

## Center for Research and Advocacy to Fight Tobacco (CRAFT) at PROGGA

### #1 Monitoring Tobacco Industry Activities during COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

(Data Collected 1 April- May 31, 2020)


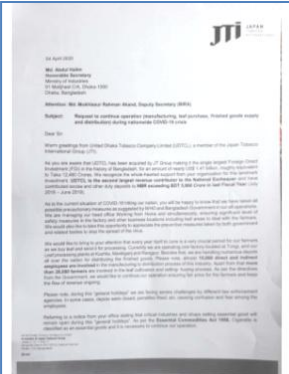
#### Background

- Bangladesh ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004.
- The cigarette market of Bangladesh, the eighth largest in the world, exceeds 86 billion sticks a year and is growing by about 2% annually.
- As the government of Bangladesh undertook COVID-19 control measures in March, PROGGA initiated to identify and register tobacco industry activities promoting their business locally and nationally.

#### Categorized Instances of Tobacco Industry Activity:

##### LOBBYING:

- Citing the Essential Commodities Act 1956 where cigarettes are listed as essential commodities, BAT Bangladesh<sup>1</sup> and JTI Bangladesh<sup>2</sup> managed to acquire special permissions respectively on 3 April and 5 April from the Ministry of Industries (MoI) to continue manufacturing, leaf purchase, finished goods supply, and distribution while the nation is only one week into the countrywide pandemic shutdown. Following protests from tobacco control groups,<sup>3</sup> on 18 May, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) issued a letter to MoI requesting for withdrawal of such special permission as well as calling for a temporarily ban on tobacco production and sale during COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>4</sup> Two days later, on 20 May, the MoI turned down the request by MoHFW.<sup>5</sup> The mounting pressure on MoHFW forced them to withdraw their letter of request itself.<sup>6</sup>

	
<p align="center"><b>Letter of Request by BATB to the Ministry of Industries</b></p>	<p align="center"><b>Letter of Request by JTI to the Ministry of Industries</b></p>

<sup>1</sup>[https://moind.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moind.portal.gov.bd/notices/a0a0de3f\\_7e11\\_4635\\_bb23\\_1e1e2636fe80/BAT%20Letter.pdf](https://moind.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moind.portal.gov.bd/notices/a0a0de3f_7e11_4635_bb23_1e1e2636fe80/BAT%20Letter.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>[https://moind.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moind.portal.gov.bd/notices/b270dd1d\\_0435\\_4d09\\_8731\\_0ad7af087fbe/Letter%20United%20Dhaka%20Tobacco.pdf](https://moind.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moind.portal.gov.bd/notices/b270dd1d_0435_4d09_8731_0ad7af087fbe/Letter%20United%20Dhaka%20Tobacco.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><https://bangladeshpost.net/posts/ministry-bashed-for-order-over-tobacco-production-32047>

<sup>4</sup><https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/health-ministry-requests-halt-tobacco-production-sales>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/20/tobacco-ban-industries-ministry-quashes-health-division-s-proposal>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.jajaidinbd.com/todays-paper/last-page/100482/>

- On 13 April, Akij Bidi Industry managed to acquire a special permission from the District Deputy Commissioner's Office of Lalmonirhat to open its fourth factories within the district's jurisdiction.<sup>7</sup>

### **DONATIONS/"PHILANTHROPIES":**

- British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB):
  - Donated around 280 pieces of Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs) to the Central Medical Stores Depot to be distributed in government hospitals, located in the capital, Dhaka and the port city of Chittagong.<sup>8</sup>
  - Introduced their brand of hand sanitizer, 'Shudhdho',<sup>9,10</sup> and donated more than 1,000,00<sup>11</sup> units of it through their newly founded sister concern, **Prerona Foundation**<sup>12</sup>. Distributions were made to the following:
    - **Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC)**, to be distributed among its 8000 cleaners and mosquito control staffs.<sup>13</sup>
    - **Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)** to be distributed among their force members.<sup>14</sup>
    - **Bangladesh Police** to be distributed among the police staffs.<sup>15</sup>
    - **Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB)** to be distributed among their force staffs.<sup>16</sup>
    - **Bangladesh Army** to be distributed among their force members.<sup>17</sup>
    - Deputy Commissioner (DC) of various districts.<sup>18</sup>
    - **Bidyanondo** to distribute 5,000 units of hand sanitizer among communities of remote areas.<sup>19</sup>
- Japan Tobacco International (JTI) Bangladesh is providing support to approximately 60,000 people across Bangladesh under a special COVID-19 fund. The fund has been disbursed to provide essential food and hygiene commodities to underprivileged communities as well as protective gears to high-risk frontline workers.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tobaccoindustrywatchbd.org/contents/uploaded/12.jpg?>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bangladeshpost.net/posts/professional-bodies-ngos-donate-ppe-for-public-hospitals-30125>

<sup>9</sup> 'Shudhdho' is the in-house sanitizer produced by BAT Bangladesh using its manufacturing facilities and distribute by its newly founded Prerona Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/companies/tobacco-factory-operation-amid-shutdown-sparks-debate-67771>

<sup>11</sup> [https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=138026754488404&id=106933307597749&\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=138026754488404&id=106933307597749&__tn__=-R)

<sup>12</sup> The governing board members of Prerona Foundation are the top executives of BAT Bangladesh including its Managing Director Mr. Shehzad Munim, Head-Legal & External Affairs Ms. Mubina Asaf, Head of External Affairs Mr. Sheikh Shabab Ahmed, Regulatory Affairs Manager Mr. Anowarul Amin.

<sup>13</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/106933307597749/photos/a.113270563630690/138431987781214/?type=3&theater>

<sup>14</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/106933307597749/photos/a.113270563630690/130576458566767/?type=3&theater>

<sup>15</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/106933307597749/photos/a.113270563630690/129660305325049/?type=3&theater>

<sup>16</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/106933307597749/photos/a.113270563630690/128937842063962/?type=3&theater>

<sup>17</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/106933307597749/photos/a.113270563630690/128716082086138/?type=3&theater>

<sup>18</sup> [http://joyjatra.com/bn/2020/05/06/248603.html?fbclid=IwAR22P4jj12cceEXTSmeW3nt7LEeywKJjni8k3G\\_CT2XlpsEvlq91MLV94H8#.Xseh6\\_8zbiW](http://joyjatra.com/bn/2020/05/06/248603.html?fbclid=IwAR22P4jj12cceEXTSmeW3nt7LEeywKJjni8k3G_CT2XlpsEvlq91MLV94H8#.Xseh6_8zbiW)

<sup>19</sup> [https://web.facebook.com/Bidyanondo/posts/2920087884693016?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=H-R](https://web.facebook.com/Bidyanondo/posts/2920087884693016?__tn__=H-R)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/246596>

 <p><b>BAT</b> A BETTER TOMORROW</p> <p>An initiative of <b>শ্রেণী</b></p> <p><b>BAT BANGLADESH OPERATIONS TEAM</b></p> <p>spearheads the production of 'Shudhho', an in-house sanitizer, to protect communities</p> <p><b>শুধু</b></p>	 <p><b>শ্রেণী</b> ফাইভস্টারের একটি উদ্যোগ</p> <p><b>BATB officials handed over hand sanitizer to the Mayor of DNCC</b></p>
<p>হান্ড স্যানিটাইজার</p> <p><b>শুধু</b></p> <p>শুধুই বাস্তবিক বিতরণের অন্য</p> <p><b>শ্রেণী</b> ফাইভস্টারের একটি উদ্যোগ</p> <p>“যারা আমাদের সুরক্ষায় সদা তৎপর তাদের সুরক্ষায় পাশে থাকছি আমরা”</p> 	<p>হান্ড স্যানিটাইজার</p> <p><b>শুধু</b></p> <p>শুধুই বাস্তবিক বিতরণের অন্য</p> <p><b>শ্রেণী</b> ফাইভস্টারের একটি উদ্যোগ</p> 
<p><b>BATB officials handed over hand sanitizer to the Director General of RAB</b></p>	<p><b>BATB officials handed over hand sanitizer to the Inspector General of Police</b></p>
<p>হান্ড স্যানিটাইজার</p> <p><b>শুধু</b></p> <p>শুধুই বাস্তবিক বিতরণের অন্য</p> <p><b>শ্রেণী</b> ফাইভস্টারের একটি উদ্যোগ</p> <p>“যারা আমাদের সুরক্ষায় সদা তৎপর তাদের সুরক্ষায় পাশে থাকছি আমরা”</p> 	<p><b>শ্রেণী</b> ফাইভস্টারের একটি উদ্যোগ</p>  <p><b>BATB's branded hand sanitizer 'Shudhho' distributed among police force.</b></p>
<p><b>BATB officials handed over hand sanitizer to the Director of Military Operations</b></p>	<p><b>BATB's branded hand sanitizer 'Shudhho' distributed among police force.</b></p>

- Akij Group, parent company of Akij Tobacco:
  - Provided medical equipment and financial assistance to Kurmitola General Hospital and 100 isolation beds to Bangladesh Police Hospital for doctors, nurses and patients.<sup>21, 22</sup>
  - Distributed masks and bottles of their branded drinking water, Spa, among the police force of Dhaka Range.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup><https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/akij-stands-by-police-medical-staff-fighting-against-covid-19-1587811448>

<sup>22</sup><https://barta24.com/details/national/87451/akij-group-bangladesh-government-corona>

<sup>23</sup><https://tbsnews.net/companies/akij-stands-beside-covid-19-fighters-73783>





**Akij Group Chairman handed over masks and drinking water to the Inspector General of Police for police staffs**



**Akij Group Chairman handed over medical equipment to the Home Minister for the Police Hospital**

- Abul Khair Group, the parent company of **Abul Khair Tobacco**, started to deliver free of cost oxygen to the hospitals in Chittagong for COVID-19 treatment. The company procured 300 cylinders with the capacity of 1.4 cubic meters each for this purpose.<sup>24</sup>



**Abul Khair Group Delivering Oxygen for Free to Hospitals**

- Vergon Tobacco distributed essential commodities (rice, pulses, oil, and salt) among 200 poor families.<sup>25</sup>



**Vergon Tobacco Distributing Essential Items Among Poor**

<sup>24</sup><https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/abul-khair-group-provides-oxygen-covid-19-treatment-80479>

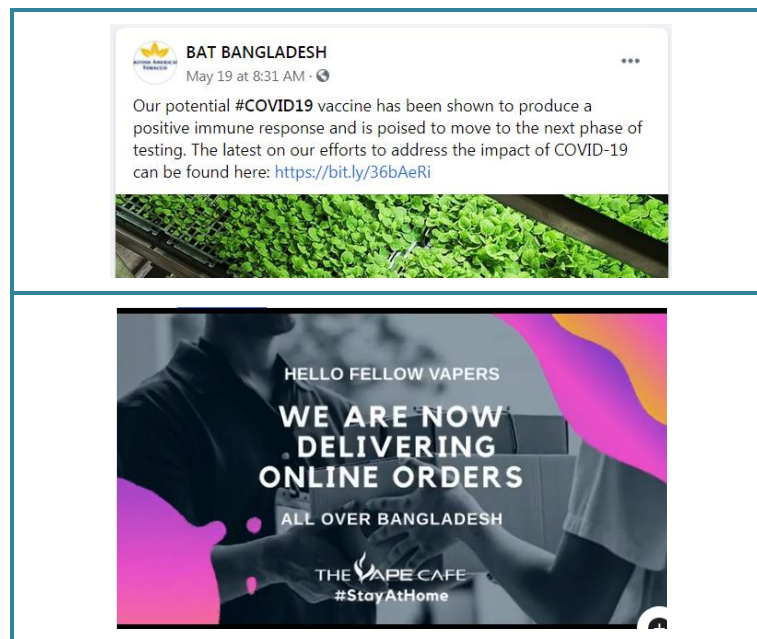
<sup>25</sup><http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/245055>

### SPREADING MISINFORMATION:

- A controversial study was promoted in the media. The study claimed that smokers may be 80 percent less likely to suffer from novel coronavirus than non-smokers are.<sup>26</sup>

### PROMOTING CORPORATE IMAGE:

- BAT promoted its activity in the media that a potential Covid-19 vaccine, derived from tobacco leaves, is ready for human trials.<sup>27</sup>
- Bidi industries claimed that the multinational tobacco companies (i.e. BATB, JTI) are operating their business well off even during the COVID-19 crisis, because of automated machines for producing cigarettes but the bidi industry, a labor-intensive industry, and its workers are hapless following the closure of bidi factories.<sup>28</sup>
- Tobacco companies continue to purchase and sell tobacco leaf under the supervision of the Department of Agriculture Marketing (DAM).<sup>29</sup>
- BATB executives appeared in live broadcasts of various Facebook pages where they promoted their corporate image to the fullest.<sup>30</sup>
- Vape shops are offering home delivery of their products to customers under the pretense of following government policy to encourage people to stay home.<sup>31,32</sup>



<sup>26</sup><https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/smokers-80-less-likely-severely-suffer-covid-19-french-study-77467>

<sup>27</sup><https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/bat-says-potential-covid-19-vaccine-using-tobacco-leaves-ready-human-trials>

<sup>28</sup><https://www.bangladeshpost.net/posts/cigarette-cos-doing-brisk-business-bidi-workers-face-trouble-30786>

<sup>29</sup><https://dam.portal.gov.bd/site/notices/70b7e7f5-9701-4c5d-8a48-88f9d915a2df/>

<sup>30</sup>[https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1165872303755788&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1165872303755788&ref=watch_permalink)

<sup>31</sup><https://web.facebook.com/thevapecafebd/videos/248400623026767/>

<sup>32</sup><https://web.facebook.com/vapeclubbd/posts/2180071765471495>