

The Daily Star

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Make antigen test kits widely available

Test kit availability vital for curbing Covid surge

IT is disappointing to see the government's laissez-faire approach to curbing the recent surge in Covid-19. Given the speed at which the Omicron variant of the coronavirus is said to be spreading, we are baffled that the authorities are ignoring the use of rapid antigen test kits to make diagnosis faster. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), 23 brands of rapid antigen test kits, authorised by the government for emergency use, can currently be found in 545 public and 100 private healthcare points across Bangladesh. Unsupervised use by individuals is currently prohibited. Even so, according to one of our reports, test kits of one of the approved brands are available in the market for people to buy directly. Would it not be more beneficial if, given the Covid surge, the government allowed for all the approved brands to be available directly to consumers, so that pricing could be fair and regulated? This would also help ensure faster access and better quality.

The exclusivity of antigen kits might have made sense earlier when the infection rate was relatively slower. However, the rate of increase in Covid-19 cases is hinting at the arrival of a third wave, and experts agree that speedy identification of an infected person, and isolating and treating them straight away, is ideal in this situation. That is exactly how making rapid antigen test kits widely available can help us during this time. Of course, nothing can beat the accuracy of PCR tests, but given how expensive they can be, many carriers avoid getting tested and end up exposing other people to the virus. Though the cost of antigen test kits available at healthcare points can still be out of reach for some, their retail price will surely be lower once they are in the market.

However, the DGHS director general's comment to this daily that making at-home rapid testing available will be "considered" if many other countries do it as well—and that there are no plans for going in that direction as of now—is not reassuring. Given that countries such as the UK made these test kits widely available long before the emergence of Omicron—and the experts' opinion on how such rapid identification of the virus can help curb the number of cases in Bangladesh—we believe it is high time the government considered releasing rapid antigen tests in the market. Not only will this make testing cheaper, faster, and easier, but it will also encourage people to take their symptoms seriously and get treatment soon.

As the UN health chief has warned, Omicron's symptoms may seem mild, but it can be dangerous to underestimate its severity.

Tale of the vanishing canals

We must restore them through excavation and mass awareness

WHY people show no qualms when a canal or a similar water body gets filled up with garbage right before their eyes remains a big puzzle. Traditionally, canal water is used in the rural areas to irrigate agricultural land, but the dying canals seem to have lost their usefulness for reasons both known and unknown. Throughout Bangladesh, we hear stories of dying canals and rivers, and we also hear about the mischievous role of some powerful quarters as well as a section of the administration behind such an environmental tragedy.

The Taltala canal, which used to flush out excess water from Khulna city, is one such water body that is on its way to oblivion because of indiscriminate garbage-dumping by the residents. It already looks like a barren piece of land, choked by water hyacinths, bushes and shrubs. As usual, a number of encroachers have constructed houses, shops and cattle farms on both sides of the canal, right before the eyes of the administration. Environment experts fear that the canal will disappear if large-scale excavations are not carried out soon.

A recent visit to the area by our correspondent revealed that the once 60-foot-wide water body has narrowed down to a mere 25 to 30 feet, with the canal bed completely filled up at places. Locals believe that the two roads constructed by the Khulna City Corporation on both sides of the canal contributed to the narrowing down of its width. As a result, the entire area gets waterlogged after a rain. We are told that the canal's demarcation work was done 10 to 11 years ago, and excavation was done in 2015, but the residents say the excavation work was not done properly.

According to the Khulna City Corporation authorities, a project worth Tk 823 crore is underway to reduce waterlogging and develop a drainage system through excavation work. The canal will be excavated with the construction of sidewalls and walkways. The residents, however, are waiting eagerly for the completion of the project in time.

This needs to be said that creating awareness regarding conservation of our water bodies, especially those facing danger, is of utmost importance. The elderly people living nearby must have seen the flowing canals during their youth, so they should come forward to create awareness among the present generation regarding the importance of preserving water bodies. And saying no to dumping of garbage must be the first step.

The consistent chaos that is Dhaka airport



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is senior deputy editor and the head of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AIRPORTS are the most fascinating places in the world. This forced congregation of total strangers from all corners of the world, rushing off to destinations as exotic as Zanzibar or Casablanca—isn't it just wonderful? Isn't it amazing that when we are at the airport, we are all in sync, looking at the same monitors together, all worrying about whether we will make it to the gate on time, everyone trying to find the best spot to sit at the waiting area, everyone watching everyone else rushing, laughing, talking, trying to sleep in the uncomfortable chairs, attempting to soothe the screaming, sleep-deprived children, eating the same sandwiches and having the same longing for a nice, cosy bed?

Oh, wait! That was in the old days and in other international airports. So, what's it like at our own dear Dhaka Airport (Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport), especially during the Covid-19 era and at a time when flights are only allowed between 8am and 12am, as it's closed from 12am to 8am due to renovation purposes?

Well, to put it simply, it's the centre of total chaos and mayhem. There are lines—unruly ones, of course—just about everywhere: starting from the entry point with cars and microbuses creating three lanes trying to get into that one little gate all at once, to the line outside the airport departure area, lines to get Covid tests verified, lines at the check in counters, lines at the restrooms, lines to get into the immigration area, and the regular lines outside the boarding gates. Now that all the flights (over a 100) have been crammed into 16 hours instead of 24, at any given time there will be thousands of people at Dhaka airport with these eternal queues being constantly broken by "considerate" travellers who think nothing of just shoving their heavy trolleys right into the middle of the queue, impervious to the dirty looks or even curses inflicted on them.

Trolley battles are common, with men running to the trolley lines treading on toes, elbowing out women, children, airport cats—anyone who may come in their way—and then getting into brawls with other contestants until the most aggressive one wins the trophy of a trolley and zooms away in triumph. The reason for this savage behaviour is simple: there are just not enough trolleys for everyone, regardless of all the assurances—was it 2,500 extra trolleys that were promised?—given by the authorities. There is also no airport staff controlling the crowd and

making sure that people know where to go or just behave like decent human beings.

Many of the flights are to the Middle East, so there are swarms of worried migrant workers who have absolutely no idea about which counters they should go to or what forms they must fill up or even how to ask for help at the fancy help desk. Unsurprisingly, our greatest remittance

kiosks feel it's okay to keep their masks under the nose, so that they can breathe (perhaps even sneeze a little) into the chicken patties and coffee before serving them.

That non-existent phenomenon called aesthetics in this airport perfectly complements this shabby show. The pathetic excuse for a snack area is a dusty corner with uncomfortable chairs

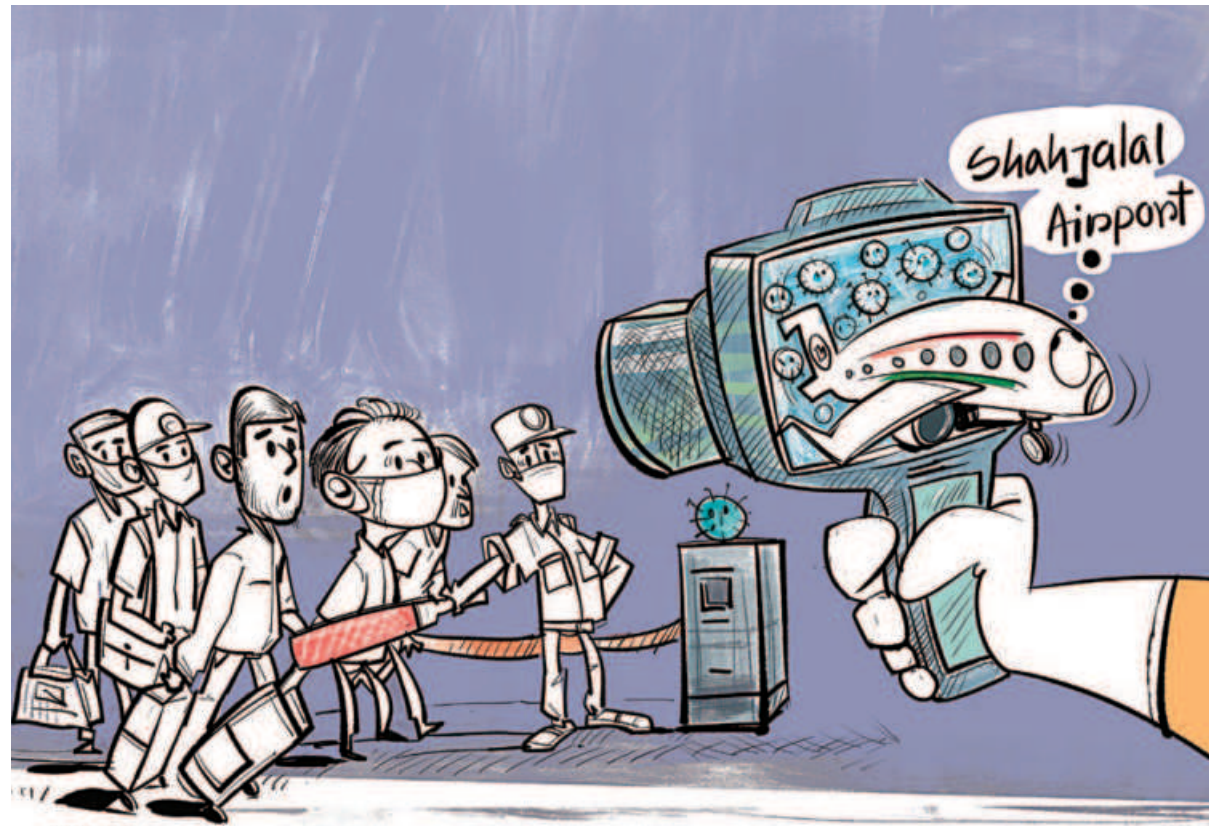


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBARTY

Strangely, while we are being told that we cannot hold public events and must show our Covid vaccination certificates at restaurants, at Dhaka airport, Covid health protocols are optional.

earnings, and the backbone of our steady economic growth, are treated with utter disdain and apathy. Why there are no designated airport staff to guide and help them go through the formalities is anyone's guess. After all, authorities have only had about a few decades to figure this out.

Strangely, while we are being told that we cannot hold public events and must show our Covid vaccination certificates at restaurants, in addition to the "No Mask, No Entry" policy at all venues and establishments, at Dhaka airport, Covid health protocols are optional.

While people are running around trying to get their Covid test results verified—why this can't be done during check-ins like everywhere else in the world is a mystery—most people at the airport, including the staff, either wear their masks with their noses exposed or have no masks on whatsoever! There are also those who believe that the mask itself must be saved from germs, so whenever they feel the urge to sneeze or cough, they lower their masks, eject all their germs out to the world, and put their masks back on! Even the salespeople at the snack

and tables next to a dirty tile mural with a few small cupboards put up against them, apparently to stow away backpacks belonging to, who knows, the snack bar employees? The tables are so close together that you can practically hear everything your neighbours are saying—which wouldn't be such a bad thing if it weren't for the fact that they are also following the "no mask" etiquette, and again, no one is there to enforce any health protocol.

Outside the airport building is the maze of lanes surrounding bizarre, unseemly steel sculptures, and a car park that resembles a garbage dump with empty plastic bottles and packets of chips strewn here and there on the grimy floors and the uppermost floor being treated as a public toilet.

Everyone knows that travel these days has become a stressful, unenjoyable ordeal. But for those who must go through Dhaka airport—whether during arrival or departure—the trauma is on a whole new level. Unless, of course, you belong to the VIP or VVIP category.

We need affordable transport, not affordable fuel



DEBRA EFROYMSON

Debra Efroymsen is executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh, and author of "Beyond Apologies: Defining and Achieving an Economics of Wellbeing."

WITH the price of basic necessities going up yet again, it is no surprise that people are campaigning for a reduction in fuel price. Fuel is, after all, related to the price of transport, food, and other necessities—which is, in fact, precisely the problem.

The climate emergency looms large, and not merely on our horizon—it is with us now and growing increasingly worse. Droughts, fires, floods and intense storms are only one aspect of our new abnormal. There will likely be increased pandemics (of which Covid is giving us an unpleasant preview), ever more refugees, and inevitably more violence and war. To slow down the catastrophe, we need to stop burning fossil fuels. Those fuels need to stay under the ground as we transition, rapidly, to a renewable fuel economy. But to do so, we must dramatically reduce the amount of fuel we need, as it is impossible to power our current lifestyles with renewables.

The only way we can successfully keep basic necessities affordable while addressing the climate emergency is to break our decades-long attachment to fossil fuels and to find less fuel-intensive ways to do things. It might help to remember that the

ways in which we currently move around and grow our food, to mention two main uses of fuel, are relatively recent when you look at the history of people on the planet. In Bangladesh, we strive to become a "modern" industrialised country where everything will be motorised as well as digital. But how sensible is that dream? The traditional ways of growing food worked for thousands of years—since the dawn of agriculture. Newer mechanised and chemical-intensive methods—both tractors and fertilisers require fossil fuels—have caused all kinds of problems in the last several decades. The biggest spike in carbon emissions started only in 1950—and has continued to surge ever since. That is to say, the price we are paying for cheap goods and convenience is the destruction of our planet and the daily loss of lives due to pollution.

Many people dream of a modern transport system, and yet we also pay the price daily for that dream—in the form of carnage on our roads, as well as pollution. Bicycles, rickshaws, and trains are slower, sure, but also vastly safer—and much better for our environment.

The more I think about it, the more it amazes me that people have advanced to this level of complex society and lost track of the basics. We don't focus on how to provide food, housing, education and healthcare to the masses; we are far more concerned about developing industries, finding new means of communicating and entertaining ourselves, and satisfying the whims of the wealthiest. We have completely forgotten that environmental destruction has a boomerang effect; we will pay—we already are paying—for the

harm that we do to nature. How crazy is it that we forget we need clean air to breathe and water to drink, and instead focus on all kinds of trivia that we could live better without?

So, do we demand fuel subsidies in order to reduce the price of basic goods, knowing that, in doing so, we contribute to pollution, road crashes, and the climate catastrophe? Or do we look to our recent ancestors for ways of meeting our basic needs without burning fuel: returning to manual methods that suited us just fine for thousands of years, and that for thousands of years were compatible with our environment?

If we're going to make the case that people are rational beings, then we need to start making rational demands. Sure, we want cheap bus fares and big roads and elevated expressways. Meanwhile, we need affordable food and housing, too. Deep down, I think we can all agree that where our future survival is in question, perhaps we should focus more on genuine sustainability, returning to methods that are compatible with a liveable future.

So, rather than affordable fuel, let's demand affordable transport: better conditions for walking, cycling, public transit and trains. Rather than subsidising fuel, how about directly subsidising some basic foods, while returning to farming methods that will require less fuel, thus making food affordable to our budgets and in harmony with our living planet? We could redefine prosperity by including a healthy environment, a sustainable future, and a decent existence for all, rather than get caught up in the destructive trappings of an elusive and ultimately deadly modernity.

Deep down, I think we can all agree that where our future survival is in question, perhaps we should focus more on genuine sustainability, returning to methods that are compatible with a liveable future.