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Too many committees spoil the broth

Why form committees that will never fulfil their mandates?

FROM the onset of the pandemic, citizens have been confused and frustrated about the government's lack of vision and direction in addressing the health and socio-economic implications of Covid-19 in a holistic manner. From its casual handling of the risk of spread at the initial stages to opening up of garment factories in the middle of the "general holiday" to lifting the lockdown altogether when numbers of the infected and dead were at their highest—the government seems to be making arbitrary policy decisions at every stage, leaving ordinary citizens as well as experts in bewilderment as to what the government is really thinking and what it wants to achieve in the near and far future.

A report published on July 3 highlights that the government formed myriad committees to help it make informed decisions. Unsurprisingly, however, none of these committees have thus far proved to be useful or effective. In some cases, their recommendations were simply ignored. The highest-level national committee with the Health Minister Zahid Maleque, the cabinet secretary, senior secretaries and secretaries to review and implement strategies and issue new directives, have thus far met a total of three times, with the health minister himself admitting that—despite being the chairman of the said committee—he had no idea that the decision to open garment factories had been taken. Yet other committees were not even convened, added the report.

The advisory committees that did meet and put forward policy recommendations did not fare much better, with most of their recommendations on how to contain community transmission or improving the quality of services at hospitals being disregarded by the government, including a warning that the number of Covid-19 cases would rise unless certain conditions were met before easing the 66-day shutdown.

It is apparent that the committees formed have not fulfilled their mandates. Why, then, continue to form more such committees, as the DGHS did on June 27, and then form yet more committees to coordinate and oversee the activities of the previously formed committees? The government's bureaucratic-driven approach has been mired in inefficiencies, mismanagement and lack of coordination from the very start, and it is increasingly becoming evident that the government is not serious at all about developing and implementing a holistic way forward that takes into consideration the interests and well-being of all its citizens, particularly the most vulnerable.

We urge the government and its bureaucrats to take their mandate seriously—the well-being of the nation and its citizens depends upon it.

Mymensingh's Ali sets a benevolent example

Poet-turned-philanthropist providing through multiple means

IT is heartening to learn from a recent report published in this daily that a 49-year-old poet in Mymensingh named Ali Yusuf has been selflessly serving his community for a long time, and even more extensively, after the pandemic struck Bangladesh. Inspired by the altruistic nature of his parents—his father was a truck driver who helped his poor relatives with the full support of his spouse—Ali now continues his philanthropic work with the earnings from his printing press, along with the support from his wife, three children and an orphaned nephew, who is part of their family.

Ali is the perfect example of how a person can be helpful to fellow human beings in one's own way, no matter the magnitude of the work that they do. He serves as the coordinator of one of the three teams of volunteers that bury or cremate deceased Covid-19 patients in Mymensingh city. The humble man is also known to arrange financial aid for the needy through his influential social media handle. When countless people are taking a blow from the economic recession, Ali and his volunteers continue to arrange and distribute relief materials to the underprivileged. A blood donor himself, Ali is also in the advisory body of three blood donation groups and organises blood donation camps on a regular basis.

At a time when many of us are going through our own hardships and can barely make any time to check the state our neighbours are in, a modest Ali continues to do his part relentlessly, inspiring countless people in the process, including the volunteers who have been working with him. Yet, he credits them and his family members for his actions. Ali's extended hands to the needy should serve as an example for the rich and the affluent to follow. We strongly believe that if more people can adopt similar endeavours in their respective communities, it will play a vital role and go a long way to ameliorate the anguish that seems to be ever so prevalent during the pandemic.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A possible genocide again?

Myanmar's new threat of "clearance operations" is a disturbing echo of atrocities committed against the Rohingya minority and a reminder of the risks of ongoing impunity. Thousands of mostly ethnic Rakhine civilians have fled their homes. Less than three years ago, more than 700,000 ethnic Rohingya fled coordinated attacks that amounted to no less than genocide. The International Court of Justice has since ordered Myanmar to take emergency measures to prevent genocide, but this latest threat shows Myanmar has not changed. The failure of the United States and other countries to recognise previous attacks for what they are and to take further action is putting more lives at risk. We urge Secretary Pompeo to declare the attacks on the Rohingya as genocide and crimes against humanity and to take action to hold Myanmar accountable.

Daniel P Sullivan, by email

End of state-owned jute mills: why close when you can reform?



OF MAGIC & MADNESS
BADIUZZAMAN BAY

SO it's official now. The government is going to shut down all 25 state-owned jute mills operated by Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) and lay off about 25,000 workers involved with them. The prime minister approved the decision on Thursday, according to UNB, putting an end to speculations following an announcement by the textiles and jute minister to that effect last Sunday. Unless there is a reversal of decisions which is unlikely at this point, we're going to witness a historic moment for Bangladesh's jute industry, although it's not the one we were promised, nor can we let it pass without proper scrutiny of what has led to this moment and what we could have done to avoid it.

Here's what we know so far: the wages and benefits of all current workers (24,886) and the dues of 8,956 already retired workers of those jute mills will be paid within "the quickest possible time", said the principal secretary to the prime minister. A Tk 5,000-crore fund will be allocated for this purpose. On average, each worker will get Tk 13.86 lakh, and the payments will be made directly to their bank accounts. As for the future of the laid-off workers, we are told that they would be trained and "given priority" in recruitment to the mills when they are "modernised" and "reopened" under Public-Private Partnerships, or some other joint ventures, or through leasing out to third parties. Details in that department are still a little sketchy.

The official narrative pins the blame for the present situation on BJMC's lack of profitability, saying it had recorded a cumulative loss of Tk 10,674 crore from 1972 until 2018-19 and cannot be viable in the face of competition from private mills. This is no doubt a huge red flag for any industry, especially in the middle of a pandemic when even profit-making industries are struggling. But what the officials have conveniently glossed over is the reason behind this turn of events. BJMC may have been a rudderless ship but it's not unmanned. It's run by real people, who have let it rot in a bottomless pit of corruption, mismanagement, lack of coordination, inefficiencies, and so on.

So what we are not being told is that loss or lack of profitability, as an excuse for outsourcing production to the private sector, is just a semantic sleight of hand to let these people and their enablers off the hook. We've heard the same excuse peddled in the past, trying to justify occasional closure or privatisation of some mills. We have heard it when the workers went on hunger marches to demand their dues. Lack of profitability is a long-worn-out excuse by now, and it's frightening that

it would be used to pass death sentence to a sector that, if properly run, has so much to offer to this nation.

Jute is called "golden fibre" not just because the fibre is golden. It's called so because it also offers a golden opportunity to turn our economy around. Jute is the second most important natural fibre in terms of global consumption after cotton, and Bangladesh has ample to offer. The country's jute manufacturing sector, one of its oldest traditional manufacturing sectors, emerged in erstwhile East Pakistan in the early 1950s, with the founding of Adamjee Jute Mills. During the 1960s and 1970s, this sector accounted for a major share of the national income. In May 1972, after Bangladesh became independent, the government nationalised the industry to streamline exports. Ironically, the main reason cited for this move was to "check corruption" in

closure of all state-owned jute mills in one fell swoop.

The history of jute in independent Bangladesh is thus one of unutilised potential and unfulfilled promises. From the wholesale nationalisation in 1972 to the wholesale denationalisation in 2020, the trajectory of the industry shows not just its declining appeal or performance through the years. It's also, importantly, an indictment of the stop-start approach of successive governments that either did too much or too little, ignoring the long-term consequences of their action. So it's little wonder that they have chosen an easy exit when push came to shove, instead of taking up the strenuous task of reforming it from the ground up.

The official narrative about closing and "reopening" the mills under private arrangements and reemploying the workers raises some questions: how can

percent in the first 11 months of FY 2019-2020. During the same period, exports of readymade garments declined by about 19 percent and exports of leather goods declined by about 22 percent. In the process, the jute sector surpassed leather to take the second place in Bangladesh's overall export trade. Meanwhile, the RMG bloodbath continues apace as global buyers withdraw orders or refuse to pay the manufacturers. Many migrant workers have already returned to Bangladesh after losing their jobs in the pandemic, making a big dent in its remittance earnings. Experts say in these difficult and changing times, sectors like livestock, jute, and agriculture can play a major role in our economic recovery. Why, then, is this regressive move to close so many jute mills at once which may set us back years, if not decades?

It's worth noting that in recent years



Activists of Left Democratic Alliance, a coalition of left-leaning political parties, protest the closure of state-owned jute mills in a human chain formed in front of Jatiya Press Club on June 28, 2020.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

the sector and ensure fair prices for jute producers. In 1973, its contribution in the overall national export was 89.9 percent. It was a golden time for the golden fibre.

In the 1980s, however, it began to lose its lustre, after synthetic materials like polythene and plastics were introduced. This led to a gradual decline in its share of the national export, overall foreign exchange earnings and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The rise of the RMG sector, regressive policies of successive governments and the push for privatisation were also responsible for the decline. Adamjee Jute Mills was closed down in 2002. Today, as far as public policies go, jute exists as a glorified relic from the past. After a brief period of euphoria over the promulgation of the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act, 2010, which paved the way for compulsory use of jute packaging for 17 products, things have come full circle, culminating with the

workers trust this promise when there is a well-documented history of the authorities failing to give them their rightful dues or break the all-powerful hold of syndicates over this industry? What guarantee do they have that their dues will be paid in full or they will be given proper wages in the privatised mills? Can denationalisation eradicate the culture of corruption and mismanagement so entrenched in the industry? Why were the calls for modernisation to make those mills profitable ignored when it is obvious that it would have cost the government a lot less than its Tk 5,000-crore settlement package? Why did the government take this decision especially when there are signs that jute is making a comeback finally?

The last point is particularly significant. According to data from the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), exports of jute and jute products increased by about 4

there has been a resurgence of interest in jute globally, thanks to the rise in environmental awareness and greening strategies being adopted to combat climate change. In the coming days, there will be a huge demand for jute products and Bangladesh can be a global leader in this sector. The private mills are stepping up to the task as best as they can but we need those 25 public mills to be up and running again. We need them to be refurbished with modern equipment to start making profits. And we need those laid off workers to be back in the game, both for their sake and the sake of the country. Proper strategies, efficient management and diversified jute goods are key to success in this scenario.

The jute industry stands at a crossroads—we need to choose our next path very carefully.

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Is it really different this time? Maybe.

The Sisyphean struggle of US Blacks

Bicharpoti tomar bichar korbe jara, aaj jegechhe shei janata! (O Judge, those that will judge you, the people, have arisen today!)

- From a Bangla song written during the anti-colonial movement in British India by leftist writer/composer Saill Chowdhury.



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

IN the long tortuous history of the battle for the emancipation of Blacks that continues to this day in the US, progress has sometimes been so slow, and recalcitrant racist biases have been so resistant to change, that the tardy progress or lack thereof has been a cause of bitter frustration.

Then in one convulsive, historic jolt—society takes a quantum leap with a dramatic change.

Take two examples from US history: The emancipation proclamation in 1863 during the Civil War by US President Abraham Lincoln, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act by Congress in the 1960s, signed into law by US President Lyndon B. Johnson.

With emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy at the end of the Civil War, Blacks experienced freedom for the first time. For a brief, golden period, they ran and won public office, enjoyed freedoms that the white majority took for granted.

Fast forward to the 1960s, when the nation was convulsed by the Civil Rights movement spearheaded by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. This led to the passage of landmark laws that provided federal protection against racist laws and Black vote suppression.

Yet there is a certain oddness in this progression. If emancipation had been so wonderful, how is it that nearly a century later, Blacks had to fight for civil rights all over again?

The answer lies in the deeply mixed record of the US in race relations. Just like a wave that crashes on the shore, and

then quickly recedes back into the sea, convulsive jolts moving race relations forward have invariably been followed by a strong backlash that has pulled the nation back into its dark racist past. As former US President Barack Obama once drily noted on US progress: "We zig and we zag."

I remember my joy and disbelief at Obama's election. Until then, I had thought that there was no way we would see a Black elected president in our lifetime.

What a president he was! Cerebral, polished, erudite, but also warm and kind—he rightly became a darling of the world, a living, eloquent rebuttal to the vile racist stereotypes that still endure.

Today, upon reflection, I wonder if that vicious, racist US historical penchant is reasserting itself. Obama was followed

Notice a pattern here? Progress, followed by a depressing proclivity towards racist recidivism.

What a breath of fresh air, then, to see a genuine grassroots movement blossom following the horrific racist murder of George Floyd by police. Thousands and thousands of whites joined their Black brothers and sisters to put their foot down: Enough is enough.

It really feels different this time. It's not just the demonstrations, which have been overwhelmingly peaceful and astonishingly diverse. There is a sense that somehow a spark of empathy has shot through the racial divide and caught fire.

Statuses of yesteryear's racist heroes are falling. Editors at *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* have quit for making a racially insensitive faux pas.



Protesters hold placards during a demonstration against the death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody, in Washington, USA, June 13, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ERIN SCOTT

by US President Donald Trump, whose record is liberally peppered with racist stances, including promoting a bogus "birther" theory that Obama was born in Kenya, slurs against Mexicans, a US judge of Mexican descent, and most recently against China.

Princeton University has dumped the name of US President Woodrow Wilson for its prestigious centre, acknowledging Wilson's racism.

Taking a knee, the practice of Black players kneeling by one knee to protest oppression of Blacks, used to be

controversial. Now it has gone mainstream as police chiefs in several cities have done so publicly, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi along with her Democratic members took a knee to honour George Floyd.

Corporate America is expressing support. Walmart announced a USD 100 million fund to create a centre for racial equity. Apple has pledged USD 100 million towards a racial justice initiative. Department store chain Target has pledged USD 10 million to support social justice.

What's so heartwarming it that American public opinion has moved.

"A majority of American voters support the demonstrations against police brutality and racial injustice that have roiled the country over the past month, embracing ideas about bias within the criminal justice system and the persistence of systemic racism that are central tenets of the Black Lives Matter movement, according to a new national poll of registered voters by *The New York Times* and Siena College," *The New York Times* reported.

The poll found that 52 percent of white voters believe the death of George Floyd was "part of a broader pattern of excessive police violence toward African Americans."

"The numbers add to the mounting evidence that recent protests have significantly shifted public opinion on race, creating potential political allies for a movement that was, within the past decade, dismissed as fringe and divisive," the newspaper added.

No wonder Trump is flailing so hopelessly. Trump, for all his bluster, is essentially a one-trick pony.

"While (Trump) has shown little sympathy for the protesters and their fight for racial justice, and has continued to use racist language that many have denounced, voters feel favourably toward the protests and their cause," the newspaper added.

To be sure, there is a long, long way to go. Having said that, today's movement could well be remembered as a landmark in Black progress towards equality much like the end of the US Civil War and the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

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