

Crossfire killings go on unabated

Belittles the rule of law and maligns the justice system

INCIDENTS of crossfire, regrettably, seems to be going on continually. So far this month, 35 people have been killed in so called-called crossfires. The accounts of the incidents have become rather predictable and hackneyed, and they hardly fit the definition of crossfire. Instead, it makes the law enforcers and the police appear to be the judge, jury and executioner, all in one, by taking, what a lawmaker termed, "instant action." It is surprising to hear the police briefings after the so-called crossfires, describing the antecedents of those killed, as if to justify the killings. Either they are drug dealers or persons with several criminal cases against him, or a suspected killer. As if an accused drug dealer automatically forfeits the right to his life.

There is no doubt that these operations are a continuation of the government's anti-drug drive to rid the country of drugs? In fact, a police super's comment that the anti-drug operations would continue in the border areas of his district where drug smuggling is going on, confirms that. We would want the country to be free of drugs. But his statement to the effect that no drug dealer would be spared, betrays the ominous intention. We support the government's zero-tolerance against drugs, but take issue with the modus of ridding the country of drugs employed by the government. In fact, as per records 466 people were killed in 2018 after the government launched an anti-narcotics drive on May 4 that year. Last year, the figure was 391. In January of this year seven people—alleged drug dealers—were killed in one incident alone in Cox's Bazaar. This particular aspect of the current anti-drug strategy, we believe, is flawed. And it may be counterproductive in the long run.

No society that values justice and rule of law can condone extrajudicial killings, which the so called crossfire deaths are. It is also a gross violation of, and disregard for, the legal system. A suspect or an accused must be allowed to have his day in the court of law, and not the court of man through "instant action."

Children drowning and falling ill in flood-affected areas

Ensure shelter, pure drinking water and food supplies for children, families

THE increasing incidents of children drowning in the floodwaters and getting infected with waterborne diseases across the country is extremely worrying. Recently, a woman lost her three-year-old son in the Teesta as he slipped out of her lap and fell into the river while she was on a boat trying to go to a flood shelter, and a seven-year-old girl in Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila drowned in a deep hole in which stagnant floodwater had collected due to illegal lifting of stones. The girl drowned there when she was crossing knee-deep water to get to a road. Such incidents have become common in the flood-hit areas as families have been forced to take shelter on streets and embankments under the open sky, losing their homesteads and belongings to the flood.

According to local health authorities, at least 24 children have drowned in floodwater in Jamalpur this month, while in Thakurgaon and Panchagarh, the number of children drowned in the last two months is 26. Although we do not have sufficient data on children drowning, it can be guessed that the situation could be the same in other flood-affected districts.

Besides drowning, children are also vulnerable to various waterborne diseases. Reportedly, the number of child patients is rapidly increasing in the flood-hit areas as diarrhoea, skin disease and other waterborne diseases are spreading among them. Malnutrition, too, has become a major issue as children in the shelters do not have access to nutritious food and pure drinking water. The halted immunisation programmes in the affected areas is another reason for the high rate of illness among children.

The Unicef has recently estimated that around 1.3 million children in Bangladesh would be affected by flooding this year. Under the circumstances, the government needs to scale up its flood response efforts and take particular measures to save our children from drowning and diseases. Families need to be evacuated to the flood shelters well ahead of time and those shelters need to be made safe for children. Children also need to have safe places in the shelters where they can play without facing any risk of drowning.

The absence of shelters in the remote flood-affected areas has increased the vulnerability of children. So, the government needs to build flood shelters in the areas where it is needed the most. At the same time, awareness needs to be raised among parents about the risk of children drowning. Moreover, flood-affected families need to be provided with pure drinking water and food supplies. The government alone cannot ensure all this; non-government organisations and well-off people of society should also come forward to meet the immediate needs of affected children and their families.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stand beside the flood victims

The recent floods have left thousands of people hungry and vulnerable to diseases like diarrhoea in the absence of adequate relief supplies. Many of the flood-hit people are unable to return home from temporary shelters as their houses were badly damaged. And they are also facing a shortage of drinking water as most of the tube-wells in the area have gone under water.

Inadequate government relief has worsened their crises and compounded their woes. Apart from the government's aid, other affluent individuals and organisations must step forward immediately to stand beside the victims of flood.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka

Making online education effective



MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

DURING the ongoing coronavirus pandemic educational institutions all over the world have introduced online medium for imparting lessons to students. Indeed, classroom lessons in many advanced countries had become technology dependent even before the pandemic. Now it is no longer a choice but a necessity if students are to be taught.

Several schools, colleges and universities in Bangladesh have also adopted this method so that students do not miss out on learning during the current situation. Various virtual platforms are being used for lessons and exams. Both private and public institutions have introduced this mechanism of teaching. Indeed, since the middle of March this year, the government has initiated distance learning through television. Various government ministries and departments such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, the Ministry of Information Technology and access to information of the ICT division of the government, have taken active measures to provide education to students during the corona crisis.

The importance of keeping students engaged in education throughout this period is a laudable task. However, how this system is functioning, who can access this facility, what quality of education are being provided and how this can be improved are issues that need to be looked at carefully.

The issue of infrastructure comes first. Online education is not accessible to all. Majority of the schools and colleges in the rural areas do not have facilities for technology-based education. Many students do not have laptops. Besides, internet connections and speed in rural areas are poor and slow. Even in the urban areas the quality of internet connection is not good.

Unfortunately, imposition of additional Value Added Tax (VAT) on internet use in the budget for fiscal year (FY) 2021 has been a contradictory measure taken by the government. Such VAT has been imposed on the bandwidth price both at the wholesale and retail levels. As a result, monthly internet payment for students will increase from Tk 1,000 to about Tk 1,400. This is a big jump for students from

poor and low-income families during the coronavirus crisis. Parents will feel this is a burden and may think of withdrawing their children from education. As it is, economic hardship during this crisis will force poor families to send their children for income earning activities. One does not know whether and when they will be able to return to classrooms. Thus, the risk of child labour may increase. For girl children, the situation is even worse. Parents are marrying off their daughters who are below the age of marriage as they cannot bear daily expenses and feel girls are additional burden. This is also going to have impact on the health of these girls since they will now be having children at a very young age.

reduced to a large extent. However, to fulfil the national development vision and to become a developed country by 2041, the current level of achievement is not enough. Shortcomings in several areas have to be removed. Higher resource availability and its use, quality education for all and improved governance in the education system are still unfinished agendas which may reverse the achievements made so far. Therefore, consolidation of the current initiatives, and ensuring consistency and alignment of education-related commitments with national priorities are essential to achieve the aspiration of building capable human resources for the future.

In the medium-term, the allocation for

increasing as the size of the budget is also increasing, the share of education expenditure compared to the total budget expenditure has not increased much over time. In the budget for FY2021, education budget as a share of total budget has decreased to 11.7 percent from 14 percent in FY2010. As a share of GDP, education budget has decreased to 2.09 percent in FY2021 compared 2.12 percent in the revised budget of FY2020. Even with such low allocation, the utilisation rate of the education budget, especially development expenditure, is low and has been decreasing over the years, except for certain years, such as FY2019.

Education objectives have to be aligned with national plans. There is no specific universalisation plan for education beyond grade five in Bangladesh. Measures are needed to reconcile global target of universal full secondary education by 2030, with national targets for grades eight, ten and twelve. The need for improved education governance has always been felt by education experts. A permanent statutory National Education Commission can be a mechanism for guiding the sector, exercising oversight, monitoring progress and assessing the impact of reforms in education governance and management.

The quality of teachers is another critical area for achieving the education objectives. The profession is yet to be looked at as a respected one. An overall transformation is needed for the teaching profession to make it prestigious and effective. A separate National Teaching Service Corps can be created with better remuneration package which will attract qualified and young graduates. The online lessons provided through digital platforms during the corona pandemic have also shown the ill-preparedness of teachers. Many are averse to technology and many have no experience.

The ongoing corona crisis underscores the need for change in the method of teaching at educational institutions. In order to adapt the new normal, the education sector has to be redesigned. Instead of following the path of providing certificates through traditional education system, the new realities have to be taken into consideration and contextualised within the plans and strategies of the education sector. This is essential for making quality education inclusive and equitable, particularly when it is becoming more technology dependent.

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Indeed, like many other sectors the achievement of the education sector made over the past decades is at risk of being reversed. During the past decades, Bangladesh has achieved near-universal access to primary education. Gender gap in access to primary and secondary education has been reduced. About 14 percent of secondary level students is in the vocational track. Students' participation in education is being supported by expanding stipend scheme and free textbooks. Student-teacher ratio has improved, teachers' salaries have increased, student assessment reforms have been undertaken and school facilities have improved.

Thus, many deficiencies that characterised the education system of Bangladesh in the past decades have been

public education budget should be raised to at least 4 percent, and eventually to 6 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), and at least to 20 percent of the national budget. Stagnation in public fund allocation for education in recent years is a worry. Actual expenditure on education as a share of GDP remained somewhat stagnant, hovering around the 2 percent mark. This is lower than what is targeted in the national Seventh Five-Year Plan (7FYP), and also below the standards set for Education 2030 Framework for Action of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Education 2030 Framework for Action advises to allocate 4-6 percent of GDP and 15-20 percent of total public expenditure for the education sector. Though total allocation has been

Apparel industry needs to recognise its truth worth



RMG NOTES

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"If you don't know your own value, somebody will tell you your value, and it'll be less than you're worth," stated Bernard Hopkins Jr, one of the most successful boxers of the past three decades. As the world slowly comes to terms with the new norms following the global Covid-19 pandemic, is it time for the ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh and the wider global apparel supply chain to reassess the value of the product that it produces and increase end-consumer awareness of the true costs of the fashion purchases that they make.

The RMG sector of Bangladesh has enjoyed rapid growth since its inception in the late 1970s and, until the devastating effects of the coronavirus hit home, had established the country as the second largest global supplier of apparel, with a 6.4 percent market share in clothing and with the RMG sector accounting for 83 percent of Bangladesh's exports, employing some 4.4 million people and contributing over USD 36 billion to the economy.

A few short months later and the entire fashion industry landscape has changed. Retailers and brands around the world have seen demand for their products shrink dramatically as their customers have been restricted by lockdown measures and, even as these measures are being relaxed, are reluctant to resume the purchasing habits they followed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. The RMG industry has felt the consequences of this contraction in the fashion industry, with orders from customers being cancelled, delayed or, worse still, payments being withheld, leaving many companies in the industry facing a bleak future.

How could it have come to this in such a short space of time? An industry that was the pride of the nation has been brought to its knees in a matter of weeks and this has raised some serious questions about how we recover and shape the sector for the future.

Let us forget, the rapid rise in the fortunes of the Bangladesh RMG industry were largely based upon the supply of "value" product, with the industry able to rely on a ready workforce whose salary expectations were, until recently, very low. The current apparel industry in Bangladesh is heavily reliant on "basic" low ticket price production, although some 40 percent of exports in 2018 were

on higher ticket price fashion items. Due to this, the sector runs on extremely low profit margins, often eroded through increasing taxes, rising charges for fuel and power and greater expenditure on transportation and wages.

Covid-19 has exposed the fragility of this reliance upon lower ticket price items manufactured by workers who depend on their salaries to support themselves and their dependents. For too long a culture of price pressure from our customers has

social and environmental standards and, at all costs, we must not turn our back on what has been achieved. Now is the time to engage with our customers and ensure that they understand our needs and the true value of the product we produce rather than continually chase orders for the lowest purchase price.

I appreciate that this approach will be alien to many involved in the Bangladesh RMG sector, but recent events have proven that we cannot let things carry on as

within the global apparel supply chain. There is a common misconception that when asked to describe the process of natural selection, as defined by Charles Darwin in his work *On the Origin of Species* and the term survival of the fittest, many assume "fittest" to mean the best physical specimen of the species and that only those in the best shape and best health will survive in nature.

However, this is not always the case. Individuals that survive are not always



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instilled a situation whereby, in general, the lower the cost paid for any apparel item, the lower the salary of the workforce that produce it.

But have we been missing a trick here? Has the RMG industry, over the years, lost sight of the true value of the product that it produces? I am not for a moment suggesting a wholesale increase in the purchase price of apparel products produced in Bangladesh but what I think needs to be realised is that the prices being paid for the product we produce are being kept artificially and, as has been proven, unsustainably low. In a post-Covid world we need to readdress this imbalance and, together with our business partners establish a fair pricing system for apparel produced in the country.

We should not forget the advances and investments that have been made in the RMG industry in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013. We have been rightly proud of improvements in ethical,

normal. In fact it would be foolhardy to assume that things will return to normal once the ravages of the pandemic subside.

Now is the time, through engagement with our customers, to ensure that the true costs of any apparel item, whether produced in Bangladesh or in other sourcing hubs, are clearly communicated to the end consumer. There is an emerging groundswell of consumers in our key markets of the UK, Europe and the USA that want to be assured that the product that they purchase is produced in the most ethical, environmentally sound manner possible. The Covid-19 pandemic offers the opportunity to inform those consumers and, together with our business partners, we can champion the virtues of the apparel product that we produce as a nation.

The Bangladesh RMG industry can no longer rely on the level of business that we enjoyed before the pandemic broke and we will need to adapt. There is much talk about the "survival of the fittest"

the strongest, fastest, or smartest. By that definition, then, survival of the fittest might not be the best way to describe natural selection as it applies to evolution. Darwin did not mean it in those terms when he used it in his republished book. He intended "fittest" to mean the members of the species best suited, or able to adapt to the immediate environment, and it is this process of adaptation that will ensure that the Bangladesh apparel industry can survive going forward.

Through engagement with our business partners, the championing of the advances the RMG sector has made and the establishment of meaningful partnerships based on a fair pricing strategy, the industry will continue, albeit in a different format to what we all knew before the Covid-19 crisis took hold.

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