

When examinations hurt children



NEWSPAPER headlines and photos on January 1 displayed jubilant children with new textbooks distributed to schools around the country as a new year's gift. The previous day's media display was also upbeat featuring fortunate students who secured the coveted GPA-5 score in the Primary Completion Examination (PECE) and Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) Examination.

A New Year's Day radio broadcast of BBC Bangla reported that at least three children committed suicide because they did not achieve the expected results in exams. A 14-year old girl in Barishal hanged herself when she learned that she did not secure GPA-5 in her JSC exam. Another adolescent girl from Goshaighat in Shariatpur took her own life because she failed in the JSC exam. A boy at Kamlakanda in Netrokona did the same when he failed in the annual class six exam.

These are devastating tragedies for the children, their loved ones, and for society. Less dramatic but damaging on a large scale is the fact that the vast majority of children taking the PECE and JSC exams, who do not score GPA-5 (87 percent and 97 percent respectively) are actually branded as failures or semi-failures and less than competent.

It should not be hard to guess the effect on self-esteem and self-confidence of the children for being placed under high competitive pressure and labelled as incompetent.

BBC Bangla quoted clinical psychologist Ishrat Sharmeen: "Adolescent boys and girls are highly emotional and sensitive and can resort to extreme steps if placed under high social and emotional pressure." Sharmeen went on, "They may also indulge in copy-cat action when they hear of what other children did."

Muhibul Hasan Chowdhury, Deputy

Minister of the Ministry of Education observed, "Most countries conduct assessment of student learning, but the grading of students has made it highly competitive." He said, "We want to bring about change in assessment so that real competencies for life rather than rote learning can be measured."

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How have the primary school and lower secondary exams turned into a source of anxiety and stress for children, parents and arguably school authorities and teachers? And why are the decision makers in the education sector so hesitant to retrace their steps?

The question has been raised persistently by education researchers, child development

experts, and parents ever since the nationwide public examination at the end of class 5 was introduced in 2010. Since then, highly competitive, high-stake, national, centrally administered public examinations at the end of grades 5 and 8 were added to the already existing SSC and HSC exams at the end of grade 10 and 12.

The counter-productive and perverse consequences of too many public exams have been well documented. A surge of private coaching centres, commercial guidebooks, rote memorisation, desperation for guessing questions, cheating in exams, question leaks, incentive for authorities to show high pass rates and so on have been identified. (Education Watch Report 2014, Whither Grade 5 Examination, CAMPE.) And now arises the tragedy of young lives being lost.

As I have written earlier, "It is not that all exams and student assessment should be ditched. The value of traditional school-

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tests for class 5 and 4, and two-hour tests for class 8. The key feature of these would be test items reflecting basic skills and competencies and not the specific contents of the various textbooks for different subjects.

Students would receive competency scores without GPA categories and no one would be declared a failure. The results would be used to assess performance of schools and the system as well as to identify the need for further remedial support for students, teachers and schools. An adaptation of the National Student Assessment currently conducted on a nationwide sampling every two years can be the model for primary and junior secondary competency assessment design and marking.

School-based annual half-yearly and annual exams would continue and be based on subjects and text book content for grade four onward (with no formal exam up to class 3). A student's performance would be judged by a combination of school score and the competency test score with equal weight to each. The combined score may be used for admission to the lower secondary and higher secondary levels.

The measures proposed need to be considered urgently because the consequences of not doing so are grave for children and the education system. With dedicated effort, due attention to the technical aspects of student assessment, dialogue with stakeholders including teachers and parents, and decisive policy steps, the change is implementable within the year.

A basic premise of the move is to eliminate the high-stake character of the current arrangements. This means that no one needs to be concerned about being affected adversely by the reform. This message has to be conveyed clearly to all. And implementation of the competency-based assessment has to be carried out competently.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University.



PHOTO: STAR

Why is most of Asia looking away from Myanmar?

KAMAL AHMED

THE latest resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly condemning rights abuses against Rohingya Muslims and other minority groups in Myanmar was the third such resolution on the subject. It was approved by 134 votes in favour and nine against while 28 nations abstained. A vote so close to the hearing at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over a petition seeking interim measures to prevent further killings and abuses with genocidal intent demands closer scrutiny to understand global community's attitude towards the Rohingya crisis.

China and Russia's opposition to any international condemnation of Myanmar was not unexpected as both of them in the past had supported so-called security operations against alleged insurgency. Had these two veto-wielding nations allowed the UN Security Council to find a way forward to resolve the crisis or at the least refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC), victims of those atrocities carried out by Myanmar security forces would have gotten some hope for justice. Apparently, there's too little Bangladesh can do to win them over.

The other seven nations who voted against the resolution were Belarus, Cambodia, Peoples Democratic Republic of Lao, Philippines, Vietnam, Zimbabwe and Myanmar. Records show that these nations too have consistently sided with Myanmar. All these countries for decades have been criticised for their human rights records. Among them, Cambodia has bitter experience of dealing with genocide. It had cooperated fully with international jurists and experts to hold some of the perpetrators to justice. But, the current authoritarian regime's

appalling human rights records in the domestic front and reliance on China for military and economic aid explain its inability to support international actions against Myanmar.

Nations which abstained in the vote were even more surprising—India, Japan, Bhutan, Burundi, Cameroon, CAR, DPRK, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Kenya, Lesotho, Mongolia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nauru, Nepal, Palau, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Serbia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Tanzania, Venezuela and Zambia. Among those abstentions, names of Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka along with India—all members of the South Asian club, Saarc—raise serious questions about our relations with our closest neighbours.

Another notable factor is the high number of Asian nations that either opposed the resolution or abstained from voting. Can these abstentions in a vote condemning gross violations of international law and obligations be called anything other than abetting such heinous crimes? If anyone makes a map of genocide abettors, it will certainly put Asia to shame.

The resolution approved by the General Assembly condemned human rights abuses against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims and other minorities, including arbitrary arrests, torture, rape and deaths in detention. It called for an immediate cessation of fighting and hostilities. It also expressed alarm at an independent international fact-finding mission's finding "of gross human rights violations and abuses suffered by Rohingya Muslims and other minorities" by the security forces, which the mission said "undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law." These gravest

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so-called neutrality of countries like Nepal, Bhutan and many others in Asia must be a reason for concern.

In order to mount a more effective campaign against Myanmar, Bangladesh needs more help from within the region. But it seems that accepting mediatory role by China might have wider consequences as too many of our Asian neighbours will prefer to allow more time to the regional heavyweight to play its role. There's no denying that China considers Myanmar of much greater strategic value than Bangladesh. Its mediatory role, therefore, may not be of much help for creating a conducive environment for Rohingya repatriation.

And early signs suggest that the Chinese mediation is not sufficient to convince Rohingya refugees to trust Myanmar authority's promise of safe return without guaranteeing their citizenship.

Certainly, repatriation of more than one million refugees should be our top priority. But it is increasingly becoming clear that unless the international community takes a firm stand against the regime that committed such heinous crimes against its own people and ensures that justice is served, no meaningful negotiation for repatriation of the persecuted Rohingyas is possible.

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PHOTO: STAR

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY



JANUARY 5, 1933
Golden Gate Bridge construction begun

In San Francisco on this day in 1933, construction began on the Golden Gate Bridge, a suspension bridge that once boasted the longest main span in the world and that has been celebrated for the magnificence of its setting.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Packing box

6 God with a hammer

10 Dance record

11 Puts on the payroll

13 Hollywood deal maker

14 Rewrite for the screen

15 Mover's truck

16 Uncooked

18 Black goo

19 Lionel Richie song

22 Print measures

23 God of war

24 Garlic unit

27 Ocean chasm

28 Annoy

29 Opposite of post-

30 Programmer's

goof

35 Dripping

36 Complete

37 Gorilla or gibbon

38 Hirsch of "Into the Wild"

40 Said with a twang

42 Matt of movies

43 Wide awake

44 Waiting room call

45 Endures

DOWN

1 Long for

2 One of Lear's daughters

3 Add a change to

4 Malleable metal

5 Radical

6 Liquefies

7 Concealed

8 Speaker's skill

9 Does some roadwork

12 Emphasis

17 Wagon puller

20 Flat

21 Record company

24 Competed in a regatta

25 Center, for one days

26 From bygone days

27 Weapons store

29 Letter before omega

31 News item

32 Desert spots

33 Dizzying designs

34 Trappers' wares

39 Smoked salmon

41 As done by

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

T	D	I	N	S		A	J	A	R	E
U	L	N	A	E		B	O	R	E	D
B	E	E	P	E	R	S		N	S	O
A	T	E		P	E	E	P	E	R	S
S	E	D	G	E	S		A	N	T	I
S	A	G	S		O	N	E	S	E	C
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I	N	N		J	E	E	P	E	R	S
L	E	T	M	E		A	L	G	A	E
L	I	L	A	C			M	E	E	T
D	E	N	T			S	A	R	A	

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott