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Budget 20-21 may not take us out of the woods

Allocations do not match the need by some margin

THE finance minister on Thursday presented the 49th annual budget of Tk 5,68,000 crore, up by a slight 8.6 percent from the previous budget of Tk 5,23,190 crore. These are our initial reactions to it and more detailed analysis will follow.

Amidst an unprecedented global pandemic, it is unsurprising to see only a mild increase in the size of the budget, as concerns over government revenue continue to linger. The revenue collection target for the coming fiscal year has been set at Tk 3,78,000 crore, which is nearly the same as last year's target of Tk 3,77,810 crore. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has been tasked to collect Tk 3,30,000 crore of the amount, leaving the non-NBR revenue collection target at Tk 15,000 crore and non-tax revenue collection target at Tk 33,000 crore.

The NBR will have its work cut out to reach this target, especially since the tax-free income limit has been increased to Tk 3,00,000 from Tk 2,50,000 in the new budget, which we wholeheartedly welcome. The budget further proposes reducing the minimum tax rate from 10 percent to 5 percent, and we again agree with this. However, the proposal to bring down the maximum tax rate from 30 percent to 25 percent is something that we find questionable, especially given the tremendous suffering the poor have been enduring during the coronavirus-induced lockdown, which has already increased inequality.

It is particularly due to this reason that we were expecting to see a substantial increase in the allocation for social safety net programmes, which has been set at Tk 95,574 crore—up from Tk 81,865 crore last year. Despite the fact that this amounts to 3.01 percent of GDP, if civil pension is excluded from the social safety net, then it would be around 1.5-1.6 percent of total GDP—which is extremely low.

Allocation for education too has remained subpar. Despite education being dealt a major setback in recent months, the government has kept the allocation to this sector almost unchanged in terms of the size and percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—at 2.09 percent of GDP—whereas UNESCO suggests it should be 6 percent.

It has been proposed that the health allocation be increased from Tk 25,732 crore in the last fiscal year to Tk 29,247 crore in the new budget. A lump sum of Tk 10,000 crore has also been proposed to fulfil emergency requirements in response to the ongoing Covid-19 outbreak. However, having witnessed the appalling shortcomings of the sector in the face of this crisis, we cannot help but feel that this increase is woefully inadequate. Our healthcare sector has proven itself to be in a shambles, and the only way to improve it by a degree that will make some difference is through massive government investment.

We call on the government to urgently recognise this, and to ensure that the quality of the expenditure in the healthcare sector in particular, but in other sectors too, is bumped up, as one of the biggest challenges we have right now with all the constraints we face is to get good value for money—something we have historically been bad at doing.

Budget allocations this year have to be more precise and there is even less room for wastage and mistakes when it comes to formulating the new budget, as we struggle to recover from this crisis. Among other matters, it is in this regard that the proposed budget falls most short.

Ensure oxygen supply equipment in all district hospitals

Immediately arrange for ICU beds

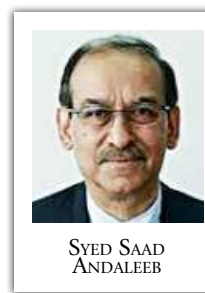
IT is most unfortunate that three months into the Covid-19 outbreak in Bangladesh, our district hospitals could not yet take the required preparations to provide treatment to Covid-19 patients. The hospitals are not equipped to treat those in critical condition with breathing difficulties—they have neither any oxygen supply system nor ventilators, as a recent study by the DGHS found. While most of the hospitals have oxygen cylinders, they lack the vital equipment needed to ensure the supply of oxygen. Moreover, 47 out of the 64 districts do not have ICU facilities, according to a health ministry database.

In the absence of ICU and oxygen supply facilities in the district hospitals, critically ill Covid-19 patients now have to travel to the divisional headquarters to get treatment, where the number of ICU beds is also limited. According to DGHS, there are only 329 ICU beds dedicated to coronavirus patients across the country, and 148 of them are in Dhaka city.

Inadequate testing facilities are also another major concern and have made it difficult to prevent the spread of infection and challenged the success of lockdowns. In this bleak scenario, there are examples of innovative initiatives to tackle the pandemic. One such initiative has been taken by the Kalihati upazila administration, Tangail. According to a report published by *The Daily Star* yesterday, the upazila administration has invested in a specialised vehicle that is well-equipped to collect Covid-19 test samples and is now going to the doorsteps of possible patients. Operating under the upazila health complex, the vehicle can collect 50 samples every day.

We think this brilliant initiative should be emulated by other upazila administrations across the country, which will not only relieve possible Covid-19 patients of the struggle to get tested, but also will help reduce the risk of further spreading the transmission. This should also be a lesson for us that in such trying times, we cannot just wait for the government's intervention to provide us with all the facilities we need. We also need to come forward, each from our own position, with our own resources, to find innovative solutions during a crisis.

The spread of Covid-19 across the country has exposed the grim picture of our healthcare system. The lack of preparation of the district and upazila level hospitals to fight the pandemic is very worrying. While we would request the health ministry and the DGHS to immediately provide all the district hospitals with the life-saving equipment such as ventilators and oxygen supply system, we would also request the hospital management to be proactive and play their part in getting their facilities ready for Covid-19 patients. Only through our combined efforts do we stand a chance to overcome this crisis.



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where a policeman placed a knee on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, has been viewed globally in horror as his life flowed

out in pain and agony. George called for his mother and implored, "I can't breathe," but there was no let-up. Shameful? The word does not carry the weight for what was on public display that day. But what word would? Cruelty, ruthlessness, inhumanity, malice, mercilessness, heartlessness?

Bystanders watched, some fervently appealed to the policeman to let go, and luckily, someone videotaped the episode (otherwise the world would not know, and George's departure from a violent and hateful world would go unnoticed as in many previous cases).

Since the episode, a revolt was born out of revulsion. A global resolve is now taking shape to bring a stop to this kind of atrocity. Millions (especially in the developed world)—black, white, brown, and all shades—marched in unison as their numbers swelled. It must have crossed a zillion minds that unless police brutality is rooted out, it could come back to haunt them personally.

To be sure, the violence committed was not an isolated act. Just Google "police brutality" or search YouTube across the world—South East Asia, Middle East, Africa, South America, Europe—and you'll see for yourself. Examples are not

Change will come when everyone, across the world, joins a movement of this magnitude to demand change. A big part of the desired change must also come from within the police force and the nexus that allows police brutality to run unchecked.

necessary: there are far too many to select from. North America's guilt is also in plain view; one is reminded of their oppression since the days of slavery when public lynching was attended in droves. In South Asia, terms like "crossfire" have emerged to evade accountability.

What gives policemen this sense of entitlement to harm a human being with such savagery and inhumanity? Something is wrong with the incentive structure. Networked with prosecutors, judges,

world to adopt:

These should: 1) Protect the sanctity of life (no violent action without exhausting all other means) and limit the use of weapons or force that can be physically damaging, unless used in self-defence; 2) Stop all humiliating practices that can be emotionally damaging (chokeholds, grabbing by the hair or neck, making one kneel, placing foot/knee on the neck, etc.). Instead, effort must be devoted to de-escalation tactics; 3) If both hands are

behaviour; 2) Penalising an entire unit (to be defined) of which the offending policeman is a part. This should encourage the group to restrict/moderate the behaviour of an individual from committing excesses; 3) Punishing not just the policeman and the unit, but the wider network of prosecutors, public defenders, judges, providers of evidence, medical personnel, reporters, etc. involved with an egregious offense, resulting in undue harm. A random set of such cases may be selected for review every year by an independent (and upright) authority; and 4) For perpetrators, abettors, and those involved but disengaged, levels of consequences must be determined including suspension, stopping pay raises, stopping promotions for extended periods, removal from the force, incarceration, etc.

The above set of recommendations represent a tall order. I suggest it as a basis for future steps towards an ideal world. Different countries may already have some combination of the above provisions on their books. Whether they are being implemented is for the public to follow up on and affirm. Where gaps exist, they must be addressed.

A review of bad decisions "of the past" that exonerated the crimes of wayward policemen will be needed periodically to rectify their wrongdoings. It will also help bring closure to many families suffering incomprehensible loss and injustice in silence.

The pressure to change brutal police tactics must be sustained across the capitals of the world. Those who are entrusted with protecting life, liberty, property, speech, and human values, and paid from the coffers of the taxpayer, must understand the consequences of their action.

Oppressive tactics and injustice should not be the way of the law enforcers. The public must feel safe in their presence and not run the other way instinctively. Trust in the policemen must be revived when they are seen as friend, not foe. Periodic surveys of public perceptions can be instrumental in this regard.

Change will come when everyone, across the world, joins a movement of this magnitude to demand change. A big part of the desired change must also come from within the police force and the nexus that allows police brutality to run unchecked. Will the present upheaval bring fresh change to police tactics globally? The world is watching. The world is waiting.

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The pressure to change brutal police tactics must be sustained across the capitals of the world.

SOURCE: REUTERS FILE PHOTO

reporters, coroners, medical personnel, and relevant others, they must feel protected for their wrongdoings and emboldened that they can do no wrong. How else can they display such impunity to "publicly" execute someone? The audacity of power, protected by a network of shameless collaborators, makes such heinous acts possible.

However, painting all policemen as wicked would be inconsiderate and utterly out of place. If that were the case, we would be living in a reign of terror of unfathomable magnitude. Respect must be given where it is due for those who take their job seriously and protect society from its other deep and diverse evils.

So, where do we go from here? Two things are imperative: We must use (new) laws and we must change the incentive structures. The task ahead is indeed a daunting one but it needs to begin.

Several laws must be considered with utmost seriousness, for all nations of the

raised, all subduing instruments must be lowered; 4) Evidence-gathering instruments must be used during a police engagement. Body cameras or similar (locally engineered) devices are recommended, otherwise there is only one version of the truth; 5) Duty to intervene (on-duty policemen must be able to stop others in the team from using excessive force); 6) Require comprehensive reporting within a few hours of the incident when force is used against someone. This is to diminish and eradicate report doctoring/tampering; and 7) Require proper selection, training, motivating, and evaluation of the police force entrusted with the mission to protect the public.

The incentive structures must also be changed and consider: 1) Placing names of errant policemen in a national (computerised) registry to restrict their access to jobs and other facilities if removed from the force for egregious

WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

Covid-19, cheaper labour and the endless miseries of our children



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

CHILDREN are our most precious assets—for some, in a very literal sense. For money, for sustenance, for survival, many parents unable to bear poverty end up pushing their precious little ones into the wide open in search of subsistence. Children as young as three-four end up in the informal sector, doing menial jobs, for a tiny sum of money.

According to The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action ("The Alliance")—a global network of operational agencies, academic institutions, policymakers, donors and practitioners that facilitates inter-agency technical collaboration on child protection in all humanitarian contexts—152 million children worldwide are involved in child labour and nearly half of them, around 73 million, are engaged in hazardous jobs.

Covid-19 is only going to exacerbate the problem. A blog posted by Unicef suggests that, "As global poverty rises, so too will the prevalence of child labour. Increased parental mortality due to Covid-19 will force children into child labour, including the worst forms such as work that harms the health and safety of children. Temporary school closures may have permanent implications for the poorest and most vulnerable. Limited budgets and reductions in services for families and children will compound the effects of the health, economic, and social crisis."

Even in case of a short-lived economic crisis, "the consequences of this increase in child labour can last generations. We know that children who enter child labour are unlikely to stop working if their economic situation improves. Instead, they will continue to experience the consequences of child labour—like less education overall and worse employment opportunities—when they are adults and start families of their own. We also know that the younger children are when they start working, the more likely they will experience chronic health issues as adults. Moreover, we have ample evidence that stress and trauma in

adolescence lead to a lifetime of mental health challenges," the blog further suggests.

While the possibility of a meteoric rise in forced child labour is a concern for the world community, for countries like Bangladesh—where, according to the UK-based Institute of Development Studies (IDS), around 87 percent of the population are involved in the informal economy and around 1.2 million children are already involved in the "worst forms of child labour"—the challenges ahead are manifold.

The Child Domestic Workers (CDW) remain a major problem of the informal employment sector. From toddlers to juveniles, girls and boys of all ages are

amended the Labour Act 2013, the miseries of Child Domestic Workers remain unaddressed. The policymakers' inability to align the discrepancy of the age bar for employability of these little workers in the DWPWP and the Labour Act—according to DWPWP, the minimum age is set at 12, whereas as per Labour Act, the minimum age is 14—is a manifestation of their apathy towards this situation.

Then, there are boys and girls who work in various other segments of the informal economy: in factories, workshops, shops, tanneries and other small jobs. These children are not only often exposed to hazardous materials and chemicals, but they also fail to access basic necessities such as nutrition,

broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults—remain the most vulnerable group.

These children are often involved in rag-picking, begging and other such tasks and miserably exploited by the people who employ them. Those involved in rag-picking are the most vulnerable, because they are prone to getting infected with various infectious and communicable diseases, thanks to the mismanagement of medical waste. Especially in the current situation, these children are at greater risk of being infected with Covid-19 because of the way we handle medical waste, especially outside the capital.

And with the nation's economic wheels slowing down due to Covid-19, these children are at a greater risk of exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Increasing poverty, loss of income, lack of jobs, and death of wage earners in the family are rending many of these children—born into poverty—easy prey for employers. With the equilibrium in the demand-supply equation of available child labour tilting towards the employers, it is the little children who will be the collateral damage.

The government must take appropriate and effective economic, social and legal measures to protect the children from becoming the "other victims" of Covid-19. The government, while expanding the social safety schemes to cover a wider group of people, can also expand its education programmes to properly accommodate the street children, giving them a better chance at life. The policies dealing with forced child labour should also be implemented strongly so that unscrupulous people are not able to exploit our children. Crafting narratives just one day a year—on the occasion of World Day Against Child Labour—is easy; what's not is the political will and its strong demonstration to truly eliminate this socio-economic menace.

Our children need our attention, especially in this unprecedented juncture of life.

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A 12-year-old boy and his four-month-old brother sleep on the central reservation of a street near Kamalapur Internal Container Depot in Dhaka. Their speech-impaired mother left them there to look for food amid the Covid-19 lockdown, sometime in March 2020.

PHOTO: MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN

employed in various households across the country as domestic workers. And these children are subjected to all forms of abuse and exploitation, from meagre wages and inhumane living conditions to sexual assault by employers and battery, leading to death in some cases. These are some of the myriad problems facing these children.

Despite the government having formed the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy (DWPWP) 2015 and

healthcare and education. And the wages they are paid are more often than not meagre and insufficient. The lucky ones can enrol for afternoon, evening or even at times weekend classes, and end up with a basic diploma in polytechnics or a BA pass course, but their prospect of a better, prosperous future remains remote.

The street children—defined by Unicef as "any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the