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PM's timely message to her cabinet

Will they heed it?

WE commend Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her prudent directives to her cabinet colleagues, saying that they should build houses for the homeless instead of indiscriminately setting up Bangabandhu's murals to commemorate "Mujib Borsho"—the birth centenary of Bangabandhu.

The sentiment behind the remark is a reflection of the vision of Bangabandhu in developing a nation where poverty and hunger would not exist and every citizen would have the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter guaranteed. But another reason why the PM made this remark was in reaction to excesses done in the name of observing "Mujib Borsho". For instance, she expressed her displeasure at a recent reception for the Education Minister where students were seen holding cutouts of Bangabandhu's face.

According to a report in this daily, 13 ministries, divisions and offices have sought an additional Tk 512 crore for organising celebration programmes. The government, in the national budget for the 2019-2020 fiscal year, had allocated Tk 100 crore for the celebration of "Mujib Borsho", with an additional Tk 50 crore to the cabinet division for the same purpose. Therefore, it is understandable that the PM would have reservations regarding additional funds and has asked the cabinet division not to allocate such funds unless necessary.

The PM's statement is thus a very timely and important message, urging the respective departments to initiate programmes that are notable. In other words, she wants these programmes to be beneficial for the people. The message also perhaps alludes to the sometimes excessive and unnecessary activities that some within her government and in the private sector engage in, which do not necessarily venerate Bangabandhu but are carried out just to win some brownie points with the powers that be. In fact, we have seen many such instances in which overenthusiasm to please the ruling elite has done the opposite of elevating Bangabandhu, which is certainly something that must be shunned. We hope the concerned people, whether they belong to the government or not, will be more restrained and sensible in their show of admiration and respect for the Father of the Nation. The birth centenary of Bangabandhu is certainly an occasion to celebrate—but in a dignified, sincere way.

Are "crossfires" the new normal?

Our law enforcement seems to lack faith in the judicial process

WE are deeply troubled by the news that seven suspected Rohingya robbers were killed in an alleged gunfight with Rab in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf on March 2, in what was the highest number of casualties in an encounter in the country in recent times. The justification offered by the law enforcement agencies follows the same narrative as that of other cases of "gun fights"—that the criminals opened fire on them and that they were "forced" to fire shots in retaliation. Rab also claimed to have recovered three pistols, seven one-shot guns, 12 bullets and 13 abandoned bullet shells from the spot.

While law enforcement has the right to use their weapons in self-defence, we should not have to remind them that they must do so only under the most extreme cases and when they have run out of all possible options. However, deaths from "gun fights" seem to have become the new normal, with a total of 15 Rohingyas killed by law enforcers in similar encounters since February alone. At least 786 people have been killed in encounters since the government launched its anti-narcotics drive in May 2018. In many cases, the victims were allegedly picked up from their own homes but were later found shot. In other cases, the police could not provide credible evidence that the alleged criminals were armed.

The sheer volume of deaths from encounters—and the impunity with which law enforcers are allowed to get away with these deaths—should give us pause for reflection. Do our law enforcers now believe that "crossfire" is an acceptable alternative to the judicial process? It would hardly be a surprise if they did, given that members of the parliament earlier this year endorsed extrajudicial killings as a preferred means of addressing criminal offences. Their frank admission about the deliberate use of "crossfire" to punish so-called criminals should be read alongside these seven deaths.

We are now on a dangerous path from which there appears to be no point of return. If law enforcers themselves no longer believe in due process, why should citizens of the country have faith in it? We cannot afford to be complacent, and our lawmakers, and law enforcers, must both answer for the impunity enjoyed by law enforcing agencies in meting out extrajudicial measures.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BCS epidemic

In the age of the Internet, Google, Wikipedia and other portals offer a barrage of easily available information. Yet the students of our most revered universities focus more on memorising facts and dates and learning arithmetic for their BCS exams. It's no surprise that the intellectual development and eligibility of jobs in the private sector does not correlate with the explosion of the number of graduates. No one wants employees who are just human trivia books and calculators, in an age where analytical and communication skills are of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, the government of Bangladesh and the public service commission are also stuck with this archaic method of recruitment.

Mirza Mohammad Asif Adnan, via email



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

EVERY day, long before dawn, before insanity grips Dhaka and all manners of chaos start swirling around us, certain parts of the capital fall into a familiar routine: alarms go off and shoes go on. A

group of students are on their way to the university library. There, in front of the gate, a queue forms and quickly swells, with many more joining it as the morning progresses. Some patiently wait in the queue, while others find a stand-in in the form of a bag, a book or two, or a newspaper as they go about doing whatever people do in the morning.

Ordinarily, this would have been a comforting spectacle for anyone: students hard at work, and so early in the morning, sacrificing the pleasure of sleep in the pursuit of knowledge. The nation's future is in good hands. But as luck would have it, most of these students are not here to dive into their studies as soon as the library gate opens and broaden their horizon with the many books, journals and research papers waiting to be discovered on the shelves. They are here for a very different purpose: to prepare for their Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams.

BCS, in our parts of the world, has become the academic version of LSD that keeps our students intoxicated. It's the glue that ties them to their reading tables, the cure-all for their troubles and hardships. It's the Bangladeshi equivalent of the American Dream in which the seekers—graduates and soon-to-be graduates—have a real chance to become rich and powerful. It's their golden ticket to a life of prosperity.

And in this self-serving purpose, the loss of early-morning sleep, just as the loss of real knowledge, is an acceptable one.

Although no formal research or survey has been carried out in this regard, an investigative report by *The Daily Star's* Asifur Rahman helps us understand the severity of this "addiction" in our country. The report was based on the attendance numbers and information on patterns of library use collected during a visit to nine libraries, both public and private, in Dhaka. The findings are startling: a whopping 97 percent of the library-goers bring their own study materials, including guides and notebooks, to those libraries. In other words, students preparing for BCS and other lucrative government jobs far outnumber those genuinely interested in reading for academic purposes. Out of the 1,395 readers present in those

libraries, *The Daily Star* found that 1,355 were studying job-related books. Nineteen were reading newspapers or magazines, or browsing the internet. Only 21 were reading library books.

The report provides further insights into the issue by breaking down the figures collated from individual libraries. For example, in the University of Dhaka (DU), where the above picture is seen every day, there are two libraries: Central and Science. The situation is similar in both of them. In the last 10 years, the number of books issued by the two libraries has declined by 61 percent. Data shows that the two libraries had issued 915,425 books to DU teachers and students in the 2008-09 academic session, averaging around 2,500 books a day.



Students queue in front of the Dhaka University's central library, waiting to get in.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Ten years later, in the 2017-18 academic session, the number of books issued stood at 352,310, an average of only 965 books a day. This shows the steady decline of interests in shelved titles, as well as the simultaneous surge of interests in guidebooks for jobs, at the largest and most prestigious public university in Bangladesh.

What are libraries for, really? From the above patterns of reading, it's obvious that our libraries are being used more as a space to read rather than as a source of books. More specifically, to read guidebooks brought from outside. In Dhaka University, this means a direct

competitive exams for government jobs are of course an important way to make sure a country is run by capable individuals. But the singular pursuit of such jobs, as evidenced by the aforementioned statistics, and the resultant narrowing of focus cancel out all other possibilities of education, which is detrimental to the growth of an economy. It also paints a bleak picture of the direction in which society is turning. As education becomes more commoditised, entrepreneurship is discouraged through various obstacles, and job growth stagnates to the point of preventing students from looking for alternative

news covering the universities. This is not to say that there are no exceptions, but those are few and far between.

We need to get our students back on a track to all-round development. We need to counter the destabilising effects of Project BCS in our higher educational institutions, and indeed in our libraries, so that these can be transformed into centres of excellence that can produce students capable of leading Bangladesh through the challenges of the future. Failure to do so can undo all our achievements.

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No economy should rely on one commodity

Diversification of the export basket a must for Bangladesh

NABILA NOSHIN

BANGLADESH has been experiencing robust growth in global integration over recent years. The factors which have contributed to this include both domestic policy changes (in the forms of trade liberalisation, market-oriented reforms, removal of an anti-export bias and the pursuance of an export-oriented development strategy) and a demonstrated capacity to take advantage of emerging global market opportunities. As Bangladesh graduates into a developing country with one of the highest GDP growth rates in the world at 7.9 percent (2018), the real challenge for the government is to maintain growth and tackle external shocks by taking up precautionary measurements, different development strategies and policies.

The main drivers for economic growth for Bangladesh are export and remittance. Export is the lifeline of the economy as the highest contributing sector to GDP. However, our economy enjoys a concentrated export basket in comparison to other Asian markets. In recent times, roughly 84 percent of Bangladesh's total exports depend on the ready-made garments (RMG) sector. Fiscal and financial incentives and strengthening of institutional support services contributed significantly to the removal of an anti-export bias and provided a favourable environment for the growth of export-oriented industries. However, as the global market becomes increasingly competitive, searching the markets for other products should be given the highest priority.

Bangladesh faces strong competition from established producers in countries like China, Turkey, Vietnam, Myanmar and India, in addition to emerging manufacturing hubs in countries like Ethiopia and Cambodia. Diversifying exports beyond garments may be a solution to Bangladesh's employment problem. Broadening comparative advantage in the global export market has not only generated economic growth but also ensured structural transformations, as seen in many Asian developing economies like Taiwan, South Korea and China. Bangladesh, like other developing economies, has made substantial progress as an exporter, but it has yet to

diversify its export basket due to limited comparative advantage. There is a huge prospect for RMG exports to increase many folds given the expected growth of global apparel demand in the future. This however, raises some potential issues about the sustainability and volatility of export growth.

No economy should rely on one commodity. To sustain economic growth within the current global landscape, we need to improve competitiveness of various other promising sectors to diversify the export basket. According to the private industry and investment adviser to the Prime Minister, Salman F Rahman, exports of non-apparel items will see an increase if the government gives the same level of attention and

Export diversification has proven to be a challenging task for Bangladesh. In fact, export concentration of RMG has increased even further. Bangladesh's export base is four times more concentrated in a few individual product lines than the average of a developing country.

incentives it provides to the garment sector. But before entering a new market or a new country, or exporting new products, it is important to analyse which of the export items enjoy a comparative advantage as well as the price offered, the levels of demand and consumption, and political stability.

Export concentration is the real issue for Bangladesh. For many decades before the emergence of RMG exports, jute and jute goods dominated the export sector, making up 70 percent in 1981. According to practitioners, in order to improve

economic growth, they advised the development of non-traditional exports, which became the ultimate solution of export policy.

Increasing the portfolio for both product and market diversification is crucial. Nonetheless, export diversification has proven to be a challenging task for Bangladesh. In fact, export concentration of RMG has increased even further. Bangladesh's export base is four times more concentrated in a few individual product lines than the average of a developing country. China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam are Asian competitors for Bangladesh, all of whom have more expanded export structures.

Many believe that non-RMG exports cannot grow because of policy support given to this specific sector. However, a strategy of export diversification is to be complemented by a policy of maximising overall exports instead of ceasing the policy assistance provided to the RMG sector.

In an optimistic scenario, if RMG exports expand at a rate of 10 percent per annum for the next 10 years or so and the non-RMG sector also moves at the same pace, Bangladesh's total exports in 2030 will be USD 100 billion. On the other hand, if RMG export growth is going to be five percent per annum, overall export performance is going to be less impressive. Therefore, RMG will have to play a pivotal role in rapid export expansion. It is also important to identify whether promising opportunities exist for generating exports in new products within the RMG sector. Strategies need to be constructed for export expansion with diversification to alleviate the adverse consequences faced by exporters due to poor performances in institutions, poor infrastructure, lack of technological readiness, financial market developments, and so on.

If a country specialises in only one or two commodities, any external shock such as a sudden decline in either world demand or domestic supply, will have a huge effect on export revenue, and eventually on the balance of payments, which in turn could cause undesirable macroeconomic consequences. However, if the export basket contains various

commodities, then the probability of suffering an adverse shock will be minimised, thus reducing the impact on export revenue and balance of payments. Export diversification will not only reduce export instability but also move the country to a higher growth trajectory.

The recent US-China trade war could have helped Bangladesh to expand its product diversification, yet we could not benefit from it due to various reasons—bulk investments on only five items, the Bangladesh taka being strong against US dollars and inefficiency in product development and marketing.

Bangladesh has grabbed a large share in RMG exports but according to experts, the government has to add more products to the country's export basket. Focusing on non-RMG sectors and expanding RMG product lines would ensure that not only export volume, but also the number of export items, increase. Although the government has been providing cash incentive for different products to encourage traders to boost the export earnings of the country, this is inadequate to support local businesses in fighting global competitors.

Industries such as pharmaceuticals, leather, ICT, petroleum bi-products and chemical products are emerging as prospective sectors and have led to a surge in exports, but on a small scale. However, further local and foreign investment can improve the situation. Other prospective sectors that the government can tap for export potential include the plastic industry, flower industry, tourism sector, cement industry, manpower industry and so on.

As a least developed country, Bangladesh enjoys duty-free access to the European Union and some other countries. However, once Bangladesh gets established as a developing nation, it will lose this preferential market access. To tackle the situation, diversification of the export basket is essential, as well as identify potential sectors for exports along with value addition to products. Enhancing efficiency, a skilled workforce and government support will ensure the sustainability of economic growth of the country, regardless of any external shocks.

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