

## Textbook crisis

Because of the trading of accusations between NCTB and the printing presses, a Bangla Bazar-based syndicate of wholesalers made some quick money from the crisis. Outside Dhaka, buyers have to pay Tk. 10 extra for each book. For making more profits, retailers are compelling students to buy illegal notebooks, which are illegally and openly sold in Bangla Bazar due to lack of monitoring by NCTB.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

It is a pity that the government has failed to provide most of the textbooks to the students of secondary schools. The education sector had not been given enough attention during the last 37 years, though it is a very sensitive sector. It is true that governments have gradually increased budget allocation to this sector. This has, however, been more helpful for the teachers and the management, but the students were not much benefited, particularly those of primary and secondary schools.

We find corruption and efficiency more or less in any department. When it goes beyond a tolerable limit the government must wake up from slumber. The secondary stage of education is regarded as the real base of education. If the base

is weak and fragile the whole nation suffers directly or indirectly.

Out of 76 categories of textbooks for secondary school students, only 14 categories have come to the market so far. This shortage has compelled the students to buy books at higher prices than those fixed by National Curriculum Textbooks Board (NCTB). No one (including officials of NCTB) can say when all the categories will be available in the market.

Because of shortage of books classes cannot start in full swing. Teachers are using last year's textbooks. They say that classes cannot start properly until April as the schools will be closed for a month from mid-February for secondary school examinations. Thus, students will get hardly seven months to complete the academic year. If we take into account

the yearly 85 days of vacations and 52 days for weekends, we can imagine how horrible the situation is.

NCTB has further complicated the state of affairs by changing the exercise section and introducing creative question method for secondary students. This has resulted in the reluctance of students to collect old books. Guardians are worried because their children are not studying due to the crisis of textbooks.

Meanwhile NCTB printers, wholesalers and retailers are blaming each other for the delay. Major causes for the crisis are, shortage of printing paper, failure of NCTB to make correct estimate of textbooks, capacity of the concerned printing presses, lack of coordination, lack of monitoring by NCTB, and the unethical practice of making extra-profit through exploiting the situation.

For this academic year, the NCTB placed orders for 26.2 million textbooks of 76 categories at a cost of Tk. 754.1 million for marketing books in three phases -- 14 categories by January 6, 38 categories by January 15, and the rest by January 25. The crisis was because the printing presses were busy with the parliamentary election, delay in advising NCTB to collect paper from alternative sources, the spread of a rumour that textbooks had been totally changed and old books would not be in use. The NCTB

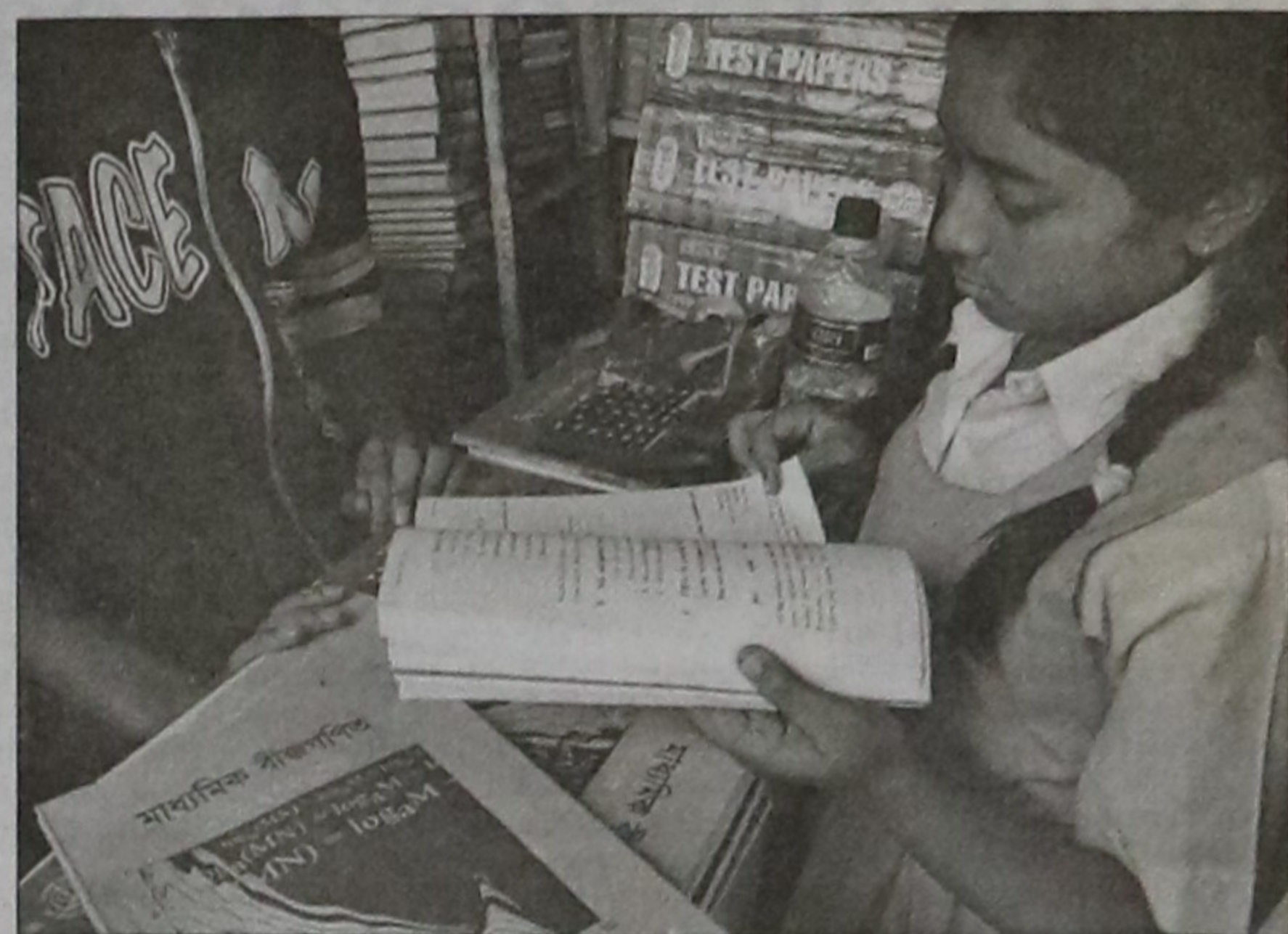
failed to quell this rumour.

In the past, large numbers of books used to be printed. Private publishers avoided printing textbook because the exercises had been changed. All three printing associations (Bangladesh Printing Industry Association, Bangladesh Textbook Printing and Marketing Society and Bangladesh Publishers and Sellers Society) repeatedly advised NCTB to tackle the looming crisis and even suggested rescheduling of the date of marketing of books. The advice was ignored by NCTB.

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The crisis is even worse in the case of the English version of textbooks. So far, NCTB has not published English version textbooks and, as such, old versions of such book are sold at highly exorbitant prices.

Prof. Masir Uddin, chairman of NCTB, has promised to take drastic action against the culprits. Incidentally, he is



I read them last year!

still unaware about duplication of new textbooks.

This kind of crisis has become chronic. NCTB accuses printers, marketing agencies and distributors who, in turn, accuse the NCTB -- and it is the helpless students who ultimately suffer. Thus, a simple enquiry, as stated by the NCTB chairman, does not appear to be enough because the issue is very critical and sensitive and, unless handled care-

fully, may result in an explosive situation.

We suggest setting up of a high-level enquiry committee for an in-depth report for true exposition of facts, so that appropriate actions may be taken by the authorities. This obviously needs strong commitment and strict neutrality.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

## A welcome move

I must admit that the actions so far taken by the EC in this respect are commendable. Pending judicial inquiry into the reported irregularities, they initially suspended election results of 7 upazillas and have now added another 16 upazillas.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE decision of the Election Commission (EC) to suspend results of 23 upazillas and order judicial enquiry following reports of gross irregularities is a welcome one.

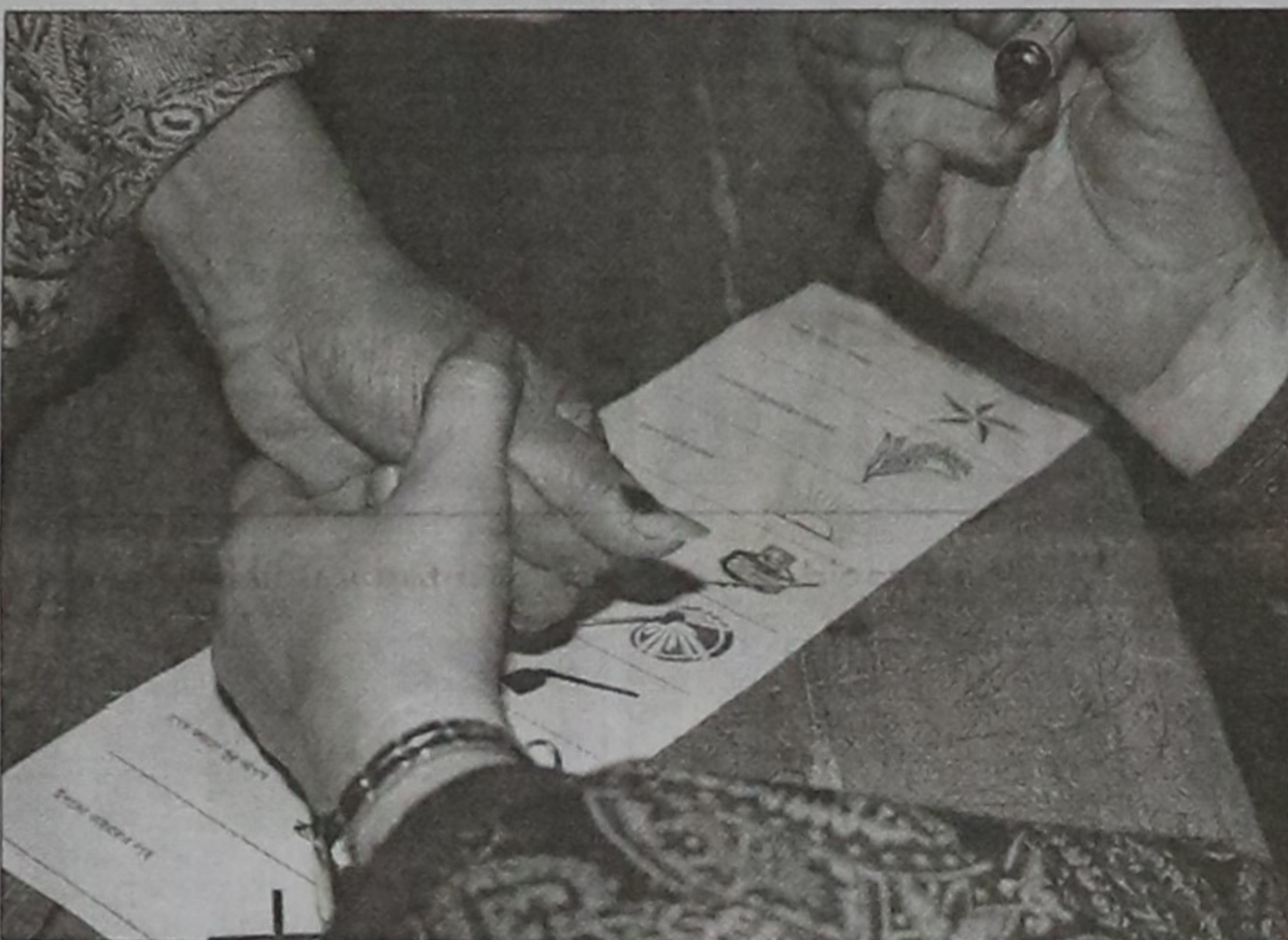
In contrast to the ninth parliamentary election, which was acclaimed at home and abroad as one of the most free, fair and credible elections the country has ever seen, the upazilla elections were, according to media reports, tainted by allegations like capturing of polling centres, stuffing of ballot boxes, intimidation of voters and ousting of polling agents, perpetrated mostly by the local leaders and activists of the ruling party. The CEC himself complained about at least one minister and one MP of the ruling party trying to influence the electoral process.

Media reports suggest that out of 475

upazillas, such irregularities were reported in at least 40. Percentage-wise the number may not look that big, but because of the implication on transition to a truly democratic polity it cannot be taken lightly.

The image that the EC had earned by holding a credible parliamentary election has been seriously dented in the upazilla election. The reason might have been inaction of the election officials in taking prompt action against the defaulters or interference by the political parties.

As per our constitution, the law enforcing agencies and the civil administration engaged in election duty were under the exclusive command of the EC during the election period. They had all the power and authority to take necessary steps, including cancellation of polling in the disputed centres and



Punish those who marred the elections.

arrest of persons creating obstacles in the smooth functioning of the electoral process.

It is now up to the EC to explain what happened. Having said that, I must admit that the actions so far taken by the EC in this respect are commendable. Pending judicial inquiry into the reported irregularities, they initially

suspended election results of 7 upazillas and have now added another 16 upazillas.

They should not only take punitive measures against those candidates or their activists who created obstacles or violated the electoral code of conduct but also take stern action against those officials who failed to discharge their

duties properly. We feel that this the only way the EC can rebuild its image and regain confidence of the people.

There are some more aspects of the upazilla elections that the EC should keep in mind for future course of action. One is the complicated, if not faulty, ballot paper. Too many symbols (some of them not easily recognisable) printed close to one another and without the names of the candidates created problems.

As a result, thousands of cast votes had to be declared invalid because of faulty stamping or wrong folding of the ballot paper. The figure in some centers has been as high as 10 percent of the total votes cast. Where a candidate won with a small margin, the result could have been different had there been fewer discarded ballot papers.

Another aspect was the money matter. In the upazilla election the EC did not look as concerned about election expenditure as it was during the parliamentary election. As a result, a huge sum of money is reported to have freely exchanged hands in the elections.

If the idea of the upazilla system is to strengthen local governments with elected representatives who will not only head the local administration but will

also be responsible for overall development of their respective areas, the electoral process should have remained free from the influence of money and muscle. Regrettably, that did not happen.

As for the Awami League, the upazilla elections went well as far as their winning target is concerned. They have so far probably bagged 305 or more seats of upazilla chairman. But if we talk about their credibility as a party in power in ensuring a free and fair election, it has not gone unblemished.

The attempts of some party men, especially of a minister and an MP of Awami League, to directly influence the election, as is alleged by no less a person than the CEC himself, have certainly earned a bad name for the party. Sheikh Hasina, as the prime minister and chief of Awami League, cannot absolve herself from the responsibility of seeing that the real culprits do not go unpunished.

This is necessary not only to ensure that the gains she and her party have earned through parliamentary election remain intact but also to remain fully committed to her pledge to the nation for a "change."

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired senior merchant navy officer.

## Revitalising education

In the end, economic progress and social development in the twenty-first century will be defined by whether or not Bangladesh can take a quantum leap in its educational experience. It will be a challenge for the nation to prepare its human capital with good quality education.

HALIMUR RASHID KHAN

ON March 2, 2008 the chief adviser of the former CTG, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, provided some guidelines for educational priorities during a conference on Governance in Education. These guidelines can help establish improved quality of education and prepare our younger generations to compete in the 21st century.

While Bangladesh achieved 100% enrollment in primary schools in 2004, the quality of learning remains questionable. Quality of learning means the levels of student achievement that meet defined minimum standards. Low quality of learning achievement remains a major challenge in the education system. This has dire implications for the education system, as well as for the economic, social and political potentials of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has made impressive gains in economic growth and educational opportunities, and become one of the most successful developing coun-

tries in creating educational opportunities for children. Despite these achievements, much remains to be done, especially in education.

### Quality of learning

The quality of education has not only lagged behind, compared to access to education, but has actually deteriorated. After five years of primary education, students master only about two to three years of the content. In a study conducted in 1992 among 2100 children aged 11-12 years, Unicef found that children who had completed five years of basic education had mastered the basic elements of 73% of reading, 28% of writing, 63% of oral arithmetic and 44% of written arithmetic, while the minimum levels in all four areas were achieved only by 22%.

When these skills were tested among children who had finished the five grades and continued to secondary school, the results were somewhat improved: reading was at 85%, writing at 50%, oral mathematics at 46%, and

written mathematics stood at 60%, while 35% of students achieved minimum levels in all four areas.

In another study, researchers found that by 1998 the quality of learning achievements has actually dropped. Only one in three had mastered the basic skills, with an achievement of 58% in reading, 13% in writing and 37% in oral arithmetic. The quality of learning achievements was found to be much lower for girls and in rural areas. Girls in rural areas performed poorly in all four tests, and were 10 percentage points below boys.

### Importance of quality of learning achievement

Unlike access to education, the problem of quality will remain at all levels. Unable to read and write at the level they are, children won't be able to learn more complex material that builds upon prior skills and will have to eventually drop-out. Soon, the country will lack a qualified and skilled workforce and, more importantly, an educated citizenry.

Education is a basic human right. EFA Global Monitoring Report (2000) says that education is for personal development and fulfillment as well as for the development of cognitive and functional skills, and that it is vital for building democratic citizenship. Fernando Reimers, a Harvard university professor and a specialist in primary

education -- suggests that education plays a vital role in establishing an understanding of democracy and democratic institutions.

He has also argued that poorly educated people are more vulnerable to extreme ideologies, and that in the interest of safety and security, it is imperative that a nation educates its citizens to protect them from such vulnerabilities.

Poor quality learning creates barriers in education's contribution towards a nation's economic growth and development. The current global economy offers unprecedented opportunities for countries with growth potential, and it is crucial to have a workforce capable of competing in this global economy.

Bangladesh is a poor country, and poverty is an increasingly serious problem in large parts of the developing world; yet, unlike in the developed nations, improving quality of education in developing countries can spur rapid economic growth.

A World Bank study in Bangladesh has found that the likelihood of a household being below the poverty line declines by 37% when the head of that household has had only one to four years of primary education. Better quality education would do much more than just lift a nation out of poverty.

While increasing literacy rates have helped to reduce infant mortality rates

and fertility among women, and increase health and nutrition conditions of the population and farmer productivity, improved quality of learning achievements may also positively influence all of these outcomes.

In the end, economic progress and social development in the twenty-first century will be defined by whether or not Bangladesh can take a quantum leap in its educational experience. It will be a challenge for the nation to prepare its human capital with good quality education. And, good quality education must, in turn, begin with establishing higher quality of learn-

ing achievements at the very basic levels.

There is now a tremendous opportunity for the newly elected government to make this most fundamental contribution to our nation: Step up to this challenge, improve the quality of primary education, and establish Bangladesh on a path to prosperity. This would be one of the most profound contributions to our nation.

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