

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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Can we have free, fair and credible elections?  
*Time for the EC to deliver on its promise*

TODAY, Dhaka dwellers will turn out in droves to vote for the candidate(s) of their choice. Or so we hope, despite the fact that in the Dhaka North City Corporation mayoral election held last year, the turnout was extraordinarily low, signifying the general apathy that has developed in people regarding the electoral process. We call upon the people to exercise their right to franchise and demand a free and fair election from the Election Commission, which is their right as citizens of a democratic country.

Today, we hope voters will not be harassed on their way to the polls, polling agents of all candidates will be allowed to carry out their duties without fear and coercion, and no voter will be intimidated or tricked into voting for a candidate s/he did not choose. We hope so, despite the allegations of such untoward incidents having happened during the 2018 national elections. Unfortunately, the EC did little to address the allegations of harassment of opposition candidates and their supporters, absence of opposition party polling agents, stuffing of ballots, orchestrated lines at polling centers, voter intimidation and so on. We pray that this time the EC will do their due diligence and ensure safety and security of the polling agents as well as that of the voters, and that they would take immediate and exemplary action against miscreants when they receive any complaint. We hope the law enforcement agencies will provide protection to those they are supposed to protect—the public—and not any one party.

We hope there will be no irregularities in the first-ever major EVM polls in the country, and no voter shall feel their vote was “stolen” from them. We hope so, despite the hurried and undemocratic way in which EVMs were instituted, and despite fears that election officers can override a certain number of votes in the absence of Voter Verifiable Paper Trial (VVPAT)—a printed receipt of sorts which shows voters that their votes have been cast and for whom. We call upon the EC, as we have in the past, to ensure that concerns of the opposition parties and the public are quelled regarding the (mis)use of EVMs.

Today, we hope the EC will rise to the occasion and fulfill its obligation to the people by ensuring a free, fair and peaceful election and put to rest all concerns regarding their unsatisfactory performance in ensuring a level playing field in the months and days leading to the polls.

Finally, we hope whoever is elected today will fulfill the promises they made in their election manifestos (even if they were published too late) and make Dhaka into a city that its inhabitants are proud to call home.

Justice for Renu  
*Delay in filing charge sheet unacceptable*

JUSTICE for a victim of “mob justice” may sound like an oxymoron for those uninitiated in the fundamental principles of law, but it is not—and for Taslima Begum Renu, the struggle for justice remains as real as the day she died, six months ago, in the hands of a bloodthirsty mob. Renu remains a painful reminder of what happens when individuals take it upon themselves to mete out “justice” or when the existing legal system fails to protect the innocents. According to a report by this daily, the 40-year-old had gone to Badda last July to inquire about the admission process of a local school when a crowd apparently suspected her of being a child-lifter. So they beat her mercilessly until she was dead. The incident caused quite a stir then, especially after videos of the grisly attack went viral on social media. Six months on, however, initial probe into the matter seems to have hit a roadblock. No charge sheet has been filed either.

We are at a loss to describe the trauma and sufferings that Renu’s family has gone through since. Renu’s two children now live with their aunt, while her former husband occasionally visits them. The youngest of the two, barely four years old, doesn’t even know her mother is dead. As the investigation drags on, and the case risks being tossed around among different departments of the law enforcement, the family also risks being twice victimised: first Renu’s murder, now a long shadow over their life cast by the uncertain legal journey.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh’s brush with such violence is neither new nor infrequent, although cases of mob beatings seldom, if ever, end in conviction. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, between 2011 and June of 2019, some 826 people were killed in mob beatings across the country. During this period, the highest number of killings was recorded in 2015 (135), while Dhaka was witness to the highest number of deaths (350). The number of people killed in 2019 was 65, according to another ASK report. Experts have often cited lack of faith in the criminal justice system and lack of its conviction rates as potential reasons for such incidents. But as stories of victims like Renu show, the tragedy doesn’t end with their deaths. It goes on to scar their loved ones too, possibly for the rest of their life. It is the state’s responsibility to end this disturbing cycle and compensate the victim’s family for the losses suffered. We also urge the authorities to ensure swift trial of the Renu case so that the family is spared the additional pain of a costly, protracted legal battle and the culprits are brought to justice. This will also send a message to all that mob justice can’t—and won’t—go unpunished.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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We salute the martyrs of the Language Movement

February is a month very close to the hearts of Bangladeshis all across the globe. Unprecedented history was made on February 21, 1952 when the sons of this land laid their lives for their mother tongue. It is for those brave souls that we are able to speak in the Bangla language today, and are so proud of it. The day is now commemorated worldwide as International Mother Language Day as we remember the martyrs with deep gratitude and reverence.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Get up, stand up: don’t give up the flight

BLOWN’ IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BY the time you will be reading this piece, I “should” be on board our national carrier, Biman Bangladesh. I write “should” because nothing about Biman can be said with certainty; listen to the passenger’s mumbling at the boarding bay or lend your eyes and ears to the incidents on the aircraft itself, you are sure to get an endorsement. Our ticketing agent convinced us that with the inclusion of top-of-the-range airliners, Biman has shaped up quite significantly. And we looked forward to being proud on board our national flagbearer.

By the time this piece will be “consumed”, I “should” be landing in Dhaka, after my sojourn from the KSA, worrying about my ride home amidst the travel ban due to the city corporation elections. While some of you will be in an electoral mood, leafing through the poll features in your favourite newspapers, scrolling through their online versions or surfing through the breaking waves of news to ponder whether your act of franchise today has actually mattered or not, how much difference that the dark-marker around your thumb has made, or how much difference the city fathers will make to this unreal city—I shall be worrying about coronavirus, luggage trouble, immigration hassles and so on. Hopefully, I shall be in a mood to ruminate on the discrepancy between the service that was promised and the one that was delivered in our “home in the air”.

No matter how high you are in the sky, you must think of the ground. I guess that is why they say “grounded in reality”. At the risk of being banal, let me point out one brutal reality: Biman’s service epitomises the poor service quality that plagues our entire public system. Then why expect more? Well, Biman is an international player, and for its foreign passengers, it is potentially their first brush with our culture. Any expatriate or an NRB who has lived abroad for a considerable time gets the taste of the country’s hospitality, warmth, sophistication, cuisine, art and culture through its airlines. Say, if you are on board a Chinese plane, it will make sure that you have an understanding of its ongoing new year’s celebration. But not Biman! There is no way you can tell that Bangladesh is celebrating Mujib Year or counting days for its golden jubilee.

Biman’s in-flight entertainment system, from which you are supposed to get your infotainment, gives you the impression that it has been designed as PowerPoint

slides by a sixth grader. Let me enlighten the doubters. The information section has the following entries: Bangladesh fact file; Biman history; Coastline of Bangladesh; Discover Bangladesh; Flowers of Bangladesh; Six seasons of Bangladesh; Green valleys of Bangladesh; and MD&CEO message. The pages are static with just one low-res image, and the scroll-down options were not functional.

The information on Bangladesh seems like a page from a BCS guide, which includes land area, current population and projected population of 20 crore by 2025. The essay on seasons must have been written by a GPA-5 SSC student. Here is an excerpt: “The country has six seasons which come in turn and in different decor and beauties. The summer

addition of Dreamliners has stirred up further expectations. Yet the condition of the plane, Arun Alo, and its interior, poor quality accessories surprised me. Five years for a plane is nothing; one expects it to be in mint condition. The seat monitor and the remote were, for lack of a better word, cheap. The buttons were not working, and the remote screamed street quality. I don’t want to believe that the quality of the products was compromised, but the proof was in the pudding. Speaking of pudding, in an entire eight-hour-long flight, only one meal was served. The served *daal-bhaji-bhaat* at our uni canteen should not have cost me more than Tk 30, and I thanked my platinum god for the pre-boarding lunch and sparing me from hunger.

Istanbul. Will our new city fathers have such a vision to merge what goes up in the sky and what comes down to earth? Say, will they consider mandatory greening of all rooftops near the airport area so that visitors land in a scenic zone, instead of the present seeming concrete jungle hit by dust storm.

It would be nice to see our city parents conceive an integrated plan. The other shot in the arm to stem the rot can be to request our Honourable Prime Minister to travel incognito in the manner of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The idea dawned on me while listening to the anecdote of Darb Zubaidah, the princess who along with her husband was known for excavating canals and installing wells for the welfare of pilgrims along the



Something is perennially wrong with Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

PHOTO: BIMAN

comes with the scorching heats and presents the sunny days. The excessive heat sucks up all the water and leaves the mud dry. The farmer yearns for the rain, the young juveniles come out in the streets to sing the song for rain ‘*Allah megh de, pani de...*’

Other entries have a similar tone where some creative genius thought it pertinent to show off their textbook memory. You may wonder why I even bothered reading all these. Well, my seat audio socket for the headphone was missing. I did not mind it—after all, I was on an Umrah flight, where looking for the popular cultural material would have been inappropriate anyway. I still remember the hyped-up inclusion of the five 777-300 ER Boeing planes to the Biman Bangladesh fleet under our PM’s initiative about five years ago. The

To make matters worse, the plane started an hour late, which, according to the steward, was for technical trouble while the captain claimed it to be a maintenance issue. I took it as a sign that something was perennially wrong with Biman. The public perception is, Biman has been exploited as a goose that lays golden eggs (or should I say “bars”) for many for a long time. Then again, I am not in a position to comment as my knowledge is limited to the corruption or smuggling stories that surface every now and then.

As a student of culture, I can simply comment on the in-flight AV system. There was no documentary, no video, no infographic markers, no audio-visual effect. By contrast, look at Turkish Airlines that has commissioned Ridley Scott to make a movie, “The Journey”, to showcase

roads from Baghdad to Makkah. Both Princess Zubaidah and her husband Caliph Harun al-Rashid were engaged in endless philanthropic projects. Harun was particularly receptive to what he had heard while wandering through the streets at night. It would be grand to see our PM paying surprise visits to the economy coaches one of these days or taking an alley without entourage one day to see the level of compromises that are being made on the public money released from the exchequer.

The old tunes must change as we approach various national milestones.

P.S. Now you know why I have given a twist to a classic Bob Marley song.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Will the coronavirus cause a major growth slowdown in China?



SHANG-JIN WEI

THE panic generated by the new coronavirus, 2019-nCov, which originated in Wuhan, one of China’s largest cities and a major domestic transport hub, reminds many of the fear and uncertainty at the peak of the 2003 SARS crisis. China’s stock market, after rising for months, has reversed itself in recent days, and global markets have followed suit, apparently reflecting concerns about the epidemic’s impact on the Chinese economy and global growth. Are these worries justified?

My baseline projection is that the coronavirus outbreak will get worse before it gets better, with infections and deaths possibly peaking in the second or third week of February. But I expect that both the Chinese authorities and the World Health Organization (WHO) will declare the epidemic to be under control by early April.

Under this baseline scenario, my best estimate is that the virus will have only a limited negative economic impact. Its effect on Chinese GDP growth rate in 2020 is likely to be small, perhaps a decline on the order of 0.1 percentage point. The effect in the first quarter of 2020 will be big, perhaps lowering growth by one percentage point on an annualised basis, but this will be substantially offset by above-trend growth during the rest of the year. The impact on world GDP growth will be even smaller.

Such a prediction recalls the experience of the 2003 SARS crisis: a big decline in China’s GDP growth in the second quarter of that year was then largely offset by higher growth in the subsequent two quarters. While the full-year growth rate in 2003 was about 10 percent, many investment banks’ economists over-predicted the epidemic’s negative impact on growth. Looking at annual real GDP

growth rates from 2000 to 2006, it is very hard to see a SARS effect in the data.

Some fear that the epidemic’s timing—at the start of the week-long Chinese New Year celebration, and in the middle of traditional school-break travels—will exacerbate the economic fallout by keeping many people away from shops, restaurants, and travel hubs. But three important factors may limit the virus’s impact.

First, in contrast to the SARS outbreak, China is now in the Internet commerce age, with consumers increasingly doing their shopping online. Much of the reduction in offline sales owing to the

the year. The short-term negative impact is thus likely to be concentrated among restaurants, hotels, and airlines.

Second, all reports indicate that the Wuhan coronavirus is less deadly than SARS (although it may have a faster rate of transmission initially). Equally important, the Chinese authorities have been much swifter than they were during the SARS episode in moving from controlling information to controlling the spread of the virus. By implementing aggressive measures to isolate actual and potential patients from the rest of the population, the authorities have improved

will be even more limited. During the last half-decade, many major central banks have developed models to gauge the impact of a slowdown in China on their economies. These models were not built with the current health crisis in mind, but they do take into account trade and financial linkages between China and their respective economies.

As a rule of thumb, the negative impact of a decrease in China’s GDP growth on the US and European economies is about one-fifth as large in percentage terms. For example, if the current coronavirus epidemic lowers China’s growth rate by 0.1 percentage point, then growth in the US and Europe is likely to slow by about 0.02 percentage point. The impact on Australia’s economy may be twice as large, given its stronger commodity-trade and tourism links with China, but a 0.04-percentage-point reduction in growth is still small.

Such calculations assume that the coronavirus does not spread widely to these countries and cause direct havoc. This currently seems unlikely, given the still low number of cases outside China.

Of course, the impact on China and other economies could be more severe if the coronavirus crisis were to last much longer than this baseline scenario assumes. In that case, it is important to remember that Chinese policymakers still have room for both monetary and fiscal expansion: the banking-sector reserve ratio is relatively high, and the share of public-sector debt to GDP is still manageable compared to China’s international peers. By using this policy space when necessary, China’s authorities could limit the ultimate impact of the current health crisis.

The coronavirus outbreak is understandably causing alarm in China and elsewhere. But from an economic perspective, it is too early to panic.

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virus will likely be offset by an increase in online purchases. And most of the vacations cancelled today will probably be replaced by future trips, because better-off households have already set aside a holiday travel budget.

Many factories have scheduled production stoppages during the Chinese New Year holidays anyway, so the timing of the epidemic may minimise the need for further shutdowns. Similarly, many government offices and schools had planned holiday closures independently of the virus outbreak. The government has just announced an extension of the holiday period, but many companies will find ways to make up the lost time later in

their chances of containing the epidemic much sooner. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the lost economic output this quarter will be offset by increased activity in the remainder of the year.

Third, whether or not China’s trade negotiators realised the severity of the Wuhan virus when they signed the “phase one” trade deal with the United States on January 15, the timing of the agreement has turned out to be fortunate. By greatly increasing its imports of facemasks and medical supplies from the US (and elsewhere), China can simultaneously tackle the health crisis and fulfil its promise under the deal to import more goods.

The virus’s impact on other economies