

Fresh concerns as Covid-19 cases rise

Vaccination is key to protecting people against the new variant

THE rapid rise in Covid-19 infections in recent days has brought fresh concerns for the public health authorities. According to data by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), a total of 557 cases were reported in the 24 hours to 8am on January 2, 2022, while the number was 370 in the preceding 24 hours. The DGHS data also shows that daily infections have increased by 60 percent this week, compared to last week. Given the fact that countries around the world have been struggling with fresh surges in cases since the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it is likely that we will also see a significant increase in cases in the coming days. A number of Omicron infections have already been reported here. India has also reported a rapid increase in Covid cases in recent weeks, which is believed to be propelled by Omicron. This means we need to take immediate measures to prevent any massive, community spread of the new variant.

One of the most effective ways to fight the virus for us would be to expedite our vaccination drives, which will surely reduce hospitalisations and deaths. The fact that more than half of our population have yet to receive the first dose of Covid vaccine is something that should worry us. While it is good to know that the government plans to vaccinate all eligible citizens with a double-dose vaccine by June and a booster dose by the end of this year, it will need a massive operation aided by proper planning and execution on part of the authorities.

The DGHS data also shows that around 82 percent of the 91 people who died of coronavirus infections in December were not vaccinated—thus, the need for strengthening the vaccination drives. Since research suggests that booster doses are effective against the Omicron variant—because an additional dose increases the level of antibodies to fight the virus—the government’s booster campaign should also gain momentum this time around, bringing more vulnerable people under its purview.

Another worrying finding about Omicron is that it is infecting more women than men globally. Thus, while continuing with its vaccination drive, the government must ensure that more women—both urban and rural—register for the vaccines. It also needs to ascertain whether women are finding the registration process more complicated or if they are discouraged to be vaccinated in any way, and try to address the issue.

In other words, we need to ensure wide, inclusive vaccination coverage to fight this new variant as well as any future surges.

Take stronger actions to make roads safe

The chronic failure of responsible state bodies can’t be ignored anymore

ALTHOUGH a number of bodies and organisations exist for the sole purpose of curbing road accidents in Bangladesh, the reality is that we are still losing precious lives on our roads on a daily basis. On January 2, 2022, nine people, including three minors, were the latest to join this endless procession after fatal crashes in different districts. This comes after a year that, up to the month of August, saw as many as 3,502 people die and 3,479 get severely injured in road accidents. By any measure, this is downright unacceptable.

A great deal has been deliberated in seminars over the decades, and many causes of accidents have been identified, but at the end of the day, very little has been done to put a brake on the killer vehicles. In an appraisal report prepared by the World Bank for financing a road safety project in Bangladesh, the following observations were made, “Different bodies exist in Bangladesh to ensure road safety, but they are not empowered and lack effective coordination to get (the) expected outcomes. These organisations are also not held accountable. Besides, the fund allocated for road safety action plans is insufficient, not prioritised, and has never been institutionalised.” The result is a disaster that’s been decades in the making, with the rise in the road crash fatality rate between 1990 and 2017 purported to be three times higher than that across the rest of South Asia.

The World Bank in its report further observed that, though a road safety management structure exists in Bangladesh, it is not sufficiently empowered or is hardly held accountable for safety outcomes. It may be recalled that the National Road Safety Council (NRSC), established in 1995, is responsible for preparing safety strategies aimed at reducing accidents. But how much this council could do remains a big question. There are reports that the functioning of numerous committees has been hampered because of poor internal communication, lack of coordination and integration, and a scarcity of resources. Undue interventions, lack of professional persons in committees, and setting impractical goals are some of the obstacles that make the task of experts difficult.

This must stop. The authorities must step up their game. If we are to make any headway in preventing road accidents ever, we must sufficiently empower and hold to account these bodies and committees, and ensure that they work collaboratively. “Road safety is no accident,” as experts say, meaning it cannot happen on its own; it needs careful planning, proper logistics and implementation by those responsible.

Journalists should be worried about DSA exceptionalism



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist and writes from the UK. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

THE extraordinary assurance that no journalist will be arrested immediately under the Digital Security Act (DSA) without a summons seems to be an attractive solution to the concerns and fears created by its random abuse to suppress critical voices in the media. Law Minister Anisul Huq recently gave this assurance to the members of Overseas Correspondents Association of Bangladesh (OCAB), when he said that journalists would be getting an opportunity to seek bail in court. In a significant shift in the government’s position on this controversial law, he also acknowledged that there were incidents of misuse and abuse of the DSA. Though his sublime remarks made an eye-catching headline, the legal and moral questions of such exceptionalism should not be ignored.

It should be noted that this controversial law was passed in a hurry, just before the 2018 elections, brushing aside the concerns of journalists and human rights activists. Those apprehensions of widespread abuse of the DSA have now been proven correct. The international community—especially Western democracies and various organisations working on democracy, human rights and the rule of law—have also expressed their concerns about the DSA publicly and in private conversations. One may wonder whether the statement made to the representatives of foreign media was an attempt to allay some of the concerns of friends abroad.

Sadly, his assurances are even more troubling, because none of his words can be found in the law. Therefore, in order to afford this extraordinary exemption to a journalist, the officials and employees of the republic have to sidestep the letter and spirit of the law. This they are not expected to do; rather they should dutifully resist. Such verbal assurances, therefore, have no legal value whatsoever. Besides, who can forget the assurances

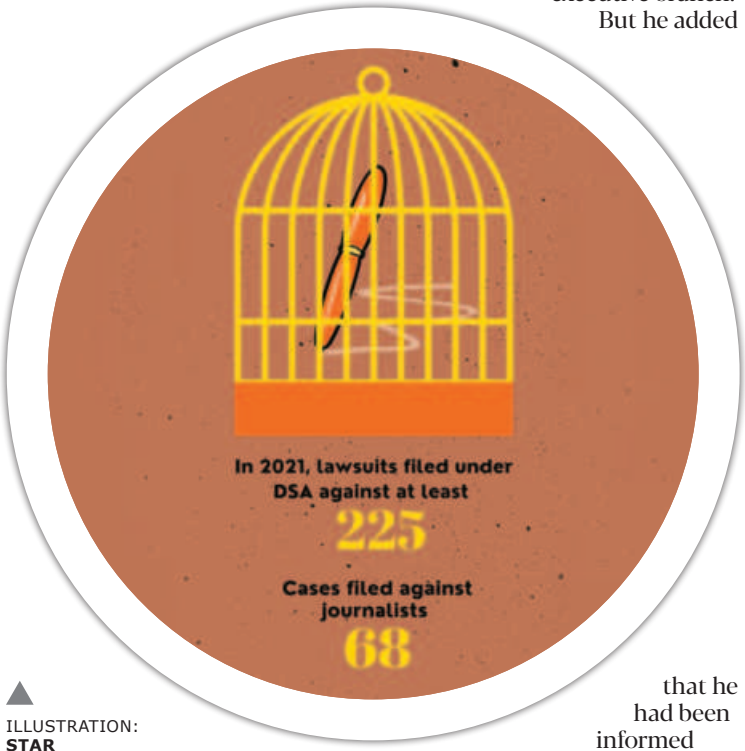


ILLUSTRATION: STAR

Whatever has been written in the law, the ministers can make exceptions if they wish to.

given by three ministers to the Editors’ Council regarding this law that were forgotten for political convenience?

This issue became even clearer when the law minister responded to a question about why there wasn’t any office order issued in this regard. He responded, “We cannot give such instructions to the judiciary from the executive branch.” But he added

that he had been informed that internally every police station had been advised accordingly. Referring to his discussions with Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, the law minister said, “We have both decided that if a case is filed against a journalist under the Digital Security Act, the court will not immediately proceed with the case. We have decided that the case will be referred to a special cell formed under a different law immediately. If it is decided upon the investigation of that cell that there are ingredients of the crime that has been complained about under the Digital Security Act, only then the case will be accepted.”

This part of his remarks suggests that the law is subject to the will of the ministers. Whatever has been written in the law, the ministers can make exceptions if they wish to. Doesn’t it raise

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Desmond Tutu’s True Self



Mabel van Oranje, a former CEO of The Elders, is co-founder of Girls Not Brides. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2022 www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

MABEL VAN ORANJE

WITH the passing of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the world has lost an unstoppable force for good who taught compassion and forgiveness, and pursued his mission with a will of iron. “Arch” will be rightly remembered as the international voice of the anti-apartheid movement, and for his place beside Nelson Mandela in the decades-long fight for racial equality and justice in South Africa. But he touched people’s lives in so many other ways.

In particular, I want to acknowledge his contribution to the global efforts to end child marriage. His involvement began with another of his great qualities: the humility to admit what he did not know. I remember the moment when he learned that child marriage rates in Sub-Saharan Africa were as high or higher than in South Asia or the Middle East. “I didn’t think this was an African thing,” he said to me frankly.

But once he knew, he became fully committed to the cause. Already almost 80 years old, he willingly travelled to remote villages in Ethiopia, India, and Zambia to meet and listen to adolescent girls who had been married or were under pressure to marry. He met their fathers, faith leaders, village elders, and politicians to learn why this was happening, and tried to convince them that early marriage was not in the girls’ best interests.

He was never afraid to take on the establishment—religious, cultural, or political. He was a brilliant communicator and wily campaigner who could make audiences laugh and cry within minutes. He knew how to press the right emotional buttons and convey difficult messages, often using stories to get his point across. While travelling with him, it was not unusual to see leaders, including presidents and prime ministers, listening like children to one of his stories, then realising that the point of the tale was



Archbishop Desmond Tutu (October 7, 1931–December 26, 2021)

PHOTO: REUTERS

directed squarely at them.

If he bore witness to injustice, he made sure that those in power knew about it. He spoke not only about the suffering of girls forced into marriage, but also about men’s role in ending this harmful practice. He spoke of the changes he had witnessed when men started treating their wives as equals: “They actually told me they liked doing housework and taking care of their

constituting that wave, and by working together, we can achieve great things.

Forgiveness of others, and of ourselves, was one of his most repeated messages. As chair of The Elders, a group of global leaders that he, together with Mandela and Graça Machel, established in 2007, he reminded his distinguished peers of our shared humanity and interconnectedness—ensuring that the

work of the group remained focused on justice and those most in need of help.

As a friend, he was deeply loyal. I will always be grateful for the comfort and counsel he gave me when my husband was severely injured. Arch called me every day in the long months while Friso was unconscious. Sometimes we spoke for hours, and sometimes just for a few minutes. But he made it clear that he was always there for me.

It is impossible to say everything there is to say about this tough, funny, brilliant giant of social justice. I will try to remember him by taking small actions every day to make a difference, and by upholding his belief that goodness will ultimately triumph in this troubled world.