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Take urgent steps to prevent Omicron spread

Vaccination campaign should be ramped up, health guidelines should be strictly enforced

FOLLOWING the detection of 10 new Omicron cases in Bangladesh, the government is considering taking fresh steps to prevent further spread of the new coronavirus variant. We welcome this as a positive sign. The government has to proactively try and prevent Omicron transmission, particularly seeing how rapidly it has spread in other countries.

From what we can gather so far, Omicron, although reportedly less deadly than the Delta variant, is far more easily transmissible. This, in some ways, makes it even more of a threat. We have seen how Delta wreaked havoc across the country last year, when the number of cases peaked around July and August. The number of daily new cases during those months regularly stayed above 10,000, putting immense pressure on our healthcare system. It would, therefore, be much wiser for the government to act now to prevent a similar outburst of new cases.

Among the measures that the government is considering taking are: stepping up its inoculation campaign; lowering the age limit for booster doses; and preventing the gathering of unvaccinated people at public places. Moreover, it is also considering not allowing anyone to enter restaurants and shopping malls, and board buses and trains without vaccine certificates, besides making it mandatory for school children above the age of 12 years to receive at least one dose of the vaccine to attend in-person classes. While we appreciate the government planning these measures, we wonder how realistic they would be, particularly given that, so far, only 31 percent of the targeted population have received both doses of the vaccine. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see the government step up its vaccination campaign, which we hope will continue without many hiccups. At the same time, rather than forcing the population to get vaccinated, we hope the government will educate the people why it is important to get the vaccine.

Additionally, the government needs to renew its awareness campaign to encourage people to follow the health guidelines such as wearing masks, maintaining social distance, and going into early isolation if they suspect they have contracted the coronavirus. Ramping up screening at airports and other border points is also crucial—especially since quite a few of the new cases have been detected among people who have come into the country from abroad.

While these preventive measures are extremely important, the government should also upgrade the country's healthcare facilities on an urgent basis. Making sure that hospitals are well equipped and have centralised oxygen systems installed and working properly are agendas that the government should pursue with equal focus.

Journey into the unknown

Hundreds return with broken dreams

THE arrival of yet another group of Bangladeshis last week as deportees from Greece accentuates the vulnerability of the unemployed youth in the country. Having tried all avenues, many of them get allured by the promises of regular work and good pay in a foreign country given by the agents of human traffickers. In their desperation for financial support from the Bangladesh government, the deportees from Greece staged a sit-in and token hunger strike in front of Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka on January 3. They narrated their story before the media saying some of them had paid the agents Tk 13-14 lakh to go to Greece.

It was quite perturbing to learn that some of them went to the Middle East a couple of years back, but as their employers did not pay them for two months, they decided to go to Greece—some fellow migrant workers had told them that the European countries offered better opportunities. The group of deportees said that local traffickers took about 70 illegal migrants, including 20 Bangladeshis, on a two-week hectic journey to enter Greece from Turkey via an illegal route. They endured immense hardships, often having to walk up to 20 hours a day through the jungle and mountainous roads, and even crossing a river on a plastic boat. The final chapter of their sad saga began when, after about two months, they were caught by the Greek police for illegal entry into the country and working as undocumented workers. About 18 of the Bangladeshis were sent to a detention centre, and after about 15 months, were deported back to Bangladesh.

It may be mentioned here that deportation of illegal migrants happens on a regular basis, but despite wide coverage in the print and electronic media, young men from our country continue to seek illegal migration to the EU and other rich countries in search for a better life. The community members, we feel, have a role to play in collecting information regarding the fate of those who have already set out for the unknown destinations. They should remain informed through the media about migration laws of different countries, and take caution when manpower agents come with unusual offers of good jobs abroad.

The department of social welfare, local government officials, UNO's office and the police should help the young men and women in verifying the job offers and checking the identities of the agents. Moreover, the government should help the returnees with whatever aid is necessary, as well as seek to establish lawful channels for them to work legally in countries like Greece.

When the protector becomes the predator



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
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“MONEY can open every DoE door”—I read out the news heading in this daily only to trip over the last two words. The stuttering tongue-twister made me chuckle. Then again, this is no laughing matter—especially when the money mantra is reportedly used to open the doors of malpractices in the Department of Environment. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) put its money where its mouth is to point out the “irregularities, inefficiencies, and corruption” within the government organisation in charge of protecting our environment. We were told how a Tk 5,000 licence fee needs a minimum of Tk 1,08,000 speed-money to be processed. The report offered other facts and figures for the consumption of avid readers keen on transparency in our civil administration.

I am sure there is going to be an official rebuttal blaming the TIB for this “notoriously fabricated, agenda-ridden, anti-state” report. There will be punches and counterpunches; even the high official who was unavailable for comments earlier will surface with a rejoinder. TIB will launch its “international” defensive missile to negate the “nationalist” diatribe. The conversation will soon die down. We will wonder why it was even considered a news item. Anyone who has sought government services knows or has experienced some level of systemic corruption. Therefore, to cry corruption in the system is like asking, “Are fish really wet when they're underwater?”

Alternatively, you may visit the Yale University site on the Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Out of 180 countries whose data have been analysed to prepare the country index, Bangladesh ranks 179. Only Burundi stands like the snake at 99 on a ludo board between us and the end. The list, based on 32 performance indicators across 11 issue categories, measures the environmental health and ecosystem vitality of a country. In the preamble, the report mentions a connection between the wealth of a country (i.e. GDP per capita) and the investment in outcome-based policy programmes. The mismatch between our recent economic prosperity and environmental health confirms the TIB report in a circumstantial manner. While access to adequate financial resources, in theory, implies the capacity to build the necessary infrastructure to provide clean drinking water and sanitation, reduce air pollution, control hazardous waste, and respond to public health crises for human well-being, corruption in the system remains the chink in the armour as it

demonstrates a lack of good governance in our civil bureaucracy.

We are branded as laggards in quite a few categories. In environmental health, we are placed in the 178th position, just above Nepal and India. The other bottom categories in which we are vying to be in the last position are air quality (179), inhalable particulate matter

sustainability is compromised. The financial benefit of one officer will have a butterfly effect on many, including the ones using the water for irrigation, sanitation, livelihood, and so on.

However, corruption is not the only instance of the violation of environmental laws. Some of the challenges in the implementation of these laws include



ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

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(PM2.5) exposures in the air (178), PM2.5 exceedance (179), heavy metals (177), and lead exposure (177). The irony is, according to the TIB report, a total of 293 DoE officials went abroad 10 times under a project titled “Clean Air and Sustainable Environment.” And one official went on all 10 trips. One wonders how these officers added to the carbon footprints through these “educational” trips.

There are a few areas in which our EPI rankings fare slightly better. They include fisheries (28), marine protected areas (36), species habitat (41), agriculture (52), and forests (98). However, in biodiversity and habitat, we rank 133, and in ecosystem vitality, we rank 153, suggesting that we have yet to attain the baseline rank.

As a developing country, issues of industrialisation and urbanisation are likely to be at odds with sustainability. Commitments to rule of law and even-handed enforcement of regulations are necessary to strike a balance between present growth and future resilience. Despite our SDG target, this is where the government officials are failing us. Say, for instance, if an environmental surveyor is tampering with the report of an effluent treatment plant to downplay the level of toxicity released by a factory, the government's commitment to

“lack of specificity, procedural complexities, lack of accountability, partisan state machinery, and the absence of environmental consciousness among the common people.” The monopoly of the system can be exemplified by the get-out-of-jail card available to the DoE director-general. Section 18 of the Environment Conservation Act is a case in point, where any damage or injury done by his actions is construed as a good faith act, which will protect him from being liable.

The lack of environmental rule of law is also symptomatic of the corrupt system. The TIB report mentions that the DoE officers prefer levying hefty fines to rendering justice in environmental court. The systemic flaws are allowing individuals to open doors for money, but they are also making us vulnerable to climate change and its consequent hazards. The money these corrupt officials are hoarding will be useless against the fury of nature once it starts hitting back. Do you think this tainted money will shield a corrupt official or his family members from the carcinogenic air and water they are responsible for? Only a fool will leave the door open for money to walk in, while allowing the wrath of nature to rush in.

India's polarised politics and media



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PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

ON December 29, 2021, India's Chief Justice NV Ramana sent out a message to the Indian media that could not have been timelier. In fact, it served as a wake-up call.

While delivering his keynote speech at a journalism award ceremony in New Delhi, Ramana, who reminded us that his professional journey began as a journalist, said mixing news with views was a dangerous cocktail, and “nothing can be more lethal to democracy than the deadly combination of confrontational polity and competitive journalism.”

He also raised a few other important points related to journalism as a profession in India. The most important of his messages was his caution to journalists against ideological biases seeping into news stories, and that factual reports must keep aside interpretations and opinions. “Allowing yourself to be co-opted by an ideology or the state is a recipe for disaster,” the chief justice said, adding that truthful reportage was essential for a robust democracy. What he appears to be driving at is the pitfalls of highly-opinionated news dissemination, a trend that has been in India for decades but really caught on in the last decade or so. Separation of news from views,

therefore, acquires more urgency today than ever before.

In this context, he pointed to a rising tendency in Indian media—that of “cherry-picking of facts” to give news stories a “certain colour.” In fact, cherry-picking or selective presentation of facts has become a favourite tool of a section of the media trying to curry favour with the government. A classic example of this comes either in the form of a total blackout of a news story going against a ruling party, or its relegation to a less noticeable space of newspapers. It has been argued by some that it is the media's prerogative to decide which facts to include and which to leave out while presenting a story. But fair journalism cannot take shelter behind such specious arguments. For a section of the Indian media, objectivity, it seems, is no longer an option—but subjectivity is.

Another key issue raised by the Chief Justice Ramana relates to TV discussions and interpretations of the judiciary's rulings, especially on social media, amounting to slandering the judiciary. The press must show some belief in the judiciary, and the media has the duty to defend and protect the judiciary from motivated attacks by evil forces, he said. One cannot agree more.

Is unbiased journalism a myth? Is some bias, however subtle and nuanced, inescapable—especially when the media sees itself as an important agent of reforming the ills of society and holding a mirror to different pillars of a democracy? We want myriad flowers to bloom in a democracy. But do we also want the media to let those flowers bloom by giving space to views of all shades and hues, barring the

rabid elements?

Justice Ramana's speech comes at a time when the Indian society is highly polarised along political lines. Unfortunately, a segment of the media has been sucked into taking sides, mainly due to reasons of economic survival. That is why one finds many newspapers becoming virtual outposts of ruling parties, irrespective of ideology both in states and at the centre.

A newspaper has every right to follow its own political line and comment on the activities of all stakeholders in a democracy, including the judiciary, but it should introspect if in the process it is resorting to downright slander. The views of the media should be reflected in its editorials and commentaries with a coating of fairness, and not in its news reporting.

Reflecting on the state of Indian media today, the chairperson of the Hindu Publishing Group, Malini Parthasarathy, acknowledged in a recent interview to the “Tricity Scoop” portal “the tendency of journalists to take sides, to take ideological positions.” Of course, she also talked about pressure from governments on journalists. Those words come from someone who has risen from a city reporter to the top post of *The Hindu* newspaper.

It is often said that most journalists are not given to self-introspection. The problem arises when journalists or media houses start visualising their roles as agents of social change and mobilisers of public opinion for the better. That is where the dividing line between activism and journalism often gets blurred. Activism is not news reporting, and news reporting is not activism.

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