**[Unhappy X mas](https://www.dawn.com/news/1597547/unhappy-xmas)**

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WHAT has mankind done to itself? World wars, global warming, lemming-like migrations, and now Covid-19. Will we ever see an unclouded morn again?

When January 2020 dawned, no one imagined that its tail-ender December would close on a note of such helpless despair. The world is undergoing an unprecedented convulsion as convivial celebrations shrink into forced isolation, annual traditions are packed away for a Covid-free day, and human emotions are being tested as never before. Joy has become a word to be used only in the past tense.

Worldwide, scientists have been developing vaccines faster one fears than the speed of safe practices. Three have emerged ahead of others in the Free World — Pfizer, Moderna and Oxford AstraZeneca. Rather like the major political parties in the West, they are identical in purpose, distinguishable from each other only in the detail.

To the layman, the major differences are the temperature at which the vaccine can be stored safely, and its cost to the vulnerable poor. Oxford’s vaccine can be stored at fridge temperature, Moderna requires storage at -20 degrees Celsius; Pfizer at an Arctic -78°C.

Who will foot the bill, and how?

The comparative cost of the doses is equally disparate. One report estimates $39 for two doses for the Pfizer vaccine, $50 for two doses of Moderna, and a low $3 a dose for the Oxford. The Oxford loaves-and-fishes miracle might be made possible through Covax, a global initiative that hopes to distribute about two billion doses to 92 low- and middle-income countries at a maximum cost of $3 a dose.

On the far side of the once Iron Curtain, Russia has developed its own Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik-V) vaccine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered a massive ‘voluntary’ free vaccination programme against Covid-19. Western reports indicate that only half of Russia’s population are willing to be inoculated ‘voluntarily’.

In parallel, China has been concentrating on two state-sponsored vaccines — Sinovac and Sinopharm. Although they have not been tested to the nth degree, these Chinese vaccines, like Covid-19 itself, have been exported already to other countries, hopefully with less lethal consequences.

In Pakistan, while the opposition PDM is busy with loftier distractions, the PTI government is occupying itself — as befits a bankrupt country with no healthcare — with Covid-19 prevention rather than its cure. It has privatised social distancing, leaving it to its citizenry to imitate self-restraint.

From its depleting coffers, the government has earmarked $150 million towards the procurement of a vaccine, “initially to cover the most vulnerable five per cent of the population” (ie front-line health workers and people above the age of 65 years). Experts have yet to decide from which source the vaccine supplies will be procured, Western or Eastern, when or at what price. $150m doesn’t buy much these days.

As a country dependent upon Saudi handouts and Chinese subventions, Pakistan’s access to the vaccine will be determined by the quantity available with manufacturers, its ability to pay, and, most importantly for a country with shallow pockets, the burden and the incidence of cost. Who will foot the bill, and how? One popular news channel has given this wishful forecast: “Two vials of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine will cost Rs1,000 in Pakistan. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine’s vials will cost Rs6,000. The Moderna vaccine will cost Rs12,000.” Charity may begin at home. It is not elastic. It does not extend to pharmaceutical companies.

Some may remember the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s brave attempt in 1972 to introduce generic medicines. The public welcomed his initiative hoping it would lead to a reduction in prices. Bhutto was thwarted by powerful Western pharmaceutical firms and their local licensees, abetted by the country’s medical profession. Will some socially conscious corporate obtain a licence to manufacture a Covid-19 vaccine locally? Theoretically, yes, provided it could remain one step ahead of Covid-19’s ingenious mutations. Meanwhile, our health authorities may achieve greater success with the anti-Covid-19 vaccine than they have with the innocuous polio one. Only time and failure will tell.

Covid-19 had been as destructive to modern civilisation as the mad monk Rasputin was to the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty, the latest television series The Crown is to the present British monarchy, and chain-mail coups have been to democracy.

In London, on Dec 25 — a date he shares with Jesus Christ and Quaid-i-Azam M.A. Jinnah — PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif will celebrate his 71st birthday with his sons in Avenfield House, Mayfair. He was elected Pakistan’s prime minister thrice — in 1990, 1997, and in 2013. After three doses, he should have developed an immunity by now to that insidious virus — power.

His fellow prime ministers — Boris Johnson and Imran Khan — have offered him a cruel choice of birthday gifts — be locked down in London, or be locked up in Lahore.

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