be meted out to stop the recurrence of such barbaric acts.

We commend the prime minister for her unequivocal stance on this issue. There have been a number of arrests made as part of the drive to nab the perpetrators. While the heavy deployment of armed police and other security measures have helped to bring the situation under control to some extent, it is the wider impact of such incidents—and their repeated occurrence—that worries us. The Cumilla incident was clearly meant to stoke communal tensions. And in that it was successful—however temporarily. But its effect—especially the feeling of trauma experienced by religious minorities, and the chasm among the adherents of different faith groups that threatens to widen with every such incident—is unlikely to fizzle out any time soon.

While all attention is now naturally on the aftermath of the Cumilla incident, it's important that we focus on the forest rather than the trees to understand why such incidents keep happening in Bangladesh. Our memory of the Ramu incident nine years ago is still fresh. There have been many such communal attacks before and since. The manner in which these tragedies unfolded, mostly under the pretext of "religious sentiments" being hurt, indicates a pattern that should worry the authorities. And in almost all cases, unfortunately, the process of the delivery of justice has been painstakingly slow. We do hope the Cumilla incident will be the starting point of an exception, as nothing sends a clearer message than justice—both for the victims living in fear and the perpetrators. While Bangladesh should work on its poor records in this regard, what would equally benefit us is to understand the dynamics of communal politics—the powerful forces that keep fanning communal tensions behind the scenes.

Given how big the problem is, it will take a whole-of-government approach to address it, meaning the executive, judicial, and legislative branches will all have to participate equally in creating an environment in which communal actors find it hard to pursue their goal or escape unpunished. The society also needs to contribute to creating this environment, through re-committing to their common ground of humanity and upholding the idea of a just, fair, and diversity-tolerant society, adopting peaceful methods to settle any differences they may have. We need to stop communal attacks before they happen—and stop them for good.

Wildlife culling must stop

The government must take urgent action to protect forest animals

It is disturbing to learn of the reported killing of around 50 monkeys at Moheshkhali forest in Cox's Bazar last week, after they ate poisoned bananas placed as a trap by a local farmer. According to a report by this newspaper, officials from the Forest Department visited the site the morning after, and discovered the bodies of three monkeys. However, a local environmentalist claimed that they had counted close to 50 dead rhesus monkeys, most of whom had been buried by the time the officials got there. One of the monkeys was seen hanging from a tree, possibly as a warning to marauding simian gangs.

The question naturally arises: Why would anyone consider committing such a barbaric act? Unfortunately, this is neither an isolated incident, nor are monkeys the only animals to fall prey to wildlife culling in Bangladesh. In a country with fast-shrinking forest areas, animals are often killed for the benefit of human settlements and agricultural land near wildlife habitats, or for their market value. Sometimes they are killed in accidents as they cross roads slicing through forest areas. In fact, going by media reports, there is no shortage of reasons (or excuses) behind animals being killed. As a result, many species are now under significant risk of eradication.

For instance, according to the Forest Department, 90 elephants have been killed between 1995 and 2016 in and around the forest areas of Cox's Bazar and southern Chattogram. Monkeys, fishing cats, and badgers are also among the frequent victims of what is essentially a one-sided human-wildlife conflict. The response to these incidents remains equally troubling. Even though the Wildlife Conservation Act, 2012 dictates in clear terms the punishment for anyone who commits crimes against wildlife, the existing rate of trial and conviction of perpetrators leaves a lot to be desired.

The bigger problem, we think, is how we as a society approach the concept of human-wildlife coexistence. Wild animals are often killed by locals when they enter their farming land. Many claim that these killings happen because they can be a "nuisance" for farmers. The legitimacy of one's ownership of a piece of forest land is another matter, but there is no denying that wild animals have an equal stake in their habitats and way of life. Should we allow culling one species for the sake of another?

The ethical question of it aside, it is up to the Forest Department and other authorities concerned to find a balance for our own sake, which means raising awareness, strengthening monitoring, bringing perpetrators and encroachers of forestland to justice, and providing training to locals to adopt more peaceful methods to repel wildlife incursions. We urge the government to be more proactive in protecting our wildlife.

Life is but a dash between dates, of birth and of death.



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I wrote this short poem a long time ago, inspired by a cemetery headstone. I was ruminating over the plight of a man who had transformed into a corpse, then reduced to a sign marked by dates. In the eternal existence of mankind, an individual occupies a limited space. No matter how "dashing" a life may appear, it is a dash between the beginning and the end. We can think of the dash as an open-ended one, where chemical compounds mix miraculously, giving life a certain form, space, and pace, before being morphed into another, or we can think of it as a spiritual transition from one non-material form to another, passing through a physical space for a short span of time. The ups and downs of life are like the waves of an echocardiogram: it is about the adrenaline rushes, hormonal impulses, instinctive actions, and reactions that create the wave patterns, before reaching the flatline.

In Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*, war veteran Ryan takes his family to visit the grave of one Captain Miller, who had saved his life during World War II. "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man," Ryan asked of his wife. He wanted his saviour to know that the sacrifices made by his peers had not been in vain. "Earn it," were the dying words of Captain Miller, whose unit was assigned to save Private Ryan as all four of his brothers had already been killed in the war. In such stories, the dash—life—gets linked with other dashes. The lines form a narrative where the group comes together to compose a story, and present life as beautiful (or ugly, for that matter). Many died so that one could live.

With more than 4.8 million people dead worldwide because of a virus, how do

we "earn" the life that we have been given? How do we express our gratitude for being alive? Every day, the TV scrolls remind us of the passing away of the people who once made our lives interesting: politicians, educators, doctors, engineers, civil servants. For the unnamed rest, there is a daily tally. In any other situation, each death of the renowned figures would have occupied more TV time and media attention. Even the deaths of celebrities don't move us anymore. Have we stopped caring? If so, when did we stop caring? Why?

The rise in death figures runs in tandem with our indifference. Experts call this phenomenon "psychic numbness": the more people die, the less we care. It seems that the human brain is incapable of processing a large number of deaths.



We must not let our guard down, even when the situation seems most bleak, so that we can stop scenes like this from occurring altogether. FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at one, I will." While a single death can be construed as tragic, multiple occurrences of death may not produce the same emotions. Each death sends a shockwave of bereavement in an inner circle. At times, it can create ripples to reach many shores. Remember the three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who was found lying face down on a sandy beach in Turkey? The photo woke up the world to the Syrian refugee crisis. Yet, the

recurrent news of hundreds dying as boats capsized off the European shores fails to evoke similar empathy. Kurdi is a faded memory. The Rohingyas are the nightmares that we want to forget.

Our indifference is going to have a lasting impact in a post-Covid-19 scenario. It can damage the way we process not only human emotions, but human values. According to a BBC report, there is already evidence that people are suffering from Covid-19 news fatigue and reading less and less about the pandemic. The lack of care also shows through the reluctance to wear masks, sanitise hands, or maintain social distance. One explanation could be because humans are selfish creatures. We want to help others to feel good, but with the rise in numbers, when the situation seems

overwhelmingly out of our control, our efforts to help seem as trivial as a drop in the ocean. It gives us an excuse to not care, to not help anyone anymore. The indifference is also caused by anxieties. However, while the overwhelming presence of news of death and disease becomes a source of anxieties for some, this also becomes an opportunity to harvest the anxieties for profit by many others. We have already seen how fear-mongering techniques have been used to raise the

prices of essentials, impose unnecessary medical treatments, or manipulate the online trade. The vicious circle in which news and anxiety rotate can make us further complacent. Seldom do we find any urgency to break away from this chain and to do something to change it.

There are, of course, reasons to be worried, but indifference is not an option. The agencies who are circulating the information in concrete facts and figures have an additional role to play in humanising the provided information. Both positive and negative messages are needed. If we don't show the physical, mental, social, and financial implications of a Covid-19 patient, many would take the pandemic lightly as the recovery number can cause comfort. Then again, if we overburden the mass with tragic stories, the urge to help the situation might dwindle. It is like when your school fraternity reaches out for help for one member, you feel generous, but once such requests become frequent, you are less likely to commit.

The same thing goes for the coronavirus news fatigue. Humanise it. Think of individual stories of survival. The people who made it through. The frontline supporters. Positive news needs to be presented at a processable proportion. Then again, there also needs to be constant awareness of the downside of complacency.

At a time when we are all dying, the challenge for us is to stay alive, stay human. My poem written over a headstone highlights life as a dash. But now that I have an opportunity to look back at my own poem, I think I also need to highlight all the dots, all the invisible moments that fret within the visible dash. Indeed, in the grand scheme of things, we deal with small cuts. But those pains and miseries make life worth living. It is time for us to feel good for ourselves so that we can remain good for others. Our lines must merge with the lines of others, so that we can compose a human story together.

Shamsad Mortuza is acting vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English at Dhaka University (on leave).

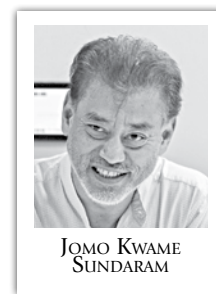
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Better late than never, but act now



JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

plan to quickly vaccinate many more people to expedite the end of the pandemic.

New WHO plan

Perhaps frustrated after being ignored by rich country governments and major vaccine producers, the new WHO plan is relatively modest, but hopefully more realisable. Supported by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the Vaccination Strategy seeks to reduce vaccine apartheid by inoculating 40 percent in all countries before the year's end, and 70 percent by mid-2022.

WHO had urged governments to vaccinate at least 10 percent of their populations by September 2021. With almost 6.5 billion inoculations by then, almost a third of the world's people were fully vaccinated. As noted by WHO Director General (DG) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "High and upper-middle income countries have used 75 percent of all vaccines produced so far."

Worldwide vaccination will also stem emerging new variants. But less than 0.5 percent of the vaccine doses have gone to low-income countries, with less than five percent in Africa fully vaccinated. Thus, more than 55—mainly African—countries have been largely left out in this "two-track" vaccination effort.

Globally, about 1.5 billion vaccine doses are being produced monthly. The WHO strategy deems this enough to achieve its targets, "provided they are distributed equitably." Although more financing is still needed, it implies enough to procure most vaccines needed for poorer countries via COVAX and the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT).

Despite the past, the WHO chief believes that the strategy can succeed if countries and companies supplying vaccines prioritise delivery and donations to COVAX and AVAT. He also urges sharing know-how and non-exclusive licences to spread increased manufacturing capacity.

Intellectual property impediment

The intellectual property rights (IPRs) underlie the world pandemic divide today. Undoubtedly, those who innovate should be rewarded for their achievement. But US law does not prevent price gouging by IP owners. Worse, there are no strong incentives for commercial vaccine suppliers to eradicate the disease.

Unsurprisingly, Pfizer has already revised its business strategy for its

main revenue stream to be from selling "boosters" and other Covid-19 needs. WHO and other initiatives to encourage voluntary technology and knowledge-sharing have gone nowhere as major companies refuse to share knowledge.

Nevertheless, genome sequencing in China in early January 2020 and the almost free use of crucial techniques to produce mRNA vaccines—such as NIH-owned patents and CRISPR technology—have expedited such vaccine development. Earlier claims that developing countries are not capable of producing the new mRNA vaccines are no longer credible. South Africa and Brazil have already made them under licence. Independent assessments suggest many more—including others in Africa—can do so.

The October 2020 TRIPS waiver request by South Africa and India goes beyond

CL require country by country, patent by patent negotiations and licensing.

As affordable Covid-19 supplies are still desperately needed, the scale and scope of the current challenge still need the waiver. But no developing country—or for that matter, a patent holder—has the means or time to negotiate to meet all the needed VIs urgently.

Achieving global vaccine equity

For Boston University's Global Development Policy Center, adequately addressing vaccine equity requires raising output, deemed necessary for a more equitable response. The university proposal calls for a simultaneous three-pronged approach to quickly scale up vaccine supplies via: a) The TRIPS waiver to surmount IP constraints to more production; b) Requiring vaccine

on booster shots should continue until equitable vaccine access has been achieved.

Socioeconomic inequalities among and within countries have also frustrated pandemic containment. Unsurprisingly, worldwide vaccine inequalities have exacerbated adverse effects. Sadly, the international community has the means, but not the political will to do what's needed.

US missing leadership chance

Half a year ago, President Biden had announced that the US would support a vaccine patent waiver. His vaccine summit before the UN General Assembly was promising, but again did not deliver much. He can still make a world of difference, uniting the world to defeat the pandemic. Without White House



Vaccine-producing nations need to suspend or modify intellectual property protections for Covid-19 jabs to accelerate vaccine production, inoculate more people quickly, and stay ahead of further virus mutations.

the 2001 World Trade Organization (WTO) approval of public health flexibilities. This allows production using patent compulsory licensing (CL) in extenuating situations during public health emergencies. But the waiver has been blocked, mainly by rich European governments.

The waiver was not mainly about vaccines. When the request was first made, the only vaccine available was Russian. The waiver request for temporary IPR suspension—only for the pandemic's duration—is for Covid-19 tests, treatments, equipment, vaccines, and other needs, subject to strict conditions.

In the face of a global crisis demanding urgent action, the European Commission's position—even a year later—is that TRIPS voluntary licensing (VL) is enough. It insists that the waiver—and even CL—are not needed even though both VL and

developers to share relevant technology and know-how; and c) Adequately financing efforts to produce and distribute much more.

The TRIPS waiver would also eliminate all IP barriers to meeting other Covid-related needs. By contrast, CL would still require many separate, often lengthy negotiations and licensing for every patent involved in making needed items. Massively increasing donations—especially from vaccine-hoarding and producing countries—can get many more doses to the under-vaccinated. The big, rich G7 countries are still very far from meeting their own modest billion-dose donation target.

COVAX, ostensibly for more equitable access to vaccines, has achieved about 10 percent of its promise, far less than the two billion doses pledged by the year's end. The proposed WHO moratorium

leadership, urgently needed technology-sharing will not occur. As Moderna received federal government funding, the US president is legally empowered to ramp up its output and supplies—e.g. on a cost-plus basis. He could also get Moderna to enable others to quickly make vaccines needed.

Washington can thus ensure that Moderna does what's needed. If Biden wants to lead the world, he still has a small window of opportunity to lead and win the war against Covid-19. Not doing so will mean millions more avoidable deaths. Only together can we rise to the greatest challenge of our times.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, is a former assistant secretary-general for economic development at the UN. He received the 2007 Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought. Copyright: Inter Press Service