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**Covid and competence**

We can argue that pandemics fall upon humanity without warning, and possibly without anything possible to prevent them from occurring. However, in this age of science, it should be possible – indeed it is possible – to bring pandemics to an end.

This is the benefit of the scientific knowledge we have accumulated over the decades and the manner in which we have learned to use it for the good of all people on earth. Of course, at present, the vaccination drive against Covid-19 taking place across the globe is absurdly inequitable, with the first dose in a developed country being delivered almost 90 days before the first dose in Africa. We see that inequity in our country too. But as the pandemic grows more dangerous in the country, with well over 4000 people now falling victim to the infection each day, and the number of deaths rising as well, we can see that the massive problem needs to be handled with much greater competence and much greater devotion to solving the issue which has already claimed far too many lives everywhere in Pakistan.

But perhaps this can only be managed by a competent government. And we know that our government, both in the centre and at least in Punjab, if not the other provinces as well, lacks competence. The recent fuss over the decision to purchase sugar and cotton from India, with the decision then being turned down by the cabinet is just a latest example of this. There have been many others, including the frequent changes in the cabinet, and the alterations in policies on issues ranging from finance, to education, to other matters. The involvement of NAB and the courts in all that is happening simply adds to the chaos.

To tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, we need urgent measures. While many other problems exist and many of them are of vast importance, the Covid issue at present threatens the country as a whole. Already, there are people everywhere who have been left hungry because they have lost jobs. We know of private businesses which have refused to pay their staff on the basis that they are no longer making profits as a result of the economic meltdown which has come along with the virus that has swept through the human population across the globe.

But stopping this pandemic has to be put on the top of priorities. We are already the country in South Asia which has the slowest rate of vaccination – at well below 0.5 percent. This is alarming. Bangladesh, also a developing country with an extremely impoverished population and limited resources, has been able to vaccinate a good number of its people. India is close to achieving a similar number, despite the vast size of its population. The fact that it is also a major manufacturer of vaccines for the world to use is also something which goes in its favour. But even without these benefits we could have managed better. Depending only on charity from China and charity from other places will not work.

As things stand, a full lockdown needs to be imposed as quickly as possible, in all major cities, across the country. The rate of growth of the virus and transmission in Lahore is now frightening. It has crept into almost everyone's homes. Many of us hear each day of a friend, an acquaintance, a workmate, or somebody else with whom we have shared some portion of our lives who has died or lies in critical condition in hospital as a result of Covid-19. The presence of the UK variant of the virus means that entire families are being quickly affected. Whereas previously one to two members of the household were brought into hospitals with Covid, now six to seven members are coming in because the UK variant spreads far more quickly and can be carried far more easily from one person to another. It is also more effective in terms of causing serious disease and therefore death.

This time children and young people have not been spared either. A number have died. Pfizer is carrying out tests on children between 12 to 15 in the US and has reached the phase three level of its trial. It hopes the vaccine will soon be available for this age group. But of course, it will be much longer before we have in our country a vaccine that is safe for use amongst children and teenagers.

Apart from a lockdown, we need to find a way to speed up vaccination for the adults who are able to receive the vaccines available. To do so is not impossible. We should not be depending on just Covax or the vaccines handed out to us by China. Pakistan can put together enough resources to buy vaccines in sizable numbers. This is especially true, as not all of its population needs to be vaccinated, given that a large percentage of it is aged below 16 years, and therefore not eligible to receive the vaccine at all. In fact, at the present time, most countries around the world including Pakistan are vaccinating only those aged over 18 years.

But we need to get the vaccine running and we need to convince people that it is absolutely necessary to vaccinate. The belief that Covid-19 is not a dangerous pandemic or that the coronavirus does not exist at all continues to do the rounds. This myth needs to be altered. People need to be persuaded to have themselves and members of their families vaccinated and also to adopt safety measures by following all the SOPs in place.

It is true that the warnings by police that those not wearing masks in Lahore will be fined and arrested has had some impact. But we need much more than this. We need to stop people moving from one house to another, and we need to stop people from attending large gatherings including weddings and other similar functions. This is not happening at the present time. Only when it does can we have any hope of preventing transmission at the rate at which it is occurring presently.

We should be asking why our government is not giving greater attention to this issue. While it is true the NCOC has acted quickly and wisely in many cases, in others it has struggled because of the lack of general will within the government to act. We need to organise a door-to-door vaccination drive, somewhat on the lines of the polio vaccination campaigns carried out regularly in the country, so that with a lockdown in place, every household and every family can be reached. It may not be possible to vaccinate adults against their will. But at least an attempt should be made to convince them and by doing so take a step towards ending a pandemic which threatens to destroy the economy of the country and the lives of thousands of people for years to come.

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