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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Preserving our Liberation War sites

Solve the land-related issues, complete the project without further delay

IT is unfortunate that a project undertaken by the government in 2017 to preserve historical sites linked to our Liberation War has been facing the same problems that the majority of our development projects usually do—it could not be completed within the deadline, the project duration was extended, and the cost also went up. Apparently, the Liberation War ministry chose 360 sites—killing fields of the Pakistani army, meeting places of freedom fighters and combat zones—in 293 upazilas to construct 284 memorials and 76 museums at a cost of Tk 179 crore. However, the ministry was able to complete only less than a third of the work by June this year, which was the first deadline of the project. According to relevant officials, the project has been extended by two more years and, consequently, the cost has gone up to Tk 206 crore.

The main reason for the delay in implementation was cited as “land related complications” by the project authorities. While such memorials are usually built on khas land, many of the sites earmarked for this project are private property which need to be acquired to build the sites. Shouldn’t the project authorities have known this before designing the project? And, reportedly, only 23 sites have land-related problems. So what could be the reason for the delay in constructing memorials and museums in the remaining sites? We understand that the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down the pace of the work this year. But why was there so little progress in the previous two years? Clearly, this has happened due to the inefficiency and lack of coordination among the authorities concerned, among other reasons.

Many historical places linked to our Liberation War are lying unrecognised or gradually disappearing due to a lack of preservation or maintenance. So, this project undertaken by the government is very important and needs proper implementation. Our future generation will get a chance to learn about the proud history of our Liberation War from these sites; apart from a memorial, many of the sites will have a museum which will display memorabilia related to the war and a short history of the site, as well as a library which will feature books on the Liberation War. Therefore, we urge the government to solve all the problems including the land-related complications immediately and complete the project without further delay.

WHO’s vaccine scheme must not fail

No one will be safe until everyone is safe

ACCORDING to some internal documents, the global scheme to deliver Covid-19 vaccines to poorer countries faces a “very high” risk of failure. A failure such as this may leave nations with billions of people without any access to vaccines until as late as 2024, killing any chances of the world defeating Covid-19 in the next few years.

The World Health Organization’s COVAX programme aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20 percent of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and middle-income countries, mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, according to the documents reviewed by Reuters, the programme is struggling to meet its goal due to a lack of funds, supply risks and complex contractual arrangements. Given the magnitude of the crisis that the world is currently mired in, and which the vaccine programme seeks to overturn, the fact that the WHO’s scheme is in danger of failing is an immense travesty. The amount of misery that people, particularly in the poorer countries, would be exposed to, should the vaccine scheme not succeed, is immeasurable.

And it isn’t only the poorer countries that will suffer. As we have learned since this crisis began, the only way this pandemic can be defeated is by eradicating the virus from all corners of our planet. Until that happens, all people everywhere will continue to be at risk, and not only health-wise, but in many different ways. That is why all countries and stakeholders must recognise the importance of a full-fledged collective effort to ensure that everyone can access a safe vaccine at the earliest time possible.

The fact that the WHO’s programme may not succeed due to financial reasons, therefore, is a concern that should be shared by all. And we hope that by recognising the danger that this gives rise to, all countries and organisations will help with the financial aspects of it. Another way in which different countries and organisations can help is by sharing their vaccine technology and by making it more accessible so that others can quickly produce their own vaccines, should they need to. Having suffered together through the whole pandemic, it would be a great shame if the world does not stick together now to find a solution that can provide a relief from this virus once and for all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

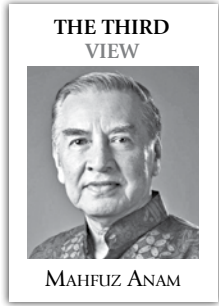
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New strain of Covid-19

British scientists have detected a new strain of the coronavirus which means the existing one is changing its character, which is dangerous. Since it will take time for Bangladesh to get the vaccines, we need to carefully assess all developments related to the virus and efficacy of the possible vaccines. We also should take precautions to avoid being infected, and strictly follow the health guidelines given by the government including physical distancing (something that we are not at all following), wearing masks, and staying at home unless absolutely necessary. It’s time we all took the virus very seriously.

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With gratitude to Trump: He woke us up to the vulnerabilities of democracy



World War, the biggest funder for many UN bodies, the self-appointed global policeman, the ever-anxious do-gooder, the unthinking bungler into things that it understood very little, the warmonger par excellence, the biggest arms seller, home to the highest number of Nobel Prize winners, the country with some of the world’s best universities, or the most diverse population, who are most easy to strike up a conversation with compared to people anywhere else in the world—the list goes on and on.

The coming of Trump added an altogether new dimension to attention grabbing. First out of curiosity, then out of disbelief and finally out of fear, we all listened, read and followed with ever-growing anxiety what President Donald Trump said or did. What perhaps rang the alarm bells the loudest for the rest of the world was when he pulled out of the Paris Accord, the agreement which the US had played a crucial role in preparing, and to accommodate which the world had made so many concessions. His withdrawal decision was whimsical, unthinking, disdainful of collective global engagement, and a shameless surrender to the polluters.

It was four years of disbelief at full stretch. But then Trump said, “Wait! What have you seen of disbelief?”

The more he talked about possible massive election fraud, the more we thought it was his usual banter. Then the election came. And then the results came in, and the final unbelievable game commenced.

Without a single iota of evidence, he called the election “rigged” and wanted its results overturned. His supporters went to the courts of every battleground state and lost. The vote recount in one state produced the same result. To add to the disbelief, about 126 House Republicans and 17 state-level attorneys general signed a petition to the US Supreme Court appealing, on fictitious grounds, that millions of ballots were fraudulent. He

also suggested on Twitter that two of his own party governors from Georgia and Arizona be thrown out as they had allowed his victory to be “stolen”.

The heartening story behind Trump’s attempt to dismantle the US electoral process is that of the resilience of the US system backed by institutions, courts and of course more than two hundred years of tradition. Against Trump’s still-unexplained hold over a large section of American voters (74 million) and a

no courage...

The flip side of Trump’s absurdities is that it has woken us up to the fact that democracy, like liberty, requires “eternal vigilance” (Thomas Jefferson), and that we need to constantly strengthen the beliefs, values and institutions of democracy to keep it alive and functioning. I think the American voters, as well as voters in every democracy, owe it to Trump to reawaken ourselves to the fact that holding elections and depending on everyone to accept the



By defending the election process against Trump’s attempts to derail it, the US courts have emerged as a great defender of democracy.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/ CARLOS BARRIA

significant section of the Republican Party, the US institutions held, including the administration and especially the judiciary. Even a call to the White House and an audience with the president of several state officials—state bureaucrats who oversaw the elections—did not make them budge, replying that “no new evidence has been brought to our attention to necessitate any change of our position.” His appointed Attorney General William Barr himself went public against his president saying that there was no evidence of voter fraud, prompting Trump’s ire and leading to his resignation.

Trump predicted that the election may go to the US Supreme Court and thus was in a hurry to make it a full bench of nine justices. Being a “transactional” person, his view was that all those whom he appointed would automatically rule in his favour because they “owed” him their jobs, revealing his own thoughts about the most venerable of American institutions, the Supreme Court. When the court ruled against him, he tweeted, “Disappointing,

outcome and play by the books is not enough.

He made us realise, once more, that democracy is a composite of a system with several parts including the constitution, the parliament (for those who follow the British Westminster system), the elected upper and lower houses, other legislative bodies, and of course the courts. The “will of the people”, as expressed through voting, has to be then upheld through a whole range of institutions in case a charismatic, demagogic and populist leader tries to overturn the process.

What is remarkable is the role played by the judiciary in the US. Trump supporters went to court in every battleground state—Nevada, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Michigan and Wisconsin—and in every instance, the courts promptly and decisively dismissed the charges of election irregularities, thereby freeing the process to move on. There were multiple cases in each state and all of them were dealt with expeditiously. The aforementioned petition signed by 126 House Republicans and 17

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Student Counselling: Unconscionably Neglected?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the seventh article of the series.

ATANU SAHA and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE Academic Experience Project has already highlighted several significant and strategic themes that deserve greater attention of the policymakers and administrators in higher education. These themes include relevance of academic programmes, joy of learning, faculty behaviour, building community among students, helping students to settle in, and the dropout conundrum.

Another theme, virtually ignored but nonetheless important, is the state of the students’ mental health and the lack of counselling available to them. It is vitally important for our universities to offer professional career and psychological counselling to assist the students in overcoming a myriad of challenges—academic pressures, loneliness, fatigue, harassment, food selection, health concerns, financial matters, relationship issues, homesickness, violence, depression, and much more. Higher education programmes have been around for decades, but nobody seems to have really cared about the non-academic challenges that students face, the resulting mental health issues, and the support they need. That is the unfortunate plight of our future nation-builders.

Most of the students come from different parts of the country, away from their parents and home, to pursue higher studies. They have to interact with and survive in a totally new environment suddenly. The age of the students at this stage is quite critical and they are vulnerable in more ways than one. Besides the need to pursue their studies, they get involved in other ways. Some students need to carry the burden of the family. Some face critical personal problems that they cannot share with their family or friends. Some are dissatisfied with their overall academic performance. Some have health issues. Most of them worry about their future careers and whether they will be able to find a suitable job to fulfil their dreams. These dark thoughts and attendant worries are a constant companion for many students with nowhere to turn. Yet they continue to be ignored while their mental pressures keep escalating.

Need we stress the importance of career/psychological counselling? The ideal counsellor with whom a student



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

can share everything—without any fear or hesitation to seek solutions to his or her immediate problem—can be a huge boon. Such a counsellor, well-trained about student concerns, who is patient, warm, knowledgeable, observant, willing to listen, and has empathy, can be a full-time guide in a way that not even the faculty members can epitomise.

A student interacts with a faculty member only for the duration of a course or two. After the coursework is completed, they may not interact ever again. But a counsellor is one with whom the student can have interactions and attachment throughout his or her entire university life and, perhaps, beyond. In many universities abroad, the availability of a student counsellor is virtually guaranteed. The role of counselling is so important in their culture that its presence is ubiquitous. Yet we have continued to ignore the role of the counsellor in our culture. Why? While friends and family play a big role here, it is time to think of providing “professional

assistance” to help build a confident future citizenry that can deal with adversity and forge ahead.

A counsellor may be responsible not only for helping students overcome personal life issues but also assisting with their academic programmes. In our country, students are often uninformed or ill-informed while selecting an academic programme to make a bet on the future. Many simply select a programme according to the wishes of their family or based on discussions with their friends. They do not know the intricacies or prospects of the programme for which many suffer immeasurable academic stress. Sometimes what is even more harmful is that they simply follow a trend without considering other factors that will ensure success.

For example, a student today enrolls in an MBA programme or CSE major because that is the trend. A trained counsellor can weigh a student’s strengths and weaknesses and provide assistance to enrol in a programme

state attorneys general also got thrown out of the Supreme Court in record time.

The process was clear, unambiguous and, most importantly, prompt. Judges responded to the fact that time was of the essence. It is the delays in handling and resolving election-related cases that often jeopardise voters’ will and keep it from being properly expressed.

Here lies the importance of the independence of the judiciary. Not only in the election-related cases, but throughout Trump’s tenure, it was the courts that kept the administration from doing too much damage to rule of law which is the hallmark of US society, especially on immigration and deregulation. Starting from the banning of travel from five Muslim countries and other restrictions and cancelling visas for international students to the treatment of immigrants and separating children from their parents at the US-Mexican border, it was the courts that stepped in each time the US president tried to reach too far out with his executive fiat. According to the Washington Post, federal courts have ruled against the Trump administration at least 70 times, and the ruling came from judges from all over the country and appointed by both the Republicans and the Democrats. In analysing 60 such cases, the newspaper found 19 related to environment, 14 to immigration, 12 to health care, 7 to sanctuary cities, etc. Thus, the judiciary restrained the executive when it came to questions of the constitution and the existing laws.

Through this election process, the US courts have emerged as a great defender of democracy, the election process and the rights of the voters to have their say in deciding who their leaders will be. Without a robust and fully independent judiciary, the US political system, especially its electoral system, would have collapsed with the most unforeseen and perhaps tragic consequences for freedom and democracy not only for the US but, in terms of demonstrative effect, for the rest of the world as well.

From Trump we learn anew something that we have been told a thousand times, something that we knew from our own experience, something that every democratic constitution repeats ad infinitum—that for democracy to last and flourish, we need an independent judiciary. This is the most pertinent lesson for us. The state of our democracy today can be directly linked to the state of our courts.

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in which she or he can attain the best “fit.” Thus, students will know what is taught in that programme, its pros and cons, difficulty levels, prior skillsets required to excel in the programme, and career prospects so that they can choose the programme in which they will build an enduring and worthwhile career. This will also ensure that the students do not get derailed in the middle of the programme and drop out with serious consequences. A good counsellor can help students develop their life goals and ensure correct placement to guide them for success.

Many students are generally bright, which shines through given the right set of opportunities. We must also acknowledge that many of our faculty members are highly qualified. Unfortunately, the two paths often do not intersect, and many bright students lose their focus and determination because of the failure of the higher education system to build synergies. Solid counselling programmes can play a vital role here. We strongly advocate that employing adequate numbers of “trained” counsellors be required in our universities—they can only have a net positive impact on student satisfaction and their subsequent success.

While there are other factors that can contribute to the well-rounded academic experience of our students in higher education, the payoff of appointing counsellors is incalculable. The immediate need is to begin a serious and sustained programme of training a cadre of professional counsellors not only for higher education, but also for other educational levels. At the same time, more research is needed to identify culture-specific issues that the counsellors must be trained to deal with. Studies must also be conducted regularly to assess the impact that the counsellors are making. With professional counsellors making deep inroads into higher education, the overall performance of the academic institutions should improve significantly. Its impact on building the needed human asset base will be a formidable achievement in the nation’s journey to middle-income status and beyond.

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