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Reduce the stress on children

Prolonged uncertainty is not healthy for them

SIX months of lockdown has left hundreds of thousands of children stuck at home, harming their education and leading to various psychological problems. The government was left with no other option but to announce school closures back in March due to the Covid-19 outbreak. However, six months later, children and their parents are still left wondering what the future holds for them.

The government's initiative to launch educational programmes online and through television has been unable to make up for the loss of education arising out of school closures—not that it was expected to, given that school is not just a place of learning, but also one for social activities and human interactions. But the problem has been further aggravated due to the digital divide that exists in our country, for example, between rural and urban areas.

According to the government's Covid-19 Response Plan for the Education Sector, only 44 percent of the children aged between 5 and 11 in rural areas have a TV at home, whereas in urban areas, it is 75 percent. And when it comes to having access to internet, we cannot help but think that the divide must be just as striking. This means that children in rural areas have perhaps been completely cut off from all forms of formal education for six long months.

Moreover, being walled into their houses is sure to take a heavy toll on the children's psych, according to psychological experts. Children need to be outdoors, involved in physical activities and socialising with others for their physical and cognitive development. The pandemic, however, is denying them all of that. Besides, it is exerting significant stress on them—particularly the weight of an uncertain future.

Although difficult to address given the enormity of the Covid-19 crisis, it is the adults who must take responsibility for this and do whatever is necessary to relieve children of such pressure. Parents and others need to be more understanding of the psychological burden that children are being asked to endure, and act accordingly.

The authorities must come up with better plans that can work around the existing digital divide to ensure that all children receive some form of education till their schools reopen. Moreover, the authorities should continually update the nation on its programmes and efforts to reopen schools. Instead of leaving schools closed indefinitely, it should inform the public on when it believes schools can reopen, backed by scientific evidence and statistics, so that children and their parents do not have to continue living in such uncertainty.

Can public procurement process be freed of corruption?

Not without unfettering it from political influence

THE departments that provide public service are particularly the targets of public contractors out to make a quick buck, most often than not, at the cost of the public. And in order to avoid extraneous pressure, political influence, physical threats and *tender baaji*, and even tender box snatching, the government had introduced a novel method keeping in mind the development of IT in the country. The introduction of electronic government procurement (e-GP) system was an honest endeavour intended to convert the process of public procurement from manual into technical. It was designed to not only get rid of the tons of paperwork involved with procurement but also to obviate the possibility of incidents like tender box snatching—since there would be no tender box to snatch under the new system, preventing tender submission physically—and avoid the hordes of contractors and their supporters descending on the office premises of respective government departments turning them into a battlefield.

But regrettably, even after nearly a decade since the system was introduced, the results are not what one had expected. Given the innovative capabilities coupled with the slyness of the unscrupulous contractors, their sponsors and minions, ways have been devised to beat the system. According to a report of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the system is still hamstrung by political influence and syndication. And it is these cabals that determine who wins a particular contract. This applies particularly to four government institutions—Local Government Engineering Department, Road Transport and Highways Division, Bangladesh Water Development Board, and Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board. These four bodies were allotted about 20 percent of the country's annual development budget in the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

Regrettably, the much-desired transparency and accountability that the new procurement system had intended can never come unless political influence is purged, the rules and regulations stipulated for those in the government dealing with procurement are religiously adhered to, and the nexus between contractors, political leaders, and officials of the offices concerned tampering with the process to secure contracts—like using others' certificates and licenses—is stopped. It is also worth looking at the five recommendations that the anti-graft watchdog has made in this regard.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure rehabilitation of street children

According to various media outlets, the number of street children in Bangladesh could be around 4 lakh. Three-quarters of them are in Dhaka. These children are struggling to survive at a time when they are supposed to study and play. They are exposed to various threats as their need for education, health services, accommodation and social security remains unmet. We must, therefore, ensure their productive rehabilitation so they can grow up as permanent citizens of this country.

Abu Faruk, Bandarban



MANZOOR AHMED

THE end of the pandemic is not quite in sight. Schools have remained closed for a full six months now since March 17. But economic activities and life's daily business are restarting, albeit with restrictions and pleas to observe safety rules. Shouldn't children now go back to school? Striking a balance between the safety and wellbeing of children and minimising their learning loss is the key consideration in this regard. There is also the concern about children gathering in school causing a spike in infection by bringing the virus back to their families, even when children are asymptomatic.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has prepared a guideline, incorporating Covid-19 related health instructions, to be followed when the decision is made to restart schools. Provisions include social distancing in classrooms, hand washing, wearing masks, having body temperature taken, and applying shifts and alternate day classes depending on the number of students and facilities in a school. Sensibly, the guideline asks each school to prepare its own plan for applying the guideline. An awareness campaign is also a part of the guideline. Posters and messages are being designed and submitted to higher officials for approval.

The ministry asked the authorities—Directorate of Primary Education, deputy commissioners and primary education officers—to make necessary preparations in this regard. "We have finalised the reopening plan and directed the relevant authorities to make preparations in line with the plan," according to a senior official of the ministry. (*The Daily Star*, September 9, 2020)

There appears to be an ambivalence between providing a guideline requiring schools to prepare and implement their own plan and a top-down plan relying on directives and instructions passed on by superiors, which often do not work very well.

Parents naturally have anxieties. How will the guideline be applied in some 134,000 primary schools and kindergartens, only half of which are government schools? Will there be sufficient monitoring? How will the additional costs be met? Will the pandemic subside enough so that their children will be safe in school?

It is commendable and appropriate that the ministry is thinking ahead and making plans for what is to be done when schools reopen. It has to be ensured that

the necessary conditions for success are given attention and the plan is realistic and implementable.

Three major concerns raised by parents need proper attention. Do schools reopen in the whole country all at once? Does one size fit all? What can be done to meet the extra costs? How can awareness be raised effectively and all concerned—students, teachers and parents—feel assured about the guideline and local plans and support and contribute to their implementation?

I had written earlier in *The Daily Star* that the larger Dhaka metropolis has about one-third of the total infection cases in the country. There are likely to be large variations among regions. An upazila—there are around 500 in the country—with an average population of 350,000 would

of upazilas, where appropriate.

No area can claim to have reached a status of complete safety, until zero infection is reported for several weeks or an effective vaccine is available. Schools could reopen in the green and yellow areas with some variation in school operation. Schools in red zones would remain closed until their status changes, as determined by testing and infection rates. One size cannot fit all. But we do not have the means for a credible upazila-based assessment of infection now.

Asked about his advice on when schools including primary schools could reopen, Dr Mushtaque Hussain, adviser to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said there has to be a minimum daily testing

without financial support for schools to meet the extra costs. An allocation needs to be made to upazilas proportionate to the total number of students in an upazila, which could supplement what the schools can do on their own. The upazila working group can consider the criteria and needs and provide support to schools—both government and non-government—since more than a third of primary-level students are in non-government schools.

The awareness campaign as well as communication with teachers and parents are critical for successful reopening. The NGOs and community organisations should be involved, with the overall guidance of the upazila working group. The goal is not just reopening, but also keeping the schools operating safely and



The challenge is not just to reopen but also to keep the schools operating safely, and help children recover their learning loss.

PHOTO: STAR

be an appropriate unit to estimate the infection rate and take necessary follow-up action. Ideally, the first step for a decision about school reopening would be to estimate as objectively as possible the upazila-wise infection rate.

The testing now is not done with any epidemiology-based sampling frame. A representative population sample from each upazila could be tested using the current RT-PCR testing procedure, complemented by larger sampling with rapid testing, such as one designed by Gonoshasthaya Kendro (which never got government approval for unknown reasons). Benchmarks for three levels of infection spread, similar to the idea once proposed (but not implemented) of red, yellow and green zones, could be used to assess the status of upazilas or even parts

number of at least 20,000 in the country and no more than a 5 percent positivity rate continuously for three weeks for schools to reopen. Where this condition does not exist, school reopening should be delayed, according to Dr Hussain. (*Prothom Alo*, September 8, 2020)

Under the prevailing circumstances, individual schools need to be helped to develop their own workable plan for reopening. An upazila working group involving education authorities and education-related NGOs and civil society can assess the situation and consider appropriate plans and steps for applying the guideline in their upazila schools, both government and non-government ones.

It is not likely that the provisions in the guideline will be followed properly

helping the children recover their learning loss. All this requires a joint effort by all.

CAMPE, the civil society forum for education with an active membership of over 200 non-governmental organisations throughout the country, and other such associations and institutions can help at the national and local levels to promote a cooperative and collaborative approach, and contribute to the reopening and recovery plan in each upazila. This can happen with a change in the mind-set of our policymakers regarding cooperation between the government and non-government actors and a provision for government funding for specific contributions that the latter make.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University. The views expressed here are his own.

Climate change smacking California in the face

Ominous orange sky of San Francisco



QUAMRUL HAIDER

ON the morning of September 9, 2020, the colour of the sky in the San Francisco Bay Area was burnt orange. By noon, the sky grew darker instead of lighter.

The morning sky resembled the red planet Mars, while the afternoon sky gave the impression that there is a solar eclipse, but a longer one.

The orange-coloured sky confused almost everyone and everything. The Bay Lights, programmed to turn off after sunrise, remained on, their digital algorithms flummoxed by the darkness, and the circadian rhythms of the locals were hopelessly out of sync with the natural world. Postings on social media reported that people, awakened by alarm clocks, rolled over and went back to sleep after looking at the sky because they thought the clock-settings were wrong.

The colours of the sky at different times of the day are a metaphor for life in the days of climate change. They were caused by smoke from countless wildfires burning across California. The smoke, mixed with clouds and fog, stained the sky and just about everything else with an apocalyptic orange hue. Vehicles, buildings, park benches, and chairs and tables of restaurants that serve outside because of the Covid-19 pandemic were covered with ashes.

Western United States, particularly California, is now the epicentre of out-of-control wildfires. Despite the fact that much of the region is yet to enter what is typically the most active phase of the fire season, the fires this year are far more intense and widespread than previous years. This is not an aberration though.

In California, the fires are raging unchecked from the Sierra Nevada to San Francisco and south to Los Angeles county. So far, at least 25 people have died, dozens remain unaccounted for, and thousands are displaced. The death toll will surely climb by the time the fires are tamed. Also, more than three million acres have already burned. This is about 25 times as much the land that burned at this point last year. Amid winds and high temperatures, Oregon and Washington

are also under assault from wildfires of historic proportions.

Wildfires have created extremely hazardous atmospheric conditions throughout the Western United States as smoke from the cataclysmic blazes stretches for thousands of miles. Air quality in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Los Angeles, among others, is currently some of the worst in the world. Indeed, instead of the usual benign fog, San Francisco is now blanketed in a choking layer of soupy fog and smoke,

igniting vegetation with high currents.

Although fire has always been a natural and beneficial part of a forest's ecosystem, climate change is fundamentally altering the frequency and intensity of wildfires. In fact, changes in weather pattern that create searing hot days with low humidity, drought and high winds are the biggest driver of out-of-control wildfires. Drier conditions and higher temperatures increase not only the likelihood of a wildfire to be ignited by lightning, but also affect its severity and duration. This means

more fires, which will release more carbon dioxide, thereby causing more warming, and so on. This is of particular concern for boreal forests in North America and Eurasia, which contain large deposits of carbon-rich peat.

Since the Industrial Revolution, global temperature rose roughly one degree Celsius. Yet, raging wildfires, severe droughts, once-in-a-thousand-year storms, devastating floods, melting of Arctic ice at an alarming rate, and lethal heatwaves are on the rise. On August 17, 2020, temperature in Death Valley, California reached 55 degrees Celsius, a potential record for the highest temperature ever reliably recorded on Earth. A derecho—a dangerous, ferocious wall of fast-moving wind that is like an inland hurricane—lashed through Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan last month, flipping cars, downing trees, causing widespread property damage and knocking out power to more than a million.

If a one-degree rise in temperature is wreaking so much havoc, what will happen to our planet if we take the free pass of heating up the atmosphere by two degrees before the end of this century, as agreed upon by the stakeholders in the 2015 Paris Agreement?

Clearly, the links between anthropogenic climate change and extreme events like wildfires and derechos are real and dangerous. They are a frightening reminder of how the cascading effects of climate change are accelerating faster than predictions of many climate change models. The situation will only get worse from here on. Hence, today's wildfires will not be the last infernos of a hot, bone-dry summer. We should expect more disastrous and more frequent wildfires raging through forests of the world. It is, therefore, time for us and our leaders to wake up and face this stark reality. Hopefully, the forest fires and other catastrophic natural disasters will make the world leaders think rationally and prompt them to take climate change seriously.

Finally, there is an old saying about the weather: "Red sky at night, sailors' delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning." We can now add to this saying: Orange sky in the morning, climate change smacking in the face.

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San Miguel County firefighters battle a brush fire along Japatul Road during the Valley Fire in Jamul, California.

PHOTO: AFP/SANDY HUFFAKER

leaving people with sore throat and stinging, teary eyes. Breathing the polluted air is like smoking the strong, non-filter Gauloises cigarettes.

California, Oregon and Washington are not the only places that have erupted in flames. Blazes devastated parts of every state of Australia earlier this year. Capping the second extraordinary fire season in a row, wildfires blazed along the Arctic Circle this summer, incinerating tundra and blanketing Siberian cities in smoke. And the Amazon is headed for another record burn.

While wildfires have the fingerprints of climate change, human acts, such as arson or tossing a burning cigarette in a forest or leaving a campfire unattended, can result in wildfires too. Among the natural causes, lightning is the major one. Lightning of varied electric voltages cause fire by directly

when a wildfire breaks out, it spreads faster and burns more areas as it moves in unpredictable ways.

Forest fires act in a synergistic manner in increasing the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In a forest, trees and plants release water through tiny pores in their leaves called stomata. The higher the ambient temperature, the more water they release. Fires will cause these water to evaporate, including water from dead plants littering the grounds. It is well-known that water vapour is one of the major greenhouse gases.

If wildfires become more frequent or intense, carbon dioxide released by the burning woods and leaves could exacerbate the progression of climate change, leading to a kind of positive feedback loop—more warming leading to