

'We must vaccinate 95 percent of the children to curb measles outbreak'

Dr Tajul Islam A Bari, a public health specialist and vaccinologist, who previously served as manager of the national immunisation programme, speaks with Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about the recent measles outbreak, immunisation gaps, and measures required to eradicate measles from the country.

There has never been such a high number of child deaths from measles in Bangladesh in the last couple of decades because of the success of our Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI). How would you evaluate the government's response to this outbreak?

The measles vaccine is administered in two doses—one at nine months and the other at 15 months. When at least 95 percent of children in each district of the country receive both doses, transmission of the virus can be stopped. However, a significant immunity gap, as indicated by the coverage evaluation survey, has led to the current outbreak. Bangladesh is a densely populated country with relatively high rates of malnutrition, making children more vulnerable.

During the tenure of the interim government, Tk 458 crore was released on December 28, 2024, for the procurement of vaccines. The government also allocated Tk 1,451 crore for the next fiscal year (2025-26). However, due to lack of approval from the relevant authorities, the funds could not be released. As a result, no vaccines were purchased in 2025. However, the current government has taken steps to release that fund for vaccine procurement. The vaccines are expected to arrive soon for our EPI.

The interim government initially stated that half of the vaccines would be procured by the government and half by Unicef. However, the current government has decided that all vaccines will now be procured through Unicef.

By what year was measles supposed to be eliminated in Bangladesh? How far had we progressed towards that goal before the outbreak?

Before eradication, there are several stages. Bangladesh, along with several other South Asian countries, had planned to eliminate measles by 2026. This means reducing cases to zero per one million population. In 2024-25, Bangladesh had achieved a rate of 0.72 per million, which is close to the threshold level. In 2025, the target was to bring it down to zero—



Dr Tajul Islam A Bari

meaning no cases per million population. This is called elimination. If achieved by 2025, elimination certification could have been obtained in 2026.

To eliminate measles, large-scale supplementary campaigns must be conducted periodically to ensure broader protection. In 2005, such a campaign was conducted in one city corporation and two districts. In 2006, it was expanded to the remaining city corporations and 62 districts. One of the largest measles campaigns in the world was conducted from January 25, 2014, to February 13, 2014, vaccinating more than 50 million children aged nine months to under 15 years. This is known as the national MR catch up campaign. Following this, measles incidence declined significantly. The standard practice is to conduct such campaigns every 4-5 years to address immunity gaps. The last follow-up campaign took place in December 2020. All measles campaign costs were supported by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, covering both vaccine procurement and operational expenses.

Later, the government planned another campaign, which was scheduled for 2024. An application was submitted to Gavi, and it was approved after review. The decision letter confirming support was sent to Bangladesh on March 7, 2025. Gavi provided around Tk 600 crore to vaccinate 2.1 crore children,

along with Tk 1.78 crore for operational costs.

Although the campaign was supposed to be conducted in December 2025 or January 2026, it was delayed due to elections and other reasons. The same vaccine stock is now being used for the outbreak response campaign launched on April 5, 2026, in 30 high-risk upazilas.

Apart from the emergency vaccination programme, the government plans further campaigns. Are such initiatives sufficient?

The current campaign will be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, 30 upazilas

Gaps in routine immunisation—especially at nine months and 15 months—must be addressed. It must be ensured that at least 95 percent of children in every district receive both doses and that this coverage is maintained annually. Door-to-door child identification, community engagement, and awareness-raising efforts must be strengthened. Birth registration must be properly done so that every child can be vaccinated on schedule.

and high-risk areas across 18 districts will be covered. The second phase will begin on April 12 in various areas of Dhaka city, as well as in Barishal and Mymensingh. From May 3, a nationwide campaign will begin for children aged six months to under 10 years.

Measles is a highly infectious disease and 95 percent coverage is required at the district level, which has not yet been accomplished. The latest coverage evaluation survey (2023) shows that first-dose coverage is around 86.1 percent, while second-dose coverage is around 80.7 percent. As a result, the number of unvaccinated children continues to grow. Bangladesh has around 34.1 lakh births per year, but not all children are being vaccinated.

No vaccine in the world is 100 percent effective. The vaccine given at six months is about 50 percent effective, at nine months, about 85 percent, and at 15 months, more than 90 percent. Therefore, even after vaccination, full immunity is not always achieved.

Those who are unvaccinated are at even greater risk. Almost half a million children remain susceptible each year due to non-vaccination or failure to develop immunity after vaccination. When the number of unvaccinated or under-vaccinated children accumulates over the years, outbreaks of this type occur.

The ideal strategy is nationwide mass vaccination campaigns to ensure broader protection and ultimately close the immunity gap. This involves going door to door to identify eligible children and vaccinating them. Whether or not a child has previously been vaccinated, they should receive at least

large amount of money flows abroad for the procurement of these vaccines, which could potentially be purchased domestically if they are WHO-prequalified. Urgent attention should be given to this issue.

What steps should the government take to prevent a similar outbreak in the future?

To prevent such situations in the future, surveillance must be strengthened. When measles cases occur, blood samples must be collected and laboratory results must be properly shared with the programme personnel. Wherever a case is detected, vaccination must be conducted in and around the affected area for unvaccinated individuals. Even those who have been vaccinated may require a repeat dose if more than one month has passed since their last dose.

Gaps in routine immunisation—especially at nine months and 15 months—must be addressed. It must be ensured that at least 95 percent of children in every district receive both doses and that this coverage is maintained annually. Door-to-door child identification, community engagement, and awareness raising efforts must be strengthened. Birth registration must be properly done so that every child can be vaccinated on schedule. These tasks are carried out by health assistants and family welfare workers. But a large number of these posts in multiple districts remain vacant. These vacancies must be filled urgently, requiring coordination between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance. Porters responsible for transporting vaccines from upazila health complexes to distribution points, from where field workers collect vaccines for administration at vaccination sites, are also employed within the immunisation system. Their salaries were previously paid from the government's development budget or from Gavi-supported Health System Strengthening (HSS) funds. However, for the last several months, their salaries have remained unpaid. That payment must also be ensured.

Decoding Pakistan's diplomatic win in Iran-US ceasefire



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On April 8, Pakistan pulled off something few thought it could do: it helped bring the United States and Iran into a temporary ceasefire, more than a month after the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28, pushing the region towards a wider catastrophe. US President Donald Trump publicly said he acted after conversations with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi also thanked Pakistan's leadership for its efforts. Indeed, in diplomacy, public acknowledgement is a kind of currency, and this time Pakistan received it from both sides.

This was more than a symbolic intervention. Reuters reported that the talks were close to collapse after an Iranian strike on a Saudi petrochemical facility enraged Riyadh and threatened to blow up weeks of backchannel diplomacy. Pakistani officials then spent the night shuttling messages among Washington, Tehran, Riyadh, and others. Islamabad reportedly conveyed its gravest concern to Iran over the Saudi strike, while also pressing Washington for assurances that Israeli attacks would not continue in a way that made negotiations impossible for Tehran. Only after that did Iran agree to a temporary ceasefire and talks. That is not the work of a spectator state. That is crisis management under pressure.

It is also worth noting that this did not begin on April 8. By April 2, Pakistan's foreign ministry was already saying that both Washington and Tehran had expressed confidence in Pakistan's role as facilitator. Its spokesperson pointed to overlaps between the five-point peace plan discussed in Beijing and the outcome of consultations in Islamabad involving Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Egypt. In other words, the ceasefire was not born from one dramatic phone call. It emerged from a layered diplomatic process that moved through Riyadh, Beijing, and Islamabad, with Pakistan trying to turn itself into the channel through which competing powers could still communicate.

Pakistan mattered because it occupied the right intersection of relationships. It has a long border with Iran and also maintains

For years, Pakistan has often been discussed internationally through the language of instability, militancy, and debt, and portrayed as one dominated by the military and marked by democratic fragility. Pakistan's success in talks with the US and Iran led to an agreement that briefly changed the script. The Guardian quoted analyst Michael Kugelman calling it Pakistan's 'biggest diplomatic win in years.' That may sound grand, but the broader point holds.

a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it has working lines to Washington and, by several accounts, it also helped draw China into a more active role at a crucial stage. This combination is unusual. Most states in the region can talk to one camp or another. Pakistan, in this case, could talk to almost all of them without being immediately dismissed. That is what gave Islamabad relevance: not moral authority, but positional utility.

The first benefit for Pakistan is the most obvious one: self-preservation. The US-Israel-Iran war has been economically punishing, with businesses impacted worldwide. On April 2, Pakistan sharply raised fuel prices, with the price for petrol up 42.7 percent and that for diesel up 54.9 percent, as the conflict disrupted oil markets and threatened supplies moving through the Strait of Hormuz. For a heavily import-dependent economy already struggling with inflation, debt pressure, and fragile public patience, a prolonged war next door is a direct domestic threat. When the ceasefire news broke, global markets rallied and oil prices fell sharply. So, for Pakistan, its latest diplomatic move was an economic necessity rather than merely a prestige issue.

The second benefit for Islamabad is reputational. For years, Pakistan has often been discussed internationally through the language of instability, militancy, and debt, and portrayed as one dominated by the military and marked by democratic fragility. Pakistan's success in talks with the US and Iran led to an agreement that briefly changed the script. The Guardian quoted analyst Michael Kugelman calling it Pakistan's "biggest diplomatic win in years." That may

sound grand, but the broader point holds. If Islamabad hosts US-Iran talks and remains central to the process, it can present itself not merely as a troubled state asking for patience, but as a state that still offers geopolitical utility. In foreign policy, usefulness often opens doors faster than virtue.

There is also a more strategic dividend Islamabad will want to collect in the future. A successful mediation strengthens its hand

the most visible broker in the crowded and dangerous diplomatic field of the Middle East. The real test begins now. Pakistan has shown that under pressure, it can still utilise geography, military channels, regional ties, and diplomatic relationships as leverage. The harder question is whether it can convert the temporary ceasefire into lasting foreign policy credibility. This is the big challenge now, which requires steadiness, not triumphalism. It requires accepting a simple truth: Pakistan did not become stronger because it solved the US-Iran crisis. It became stronger because, for one critical week in April 2026, too many powerful actors discovered they could not move forward without Pakistan.

with Washington at a time when Pakistan has been trying to reset ties beyond the old security lens. It reassures Gulf partners that Islamabad is not an unreliable bystander in moments of regional emergency. And it reminds China that Pakistan can be more than a corridor or a client. According to reporting in *The Guardian* and Al Jazeera, China's role became more important in the final stretch, but Pakistan appears to have helped create the diplomatic architecture within which that role became useful.


Still, Pakistan should resist the temptation to overread the moment. The ceasefire is fragile, and the disagreements over it are enormous. Reuters reports that Washington still wants Iran to halt enrichment, curb missiles, and give up nuclear material while Tehran insists on sanctions relief, acceptance of enrichment, and continued control over Hormuz. Even the scope of the ceasefire remains disputed, especially over Lebanon. Over the night of April 8, Israel bombed several commercial and residential neighbourhoods in Lebanon, killing over 200 people. Most world leaders condemned the strike, while Iranian authorities called it a "grave violation" of the US-Iran ceasefire, raising doubts on whether the ceasefire would hold. So, Pakistan's diplomatic success for the current episode may be real, but it is provisional.

Besides, Pakistan was not the only country playing an important role. Reuters reported that Turkish intelligence also played a part in the deal-breaking, like China did, according to other media reports. That means Pakistan was not the sole architect of the temporary peace between the US and Iran, but rather

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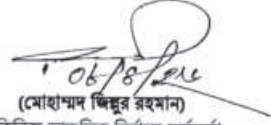
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আকেজো হার্ডজীপ গাড়ি ও মোটরসাইকেল নিলামে বিক্রয়ের দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি

০১	শিরোনাম	: আঞ্চলিক নির্বাচন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, বরিশাল এর আওতাধীন সিনিয়র জেলা নির্বাচন অফিসারের কার্যালয়, পুটুয়াখালী এর আকেজো যোষিট ১ (এক) টি হার্ড জীপ গাড়ি (স্ট-৬) ও সিনিয়র জেলা/জেলা নির্বাচন অফিসার এবং উপজেলা নির্বাচন অফিসারের কার্যালয়ের আকেজো যোষিট ৪৪ (চুয়াচিঙ্গা) টি মোটরসাইকেল (স্ট-৬)
০২	নিলাম দরপত্র প্রাপ্তির স্থান	: আঞ্চলিক নির্বাচন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, বরিশাল অঞ্চল, বরিশাল (ভূগোলিক স্থানাঙ্ক নং: ০০৩)
০৩	নিলাম দরপত্র বিক্রয়ের তারিখ ও সময়	: আগামী ১০/০৪/২০২৬ হতে ২৮/০৪/২০২৬ তারিখ অফিস চলাকালীন সময় পর্যন্ত
০৪	নিলাম দরপত্র জমা দেয়ার স্থান, তারিখ ও সময়	: আঞ্চলিক নির্বাচন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, বরিশাল অঞ্চল, বরিশাল (নেতৃত্বাবাদ বাসস্ট্যান্ড সংলগ্ন কাশিপুর, বরিশাল)। তারিখ: ২৮/০৪/২০২৬ দুপুর ১২:০০ ঘটিকা পর্যন্ত
০৫	নিলাম দরপত্র উন্মুক্তকরণের স্থান, তারিখ ও সময়	: আঞ্চলিক নির্বাচন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, বরিশাল অঞ্চল, বরিশাল (নেতৃত্বাবাদ বাসস্ট্যান্ড সংলগ্ন কাশিপুর, বরিশাল)। তারিখ: ২৮/০৪/২০২৬ দুপুর ১২:৩০ ঘটিকা
০৬	নিলাম দরপত্রের মূল্য	: ১,০০০/- (এক হাজার) টাকা মাত্র।
০৭	দরপত্র জামানত	: উল্লিখিত দরের ১০% আর্নেস্টম্যানি (ফেরতযোগ্য) দরপত্রের সাথে পে-অর্ডারের মাধ্যমে জমা দিতে হবে।
০৮	কর্তৃপক্ষের কোন কারণ দর্শানো ব্যতীতকৈ যে কোন দরপত্র বা সকল কাগজ গ্রহণ বা বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা সংরক্ষণ করেন।	

২। (ক) দরপত্রের সিডিউল ক্রম ব্যতীত কোন দরপত্র/দরপত্রের সিডিউলের ফটোকপি গ্রহণযোগ্য হবে না।
(খ) জামানত ব্যতীত কোন দরপত্র গ্রহণযোগ্য হবে না।
(গ) বিজ্ঞপ্তির শর্তাবলি দরপত্রের সিডিউলে উল্লেখ থাকবে।


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