

Focus on Education

GOVERNMENTS over the years have unfailingly kept education at the top of all sectoral allocations in the national budgets. This year's proposed budget is no exception. In fact, there has been an eight per cent rise in the allocation for education over the last year's level taking it to Tk 5,596 crore. Last year, eight crore more were added to the original allocation of Tk 5,145 so that this year too there could be an upward revision to the proposed figure. Consistently, education has occupied roughly 12 to 13 per cent of the whole budget. Whether the governments could have earmarked more money for the sector or not is indeed debatable. However, today's editorial would focus on the quality of education expenditure rather than the quantity of it. Are we properly spending whatever is allocated? Certainly not.

Standard of education appears embarked on a perpetual decline. Especially, our primary education system has simply hit a dismal depth. Inadequate curriculum and textbooks, under-qualified and untrained teachers, poor infrastructure, etc have all contributed to its poor quality. The rude reality is, even in regional context, the standard of education is at the bottom rung.

Obviously, annual expenditure in this sector is not bringing about any palpable change. One argument is, most of the money allocated for primary education is spent on teachers' salary and physical infrastructure development. Curriculum development, enhancement of teaching material or teachers' training never get the deserved attention. The counter-argument is, a significant portion of budgetary appropriation is either mis-spent or misappropriated, hinting at mismanagement and corruption in the sector. So, along with increase in funding, there arises the question of expenditure control. We need to institute an in-built mechanism to monitor wastage.

The primary objective, however, is qualitative improvement of primary education as it is the pivot of the whole education system. The first step in this direction should be formulation of a forward-looking uniform set of curricula. In an age of information technology, it is a crying shame that computer education is yet to be fully incorporated in the curriculum. Of course, it would mean training the teachers first which appears a troublesome proposition, especially given the lingering doubt over the very quality of the teachers in question. That leads to the question of recruitment. It is true that there is a pervasive reluctance to take up teaching, especially at the primary level, as a profession, obviously for want of perks and privileges. So to attract bright minds into primary teaching, there needs to be more investment.

Overall, primary education does need more funding from the state towards betterment of its quality. We have ignored it for long and paid the price with an alarming decline in our education standard. The time has come to rethink our budgetary strategy.

Private Terminal Imbroglia

WE have been watching with trepidations the controversy raging over the question of construction of a private container terminal at Patenga by the Stevedoring Services of America (SSA). Matters have come to head with a high-voltage clash of opinion between what the government intends to do and what the mayor of Chittagong city, a ruling party loyalist, would like to see happen.

The negotiations with the SSA for the construction of this important terminal at Chittagong port went on for quite sometime and a deal was apparently struck but the whole process appears to have been opaque. In determining the lease period and the financial size of the project there have been oscillations. We gather the British offer was even better but the reasons for its rejection have not been made known. In short, the handling of the issue gives rise to a barrage of questions which should be answered by the ministry concerned for the sake of transparency as well as to allay the fears of the people who seem certain that they would be affected by it.

After all it is a question of the need for transparency being highlighted as a result of a party insider not only questioning the merit of the project but also resisting it with considerable local support. Let the government place all its cards on the table.

Safe Water Supply

NEARLY one-fifth of Dhaka city's 2000km water supply pipeline is either not serviceable or its life span has come to an end. The Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) has blared out an SOS call for the old pipes to be immediately replaced. It is beyond our comprehension that when a large segment of the city population is at grave risk of being exposed to "contaminated water supply" due to leaks and cracks in WASA's age-old pipes, we are barely waking up to it.

The city's water supply network is a maze of various types of pipes mostly installed during the British colonial time. Replacements have, however, been carried out from time to time, but these have been outstripped by more pipes of the older vintage turning up for wholesale change. The pipes have become clogged due to deposits of different chemicals and filth, obstructing water supply and producing germs of deadly communicable diseases inside them. The information that "more than 75 per cent of WASA's total network consists of PVC pipes which are in a good service condition" may read statistically somewhat reassuring but with drinking water even a 25 per cent deficiency in terms of potability is a huge health hazard. The authority's recent introduction of high quality Ductile Iron pipes that cover "more than one per cent of the total network" is a tiny step that has a long way to go to make a stride. In any case, WASA's water has been suspect for a long time calling for a total network overhauling.

Top priority must be attached to modernising the city's water and sewerage networks. On such an important agenda, garnering of funds from multi-lateral organisation like the World Bank should not be a problem. In fact, they are likely to be most responsive to such a demand. Ensure uninterrupted safe water supply to the citizens as part of health strategy.

THE bodies of 58 reported Chinese nationals who suffocated inside a refrigerated truck in Dover (England) while trying to enter Britain provide a graphic illustration how desperate the people have become to escape from the countries of their origin. The fact that a person uses the services of a smuggler (known as snake-heads) does not mean that the person is not a refugee or an asylum seeker. One has to realise the fact that the presence of a smuggler will continue to exist so long there is a need. It is the age-old principle of supply and demand that is at work.

The smugglers are no doubt the cruel villains as they exploit the miseries of the people who want to escape from the situation perceived by them as intolerable and humiliating. The existence of smugglers of human beings appears to be a symptom and not the cause of the problem. While efforts to stop such disgraceful trade need to be well co-ordinated by the international community, there is a view that such risks are being taken because the advanced nations have tightened the immigration rules and regulations in such manner that their territories became almost "a fortress" for the refugees or asylum seekers.

The Bible for the international law of the refugees is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol. A refugee as defined in the Convention is a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or member-

ship of a particular social group or political group.

The Refugee Convention is an elaboration of the rights of a refugee that are derived from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 13 of the Declaration provides that "every one has the right to leave any country, including his own and to return to his country" and Article 14 states that "every one has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution".

The 1951 Convention was designed primarily to address the displaced persons including the Jews from the former communist countries in Eastern Europe. The Conference that adopted the Convention was attended by only 26 states, 16 of them European and 10 non-European countries. At the time most of the developing countries had not attained political independence from their colonial masters and as such they had no voice in the preparation of the Convention.

Most of the critics of the Convention hold the view that the definition of refugee in the 1951 Convention is regional than universal. They argue that the Convention is a product of the cold-war phenomenon and is Euro-centric. The definition is too restrictive given the situations in the contemporary

world and does not meet today's needs. To highlight this point let us look at some of the examples given below whether the persons involved are considered as refugees in terms of the Convention:

F was a female teacher in X country. The local laws restrict the movement of women for work. She flees to a European country and lodges a claim for the status of a refugee.

Z escapes from his/her country because of the armed conflict and claims refugee status in Europe.

M in order to avoid conscription because of his/her religion prohibits from serving in the military, escapes to Europe and wishes to become a refugee.

O, a victim of radiation from a failed nuclear power plant, escapes his/her country and seeks refuge in a neighbouring country in Europe.

K escapes from her country because of the national policy of imposition of penalties on families with more than one child.

L was coerced into joining guerrilla group but later deserted; the person alleges that he/she fears persecution from the guerrilla group (who will punish for desertion) and the government (who will continue to consider that person a guerrilla) and seeks refugee status.

None of the claims above is likely to succeed simply because they do not satisfy the criterion of a refugee as defined in the 1951 Convention, although there could be genuine risk for their lives in the country of origin. Under the circumstances what could these persons do? Most likely they would seek the assistance of smugglers to get out of the frantic situation.

It is to be noted that the total population of concern including the "Convention" refugees under the care of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is around 21.5 million as of 1 January 1999 and most of them are arguably victims of situations unrelated to the 1951 Convention.

Human Rights activists believe that the definition of a refugee in the Convention is based on violation of civil and political rights and appears to ignore economic and cultural rights. The escape of a person from a country of his/her origin could arise from various circumstances as noted above, besides the traditional reason of 'persecution' as defined in the Convention.

There is a view that the Refugee Convention serves fewer and fewer people as time goes on. There is an increasing realisation that the Convention is out-dated and needs revision

to cater to the needs of the people who are forced to flee from the country of origin under various compelling and distressful circumstances.

However, the danger appears to be that the developing and industrialised countries wish to revise the Convention for entirely different reasons. The Western nations wish to narrow down the definition of a refugee while the developing countries want to broaden the scope of the definition of a refugee to take into account the contemporary global situation. Therefore the prospect for agreed revised Refugee Convention appears to be bleak.

It is an intriguing fact that almost all the claimants for refugee status are considered prima facie by the West as "economic migrants". This assumes that they fled the country to seek better economic opportunities in the receiving countries. The rise of the right-wing parties in the West is likely to induce the governments to tighten more the immigration laws in such a way that the distressed persons will be denied entry into the territories of the advanced nations. The tragic death of 58 would-be arrivals in Dover indicates the risks that people are prepared to take in order to relocate in Western countries. It appears the more

the rules are made stringent, the more a person is likely to use a smuggler to seek refuge in a third country at a great risk.

It is to be noted that unlike applicants for immigration, refugees or asylum seekers have no choice. The timing of their departure is usually unplanned and hasty. Desperate people use desperate means. In confronting the situation of smuggling people, a view prevails that the response from the governments should address the humanitarian aspect of the situation and a humane approach should be directed to the people who have been forced to escape from their countries of origin. Compassion rather than draconian laws could be the answer to evade the grim tragedy occurred in Dover.

It is an irony, that when globalisation is advocated in every sphere of global activities and when it has become fashionable to speak 'withering away of state sovereignty', the movement of people from one country to another is being restricted day by day. The paradox of modern times appears to be that the gap between the rich and poor nations is getting wider and inequality is on the march. There is no reason to think these trends will disappear. Unless this gap of inequality is addressed globally, the tragedy that occurred in Dover might re-visit again. A dose of realism and moralism is needed to address the problem.

The author, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

Death in Dover

by Harun ur Rashid

The paradox of modern times appears to be that the gap between the rich and poor nations is getting wider and inequality is on the march. There is no reason to think these trends will disappear. Unless this gap of inequality is addressed globally, the tragedy that occurred in Dover might re-visit again. A dose of realism and moralism is needed to address the problem.

On a Rocky Road to Peace

The road towards negotiated end to nearly two decades of civil war in Sri Lanka remains rocky. But new developments, particularly the agreement between the government and the opposition for an interim council, have kindled hopes for peace in the strife-torn emerald island.

THE civil war in Sri Lanka continues unabated. There is no let-up in the fierce fight for the strategic Jaffna peninsula. While the Tamil Tigers have launched an intense onslaught to reclaim their cultural capital, the government troops are determined not to let go.

There are however moves towards a negotiated end to the 18-year-old bloodbath on the issue of an independent state for the minority Tamils. The ruling and the opposition parties are working to devise a mechanism to end the war through a process of dialogue. International community is also seeking to broker a negotiated end to the imbroglio that has taken heavy toll on both sides.

Indian external affairs minister Jaswant Singh was recently in Colombo to discuss the matter with Sri Lankan government. He met President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Foreign Minister Laxman Kadirgamar and exchanged views on different aspects related to the prolonged crisis. The Norwegian government has also stepped up its effort towards a negotiated settlement of the ethnic tension that has led to the demand of Tamil Elam or independence for Tamils in the northern and eastern region. The United States also favours talks to end the conflict but is against partition of Sri Lanka.

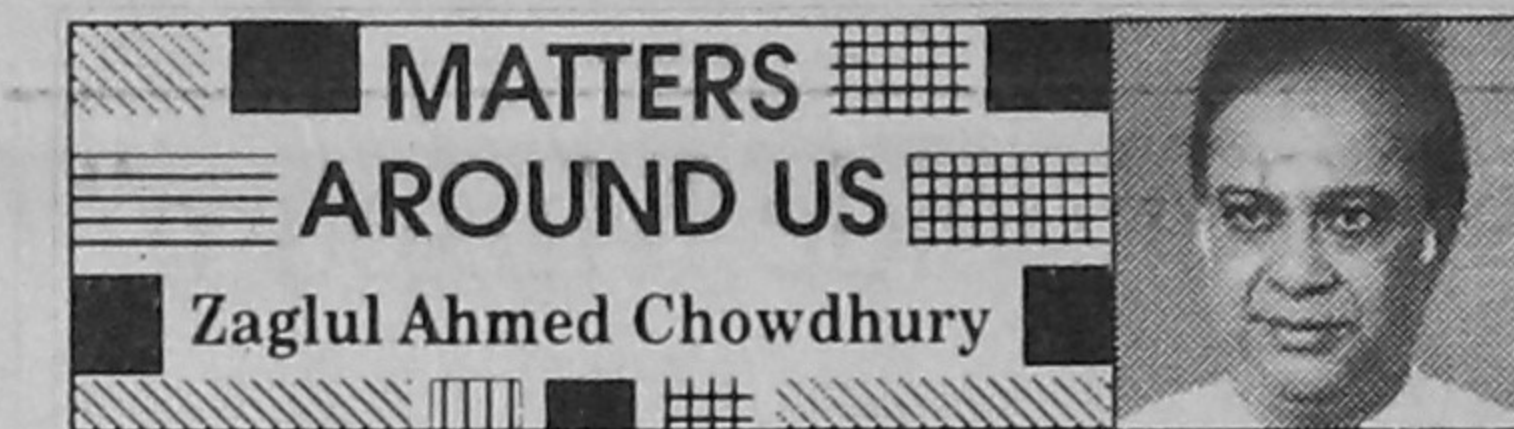
Of late, ruling and opposition leaders in the island state have agreed to form an interim administrative council for the embattled north-east as part of a controversial plan aimed at ending the bloodshed. In the landmark bipartisan talks, President Kumaratunga led the government side. The main opposition party United National Party (UNP) has agreed on the council as an effective measure to help end the strife.

The new administrative council is meant to give enough power to the north and east areas considering them as one region and Sri Lanka may turn into a de facto federal state from the current unitary system. The new formula seeks an interim council for five years, and both the government and the opposition hope that the proposal creates strong basis for peace talks with the Tamils. Earlier, a senior minister said a new proposal would be presented to the Tigers before it was placed in the parliament in a bid to end the civil war.

Now, the question is whether the Tamils will accept such a proposal, especially when they appear to have the upper hand in the battlefield?

Certain new developments have taken place in recent times, one of them being the desperation of the rebels to strike Colombo once again as they try to push closer to Jaffna after taking control of several strategic areas like the Elephant Pass. One Lankan cabinet minister and at least 20 others were killed at the heart of the capital in a suicide bomb

attack. The incident injected fresh fear amongst key figures in Colombo who had thought the rebels were concentrating more on the warfront rather than such attacks. Although similar attacks rocked the capital and other areas on several occasions in the past, there had been a lull of sort until the Colombo blast.



Tamils in Sri Lanka constitute nearly 18 per cent of less than two-crore population of

the island state and are concentrated in the north-east. Their fight began in early 1980s under Villupillai Prabhakaran whose influence over the Tamils remains undiminished. The Lankan Tamils have closer cultural, linguistic and religious proximity with the people of the Tamil Nadu state of India whereas most of the Lankans are Sinhalese Buddhists. Obviously, the Tamils in India are by and large sympathetic for the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka and the rebels are believed to have enjoyed all form of possible support from Tamil Nadu. As such, Indian government was lukewarm when Colombo recently asked for Indian help to the Sri Lankan government. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi, on the other hand, has called for partition of Sri Lanka into two republics in the line of Czech and Slovakia.

His views have been condemned by key figures in the Lankan government.

The issue involving the nature of Indian support to the Colombo government came to the fore when New Delhi was approached to help and assist more than 30,000 Lankan soldiers believed to be trapped in Jaffna in the face of intensified Tamil onslaught. India initially indicated it is willing to consider such a request if approached formally. The government troops in Jaffna were, in a difficult situation and were eager to be evacuated from there. As the New Delhi government was considering a Lankan government request in this regard, Karunanidhi rushed to the federal capital to tell Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh that India must not take an anti-rebel stance. It was only expected that the Tamil Nadu chief minister whose DMK party is extending critical support to Vajpayee's BJP-led multi-party NDA government cannot support federal government's pro-Colombo decision.

India at the same time cannot be seen to be interfering in the internal affairs of the is-

land state. New Delhi sent its external affairs minister to Colombo obviously to discuss the possibilities of ending the civil war through dialogue. It could neither support Karunanidhi's line of thoughts nor entertain the idea of favouring the Lankan government.

Norwegian peace efforts, meanwhile, has also received a boost after the Lankan government and opposition stepped up their efforts to find a non-military solution. Halt in the rebels' progress on the warfront has given rise to the possibility of success of a two-pronged peace efforts which are based on Lankan government-opposition endeavour in one hand and foreign encouragement on the other. Despite remarkable success in the battlefield a few weeks ago, the Tigers seem to have lost the advantage and this may put pressure on them into going for a peaceful solution. But they want independence which the Colombo government will not concede through discussion or dialogue.

The road towards negotiated end to nearly two decades of civil war in Sri Lanka remains rocky. But new developments, particularly the agreement between the government and the opposition for an interim council, have kindled hopes for peace in the strife-torn emerald island.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

The upcoming parliamentary elections

Sir, There is much ado in all walks of life about the upcoming parliamentary elections that are held every five years. The Government has appointed a new CEC whom none of the four opposition parties like. They never seem to be able to agree with the Government on any issue. Currently, the whole country is busy with preparing the voter's list. To ensure free and fair elections, people from all walks of life must co-operate with the election officials.

The main opposition party BNP seems bent on defeating the Awami League in the elections. To this end, they have forged alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami whose role during the War of Liberation is deplorable. The other major party JP also used to be at loggerheads with the BNP during the latter's rule. Clearly, for BNP, it seems that end justifies the means. However, it wouldn't be surprising if their recent 'marriage of convenience' is short-lived and they find themselves once again on a war footing.

Today, we Bangladeshis are faced with numerous problems that need to be addressed without any delay. But with the spectre of destructive power-oriented politics looming large over us once again, all our development efforts will go down the drain, making the country even poorer. This self-destructive exercise of confrontational politics has been going on for too long and we are fed up with it. We demand an immediate end to all this mindless power-play at the expense of the well-

being of the poor, innocent citizens. Indeed, it is long overdue.

Keeping this in view, the opposition should immediately give up its hawkish attempts to capture power and instead, follow a truly democratic path by facilitating the election process. Also, it must be realized that the government, or rather any government, cannot solely be held responsible for all the problems the country is beset with unless there is co-operation from all quarters, specially the opposition. Finally, it is of paramount importance that all take the upcoming elections seriously and cast their votes in favour of the most competent candidates.

Md. Fazlur Rahman
Department of English
Dhaka Commerce College

One-way traffic

Sir, This is in reference to the DS news item of converting the Kudrat-e-Khuda Road into one-way traffic. I draw the attention of the authority concerned to the news item. The DS reporter was right to surmise that the decision was hasty and enforced without any preparation. In case of such a change the authorities should take some time to give publicity to the proposed change. A road user who was using the road in a certain manner for over a quarter century can hardly adjust to a change inflicted on him suddenly without any prior intimation. Why this immature effort to surprise the people?

Extensive newspaper/radio/TV campaign, miking and educating about the alternate routes could convert the people/businessmen of the area

to support the one-way implementation. One-way traffic system is an accepted norm in all cosmopolitan cities in the world, including our neighbouring country. But in case of the mentioned road, the method of implementation was sloppy. In our country, chaos and confusion regarding any issue gives the authority a feeling of importance and now it is found that they have won their point by proving that one-way system is not for Bangladesh.

MAH
Dhaka

Using religion for business

Sir, The Daily Star has done well to expose influential tycoons in the society using religious garb to do business and amass money ("Safest way to grab public land", June 17)

Land in Dhaka metropolis is gold, and moral scruple can take a back seat to realise materialistic and corporal goals. This is not possible without political godfatherism. The politicians do and can provide services, but most prefer the back door most of the time.

Which come first, society or politics?

A taxpayer
Dhaka

Keep the city clean

Sir, Our city is engulfed with numerous banners, festoons and billboards. These old, tattered, outdated banners seem to be everywhere be it across the city roads, road islands, entrance to city parks, markets, bus stations, railway stations and every possible open space. These give the city a dirty look. But still the city fathers appear least interested to remove these banners.

The banners include information regarding admission to various educational institutions, information regarding

tailoring, eating places, beauty parlours, sports meet, art festivals, fairs and of course, regarding political and religious occasions.

In some places, these banners makes it difficult to locate addresses and in some islands completely obstructs the view of the traffic movement. In no capital city of the world is the law so democratic and flexible to allow indiscriminate display of banners, posters and billboards. I believe our City Corporation has the necessary laws to act effectively against such misuse of law. The City Corporation can also earn a huge revenue if laws are properly enforced for proper display of advertisements (preferably on the rooftop and along the highways and railway tracks).

As for the removal of banners and festoons, all that is required is a pair of scissors and the will to act. This is not too much of asking from our city fathers. We all love our city and would like to see it grow as a clean, green and healthy one.

Noman Ali
6, Elephant Road
Dhaka

Stop supplying contaminated milk

Sir, As an alert citizen I would like to share a painful experience with the readers and caution them.

I am a regular consumer of Savar Dairy pasteurised milk. For the last 2/3 months they have been supplying contaminated milk in the market. As a result of this, I was having stomach trouble which turned out to be really serious. I consulted the shop keeper from whom I bought the milk and also the Directorate of Livestock at Khanbar Bari but all of them came up with a vague reply.

With my personal inquest I found out that the pasteurising machine of the Savar Dairy Firm has not been working properly.

Therefore, I would like to request the Director General, Livestock to stop supplying such contaminated milk in the market till the machine starts to function properly.

Morshed Ali
35, Segun Bagicha,
Dhaka

Names and nicknames

Sir, I often get surprised at the practice of using nicknames in all spheres of life.

In different professions and social standings we find names like Fazlur Rahman Pitol, Asadul Haq Jontu, Minhazul Abedin Nannu etc. This practice is being fervently exercised in case of a person whether he is an honourable MP, popular cricketer or an ordinary person.

I do not know of any other country where they have such a ridiculous practice.

Can't we get rid of this practice and use people's name in a more civilized manner and leave the nicknames to be used by the families and dear ones?

A M Mahmood
Dhaka

Whither health services?

Sir, Bangladesh, a lesser-developed country, is fortunate in having, comparatively, a better network of health services in the public and private sectors; the former extending into the rural areas, where about 100 million people live. But, due to anomalies in both the sectors the lower-income groups, the fixed income group and the middle class are not getting the expected benefits of these expanded services.

The government-controlled public health service is inefficient and bureaucratic, and the motivation is simply not there, coupled with corruption and

pilferage. The doctors do not relish posting outside the big cities, especially in the interior, as there is scope for making money in the urban area with private practice during spare time.

The private sector is for the rich people, and most of the families cannot afford private treatment, without incurring huge loans. Ironically, the government is sympathetic to the development of specialised health services in the private sector, to discourage the drain of foreign exchange for treatment abroad. The latter is very popular, regardless of social and monetary status.

Another irony is that the manufacture of medicines is well developed in Bangladesh (the retail prices of local medicines are one of the cheapest in the world). Today's modern treatment involves a lot of lab tests, but the quality control in many of the diagnostic centers is questionable.

With the right policies, the situation can improve fast, as the networks already exist; the loopholes and weaknesses can be spotted, and the remedial measures are not that far-fetched. Now the private sector is attracting investment, including foreign tie-ups. The quality of the public health service has not been improving for decades.

The government is aware of the shortcomings, and have launched some modified rural projects involving one-stop integrated health service at the village level. The problems are not technical, but mostly human-motivation, inefficiency, and corrupt practices. Only administrative reforms and decentralisation can handle this complex and unhealthy foundation. As for the private sector services, health insurance is part of the solution — the cost of treatment has to be in tune with the average monthly income of families.

A Husain
Dhaka