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FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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# Health guidelines for reopening primary schools finalised

*But are the schools prepared?*

THE ministry of primary and mass education has finalised a plan for reopening primary schools across the country—which have remained closed since March 17 due to Covid-19—and prepared the necessary health guidelines in this regard. According to the plan, only two students will be allowed to sit on each bench at a classroom, everyone in schools (students, teachers and other staffers) will have to wear masks, and there will have to be arrangements in all schools for hand washing and measuring of body temperatures.

While we understand the importance of reopening schools as the academic activities of about two crore primary students of more than one lakh primary schools and kindergartens have been hampered due to the pandemic, we also think that before taking the final decision, the government should consider all the risks associated with it.

There are over 65,500 government primary schools across the country. With many of these schools having only one classroom, how will they ensure that students maintain physical distancing? Also, many of the schools have around 80 students in each classroom. Will it be possible to reserve one bench for two students in reality? Also, who will monitor all these health protocols at schools? And, needless to say, additional funds will be needed to ensure proper health hygiene at schools. Who will bear these additional costs?

Moreover, parents are confused as to what to do if schools reopen at a time when the Covid-19 infection rate is showing no sign of dropping. Although primary schools are not reopening at least until October 3, according to a previous government announcement, we assume that the decision will come soon since the government has already finalised the health guidelines.

Now we hope that the government will complete all the groundwork needed to reopen educational institutions without jeopardising the health of students and their families. All the government primary schools should have proper infrastructures for maintaining the health guidelines. The government also needs to conduct awareness campaigns to educate the students as well as teachers about the health rules. So, finalising the health guidelines for reopening the schools is just the first step; the more challenging task for the government lies ahead: preparing all the schools in a way that they can actually operate following the health directives, ensuring the safety of all students.

# An unprovoked attack on peaceful protesters

*Do citizens not have a right to protest extrajudicial killings?*

WE stand with the civil society members who have condemned an attack on a photography exhibition on extrajudicial killings organised by Drik Gallery on September 4. It is truly shocking that even protests that are organised by cultural organisations without particular political leanings are now being foiled by such aggressive and anti-democratic tendencies within certain factions.

The event in question was being streamed online from the University of Dhaka campus premises when the attack occurred. According to a statement of protest released by the civil society members, more than 100 activists of the ruling party, led by the councillor of ward 26 of Dhaka South City Corporation, were seen storming into the programme venue on the live stream. They told the protesters that the trial of the August 21 grenade attack case has to be carried out first and that no other trials can take precedence before then, after which they started pushing the rights activists, snatched photos displayed for the exhibit, tried to seize activists' mobile phones and stood in front of the gallery's banner wielding their own placards.

This is not an incident that can be easily ignored, and it reveals some disturbing truths about the state of our democracy. The fact that the police allegedly played the role of silent spectators during the whole incident is equally distressing. Why did the police allow such an unprovoked attack on peaceful protests? Since when do ruling party supporters have the authority to distinguish between the significance of different cases that are under the jurisdiction of the legal system? Do any and all supporters of the ruling party have a free pass in abusing their power with impunity? Can we claim to live in a democracy if protesters do not even have the right to peacefully stand together against an issue as serious as extrajudicial killings?

If the authorities believe in democracy and the rights of the people of this country as enshrined in the Constitution, they must answer these questions and bring the perpetrators of this unprovoked attack to account.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

We miss you, Tigers

The world has changed dramatically in just months. Gone are the days when we could do things we love, like watching our national cricket team play, without having to worry about anything. The national teams of several countries have recently started playing Tests and ODIs. After nearly six months of coronavirus-induced downtime, the Bangladesh team is also gearing up to return to international cricket with their tour of Sri Lanka in October.

With this, players who have tested negative for Covid-19 can safely return to the field. If every safety precaution is maintained and all the equipment disinfected regularly, we can watch the game and our beloved athletes on TV once again. I know it is not going to be the same without all the cheering fans in the stadium, but I believe it will be better than having no cricket at all.

Aminur Rahim, Dhaka

# Six months of Covid-19: Is the economy on a path to inclusive recovery?

**RIZWANUL ISLAM**

THE Covid-19 pandemic derailed life as a whole and severely disrupted the global economy as well as that of Bangladesh. Looking at the impact on economic growth, the country was cruising at over 8 percent growth of GDP which then came down to 5.24 percent (according to government estimates). Although the government has projected a GDP growth of 8.2 percent for 2020-21, almost all independent analysts have expressed doubts about the practicality of that target.

The pandemic is still continuing, and no one knows when it would end—although, in Bangladesh, people in responsible positions seem to believe that it will either wane by itself or weaken sufficiently by the end of this month. But on the ground, it seems that the present uncertainties are likely to continue for at least another six to nine months, and normal economic activities are unlikely to resume before the middle of 2021. At least that is what came out from a mini-survey of “informed citizens” consisting of representatives of the government, employers, workers and the research community that I did in the first half of August.

Even when the economy gets back on the road to recovery, an important question would be whether that would be sufficiently inclusive so that the frailties that surfaced during the pandemic-induced economic crisis can be overcome. That the impressive pre-pandemic economic growth was not inclusive became apparent when we saw growing inequality in incomes and large numbers of people placed precariously on the edge and falling off the cliff at the first strike of the storm. Do we want to go back to the same growth path, or do we want to see growth of a kind that would build resilience of the economy and its people to withstand such shocks and crises?

It is by now well-known that the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis had a severe adverse effect on the livelihoods of people, especially the poor and low-income ones. When the shutdown came in March, neither the government nor the people were prepared for the economic fallout. My estimate shows that one in five workers were without their source of income during that period. There was hardly any safety net to provide them with necessary support when they needed it most.

Although public life was allowed to resume at the end of May, uncertainties continued as the strategy to fight the virus included localised lockdowns. As a result, economic activities did not start in full swing immediately. Huge numbers of people are still without jobs. Projections I have made indicate that the manufacturing sector may have lost about six lakh jobs, with the ready-made

garment (RMG) sector shedding between three and four lakh workers.

Apart from loss of jobs, working people are having to cope with a downward pressure on real wages. During April-June this year, growth of wages in major sectors like construction, fishery, and services has not been able to keep up with the increase in consumer prices, thus indicating a fall in real wages. Meanwhile, a large number of low-income people are returning to their village roots, indicating that reverse migration from urban to rural areas has become a coping mechanism. Likewise, thousands of workers are returning from abroad after having lost their jobs. These pressures on the rural labour market may depress rural wages.

In order to boost economic recovery, the government announced a policy package for economic recovery amounting to Tk 1,03,117 crore, which

announcement of shutdown measures.

Not surprisingly, the only component that seems to have been fully implemented is the allocation for export-oriented industries, although not without its share of initial confusions concerning details and uncertainty about the period of coverage and amounts to be paid.

The second scheme in terms of the progress in extending credit support is the one earmarked for large enterprises, with about 73 percent of the allocation disbursed. The schemes dedicated for smaller enterprises and the farm sector are nowhere near this level, with disbursement in the range of 20 to 35 percent of allocations (*The Daily Star*, September 8, 2020). It is clear that the bigger enterprises have been able to access the stimulus support of the government with greater ease and speed. Not only that, no disbursement has yet

absence of necessary social protection and “automatic stabilisers” that could come into force when the economy and labour market confronted a downturn was laid bare.

Building resilience is an important part of a country's preparedness to face a crisis; and the present crisis has clearly shown the areas where work needs to be done. A major element of this should be to have a universal and institutionalised system of social protection and social safety net for the poor. Keeping a complete and up-to-date database of the poor and the near-poor—a mechanism for reaching them when needed and creating necessary fiscal space for expanding the coverage of safety nets when needed—should be on the agenda for building resilience.

The private sector also has to build up its own resilience to face crises in the future. All enterprises irrespective of size and market should try to build up their own “crisis management fund”, so that they don't have to depend solely on government bail-out. Part of their strategy for building resilience should focus on strengthening their competitiveness, and diversifying their product range and markets.

At the level of broad development strategy, the discourse on economic recovery should move beyond an exclusive focus on GDP growth to making growth more inclusive and sustainable. Although we have reasons to be satisfied about the growth experience in recent years, from the point of view of inclusive growth, there were questions even before the pandemic struck. Rather than adopting conventional strategies for recovery and going back to the pre-crisis pattern of growth, there should be specific and stronger focus on making growth more inclusive. That there is clear consensus on this in the society is indicated by the fact that the respondents of my survey of “informed citizens” (mentioned earlier) were almost unanimous in their recommendation for an employment strategy, and completely unanimous on the need for institutionalising social protection.

For making economic recovery and growth inclusive, the following would need particular attention: building resilience and making poverty reduction sustainable through a universal and institutional system of social protection; undertaking concrete steps towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals of reducing income inequality and achieving full and productive employment for all; providing people of all income classes with access to quality education; and ensuring access to basic health care for all.

Rizwanul Islam is an economist and former Special Adviser, Employment Sector, International Labour Office, Geneva.



Many workers who lost their jobs have been languishing in poverty as the pandemic-induced shocks have curbed alternative employment opportunities.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

included schemes to provide low-interest credit to enterprises to aid their recovery as well as social safety nets. The experience with the implementation of that package should bring out interesting and useful lessons.

The sequence in which various measures were announced was wrong and the effectiveness of implementation varies widely. For example, the cash transfer scheme for the poor came very late, was too small in amount, and failed disastrously in its implementation. What should have been in the hands of the poor in April was “inaugurated” in May, and by July, only a small proportion of the target beneficiaries were reached. Credible and effective social safety net measures for those going to be affected by the shutdown should have been put in place right at the beginning, alongside the

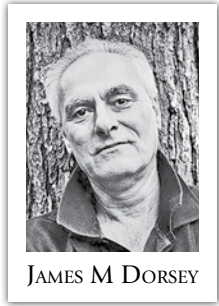
been made under the scheme for credit for job creation, although the listed partner agencies—PKSE, Probashi Kallyan Bank, Karmasangsthan Bank, and the Rural Savings Bank—have received part of the allocated resources (*Prothom Alo*, September 7, 2020).

In sum, the experience with the implementation of the recovery package does not raise much hope for an inclusive economic recovery unless urgent action is taken to reorient the course.

The lessons from the experience are clear. First, preparedness to face a crisis was woefully inadequate. Although the country can boast about its capacity to face natural disasters like floods and cyclone, there is very little capacity and preparedness to face a health and economic crisis as the present one.

On the economic crisis front, the

# China could signal increased engagement with Iran but doesn't



JAMES M DORSEY

push for Iranian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and renewed interest in a China-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey energy pipeline. China has moved on neither.

While converting Iran's SCO observer status into membership would primarily signal Chinese interest in substantially increasing its engagement with the Islamic republic, moving ahead with the pipeline could be a geopolitical game changer.

China's refusal to signal interest in putting flesh on the skeleton of its partnership with Iran following the leaking of a purported, wide-ranging agreement between the two countries suggests that the People's Republic neither wants to increase tension with the United States by blatantly violating harsh US sanctions against the Islamic republic, nor does it wish to upset its balancing of relations with Tehran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia.

The pipeline that would cater to the energy, economic and security needs of all participants may be on the backburner for now, but geo-politicking in the Middle East and South Asia is likely to spur a renewed Pakistani, Iranian and Turkish push for the project.

Driving a potential push are shifting sands that raise the spectre of geopolitical realignment. They include a rift between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia over the lack of Gulf support for Islamabad in its conflict with India over Kashmir; calls for India to align itself with the Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led alliance against Turkey, Qatar, and Iran; and ambitions of Turkey, embroiled in multiple conflicts in the Mediterranean, to position itself as an energy transit

hub. The pipeline was first touted in 2015 in anticipation of the lifting and/or easing of US and United Nations sanctions against Iran as a result of an international agreement that curbed the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

Funded by China, construction that was slated to incorporate an already partially built link between Iran and Pakistan was to be carried out by a subsidiary of state-owned China

energy corridor is in line with the energy strategic objectives of China, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey,” but cautioned that regional conflicts, including in Pakistan's Balochistan province as well as in south-eastern Turkey and in Iran, posed threats.

A Chinese Communist party newspaper, in a rare comment on possible greater engagement with Iran, suggested in July in an op-ed written by Middle East scholar Fan Hongda that there could be a point in the downward

*Greater South Asian alignment with rivalling Middle Eastern states constitutes one more incentive for China to step up its subtle efforts to persuade Middle Eastern states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, to dial down regional tensions and seek arrangements to manage their differences in a way that prevents them from spinning out of control.*

National Petroleum Corporation. The United States' withdrawal in 2018 from the nuclear agreement and reimposition of sanctions put the pipeline project on ice, with neither Pakistan nor China wanting to be in violation of US law.

But Pakistan and Iran, in a first step aimed at reviving the project, agreed last year that the Islamic republic that completed its section of the link between the two countries would withdraw from arbitration procedures that would have likely forced Pakistan to pay a penalty for not living up to its part of the deal. Under the agreement, Pakistan has to complete its leg of the pipeline by 2024.

Chinese scholars Fei-fei Guo, Cheng-feng Huang, and Xiao-ling Wua concluded in a detailed study that “China urgently needs to open up new energy channels to reduce the reliance on the Malacca Strait,” a chokepoint in Southeast Asia that China fears could become a stranglehold in a confrontation with the United States.

The scholars went on to note that “the

spiral of US-Chinese relations at which China would no longer regard the potential cost of violating US sanctions as too high. A “factor that cannot be ignored regarding the improvement of Sino-Iranian relations is that China is less and less constrained by US factors when considering its diplomacy with Iran,” Mr Fan said.

China is not there yet but the Middle East and South Asia's shifting sands are lending urgency to the project from Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran's perspective.

Pakistan initially signalled last December its interest in aligning itself with Turkey, Qatar and Iran by agreeing to participate in an Islamic summit in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur convened to challenge Saudi leadership of the Muslim world.

Bowing to Saudi pressure, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan withdrew from the summit at the last minute. Eight months later, Pakistan was again challenging Saudi leadership.

Complaining about lack of support

of the Saudi-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that groups 57 Muslim-majority nations for Pakistan in its conflict with India over Kashmir, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureishi suggested that his country would seek to rally support beyond the realm of the kingdom.

The spat, coupled with Turkish support for Kashmir, much to the chagrin of India, has opened the door to South Asian nations potentially lining up on different sides of the Middle East's fault lines at a time that China and India are at loggerheads.

The potential line-up and Chinese-Indian tensions are likely to be insufficient for Beijing to divert for now from its Saudi-Iranian balancing act. Ultimately, that keeps the China-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey corridor on ice but does not take it off the table.

However, greater South Asian alignment with rivalling Middle Eastern states constitutes one more incentive for China to step up its subtle efforts to persuade Middle Eastern states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, to dial down regional tensions and seek arrangements to manage their differences in a way that prevents them from spinning out of control.

The stakes for China are high given that it is investing up to USD 62 billion in Pakistan, the People's Republic's single largest country investment related to its Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to tie Eurasia to Beijing through transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure. Nonetheless, Daniel S. Markey, author of a recent book on China's Western Horizon, cautions that “we should not underestimate the extent to which...China remains relatively conflict-averse and conservative, reluctant to throw itself into potentially costly situations...”

At the rate at which Middle Eastern and South Asian sands are shifting, that could prove to be increasingly difficult.

Dr James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He is also a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute and co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute of Fan Culture in Germany.