

## We condemn the arson attacks on buses

*There must be a judicious and thorough investigation*

IN what feels like a blast from the past, nine buses were torched in the capital within a span of a few hours on November 13. According to news reports, the arson attacks took place between 12.30 pm and 4.30 pm outside polling centres in different locations of the capital, where by-elections for Dhaka-18 constituency were taking place. Law enforcers have thus far arrested a suspect with a crude bomb from Uttara, picked up nine more men from the Nayapalton area and cordoned off the BNP central office following the arson incidents.

We are deeply concerned by these arson incidents and by the possibility of a resurgence of unwarranted violence against civilians in the name of politics. Although thankfully no casualty was reported this time, we are reminded of the horrific deaths of at least 95 people and injuries to 1,500 others as the transport sector came under attack from various types of crude bombs during the countrywide blockade called by the BNP-led 20-party alliance following the 2014 elections.

It is of utmost importance that a judicious, thorough and impartial investigation is conducted so that the real culprits can be identified and brought to book. Blame games and politically motivated investigations will not provide a constructive solution.

Voter turnout for the Dhaka-18 constituency was noticeably low, and there were reported instances of vote rigging in some polling centres. Although both local and national elections have been fraught with anomalies and undemocratic practices over the past years, we cannot in any way condone violence as a means to protest the irregularities in the electoral process. Citizens are disenfranchised and disillusioned enough with the status quo without our political parties falling back into old habits.

## Study reveals TV lessons not bearing fruit

*Deprived of remote learning, students incur irreparable academic loss*

THE government yesterday extended the closure of educational institutions till December 19 amidst fears of a second wave exacerbating the ongoing pandemic situation in Bangladesh. Following the shutdown of all educational institutions from March 17, recorded classes for secondary students were aired from March 29 through Sangsad Bangladesh Television, aiming to minimise academic session loss. However, the effectiveness of the televised lessons remains questionable.

A recent study from Bangladesh Education Reporters Forum has highlighted some worrying statistics about the current state of education. Carried out on 1,126 secondary and higher secondary students in Dhaka, Chattogram, Barishal, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Sylhet, the study revealed that 94 percent of students are aware about TV education being broadcast during the pandemic, but 89 percent of them do not watch the lessons. Additionally, 97 percent of students reported that their family income has reduced, and 65 percent of secondary students said online education increased their educational expenditures and is putting additional financial burden on parents. Such prolonged lockdowns have left hundreds of thousands of children stuck at home, harming their education and leading to various psychological problems as well. As a result of the digital divide that exists between rural and urban areas—for example, schoolchildren in many char areas cannot access the government's remote education programmes because they don't have access to electricity—initiatives to launch educational programmes through television have been unable to make up for the loss of education arising out of school closures.

We hope that the Ministry of Education will engage with experts as well as students in order to mitigate these problems and complete the groundwork needed to facilitate education without putting undue financial burdens on students and their families. The education gap must be removed and the lack of access to TV lessons rectified. It is crucial that the government come up with better plans that will ensure that all children receive some form of education till schools reopen. Without sincere interventions, there is a risk of mass dropouts, particularly as poor families, struggling to tide over the pandemic, put their children to work or even worse, marry their daughters off. The government must employ more resources to make sure all students have access to either online learning tools or can learn through televised classes. Besides access to television and uninterrupted electricity (a major challenge in remote areas), there must be collaboration with education experts and relevant NGOs to make these classes lively and engaging.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Arson in the capital

I was horrified to see the recent news of at least nine buses being set ablaze in different parts of Dhaka within the span of a few hours, which police suspect was part of a plot to carry out subversive activities. When you are a frequent user of public transport, you cannot help but think of the consequences of such acts. It all happened in crowded areas, meaning whoever carried it out wanted to harm the masses! Thankfully, firefighters and locals managed to extinguish the flames before anyone was hurt. The law enforcement agencies must crack down heavily on this case and bring the perpetrators to book. Such life-threatening crimes cannot go unpunished.

Shayla Zaman, Dhaka



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

ONE more circular. One more extension. The opening of the educational institutions is further delayed; this time up to December 19. The school doors were closed in

March 2020, and they are likely to remain so till the end of this calendar year. All stakeholders have been forced to readjust to this new normal. While teachers and academic administrators tried to pivot to some form of remote learning, parents and families began to realise how linked their daily schedules were with those of their wards in schools. For many, there was no room to manoeuvre. With the widening of the digital divide, many students were "virtually" denied from accessing education during this pandemic.

Then again if Winston Churchill is right, who once quipped, "never waste a good crisis", we should not let go of this pandemic without benefitting from it. After all, it has presented us with an opportunity to completely re-haul our education system and emerge stronger than before. Just imagine how, following a series of cyclone disasters, Bangladesh created cyclone shelters-cum-day-schools thinking that communities would go to schools during the time of an emergency. But this pandemic has reversed the process; the school has been emptied out during this health emergency, and education has to be sent home—where the community resides.

The virus has given us a nudge towards the direction of change. Taking our cue from the micro-organism, we can actually think of an educational model that can make the community a part of this learning process. There is an emerging model of pedagogy known as local learning ecosystem. It uses evolutionary biology as its conceptual foundation. In an ecosystem, a community of interdependent organisms function in tandem with the natural environment. Borrowing the same idea, many countries across the world are redesigning their public schools to

create a schooling system that gets its energy from multiple sources within the community—the schools are powered through their connectivity with the families, health providers, community institutions, local businesses, out of school programmes and employers.

The necessity for involving the community was prompted not only by this pandemic but also due to the prevalent "learning crisis". Even before the pandemic, the World Bank and other

stage must master their communication and critical thinking skills.

The traditional system with its poor infrastructure and ill-paid, ill-trained teachers fail to provide our students with the right aptitude to survive, let alone excel, in the tertiary level. Maybe the post pandemic pedagogy can emerge stronger by taking advantage of this crisis and adopting a new teaching and learning model altogether.

The purpose of this type of



PHOTO: STAR

agencies recognised that most of the developing countries were successful in getting almost all primary-aged children into schools; however, the students were not learning even the basic literacy and numeracy skills required for education. The crisis was further deepened by the disproportionate use of technology. As technology begins to change the way we work, skills gaps between low- and middle-income countries opened up, stunting the economic growth.

Why are we not surprised that many high paying jobs in Bangladesh are given to overseas workers from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Philippines and South Korea, whereas 46 percent of our university graduates remain unemployed? The employers will shout in unison that our local graduates do not have the edge to compete in the global scene. But to get results at the tertiary level, we must fix the primary and secondary systems. Students at an early

educational model is not to force students to remember and understand but to analyse and create. It crowds in a diverse range of people and places them in aid of professional teachers to help support learning in schools. It recognises the importance of technology and innovation as the mainstay for future education. The community inputs ensure that students learn common values and knowledge with the social benefit of making the community cohesive.

The local learning ecosystem is being adopted in countries from India to Nicaragua. This model is keenly aware of the accessibility issue. It knows that one in 10 of the poorest children in the world's largest economy had little or no access to technology for learning. In response, the strategy adopted by this model involves creative uses of text messages, phone calls and offline e-learning, for instance.

According to a report by Brookings

# Urgent action is required to protect the learning of all South Asian children



JEAN GOUGH

SCHOOL closures in South Asia are threatening the futures of millions of children—and the most marginalised are paying the heaviest price. Governments must prioritise the safe reopening of schools and seize

the opportunity to build education back better.

When classrooms closed in South Asia, 434 million children's lives changed. School is more than just a building. It's a crucial part of a child's life. For many, school provides access to food, health services and support networks not available at home. For vulnerable children, it's also a refuge from abuse, neglect or dysfunctional parenting. When schools closed, many children were torn from the warmth of their friends and teachers and left to battle trauma and anxiety without support. During lockdowns, calls to child helplines rocketed. For children without access to internet or phones, isolation was compounded.

A recent global UNICEF study into remote learning found that at least two in five children in South Asia did not have the tools to access remote learning at home. So when schools closed seven months ago, at least 147 million children stopped learning. However, in Nepal, a recent study found that just 25 percent of children had used distance learning platforms to continue learning during school closures.

Decades of progress in access to quality education, especially for girls and the most marginalised, now hangs in the balance. The most disadvantaged children have fallen the furthest behind. This includes hundreds of millions of the poorest, the displaced, girls without access to internet and phones, and those from remote localities and linguistic minorities. Children with disabilities have been particularly affected. The impact on their long-term futures could be drastic, if such children are not prioritised in efforts to re-open schools. Many may drop out of education entirely.

As the pandemic pushes more people into poverty, closed classrooms leave children exposed to forced marriage and child labour. Girls are disproportionately affected. South Asia already has the highest rates of child marriage in the world. The rate had been in decline, but emerging anecdotal evidence indicates child marriage is now becoming more frequent.

This is an education emergency. The longer children are out of school the less likely they are to ever return. Yet, trends in

the region suggest that the pandemic could become a protracted crisis. Children's education could be disrupted for many more months and the impact felt for years. This is why reopening schools must be considered an utmost priority, as soon as adequate safety can be assured.

The current evidence shows that children are not the main drivers of the pandemic and have an extremely low risk of becoming severely unwell from the infection, although they can pass the virus on to each other and adults. Schools can substantially reduce infection risks by providing frequent opportunities for children to wash their hands with soap and water and ensuring physical distancing through shift systems or use of open spaces. All children do not need to suffer

Hopefully they will re-open again soon.

Between July and October, all children returned to school in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while phased re-openings also began in the Maldives. Governments in India and Nepal have recently empowered states and local authorities to decide when to reopen schools. This is all significant progress.

Where schools cannot re-open safely, remote learning must be improved and expanded to reach all children—especially the most marginalised and those with disabilities. We must also be mindful that remote learning is less appropriate for the youngest children. As countries have reopened schools, these children have often been the least prioritised, despite their need for face-to-face interaction to

The opportunities are as great as the challenges. Since this crisis started, parents, caregivers and educators have found innovative and admirable ways to keep children learning. In just a few months, significant changes to teaching have been witnessed in pockets throughout the region. This creativity is testament to how much learning can be enhanced in future if we re-imagine how education is delivered.

To prioritise learning, we must make schools safe to reopen. Currently, 50 percent of schools in the region do not have access to soap and water. We must increase investment in the services that keep children safe and healthy—handwashing, hygiene, school meals, health and immunisation. A healthy child is likely to



Math teacher Muneer Alam sprays disinfectant before the start of an early-morning outdoor class in Srinagar, Kashmir, on July 18.

PHOTO: DAR YASIN/AP

learn more and an educated child is likely to lead a healthier life.

Governments, UNICEF and other agencies across the region are collaborating on surveys to understand the effectiveness and accessibility of remote learning. These will help countries prepare for higher quality remote learning options that reach all children, if schools need to close again in future. Remote learning should embrace the full spectrum of options. Television, radio and SMS should be explored alongside printed materials—to ensure we reach the huge numbers of children without access to electricity, the internet or devices.

help them develop foundational skills and address their socio-emotional needs.

What we do next could transform the future for millions of children. Or, it could tip our education emergency into a learning catastrophe.

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