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Health minister gives himself an 'A'

It's the height of irresponsibility and callousness

AT the height of controversy surrounding the health sector, when allegations of scams, mismanagement and corruption regarding the government's efforts to contain Covid-19 are rife in the media, the health minister has lauded himself and his ministry for a performance well done in managing its response to Covid-19. Given the sheer scale of mishandling, chaos and inefficiencies in the sector since the outbreak of the pandemic, and the serious allegations against the ministry itself for its involvement in the Regent Hospital's issuance of fake Covid-19 certificates as well as supply of sub-standard N-95 masks to government hospitals in April, we feel this statement is the height of irresponsibility and callousness. It highlights, once again, that the ministry is completely unwilling to even acknowledge—much less be held accountable for—the debilitating state of affairs in the health sector.

After weeks of blame game, during which DGHS made some pointed charges about how it was instructed by higher authorities at the health ministry to sign the MoU with Regent, the DG of DGHS has resigned, citing "health reasons". The government is also making changes at the DGHS top-end to apparently manage its image. But we ask: have the critical allegations against ministry officials been investigated by the government, or is the ministry itself playing judge and jury? Even if we are to assume that the DGHS top officials were solely responsible for the incident, it does not bear well that the ministry has so little control and oversight over its own departments. And let us not forget that Regent/JKG is not an isolated case, but just a high-profile example of the countless incidents of corruption, mismanagement and inefficiencies that have all but destroyed the most important sector at this time of unprecedented health crisis.

From the onset of the pandemic, the health ministry has failed miserably to take charge of the situation and come up with a systematic plan to control the spread of Covid-19 and provide affordable and quality treatment to patients. When asked about contradictory decisions made by the government over the past months, the minister himself claimed, on multiple occasions, that he had no idea why some of those were made. Now, he is giving himself a pat on the back solely based on the fact that the fatality rates in Bangladesh are "lower" than in many other countries, ignoring that, unlike those countries, we are only testing a handful of the population. To say nothing of the fact that an additional 1,776 people have died after showing Covid-19 symptoms from March 22 to July 11, who have not been included in the official count, according to Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies.

At a time when the health ministry needs a complete and radical overhaul, the health minister's remarks have not only disappointed us, but truly made us apprehensive about the future of the sector.

Grab the land grabbers in Khilgaon!

Police must protect people's land and property

IT is shocking that while the whole nation is grappling with a pandemic, there have been instances of land grabbing in Khilgaon, Dhaka. According to a report published recently by this daily, as most people remain indoors or uninvolved because of the pandemic, encroachers are using this opportunity to take over unguarded and empty plots of land in Khilgaon. The report further reveals that in the last few months, grabbers aided by a former Chhatra League leader and a sacked police constable have taken control of at least a dozen plots in Nandipara area by building boundary walls and putting up signboards around them. Landowners and locals alleged that a high official of the Khilgaon Police Station provided shelter to the criminals.

The incident came under public scrutiny after the principal of Dhaka Dental College, on behalf of the plot owners, submitted a prayer on June 24 to the deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (Motijheel Division) seeking legal support, following which the police began their investigation. Prior to that, when he submitted three complaints to Khilgaon Police Station, they did not take any action nor did they register any case. Later when the principal filed a case with Khilgaon Police Station on July 1, police arrested the prime accused Masud Ahmed and his partner Ziaur Rahman Pintu. However, active land grabbers are still at large in Khilgaon. Visiting the area on July 4, our correspondent witnessed new boundary walls being built around seven to eight separate plots. A temporary tin-shed room was also found on the principal's plot. Various other landowners talked about experiencing a similar fate, who had trouble registering a general diary at the police station. Moreover, when the plot owners tried to recover their property, the criminals claimed large amounts of money from them!

The above incidents highlight the audacity of these land grabbers who carry out their crimes with impunity. These acts cannot go unpunished and legal action must be taken. In order to keep the plots from being plundered, law enforcement officers should strictly monitor the area and make sure they are protected from land grabbers. The authorities must also thoroughly investigate the matter to find out why complaints couldn't be registered at the police station and bring all the perpetrators to book. Needless to say, it is the responsibility of the law enforcers to assure the safety and security of the people and their property.



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

CROSS-BORDER cattle smuggling prior to Eid-ul-Adha is an irritant that keeps officials in both Bangladesh and India nervy. The il/legal trans-/ex-port of cow is a sensitive issue given its sacred status to the Hindus. For them, the cow is considered a sacred mother-figure and is linked with Lord Krishna, whereas the bovine is attributed with symbolic significance during the Islamic festival of sacrifice, Eid-ul-Adha.

Muslims all over the world continue the practice of sacrifice as a reminder of Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his only son, Ismail, for the sake of Allah. Just when the prophet was about to perform the ritual, a ram was found sacrificed in place of his son. Muslims believe the desire to show their devotion to Allah is more important than the meat or blood. The same ordinance is applicable for the other people of the book. The Jews, however, interpreted the incident from the Hebrew Bible as Abraham's way of testing God as he knew that God would never want him to sacrifice his son. Conversely, the Christians downplayed the sacrifice by arguing that only Jesus Christ's sacrifice had the redemptive power to wash away human sins. Animal sacrifice (except for cows) holds a special place in the ancient Vedic scriptures that make devotional offering obligatory.

Ever since the Modi government came to power in 2014 with the help of the Hindu nationalist organisation RSS, a feisty euphuism to save cow has entered the lexicon of Indian media. Cow vigilantes are on the prowl. Beef eating is being used as an excuse to normalise a hate crime that has seen the horrific killings of mostly Muslims and Dalits by murderous mobs. According to a report by IndiaSpend.com, 97 percent of the "cow terrorism" between 2010 and 2017 took place in the first three years of the Modi government. Although PM Modi has publicly spoken against cow terrorism, the practice is rampant in the country, and is echoed in India's characterisation of its beef-eating neighbours.

Last year, the right-wing magazine Swarajya claimed, "Bakr Eid is fast approaching, and there are just too many carnivorous stomachs to feed in the neighbouring country" (July 19, 2019). The rhetoric is tinged with frustration over India's push to save its cows to starve Bangladesh of beef (Reuters, July 3, 2015). In 2015, the then Interior Minister Rajnath Singh instructed India's

Border Security Force to halt cattle smuggling completely so that the "people of Bangladesh give up eating beef." The same report quoted Jishnu Basu, an RSS spokesman in West Bengal, who said, "Killing or smuggling a cow is equivalent to raping a Hindu girl or destroying a Hindu temple."

Thankfully, the Indian ban on cow trade, both formal and informal, has helped the growth of our local cattle industry. According to Bangladesh Livestock Department, while 2.6 million cows came from India to Bangladesh in 2013, it was only 92,000 in 2018. Last year, due to the revamped cattle farming and rural economy, the country had about 11.5 million animals ready against



This file photo shows Indian cattle being brought through shallow water in the Bichhanakandi area of Gowainghat, Sylhet.

PHOTO: STAR

the estimated demand for 11 million animals (EFE-EPA, Aug 12, 2019). Fifty thousand entrepreneurs had joined the sector and made the country self-sufficient in meat. The heavy price of cattle feed in Bangladesh, however, makes Indian cows cheaper allowing cross-border cow trading still to persist. The trade is further patronised by the opportunist businessmen and corrupt security officials on both sides of the border. Yet, the Indian media presents it as a fault of Bangladesh alone—its eating habit.

The internet is replete with images of cows being tied to rudimentary rafts made out of banana shoots and ferried across the river, or being pulled by the necks using pulleys to hoist them over the barbed border fence. This inhuman treatment of the animals shows that there are some greedy, desperate people on both sides of the border who want to benefit from the price gap of a product. Their method is profane, but its media representation remains sacred.

The moral high ground assumed by

the Indians, judging us guilty of the cardinal sin of gluttony, demands a state-level response. Indeed, we have spoken through our action—by living up to the challenge of meeting the country's need for quality protein, but the unchallenged monologue is helping the xenophobia affecting the relationship between the two countries.

On July 19, a news scroll snaked silently at the bottom of the TV screen. Our media did not even find it worth voicing out in the main news section. The following day, a few local print dailies covered the news almost in a nonchalant manner—that three Bangladeshis were lynched in India for their alleged involvement in stealing of a cow.

I searched for the news coverage of the incident in Indian media: "Three from Bangladesh lynched in Assam for 'cattle smuggling'" (*The Hindu*, July 19); "Bangladeshi Men Lynched on Cattle Lifting Suspicion" (*The Wire*, July 20); "3 Bangladesh cattle thieves lynched in Karimganj" (*Times of India*); "3 Bangladeshis lynched by locals for stealing cattle from Karimganj tea estate" (*India Today*).

How do you know that they were Bangladeshis? "The bodies were found with biscuits and pieces of breads made in Bangladesh, ropes, wire cutters and pliers," the local police officer reported. Ah, so the confectionary items gave away the national identities of individuals who entered the cow shed of a tea estate labourer whose home is 1.5 miles away from the Bangladesh border. This is the second time a mob lynching happened in the same area within the span of a month. On June 1, one Bangladeshi cattle lifter identified as Ranjit Munda was lynched by a group of villagers in the Putani tea

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Europe Rescues Itself



PHILIPPE LEGRAIN

AFTER four days and nights of tough negotiations and many painful compromises, European leaders have reached a deal on a groundbreaking 750 billion euro (USD 868 billion) recovery fund. As a gesture of solidarity toward Italy, Spain, and other countries still reeling from the Covid-19 crisis, the agreement is a major step forward for the European Union. Even so, it does little to address the eurozone's deepest problems.

The Covid-19 crisis has strained the monetary union to breaking point. While the pain has been widely shared, some countries have been hit harder than others. Italy, France, and Spain have suffered the most deaths and the deepest recessions, and tourist-reliant southern Europe seems headed for an especially slow recovery.

Worse, while government debt is soaring across the eurozone, it is reaching perilously high levels in many southern countries, particularly Italy. The initial response to the pandemic left Italians feeling aggrieved, owing to the perception (not unjustified) that northern Europeans had been quicker to blame them for their plight than to offer assistance. Even the pro-European Italian mainstream—from President Sergio Mattarella on down—felt politically alienated from the EU at the height of the crisis.

To her credit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel recognised the gravity of the situation. In May, she and French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a 500 billion euro recovery fund that would be financed through EU-issued debt and allocate grants to the hardest-hit regions and sectors. The European Commission then built on the Franco-German proposal, increasing the headline total to 750 billion euro by adding EU loans to the grants.

The deal struck by beary-eyed EU leaders in the early hours of July 21 is welcome in several respects. While an agreement of some kind was always likely, there was reason to worry that the negotiations would drag on throughout the year, deepening the EU's internal divisions and distracting policymakers from other priorities. Reaching agreement before Europe shuts down in August is a significant achievement in itself.

Better still, the deal preserves many positive elements of the Merkel-Macron proposal, notably 390 billion euro for EU grants, with few strings attached. Four richer northern European countries, led by the Netherlands, had previously insisted that the EU provide only loans, conditional on recipient governments enacting reforms dictated by the EU (and subject to national vetoes). But the stigma of such intrusive conditionality—reminiscent of Greece's treatment a decade ago—was anathema to southern European countries.

Moreover, with government borrowing costs already so low—owing in no small part to the European Central Bank's 1.35 trillion-euro Pandemic Emergency

stimulus packages, the EU grants still will provide a helpful boost to complement the ECB's monetary firefighting.

The biggest benefit of the recovery fund, though, is political. The EU is demonstrating that it can come to Europeans' aid when they need it most. That should provide a sorely needed antidote to Euroscepticism and alleviate the anger generated by the crisis.

Institutionally, the deal is a major win for the European Commission, which was often bypassed during the 2010-12 eurozone crisis. The Commission will be the one borrowing the 750 billion euro to finance the fund, and directing the grants and loans through the EU budget that it administers. And with an eye toward



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (right) and French President Emmanuel Macron (middle) on July 20, 2020.

PHOTO: JOHN THYS/POOL VIA REUTERS

Purchases Programme (PEPP)—EU loans would have been of little help. If anything, they would merely aggravate debt-sustainability concerns, not least in Italy, where public debt is set to soar to more than 160 percent of GDP next year.

As an economic matter, 390 billion euro in grants over the next three years will provide a significant boost. The European Commission expects the EU economy to contract by around 8 percent this year, to 12.8 trillion euro. As such, the recovery-fund grants would be equivalent to 3 percent of GDP, or 1 percent for each year. If Italy's economy shrinks by 10 percent this year, the 82 billion euro earmarked for it would amount to some 5 percent of GDP. Thus, while much smaller than national fiscal

repaying the debt after 2027, it will also oversee the search for new EU revenue sources, such as a digital-services or carbon-border-adjustment tax.

The downside is that, because the recovery fund was folded into the broader negotiations over the EU's 2021-27 budget, the deal required some regrettable compromises. Before the pandemic, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's flagship initiative was the European Green Deal to address climate change. Now, the funding to support a clean-energy transition has been slashed.

Another big challenge for the EU is homegrown authoritarianism. Illiberal governments like that of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continue to subvert the rule of law with impunity while

misappropriating EU regional cohesion funds for their own benefit, which is why one of Merkel's top priorities had been to tie future EU funding to respect for the rule of law. But conditionality provisions were gutted, apparently in order to overcome Orbán's threatened veto (which was scarcely credible, because Hungary would have remained a large net beneficiary of EU funding anyway).

With the departure of the United Kingdom in January, there was also hope of doing away with the proliferation of national rebates, a perk first secured by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and subsequently obtained by other net contributors to the EU budget. These provisions tend to encourage a penny-pinching, zero-sum mentality that undermines European solidarity. But instead of curbing rebates, the budget deal essentially bribes the obstreperous Dutch, Austrians, Swedes, and Danes with even larger ones.

After the 2010-12 eurozone crisis, the philanthropist George Soros pointed out that Merkel always does just enough to keep the euro going, "but nothing more." That is true again. The recovery fund is a welcome step forward. But it does not resolve the eurozone's fundamental problems, which include Italy's unsustainable debt dynamics, Germany's deflationary bias, and the lack of a fiscal rebalancing mechanism. The eurozone has dodged a bullet, but it is still an open target.

It is not possible to know whether the victims were the recently declared "illegal immigrants". After all, the only identity markers are some Bangladeshi-made bread and biscuits. Also it is not clear how many cows were there in the shed of a tea garden labourer to characterise the strangers as smugglers. One thing is obvious: we are indifferent to the state of the victims. We do not protest with the sincerity that these state crimes deserve. Every accused has the right to a fair trial. Somehow, we have accepted the idea that our poor people are disposables. They can be sacrificed, albeit to violence instigated by mob mentality, because they are "smugglers". Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, violence is being construed as a sacred duty to protect a shared ideology. Unless we treat the life of every citizen as sacred, we will not have any meaningful exchange and interactions with our neighbours. Let us raise the ground of our morality so that we can match the moral high ground assumed by the Indian ideologues. If we do not care for our citizens, how can we expect others to do the same?

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