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For several months, Bangladesh has faced a crisis in the Expanded Programme for Immunisation (EPI) vaccine supply, leaving many parents frustrated as they returned home without getting their children vaccinated.

However, programme managers have announced that procurement complications have been resolved, and the crisis is expected to end by January.

Vaccine shortages affecting newborns

In the first week of January, Chapainawabganj Sadar, a district on the western border, experienced severe shortages. Hasibur Rahman, whose newborn needed the first BCG vaccine, found himself caught in this predicament. "When our child was born, we contacted the neighbouring vaccination centre, only to be told there was no supply of the vaccine," he recounted.

The following week, after contacting health centre officials again, he was informed that the vaccine was available. Yet, upon arriving at the centre, he discovered there were no vaccination cards.

"This card is extremely important for children," Hasibur emphasised. "It serves as a document for birth registration and preserves life history." The absence of these cards further compounded the distress for families seeking timely vaccinations.

Widespread impact

The situation was similarly dire in the southern coastal district of Barguna. On January 15, Shahima Akhtar, mother of Asfia Tayyaba, along with 10 to 12 others, left Barguna General Hospital without receiving the necessary vaccines. "We went to the hospital on time, but they turned us away because they did not have the vaccine," she told Jago News. Fortunately, she managed to get her child vaccinated the following Wednesday.

National crisis acknowledged

Officials from the Expanded Immunisation Programme admitted that this issue extended beyond Chapainawabganj and Barguna, affecting the entire country.

Dr Abul Fazal Md Shahabuddin Khan, Programme Manager of EPI, confirmed, "This crisis arose due to delays in procurement. We have started sending vaccines across the country. Already, 40 per cent of the vaccines have been dispatched, and the remaining 60 per cent are in transit."

Dr Shahabuddin Khan assured, "We have paid the money, and once the full shipment of vaccines is completed, there will be no more crisis."

Preventive measures for future

Addressing concerns about potential future crises due to inherent delays in government procurement, Dr Shahabuddin Khan said, "We have taken measures to prevent such situations from recurring."

He elaborated on the ongoing efforts to streamline the procurement process and ensure consistent vaccine availability.

Comprehensive vaccination programme

Under the EPI programme, vaccines against nine critical diseases—tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio, hepatitis B, Haemophilus influenza B, measles, and rubella—are administered at different times. After each vaccination, patients receive cards detailing the date of the next scheduled vaccination. For older patients, the same information is updated on their existing cards. Additionally, women aged 15 to 49 receive five doses of the TT vaccine.

Looking ahead

With the immediate crisis seemingly resolved, focus now shifts towards ensuring long-term stability in vaccine supply. The success of Bangladesh's immunisation programme is recognised globally, and addressing these procurement challenges is crucial to maintaining that reputation. Parents like Hasibur Rahman and Shahima Akhtar hope that future efforts will prevent such disruptions, allowing every child to receive the essential protection they need.

As vaccines reach hospitals and centres across the country, the collective relief among healthcare workers and families alike underscores the importance of timely and accessible immunisation services. Ensuring the uninterrupted flow of vaccines remains a top priority for the health authorities, safeguarding the well-being of Bangladesh's youngest citizens.

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