

Dealing with Coronavirus Pandemic in the Bay of Bengal Region

By Prabir De

The coronavirus has had a devastating impact on the health and economies of countries in the Bay of Bengal. India, Bangladesh, and Nepal are the region's most affected countries in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths, followed by Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. It seems that Bhutan and Thailand, the least affected countries in the region, have successfully escaped the brunt of the pandemic. All these countries implemented strict lockdowns as early as March 2020, and the region's recovery rates have been relatively high. However, the devastation from the pandemic did not reach its peak until after the lifting of lockdowns. The economic costs of the pandemic have soared and are still climbing. Today, most Bay of Bengal countries are facing a second or third wave of COVID-19 infections. India has been badly hit by a huge second Coronavirus wave, registered daily cases over 400,000 since April 2021. The damage being done by these additional waves is more intense than their predecessors.

The Bay of Bengal countries are now looking for COVID-19 vaccines. India serves as the region's primary producer of immunizations. Two Indian pharmaceutical companies have launched vaccines, with five more firms in the race to launch their own treatments. When vaccines are developed in India, they are easier to distribute across the region. In terms of availability, accessibility, and affordability, India's vaccines are better suited to the needs of the region. In recent months, India has successfully supplied over 18 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to many Bay of Bengal countries, with Thailand being a notable exception. India has also ensured more supply of the vaccines in the neighborhood.

Bharat Biotech, an Indian company, indigenously developed the Covaxin vaccine. The vaccine Covishield, which the Oxford University and Astra Zeneca developed, is manufactured by the Serum Institute of India (SII). The advantage of Indian vaccines is affordability as well as safety. Thailand, on the other hand, has signed a deal with UK-based AstraZeneca to supply COVID-19 vaccinations. Bangkok-based Siam Bioscience signed a letter of intent with AstraZeneca to supply 200 million doses. Bangladesh's Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd. (BPL) has signed a deal with SII to acquire COVID-19 vaccines. Besides approaching India, some Bay of Bengal countries have also signed contracts with the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVAX facility for the vaccine (e.g., Sri Lanka, Bangladesh).

The major challenges for the Bay of Bengal countries are primarily threefold: secure vaccines at an affordable rate, supply the vaccines with the required technological sophistication, and ensure the safe and secure administration of vaccinations. At the same time, countries also must also provide adequate care for post-vaccination complications or emergencies.

Post-COVID-19 challenges and regional cooperation contours

In response to the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, three major calls to action have resounded across the region: strengthen regional cooperation in the public health sector and related services, enhance trade facilitation to augment supply chain resilience, and restore economic growth. The key message is that measures to mitigate COVID-19-related challenges must serve to reduce the costs of the pandemic in the region.

These calls to action suggest a need to broaden the scope of regional cooperation among the Bay of Bengal countries, with particular reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Prabir De, Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi, explains that "The major challenges for the Bay of Bengal countries are primarily threefold: secure vaccines at an affordable rate, supply the vaccines with the required technological sophistication, and ensure the safe and secure administration of vaccinations."

Across the Bay of Bengal, national public health strategies have primarily focused on containing the spread of COVID-19. The region has yet to witness a unified response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving beyond infection prevention and control, Bay of Bengal countries are now busy securing vaccines and protecting supply chains. Barring India, the remaining Bay of Bengal countries do not have the capability to manufacture advanced vaccines and the related medications. For this reason, India could become the vaccine hub for the entire Bay of Bengal region and beyond. The Bay of Bengal countries should give renewed focus to public health management and epidemiology research and training. Collective public health action will pave the way to control the virus within and across borders effectively. What can be done jointly and regionally?

First and foremost, countries must reach a consensus on a protocol concerning health security coordination and cooperation mechanisms in the Bay of Bengal region.

Second, countries need to strengthen and empower the Secretariat of BIMSTEC, the regional organization for the Bay of Bengal, to draw up a regional plan and strategy for public health management. Moreover, BIMSTEC member states should endorse the plan in a timely fashion.

Third, the Bay of Bengal countries could set up a BIMSTEC Facility to Fight the Pandemic (BFFP) and a BIMSTEC COVID-19 Fund (BCF) under the supervision of the BIMSTEC Secretariat. The modus operandi of the BFFP and BCF can be discussed and agreed upon through mutual consultation. The BFFP is a shared facility to improve the region's capacity to fight the pandemic. The Fund may encourage research projects aiming to develop diagnostics, vaccines, and therapeutics for not only COVID-19 but also other infectious diseases. Thailand, as the current BIMSTEC chair of public health, may lead the discussion. In parallel, a Bay of Bengal-wide Research and Development Blueprint may be drafted. The Blueprint should aim to improve inter-country coordination, develop new protocols and standard operating procedures, and other joint efforts.

Fourth, BIMSTEC may set up a network of Epidemiologists and Scientists to promote scholarly exchange, share research findings, and inspire medical innovation across the region. Additionally, the network could organize region-wide seminars and workshops, which would serve to deepen the regional knowledge pool and expand access to resources.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Health Development Agenda outlines efforts to strengthen regional disease surveillance networks and improve communications strategies in relation to the control and prevention of emerging infectious diseases. ASEAN's foresight offers an important lesson to BIMSTEC. ASEAN's experience recommends that the Bay of Bengal countries establish a meeting of senior public health officials to facilitate the development of a COVID-19 response mechanism.

Sri Lanka, the current Chair of BIMSTEC, will host the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in 2021. With the holding of the 5th BIMSTEC Summit, the organization's chairmanship will pass from Sri Lanka to Thailand. Public health, the sector which Thailand currently chairs, is likely to become the most demanded area of cooperation during Thailand's chairmanship of BIMSTEC.

Countries in this region have been deeply affected by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Regional integration can lead to substantial economic gains for the Bay of Bengal region, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period. However, the benefits of regionalism will likely depend on the spirit the Bay of Bengal countries bring to the integration effort.

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