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Loadshedding returns with a vengeance

Govt should have expected gas price volatility and taken apt measures

IT is concerning to note that people across the country are having to endure long power cuts as electricity production is being hampered mainly because of a shortage of natural gas supply. Around 52 percent of the country's power is produced using gas, according to Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) data. And data from Petrobangla shows that the government has been injecting less LNG into the national gas supply grid, as it decided to not buy LNG from the international spot market for the time being due to its increased price. When the government last bought LNG from the spot market in May, the price of LNG was USD 26 per Metric Million British Thermal Unit. Now, it has shot up to USD 36 per Metric Million British Thermal Unit. According to the Petrobangla chairman, the government would only buy more LNG once the price comes down which, given the global circumstances, may take some time.

As the government lowered its gas supply for energy production, people across the country have been experiencing power outages multiple times a day, bringing back memories of days when "loadshedding" was a common phenomenon. At least 854 mmcfid (million cubic feet per day) of LNG was supplied to the national gas grid on June 29. That figure, however, dropped down to 507 mmcfid by July 4, according to Petrobangla data. Even though it is easy to accept that the government is in a tight spot in relation to gas supply because of external factors, what we cannot understand is why the government did not anticipate the ongoing supply crunch and take pre-emptive measures to prevent the present crisis.

The government itself has admitted that the main reason for the rise in gas price is the Russia-Ukraine war. But that war began on February 24. The government should have anticipated a rise in gas price in its immediate aftermath, and taken necessary steps to mitigate any potential crisis. In fact, experts have long warned of an impending crisis because of the government's overdependence on expensive LNG from abroad. Because the government failed to take into account these concerns, people across the country are now suffering – industries are having to endure higher production costs, and hospitals are suffering from power outages while doctors are in the middle of performing surgeries on their patients.

This cannot continue. The government cannot simply expect people to endure such hardship day in and day out. It needs to immediately come up with an alternative strategy, with a focus on renewable energy, and in the meanwhile, make sure that healthcare and other essential services are not hampered by this type of power outages. Additionally, it needs to return to focusing on local gas exploration and extraction instead of relying so heavily on its export, as experts have suggested for years.

Wake up and smell the 4th Covid wave

Virus transmission could go from bad to worse during Eid

AS experts have confirmed already, Bangladesh has entered its fourth wave of Covid infections within the last few weeks. In the 24 hours till 8am on Tuesday, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 7 Covid deaths and 1,998 cases of infection. The day before, the country reported 12 Covid deaths – the highest after March 5 this year when 13 people had died. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the test positivity rate for the virus stood at 16.74 percent, which is a staggering difference from the 0.8 percent positivity rate at the end of May. While it was timely of the Cabinet Division to issue a mask mandate on June 28 to battle this rise in Covid cases, all institutions and individuals must come together to practice health safety rules vehemently – especially during the upcoming traditionally chaotic homegoing days of the Eid-ul-Adha.

In addition to a reluctance towards mask-wearing and social distancing, many of the population also seem to be in denial of the fact that the fourth Covid wave is in Bangladesh. Some think their fever may be due to dengue – which in itself is nothing to be brushed aside – or that their symptoms indicate only a seasonal flu. However, the data of recent weeks proves otherwise.

The only way for one to find out whether their symptoms are from the coronavirus or not would be to get tested. Given that many are intimidated by the costliness of laboratory tests, the government should subsidise such testing so that citizens are able to get reliable diagnoses early on and can seek proper treatment.

More worrying is the fact that Eid holidays are days away, during which thousands of people will be travelling between the capital and the rest of the country, packed into cars, buses, trains, and ferries. Experts rightly fear that this could result in a high surge in Covid cases post-Eid.

The coronavirus is something that is here to stay, and will only mutate to take different, often more dangerous, forms. To combat this, it is crucial that the population stays up-to-date on their Covid vaccines, as every dose eventually wears off – exposing a person to higher chances of being infected.

As such, only our vigilance (through daily health safety measures and receiving vaccines) can prevent the virus from devouring numerous lives and livelihoods, as it has done in the past. We urge the government to ensure that health and safety rules are strictly enforced at shopping malls, kitchen markets, and on public transport vehicles, and that a thorough and efficient vaccine drive is conducted to safeguard the population against this fourth wave of the Covid virus in Bangladesh.

Vigilance, precaution and prevention



A CLOSER LOOK
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TASNEEM TAYEB

BA NGLADESH is seeing another rise of Covid-19 cases. In the first five days of July alone, 32 Covid-infected patients died, according to the health directorate. As of 6pm July 5, our total caseload stands at 1,982,972 since the pandemic broke out in the country on March 8, 2020.

This scenario once again reminds us of the fact that we are still in the midst of a pandemic, although at times – especially when Covid is less active – we seem to lose sight of it and take on a more complacent approach in our fight against the pandemic.

For some time now, Europe, the Americas, Eastern Mediterranean and Southeast Asia have been witnessing a rise in Covid, with Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5 accounting for many of those cases. These two subvariants are highly contagious, classified as variants of concern by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), and can easily navigate the immunity provided by previous infections and cause breakthrough infections.

Traces of BA.4 and BA.5 have also been found in Bangladesh. The Jashore University of Science and Technology was the first to report detection of the subvariants in June. And with the rising number of cases, the footprint of these subvariants has increased.

Under such circumstances, our immediate way forward is strictly reinforcing and adhering to safety guidelines. But even in this, there seems to be a reluctance on the government's part. In view of the deteriorating situation, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) for Covid management in Bangladesh, during a meeting on June 14, recommended implementing six restrictions to curb the spread of the infection. However, it was not until June 28 – two weeks after the NTAC meeting – that the Cabinet Division issued a notification on the new restrictions. Given the urgency, why did it take two weeks for the authorities to issue the notification?

Similarly, people too seem reluctant to stay safe. They are hardly seen wearing masks out in public: on the roads, in public transport, inside shops, in the crammed lifts.

But then, masks are a luxury for some – especially for rickshaw-pullers, van-pullers, hawkers and day labourers, for whom meeting the daily basic needs is a challenge at present. And in the

reality of inflation, for most – even in the middle class – masks would likely be at the bottom of the monthly grocery list. One needs to note here that masks are no longer VAT-exempted, meaning their prices have increased. Why the authorities made such a decision is another question which with no logic one can answer. What is even more unfortunate

Bangladesh, the challenge would be to get the bivalent vaccines.

A two-pronged approach could cushion us from the shocks of the fourth wave of the pandemic. While complete lockdown is not a feasible solution, especially in view of the economic pressures we are already facing, we cannot also allow the situation to reach



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is the irresponsible behaviour of the people and institutions we consider responsible. Big, crowded events such as Eid fairs, weddings, parties and official programmes are going on in full swing. Now, with Eid-ul-Azha coming up, Covid cases are expected to increase, because as usual, public transports will be operating in overcapacity; buses, launches, trains and trawlers will be overcrowded with homeward-bound people, turning them into the ideal hotbeds for Covid breeding.

In view of this, our healthcare professionals need to brace themselves for a new onslaught of Covid cases. Although the government has done a commendable job of vaccinating more than 70.4 percent of the population with two full doses of the coronavirus vaccine, it won't be enough to stop the spread of the subvariants. A part of the solution could be in the bivalent vaccine, which is currently in development. Bivalent vaccine works by "stimulating an immune response against two different antigens, such as two different viruses or other microorganisms," according to the National Cancer Institute in the US.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has asked Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna to develop bivalent vaccines that could target both the original coronavirus strain, as well as the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants, according to the FDA's top vaccine regulator, Dr Peter Marks. The FDA is planning this for the autumn boosters. However, for countries like

a point where the only solution is a hard lockdown. Therefore, at this point, what we need to focus on are strict implementation of social distancing and health safety protocols. Since the new variants are still active in small clusters, vigilant monitoring of cases, proactive contact tracing, immediate testing, and isolation where required would be key in preventing the new variants from spreading. At the same time, law enforcement officials need to strictly enforce social distancing guidelines. At the same time, VAT on masks should be withdrawn immediately. Rather, masks should be subsidised so that a greater number of our population can afford them.

Vaccination is the other component of this two-pronged solution. The government needs to ramp up efforts further to vaccinate the population with booster shots, and start immediate inoculation of children aged 5-12. Moreover, it should start working right away to secure the doses of bivalent vaccines, especially for the frontline workers and the elderly in order to provide them with the immunity required.

Comprehensive, combined and concerted efforts are our only weapons to overcome the fourth wave. With the holiday weekend coming up and then winter in a few months, vigilance, precaution and prevention should be our agenda to tackle the fourth wave of Covid infections.

Muslims are not alone in being hounded in India



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JAWED NAQVI

THERE'S no denying that India's Muslims are a major target in the culture of hate being fomented across the country. It's equally true, however, that Muslims are not alone in being hunted and hounded by an increasingly wilful right-wing state.

Let's not ignore too the virtual absence of Muslims from struggles in India on issues that may not seem to involve them as a community per se, but in a wider shared sense of the fight for democracy do.

Seldom – if ever – has one seen the community taking to the streets on issues of education and health, or even jobs for their people or other Indians. There's an invisible obstacle, as it were, to a full-throated participation like, for example, the time when a controversial citizenship law is being imposed on the community or when majoritarian groups make offensive remarks about their religion. Let's see what so many non-Muslim activists are doing for the Muslims and for the country as a whole, of which the Muslims are such a large, if grudging, part. Is there a way to cut loose from the self-limiting worldview?

Let's begin with July 5, which marks a year since Father Stan Swamy died in a Mumbai prison.

Millions had celebrated the 84-year-old Jesuit priest as a selfless worker for the Dalit and tribal people of Jharkhand, and also for his commitment to the constitution's secular, democratic and socialist objectives.

Then one day Swamy became the

oldest member of a clutch of renowned public intellectuals who were thrown into prison under reason-defying anti-terror laws. Swamy died of Covid-related complications, a scourge his younger colleagues in prison somehow survived.

A gentleman to the core, Swamy knew he was innocent, though the charges did not surprise him. "What is happening to me is not something unique or happening to me alone; it is a broader process taking place all over the country. We all are aware how prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists, student leaders are all put in jail because they have expressed their dissent or raised questions about the ruling powers of India," he told an interviewer.

Christophe Jaffrelot, in his book *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, discusses in detail the Bhima Koregaon case in which Swamy and some of India's most selfless rights activists stand targeted as "urban Naxals."

"The way the urban Naxals have been harassed and arrested in India before and after 2019 suggests that police forces reporting to BJP ministers have emulated the Hindu nationalist vigilantes to some extent, and appear to be translating into action the increasingly authoritarian strategy of the government, a trend that also manifested in the decline of freedom of expression..." says Jaffrelot.

Many eyebrows were raised recently when the Supreme Court gave a clean chit to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in cases pertaining to anti-Muslim pogroms during his tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat. What caused greater consternation was the court's censure of the petitioners and an unusual order that those who pursued the case for over 16 years be put in the dock.

Consequently, rights activist Teesta Setalvad and two former top cops were slapped with charges and jailed. All three

had stood shoulder to shoulder with the Muslim victims of the pogroms. But the debate over the shocking judgment hasn't significantly enthused major Muslim groups – barring some individual responses – that seem to confine their interest to religious disputes.

The Indian state has acquired additional features of a police state under the post-2019 BJP-led government. Immediately after Modi II was formed, recalls Jaffrelot, Indian parliament passed a law that empowered the state to designate individuals as terrorists. Previously, that was the case only for organisations.

Many were arrested since the law came into effect, all accused of conspiracy to overthrow the government and assassinate the prime minister. The Amnesty Tech (Amnesty International digital security team) later discovered that one of the seized computers contained malware allowing remote access, through which incriminating letters could have been planted. The idea that the letters had been manufactured was supported by the fact that Naxals' communication is heavily coded, says Jaffrelot.

Eminent historian Romila Thapar and other scholars filed a petition against the targeting of intellectuals, but lost the appeal. The dissenting judge, Justice DY Chandrachud, observed "that a clear-cut distinction has to be made between opposition to the government and attempts to overthrow the government by rising up in arms." For him, the Bhima Koregaon case was "an attempt by the state to muzzle dissent... Each of them is prosecuted for being a defender of persons subjected to human rights violations." Justice Chandrachud is expected to become chief justice in November 2022.

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