

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY MARCH 16, 2020, CHAITRA 2, 1426 BS

Journalist's arrest highly questionable

Gross misuse of power?

There are enough grounds to suggest that the arrest of the Kurigram correspondent of *Bangla Tribune* Ariful Islam by a mobile court under a taskforce of Kurigram district administration and sentencing him to one-year imprisonment on the early hours of March 14 after he was picked up from his home on charges of possessing narcotics was done out of spite at the orders of the district commissioner rather than for the purpose of serving the rule of law. A Kurigram court, however, granted bail to Ariful yesterday.

There are contradictions in the statement of the district administration and officials of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) at Kurigram district office about the anti-narcotics drive on Ariful's home, which compels us to surmise that Ariful incurred the wrath of the district administration for carrying reports of the alleged irregularities of the DC and obliges us to ask a few questions in this regard.

Firstly, we wonder whether the drive was led by a judicial magistrate or not. If not, then the punishment would be illegal since mobile courts led by executive magistrates, according to a 2017 Ruling of the High Court, are unconstitutional. Secondly, what was the hurry in awarding the punishment? If it was indeed a part of the anti-narcotics drive, would it not have been better to put the accused through the process of law to find out whether he was part of a narcotics gang? Thirdly, is it normal for mobile courts to take an accused to the DC's office after arrest, and beat him up, as has been alleged? It is also pertinent to ask if the mobile court went beyond its remit and raid someone's house late at night? And one wonders why the DC has named a pond that she has used government money to excavate, after herself? And finally, if it was indeed an anti-narcotics drive planned by the DNC, why was the local head of DNC not aware of it till informed by his subordinates the next afternoon?

We believe that there is more to it than what the DC has said and it is encouraging that the government has asked the Commissioner of Rangpur Division to enquire into the matter. Arresting a journalist from his home at the dead of night and awarding him summary punishment is not only a miscarriage of justice and gross misuse of power, it is also a blatant violation of the constitution. Not only will such highhanded and illegal acts by public servants denude public confidence in the local administration, it will also gag press freedom.

Is denial still the government strategy?

Government response is recklessness

HAVING written multiple editorials over the past month pleading with the government to prepare accordingly to handle the massive threat to the population posed by coronavirus, we are, honestly, at a loss of words at the utter recklessness and unprofessionalism with which our authorities are choosing to respond to the looming crisis. How does one make sense of the horrifying and inept way in which 143 Bangladeshis returning from Italy—the new epicentre of the disease—were quarantined in the Ashkona Haji Camp, and the equally horrifying and inept decision to allow them to go home without conducting any tests for the virus?

We've been luckier than most countries in that the virus has not yet reached alarming levels of penetration in Bangladesh. We had at least a month's lead to prepare ourselves to tackle any possibility of an outbreak. We would have thought that the government would take this opportunity to urgently, efficiently and transparently engage with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector and NGOs, to prepare a comprehensive corona-management plan. Instead, what we're witnessing is complete anarchy in the authorities' handling of the situation, and we are yet to understand what the government's strategy really is, beyond denial and hope that somehow miraculously Bangladesh will be spared of the pandemic that has paralysed even the most developed countries with the best healthcare systems in place.

What else but this "strategy" explains the mismanagement at the camp yesterday—hardly anyone, including law enforcers who were jostling the crowd, was wearing a mask or protective gear, and families and friends of the returnees were allowed to go in and out without any supervision or protective measures. How is it possible that the authorities had no food or basic facilities for those quarantined? How are they still so ill-prepared? Why were the returnees not tested at the airport or at the camp, when they can easily be carriers of the virus even if they are still not showing outward symptoms such as a fever?

The returnees have been asked to self-quarantine at home, and we know how that's working out—a report published on March 15 shows people who are supposed to be in isolation are roaming around, mingling with their family and wider community, without any monitoring or follow up at the upazila levels. According to government statistics, over 1,200 expatriates have so far been asked to be in home quarantine. But how many of them are sticking to the instructions?

There can be no excuse for the unprofessionalism and recklessness with which both the government and citizens are responding to the crisis. If this is a reflection of how prepared we are to actually treat an outbreak, we are in deep trouble.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Schools should be closed

The spreading of the coronavirus has led to many countries closing down their educational institutions. It seems that once the virus enters a country, it spreads very rapidly.

Bangladesh has a huge population. Its capital is densely populated. The authorities should realise that it is better to shut down educational institutions now rather than later when the virus has already started to spread among students. I hope the government comes to that realisation.

Malik Muntasir Reza, Dhaka

Tackling the economic fallout of COVID-19



MACRO MIRROR
FAHMIDA KHATUN

doctors and scientists are spending sleepless nights to fight this pandemic, the world is already grappling with its economic fallout. Since the situation is evolving every day, economic estimates can only provide a magnitude of the impact. The actual ramifications will depend on the extent of the spread and length of the duration of the outbreak and how quickly policymakers can take action to mitigate the health and economic damage.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in a preliminary estimate, indicates a shortfall of USD 2 trillion in global income. This will also bring down global annual growth to below 2.5 percent. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has projected that the world could lose from 0.089 percent to 0.404 percent of its GDP due to COVID-19. In monetary terms, it ranges between USD 77 billion and USD 347 billion. Two-thirds of the impact will be faced by China itself.

The above consequences will be felt in a number of ways. China accounts for over 19 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity. Hence any impact on the Chinese economy is going to have repercussions on the global economy. China is the world's largest exporter accounting for 13 percent of the world's trade. The country is also the second largest importing nation, accounting for 11 percent of total global imports. There will also be disruption in the supply chain. As China is the world's largest manufacturer and exporter, global production will be hampered if Chinese industries are shut down for some time. China is, in fact, the highest supplier of goods to more than 100 countries in the world. China produces about 20 percent of global manufacturing intermediate products which are traded. The global shock will also be felt through fall in commodity demand and prices. Due to the decline of Chinese consumption, demand for oil could fall by 30 percent.

Bangladesh's dependence on China is significant. China has been the

largest trading partner of Bangladesh with a share of 18.94 percent of total trade in 2018. China is Bangladesh's biggest import partner. Bangladesh's main export commodity, readymade garments (RMG), relies heavily on China for its raw materials. Raw materials for pharmaceuticals are also imported from China.

Bangladesh's recent surge in FDI is largely driven by Chinese investment. China has invested in a number of projects including in the transport and energy sectors. Activities of several infrastructure projects in Bangladesh

loss of USD 1 million.

The ADB has estimated that Bangladesh will lose about 1.1 percent of its GDP in the worst-case scenario—when the outbreak will last at least for six months. It implies that coronavirus can take away USD 3.02 billion from Bangladesh's economy. Additionally, it is also being apprehended that there could be 894,930 job losses due to a global economic downturn.

Bangladesh's economy is also integrated with the global economy. The degree of trade openness in the economy is currently 38.24 percent. Countries such

migrant workers.

Second, for essential import items, particularly raw materials which used to be imported from China, the government should immediately look for alternative sources. The prices may be higher. However, given the essential nature of these items such as pharmaceuticals and medical devices, the government can provide special support urgently. Import of non-essential items may be put on hold.

Third, the government should initiate a job support scheme for workers affected by coronavirus. Workers should be retained and employed through reskilling and retraining. They should also be provided with working capital to start small businesses. A special financial scheme for small enterprises may be initiated.

Fourth, banks should have adequate liquidity to support companies with loans on easy terms. Given that the banking sector in Bangladesh is not healthy at this moment, the central bank can help other banks through refinancing schemes so that they can provide loans to small businesses.

Fifth, loans to the affected businesses, particularly the small and medium ones, may be assessed more leniently; the pay-back period may be extended.

Sixth, the government should help the virus affected households and corona-induced unemployed people by providing temporary support in the form of cash transfer.

Seventh, this is also a time when there will be less consumption demand which in turn will slow down the economy. Hence continuation of the investment expenditures in the economy is necessary for job creation. But efficiency in such expenditures will be critically important. Besides, public expenditure has to safeguard the low-income group and the poor through expanded social safety nets.

Eighth, supportive monetary policies are usually suggested during such crisis moments. That is, interest rates are lowered for businesses to make up for their losses. Bangladesh Bank has already instructed the commercial banks to reduce lending rates. Further interest cut should be aimed for small and medium businesses.

Finally, any measure designed for the virus affected workers and businesses should be strictly administered and monitored with full transparency, so that the wilful loan defaulters and fake victims do not take advantage of the facilities provided by the government.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.



The Asian Development Bank has projected that the world could lose from 0.089 percent to 0.404 percent of its GDP due to COVID-19.

which are being implemented by the Chinese construction firms have slowed down due to COVID-19. Not only has the supply of construction materials been hampered, but many Chinese workers engaged in Bangladesh's infrastructure projects have also been confined in their country. This may lead to time over-run and cost escalation of projects leading the Bangladesh government to borrow more.

With Bangladesh's economy depending so much on China, it is apprehended that the coronavirus outbreak may have serious implications for Bangladesh. UNCTAD has forecasted that if Bangladesh's imports of intermediate inputs from China declines by 2 percent due to the coronavirus, it will cost Bangladesh USD 16 million. The leather sector will lose USD 15 million. The textile and apparel sector will experience a

as Canada, the US, and the European Union are major export destinations for Bangladesh. Middle Eastern and South East Asian countries are sources of Bangladesh's remittances. So, economic effects on those countries will also have significant consequences for Bangladesh.

As the economic damage of the coronavirus outbreak cannot be avoided, policymakers should take a few immediate measures to minimise the losses.

First, the government will have to take all precautionary measures to control the spread of the outbreak. Financial allocations are needed for strengthening the health system with adequate testing facilities, staff, medicine, beds and other medical necessities. The government should provide medical support to the poor affected people and returnee

Four priorities of the education agenda

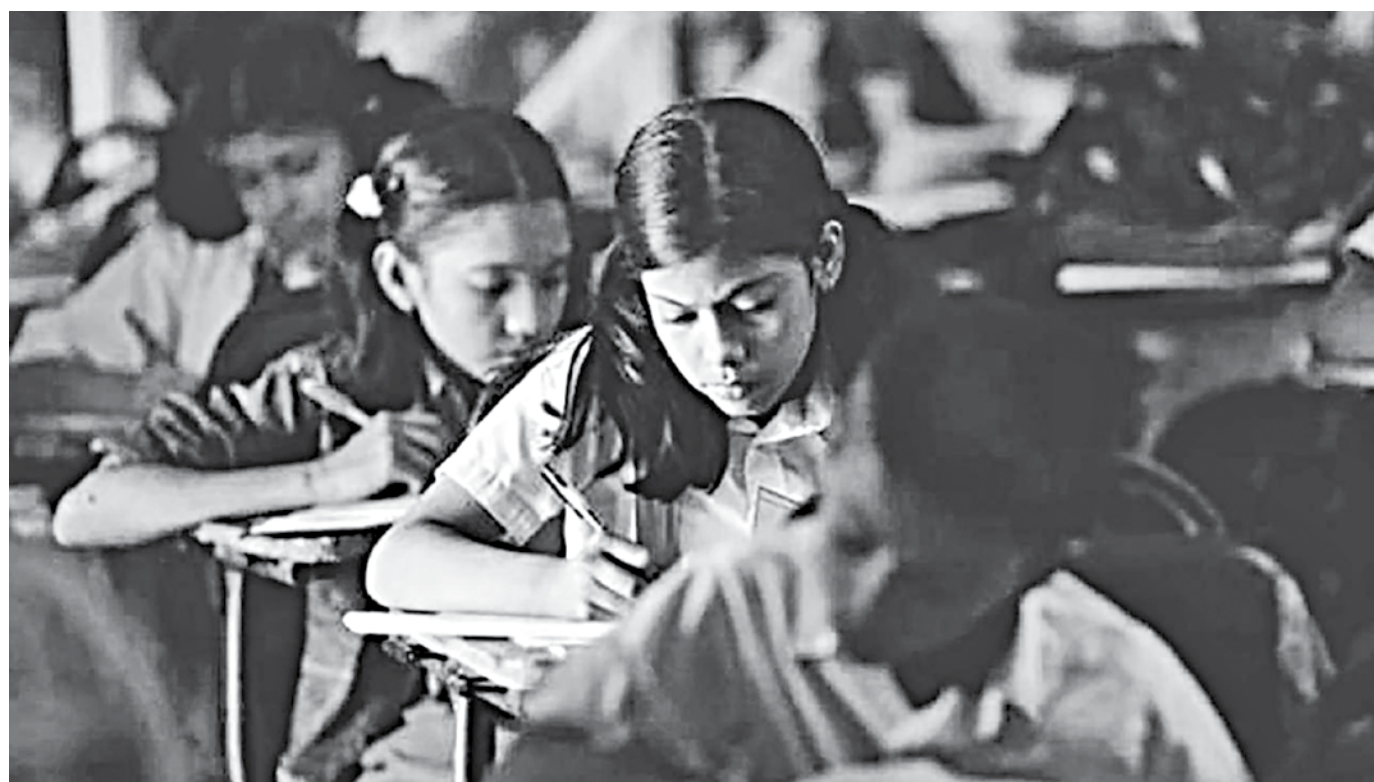
MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

Over the next two decades Bangladesh is to maintain its impressive 6-plus percent annual GDP growth, special policy level attention must be given to educational investment. Higher spending and better accountability of education officials for good management and results should be the focus—and four priorities must be on the education agenda.

First, the government should consider spending on universal education as an investment instead of treating schools as cost centres. Recent experience from the Delhi's Legislative Assembly election and the stunning victory of the Aam Admi Party (AAP), defying the political tide, demonstrates that higher spending in public education combined with good school management pays off. It has resulted in better learning outcomes, higher student attendance and improved school infrastructures, which earned the AAP political credits. This is a lesson worth noting for Bangladesh.

Second, all providers of primary and secondary education—public, non-state and private—should focus on student learning outcomes, not just enrolment, dropouts and completion. Great strides have been made in Bangladesh in bringing children including girls into schools. A National Student Assessment (NSA) is undertaken every two years on a nationwide sample of grade three and five students and schools by the Directorate of Primary Education. NSA measures student learning in Bangla (the first language) and arithmetic against basic skills specified in the curriculum. NSA showed that more than half of class three and class five students did not perform at grade level in Bangla and arithmetic. In other words, after five years of primary education, the majority of students do not acquire literacy and numeracy at a functional level, handicapping them for further education or vocational skill training.

Education researchers and academics suggest two measures to help children achieve the essential competencies specified in the curriculum: i) Attract and retain enough capable teachers in the system and support and motivate them to perform in classrooms according to set performance standards; and ii)



Schools of the 21st century must be responsive and adaptive to the diverse needs and circumstances of students all across the country.

PHOTO: ANDREW BIRAJ/REUTERS

Discontinue the present high stake, nationwide public examinations at the end of grade five and eight which push students to memorise guidebooks and spend time and money on private tutors—and force teachers and parents to aid and abet this distortion of learning.

Testing is not a substitute for good teaching. School-based formative assessment of learners should be emphasised. The assessment of system, school and teacher performance can be better done through an adaptation of the NSA approach, without putting young children in tough competition with their peers.

Third, Bangladesh should consider joining OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D). It is a pilot project that aims to make cross-country assessment more accessible and relevant to a wider range of countries. PISA measures key knowledge and skills that are essential to function in modern

societies across countries.

In today's global world, Bangladesh has to compete in the world market and be at par in skills and competencies with other countries. Up to 700,000 young workers, almost half of all new entrants to the workforce every year, go abroad as migrant workers. These individuals as well as those staying at home must acquire the skills and capabilities necessary to adapt to the changing needs of the global market.

Cambodia, a country facing quality issues similar to Bangladesh, has joined PISA-D in its bid to improve student learning and assessment capacity. Its focus is on equipping young learners with 21st century skills that are in demand globally. Cambodia is being assisted by UNICEF-sponsored Southeast Asia Programme on Learning Metric (SEA-PLM). Bangladesh can benefit greatly by joining PISA-D.

Fourth, school level education planning, budgets, governance and management need to move progressively

towards meaningful decentralisation and devolution of authority, where accountability lies with district, upazila and individual institutions. No other education system with the size and scale of Bangladesh—with 40 million students, a million teachers and 200,000 institutions—is run in such a top-down way as it is done here. The decisions that should be taken by the schools or local education authorities are often taken in Dhaka—frequently the buck is even passed onto the highest level of the government.

Schools of the 21st century must be responsive and adaptive to the diverse needs and circumstances of students all across the country. Given that Bangladesh wants to join the rich countries club by 2041, it needs to pursue these four strategic steps.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is an education policy researcher at the University of Toronto, and former Senior Education Adviser of USAID in Bangladesh and Afghanistan.