

Public awareness is a must in tackling coronavirus

Make available clear guidelines, daily awareness drives

THE response to the news of coronavirus cases being reported in Bangladesh has been one of widespread panic. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the news has been greeted with panic-buying and hoarding of face masks, hand sanitisers and antiseptic liquids as protection against a potential spread of the virus, which has globally infected over 100,000 people and killed at least 4,028 so far. In Dhaka, a number of pharmacies and supermarkets have reported a shortage of these items, thanks to coronavirus fears leading to stockpiling. Even the demand for tissue paper, which is not known for offering special protection against the virus, has almost doubled overnight, according to some retailers. The risks associated with such a buying frenzy are well-known: it can, for one, deprive those who might need them. If left unchecked, the effects of panic-buying and hoarding of such items may eventually extend to daily essentials resulting in total chaos in the market, which is anything but desirable at this stage.

Experts have offered some explanations for the panic: that people are resorting to extremes because of the unpredictability of the disease and the mysteries surrounding it; that they are reacting to the lack of a clear direction as well as the lack of preparedness from health officials, etc. Whatever the reason, the government must find a way to address it. Public awareness and clear communication are of the essence if we want to limit the damage of this pandemic with any degree of success. There are two sides to the public engagement issue: first, people should be made aware that responsible behaviour on their part would be of enormous help. This means, no panic-buying. Families of persons coming from abroad, in particular, who may have passed the initial screening but start showing symptoms later, must report such cases to the authorities. Those trying to profit from hoarding should be strongly dealt with. Secondly, health officials and those in charge of tackling the crisis should make available clear guidelines on what to do and undertake daily awareness campaigns using electronic, print and social media.

One of the advantages of the coronavirus entering late in Bangladesh is that we can learn from global best practices. In Kerala, for example, they have formed a cell to counter the spread of misinformation. In Singapore, they have mounted a massive cleaning campaign and even reportedly employed the army to pack masks in their millions to be distributed freely to every single household in the country. These are but a few examples we can learn from. Nothing, however, will be of much use if citizens do not behave responsibly and the authorities do not undertake programmes consistent with the gravity of the situation.

Switching from 2G to 5G

Let users decide if they want to

ACCORDING to a report published on March 10, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has issued letters to listed handset importers, producers and vendors asking them to discourage the use and trade of second generation (2G) mobile phones. The rationale put forth by BTRC is that since 4G services are already being offered in the market and the government is planning to bring 5G services, vendors ought to herald the country into its digital future by deterring 2G use and popularising smartphones instead.

While we welcome the BTRC's ambition to expand digital services for the vast majority of the Bangladeshi population, we are at a loss to understand how "discouraging" 2G use through supply side management makes sense when the demand for smart phones is still very low in the country. As much as 70 percent of the population still use basic phones and have no need for more advanced functions on their phone. Why, then, should they be required to pay thrice as much for a smartphone, if all they need is to make calls? We cannot help but wonder if the BTRC, in its eagerness to propel the country into the future, has forgotten that technology must serve the needs of the people, not the other way round.

Vendors are confused as to what BTRC means by the term "discourage"; we share their confusion as well as their concern. We ask the BTRC to clarify what they mean by it, and urge them to be more prudent in their analysis of the market for smartphones and cognizant of the needs, education and purchasing power of basic phone users. If we want more people to graduate from using 2G to 4G services and decrease the digital divide, we should ensure digital literacy of the masses, create affordable and compelling products that the yet untapped population need, and improve network quality across Bangladesh so that users in remote areas, too, can access 4G services. Rather than address these concerns, simply pulling the plug on 2G handsets would disproportionately impact low-income groups.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Empower women for a better society

Once, our society expected women to be responsible for child-rearing and household chores only. Today, things have changed and women are not only contributing to the workforce but participating in politics, business, sports and other fields. This is a reflection of the gender equality that is needed for the progress of society. Additionally, women's increasing participation in local administration positions like upazila nirbahi officer, district commissioner, secretary, banker, teacher, police etc goes to show that they can compete with male peers and play a significant role in every sector successfully. An educated woman contributes to society in various ways. The provision for scholarships in schools and college is a good place to start, to pave the way for women empowerment. The government should help equip women with these rights, as they lead up to economic growth, progress and sustainable development.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Gandaria, Dhaka.



three decades of suppression of student government in the premier university of the country (as in all other institutions of higher education), the election was seen as a precursor to the revival of a tradition of the university student union as the incubator of democracy, harking back to the glorious past of student activism. How has it turned out?

Ducsu was formed in 1922, a year after the University of Dhaka (DU) was established. The aim of the elected student body was to promote extra-curricular activities at the university and foster a spirit of cooperation and unity among the students of different halls. At critical moments of our history, the university students have taken on the role of the conscience-keeper of the nation.

Students in 17 halls or dormitories, each student being affiliated to a hall, cast their vote at their respective halls on March 11 last year. Student leaders had voiced their fears that the election might not be fair if the polling booths were set up inside the dormitories, which were all dominated by Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the ruling Awami League-backed student organisation.

Not that the political decision-makers and university authorities looked upon the student body election with any great enthusiasm. The High Court in a ruling on January 17, 2018 had directed the authorities concerned and the government to hold the election in six months. This was in response to a writ petition filed by 25 former DU students in March 2012. The DU authorities filed an appeal to the Supreme Court, which passed an order to hold the election by March 15, 2019.

The election on March 11, 2019 had polling booths set up in the dormitory halls, instead of central locations under public and media gaze. All premonitions expressed about the lack of a fair election proved to be true. The election was marred by all kinds of irregularities, reminding one of all the malpractices heard of in parliamentary or local body elections. The poll was organised by academics at the highest seat of learning, and voters were educated and politically savvy. Yet there were complaints galore about ballot box stuffing, voters prevented from voting, rigged voter rolls and violence—recorded and reported by media—against supporters of panels other than that of the ruling-party backed BCL.



leaders to treat climate change as a truly global emergency.

The global outbreak of coronavirus is demonstrating to all of us that we live in a truly global world and no country can shut itself off from the rest of the world, no matter how hard it may try.

The coronavirus pandemic is a harbinger of more things to come due to climate change, for which we are very ill prepared. Hence, the need now is to figure out global responses that link all countries together to deal with the coming climate change crisis. There are two distinct and clear paths for us ahead, namely either trying to protect ourselves within each country (which is bound to fail) or cooperate with each other to protect everyone (which won't eliminate the problems but will limit their adverse impacts enormously).

It is in this context that the global youth movement takes on an added significance, as it is the seed of a truly global citizenry where every young individual can consider herself or himself as a global citizen first and a national citizen second.

I had an opportunity to speak to over 600 young people from all over Bangladesh at the annual Youth Conference, organised by Jaago Foundation in Cox's Bazar recently. I wanted to share here what I told them and I hope that the young people of Bangladesh will get a chance to read it.

ONE YEAR OF DUCSU REVIVAL

Incubator of democracy or lessons to subvert it?

All the major panels in the election, other than that of BCL, announced a boycott of the election before the end of the day over allegations of irregularities and vote rigging. They demanded its scrapping and a new poll, and called a student strike.

In response, Vice Chancellor Prof Md Akhtaruzzaman formed a seven-member probe body, headed by Supernumerary Professor Sajeda Banu. The committee was asked to submit its report in seven

The most egregious hostility was the assault on the VP and his peers in his office at Ducsu.

As reported in the media, Ducsu Vice President Nurul Haque Nur and 27 others were injured in an attack allegedly carried out by activists of Chhatra League and Muktijuddha Mancha on December 22, 2019. VP Nur, along with the others, was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) for emergency treatment. According to eyewitnesses,

detailed from two dormitories following an attack and counterattack between two factions of the organisation on campus. A house tutor of Bangamata Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib Hall in DU was assaulted when she was trying to stop two clashing groups of Chhatra League women on campus.

If a dream was nurtured that Ducsu would be revived to protect the interests of students; and that it would again play the role it had historically until 1990,



Students line up in front of Poet Sufia Kamal Hall to vote in the Ducsu elections. This photo was taken on March 11, 2019.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

days. No report has been made public and no action has been taken.

Against all odds, out of the 25 elected posts, two were won by non-BCL candidates, including the post of the Vice President (VP), the elected head of DUCSU, with the President being the *ex officio* Vice Chancellor. Nurul Haque Nur, the elected VP, is a popular non-partisan student leader who came to prominence as the organiser of the anti-quota movement (in support of scrapping quotas in the civil service that took more than half of fresh recruitment out of merit-based competition).

But facing a solid wall of opposition in his own cabinet and little support or cooperation from the university administration, the resuscitated Ducsu is hardly alive. In fact, Nur and his sympathisers faced physical assault on the day of the election and continue to be subjected to harassment and even violence since then.

the Ducsu VP office was also vandalised during the attacks. Twenty-eight students were admitted to DMCH, 14 with minor injuries.

The tragic death of Abrar Fahad, a student of BUET, on October 7, 2019, after torture by fellow students, allegedly to demonstrate their loyalty to the ruling party, has not put an end to such mayhem on campuses across the country. There are a number of cases that show this, as gleaned from new reports. For example, four students of the University of Dhaka were beaten up on campus on suspicions of being part of Shibir (student front of Jamaat-e-Islam), allegedly by BCL activists on January 21, 2020. A student of Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology filed a case against 10 activists of the university unit of BCL, including its president and secretary, for allegedly physically assaulting him. Twenty activists of the Chittagong University unit of BCL were

when the last Ducsu election was held, it was rudely shattered.

If anything, the Ducsu election has served to "legalise" the ruling party student wing's control over the campus, to the detriment of promoting the academic vibrancy of the university community of students and teachers. Instead of being the incubator of future leaders, the campus has now turned into a training ground for ways to subvert the practice and culture of democracy. The irony is that the value added, even from a narrow partisan point of view, is highly debatable.

The stalwarts of the glorious days of student politics who are still around—Tofael Ahmed, Motia Chowdhury, Rashed Khan Menon, Hasanul Haq Inu and a few others—have remained very silent about these disturbing developments. Will they speak up before it is too late?

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND YOUTH

The transformational force behind climate movements

My first point was, as one would expect, to paint a picture of the potential damage that human induced climate change can cause globally and for Bangladesh in particular. However, my second point, which I feel is the more important one, is that while it remains a problem for our country, it also represents a challenge, and indeed an opportunity, for our youth.

This is because we can find solutions for each of the many climate change related problems that we will face before other countries do. Hence, for

face the problems tomorrow that we are facing today.

Let me outline a plan for making this happen, starting with the thousands of postgraduate students studying in more than a hundred universities in our country. Every one of them, regardless of their subject of study, should receive some basic instructions on climate change and Bangladesh, and what can be done to tackle the problem. One such initiative is being taken to provide an online training course on the Bangladesh

to also be radically reformed to try to produce young problem solvers rather than just jobseekers. At the same time, our students also need to change their mindsets accordingly. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has correctly directed all students to aspire to become job creators and not just jobseekers.

None of the above require any additional funding, but it does require changes in the ways of working, and the re-training of university faculties across the country.

Finally, the younger students in colleges, high schools and even primary schools can also undertake actions at their own local levels to identify environmental problems, and can go on to find ways to tackle these problems that they see around them.

One of the characteristics of environmental problems is that they are clearly visible to every one of us as we move around our town or countryside, but each of us feels that either it is someone else's problem to take care of (in which case we just complain about it), or even if we try to do something individually, we know that it will be ineffective unless others join us. Hence, we need to accept that it is up to each one of us to take some responsibility to tackle any visible environmental problem, by both taking individual action and soliciting others to join our actions. We can then lobby with the relevant authorities to do their jobs, but by offering to help them, not just by complaining about their lack of action.

Over the next decade, the youth of Bangladesh have the potential to be a transformational force, not just for Bangladesh but for the world, as it tackles climate change impacts.

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Thousands of children from different schools and colleges staged a demonstration at Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka on September 20, 2019, urging world leaders to act against climate change.

PHOTO: STAR/ PRABIR DAS

every solution that we find in any given locality of the country, it is not just a local solution but can also be applied at the national level and indeed, even at the global level. Our young people, if they choose to, can become climate change problem solvers, and that knowledge will become a global public good which other countries will want to learn from, as they

Delta Plan for all Masters level students.

The second cohort are undergraduate students in the same universities. Many of them have already formed green clubs or environmental clubs in their institutions, and these need to be linked up with each other and become solutions oriented rather than only problem oriented. Here, the teaching in our universities has