Bangladeshi school reopenings threaten wave of COVID-19 infections among children

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More than a dozen students have been infected and one has died from COVID-19 after schools were reopened in Bangladesh this month.

On September 12, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ordered all schools, apart pre-primary facilities, to reopen with in-person classes. Educational institutions had been closed more than one and a half year, following the outbreak of the pandemic in Bangladesh in March 2020.

Government and education officials justified the reopenings by claiming that 97 percent of teachers and staff had been vaccinated. Most students, however, are not vaccinated and are highly vulnerable.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque said claims that students between 12 and 17 years will be vaccinated in October and those 18 years and over are being registered for vaccinations.

Inadequate and unsafe school infrastructure, however, makes it virtually impossible for students to maintain official health guidelines, including social distancing. This makes them highly vulnerable to infection and as transmitters of the deadly disease to their families.

The reopening of schools is a part of Hasina's attempts to claim the situation in Bangladesh is "normal." This is to justify the easing of pandemic control restrictions, which began on August 11, and allow major industries and many other businesses to resume full production. With the Bangladesh ruling elite prioritising corporate profits over human lives, most sectors of the economy are operating.

When schools began reopening in Bangladesh, the national test positivity rate was 7 percent, with some districts recording between 10 percent and 20 percent.

Epidemiologist AM Zakir Hussain warned in the *New Age* on September 13 that there was the danger of an infection "spike" of the virus. "What we see here is cluster transmission," adding, "cluster transmission can develop into community transmission and then may cause a countrywide spike of Covid cases."

Notwithstanding Bangladeshi government assurances, countries with high rates of vaccination are experiencing rising numbers of deaths and infections among students following the reopening of schools. In the US, where 54 percent of the population is vaccinated, "children and educators are dying of COVID-19 at a rate of at least three per day nationwide," the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on September 23.

Bangladesh, however, has one the lowest vaccination rates in the world, with some 21 million or 12.7 percent of its 165 million population with one dose and just 14 million or 8.5 percent having had a second dose. This is less than a third of the 31.4 percent of the world population's which is fully vaccinated.

As of September 24, the total number of COVID deaths in Bangladesh since March last year, was over 27,000 and total number of cases more than 1.5 million. Official, grossly understated, figures issued by the government are being used to claim the pandemic is under control. On September 21, the daily COVID test positivity rate fell below 5 percent, according to *New Age* .

While some online education was available in Bangladesh during the lockdown, most Bangladeshi parents cannot afford a computer or pay for internet access so their children can access online education. A study conducted by one Bangladeshi NGO found that about 56 percent of the country's students had no online facilities.

The school reopenings are already adversely impacting on students. The *Dhaka Tribune* reported that a grade eight student at Surendra Kumar Government Girls' High School at Manikganj Sadar died from COVID-19 on September 22. Her relatives told the newspaper: "She had been suffering from fever and sore throat since her first day of school on September 15."

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The young girl later suffered from shortness of breath and was rushed to Kurmitola General Hospital in Dhaka that day. The school was closed for a week when another student tested positive.

The *New Age* reported on September 24 that at least 14 primary and secondary school students at three educational institutions in Thakurgaon had tested positive for COVID-19, since schools reopened. A student from Ferdhora Government Primary School in Kotalipara sub-district of Gopalganj also contracted the virus on September 17, and her mother also tested positive.

Parents fear their children being infected. The father of one student told Al Jazeera, "COVID is still there, and I am not feeling comfortable sending my children to school." These concerns are reflected in declining attendance at schools.

The *Business Standard*, citing the education ministry data, reported on September 24, that student attendances across the country stood at 67 percent on September 12 but dropped to 59 percent by September 21.

The decision to reopen all educational institutions was made following discussions early this month between Education Minister Dipu Moni and senior authorities from universities and schools.

Moni recommended "gradual" and "phased" reopenings in line with government health guidelines. These included temperature monitoring of teachers and students, social distancing, provision of hand washing facilities and other minimal procedures.

While the schools opened September 12, university authorities could decide for themselves to reopen any time after September 27, subject to government's recommendation. This involved the vaccination of one dose for 70 to 80 percent of students, a retreat from the government's previous target of all university students being fully vaccinated by September.

Under this "gradual" reopening, school classes will be held for a limited number of days per week—initially one day per week for lower grade classes.

The 18-month closure of schools has seriously impacted on children and led to a high number of dropouts. The *Dhaka Tribune* reported on September 17 that 50,000 children may have dropped out in the district of Kurigram, alone. Frustrated students from Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar universities have also demonstrated, demanding the universities be reopened by the end of September.

The government has exploited the concerns of poor parents and university students to declare the necessity for all education facilities to reopen. But the conditions that undermined the education of millions of students during the pandemic were created by the Hasina government and its failure to provide online education facilities for all.

This is the case across the region. Citing a report based on research in India, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, UNICEF's regional director for South Asia George Laryea-Adjei said: "School closures in South Asia have forced hundreds of millions of children and their teachers to transition to remote learning in a region with low connectivity and device affordability…

"Even when a family has access to technology, children are not always able to access it. As a result, children have suffered enormous setbacks in their learning journey."

The inability of the ruling elites in Bangladesh and rest of South Asia to maintain proper online education is another expression of their incapacity to address any social and democratic issues confronting hundreds of millions of working people and oppressed masses in the region.

The eradication of the pandemic, leading to safe reopening of educational institutes, requires a global strategy to mobilise the world's vast resources and expertise.

This must include the closure of in-person education until the virus is eliminated, while providing all technological facilities to teachers and students to maintain online education, along with a full-range of health measures, including vaccines and a vast expansion in public health spending.

Such a program requires the independent political mobilisation of international working class based on socialist program.

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