

## Holidays and healthcare deficit

*This must be overcome with contingency planning*

THE saddest thing that could happen to people is for them to be deprived of public services every time a holiday season comes round. It is a reality which has always been felt keenly during the period around and on Eid. As a report in this newspaper makes clear, innumerable citizens (and they are almost all in the lower income category) suffered during the festival holidays because of an acute absence of doctors and other medical personnel in the hospitals. Given that public services are always a twenty-four hour job, arrangements should have been in place to handle patients during the holidays. Is there any mechanism to ensure this?

A large number of patients crowded Dhaka Medical College Hospital during the just-concluded Eid holidays after they were referred there by the clinics or hospitals they had gone to earlier. Most of these patients hail from Narayanganj, Savar and Gazipur and under ideal conditions should have been provided with treatment at their local medical institutions. That was not possible because doctors and nurses were not available. That medical personnel do require leave or need to be with their families on festive occasions is a fact to be duly acknowledged. However, hospitals and clinics, in the capital as elsewhere, need to have fallback arrangements in place in order for emergencies to be handled. We are sure that such thoughts did not escape the minds of the medical authorities. But when even institutions such as Suhrawardy and Mitford hospitals refer their patients to DMCH on the plea that their anaesthetists and other staff have gone on leave, it is clear that something is seriously wrong with health care in the country.

The picture accompanying our report (in yesterday's issue of this newspaper) says it all: a man, his left foot in bandages, crawls along the floor at the Pongu Hospital in order to help himself because there are no hospital staff around. The shame is not merely that of the hospital. It is also that of society as a whole.

In a country where there are regular complaints about the poor conditions or paucity in health care facilities, it should be the moral responsibility of the hospital authorities that people do not suffer because of negligence. Nothing can be sadder than the sight of seriously ill or badly injured individuals in agony right inside the hospitals owing to an absence of doctors and nurses.

We urge the ministry of health as well as hospital administrations to take these facts into cognizance so that such conditions are rolled back.

## Birth registration process needs a final thrust

*It should be taken up as a priority concern*

THE local government bodies tasked with registering the birth and issuing certificates for it are facing a big challenge ahead. That is because they have only a few months in their hand to complete the job by June 2010.

Back in 2001, the project of birth registration and certification was taken up largely at the initiative of the Unicef. But since the first deadline could not be met over a period of seven years until 2008, now the job should have to be done by June 2010 according to the rescheduled time line.

What is so far the achievement of the local government bodies like the union parishads (UPs), upazila parishads, municipalities and the city corporations, who are responsible for completing the mission within time left? It is learnt that till last June 58.77 per cent of the total population could receive their birth certificates. The job has a long way to go in nine months.

It is worthwhile to note that the worst performer is the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), which could register the births of only 13.28 per cent of the city's population. Perhaps, that is partly because of the large presence of homeless people in the city. However, the authorities concerned put the poor performance down to shortage of manpower. We suggest hiring of seasonal workers for the purpose.

Enormity of the challenge notwithstanding, there is no question of going back on it. For at stake is the fundamental rights of the newborn child as well as the access of the population to a good number of services of the state like getting a job, business, passport, TIN number, opening bank account, getting married, being identified as a voter and so on, to mention but a few. So, to have the job done within the stipulated timeframe, a massive campaign has to be launched to build up people's awareness and motivate them to come forward with birth information on their own. This is very important. Service of the mass media, both electronic and print, may be pressed to sensitise the population about the need for it and their right to it.

Bangladesh has carved out a name for itself among the South Asian countries for its successful child immunisation programme. If such a massive undertaking could be synchronised with clockwork precision, why can't the birth registration process be speeded up in a similar fashion to meet the deadline?

## UN climate talks could fail

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TAREQUL ISLAM MUNNA

EUROPEAN ministers warned that December's landmark UN climate talks could fail, as the EU Commission urged rich nations to stump up tens of billions of euros to help the developing world combat global warming.

"The Copenhagen deal is hanging in the balance," British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told reporters. "It's a real danger that the world will not come together in the way that is necessary to agree on an ambitious and comprehensive deal in December," warned Miliband, in Denmark to meet with his Danish, Finnish, French and Swedish counterparts on the issue.

The December 7-18 talks in Copenhagen, under the 192-nation UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), aim to craft a post-2012 pact for curbing the heat-trapping

gases that drive perilous global warming.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner told AFP that Copenhagen would be judged as a success if there was the willingness from rich countries to help poorer ones deal with the effects of global warming. "It is the richest who must share most of the burden with developing countries," Kouchner said.

His comments came on the day that French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced plans to impose a new carbon tax next year on oil, gas and coal despite polls showing strong opposition among the public.

Poorer countries such as India say over-ambitious targets for cutting greenhouse gases will hamper economic growth and that richer countries should offer greater emissions cuts of their own. Developed nations acknowledge the need to help out their poor neighbours but are unwilling to write any blank

cheques.

The European Commission in Brussels proposed that richer nations provide tens of billions of euros in global aid annually for poor nations to fight global warming. "With less than 90 days before Copenhagen we need to make serious progress in these negotiations," said EU Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso.

The sums involved "will only get higher if we delay," he cautioned. The proposals will serve as a basis for discussions in October when EU nations will seek a common position to take to Copenhagen. In total, the EU estimated that developing countries would need to find around 100 billion euros (145 billion dollars) per year to tackle climate change by 2020.

Breaking down the 100-billion-euro figure, the Commission foresees that domestic and private financing in the developing countries themselves should provide 20-40% of the total. Another 40% should be found via an international carbon market, which should create an increasingly financial flow to developing countries.

Each country's contribution would be assessed according to a scale of emissions levels and ability to pay. The EU

would be expected to provide anything in a range from 2 to 15 billion euros, according to the Commission.

A diplomatic source said that the EU wanted to see the equivalent of 12 billion euros per year coming from the United States. Notably, the Commission stressed that the rest of the aid should come from "industrialised nations and economically more advanced developing countries," a phrase which brings China into the funding equation.

EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said that "balanced" proposals were needed to "break the impasse in the Copenhagen negotiations." Brussels sees itself at the forefront of that battle against climate change. The 27 EU nations have already agreed to cut greenhouse gases emissions by 20% by 2020.

They have also said that they would increase that figure to 30% if there were international agreement to do the same. The Commission proposed exempting the poorest Least Developed Countries from any commitment to put forward low-carbon emissions plans.

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## A victim of wrong perceptions?

Perhaps manpower export is the worst victim of wrong perceptions. While everybody, from arm-chair intellectuals to policy makers, is gloating over robust growth of remittance, even in recession, they seem to forget that migration is the mother of remittance.

ABDUL ALIM

IN the Philippines, any act at undermining manpower export is considered an act of treason against the state with specific penal provisions. Moreover, their president allocates a particular day every year to be personally present at the airport to see-off and receive expatriates. Such a gesture of honor shows the importance the Philippines, a role model to other sending countries, attaches to migrant workers. No wonder, they net about \$16 billion in yearly remittance with foreign currency reserve settled around \$35 billion. Just compare this with our \$10 billion remittance and reserve of \$8 billion. It signifies the difference in importance each country attaches to this golden goose of its economy.

How is this sector looked at in Bangladesh? Distorted focus and inept role of its trade body have given scope to media to portray this sector as a club of greedy recruiters. The society rebels at the very mention of *adam bepari*, and policy makers steer clear of uttering anything positive about this sector.

Policy makers seem to suffer from perception deficiency syndrome. They forget that command economics neither did work during the regime of the last CTG, nor will it now or ever. No wonder the high migration cost vis-à-vis govern-

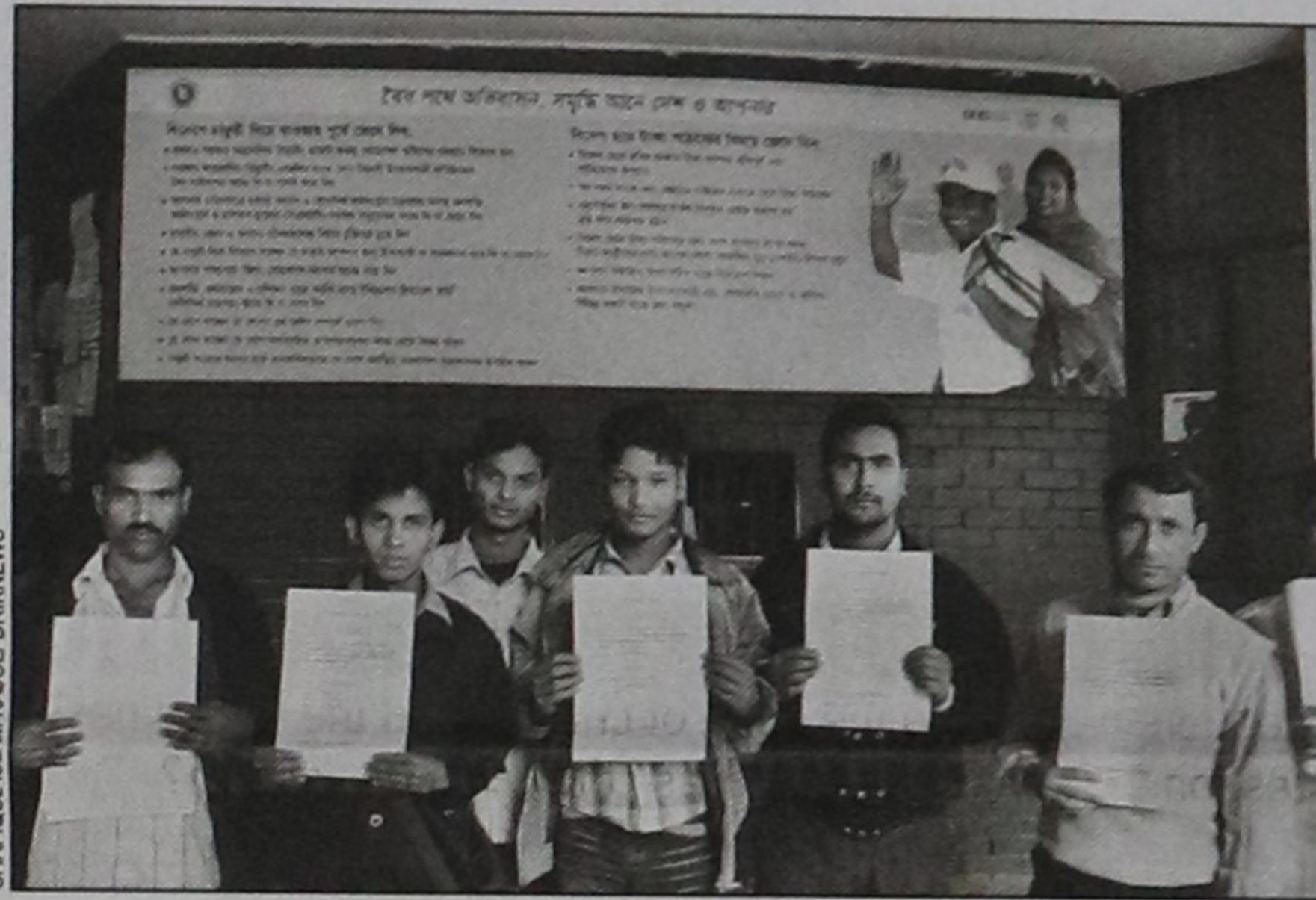
ment's fixed cost has paralysed the manpower export sector.

Perhaps manpower export is the worst victim of wrong perceptions. While everybody, from arm-chair intellectuals to policy makers, is gloating over robust growth of remittance, even in recession, they seem to forget that migration is the mother of remittance. God forbid, if the figure of returning migrants overtake number of fresh out-bound migrants, this complacency will evaporate.

Such a scenario is not unlikely, as the tenures of a huge number of our job migrants, especially in Malaysia, are ending in the near future. Once this avalanche starts happening, there will hardly be anything left to do. While still honeymooning with remittance, the policy makers' primary concern should be streamlining manpower export.

Believe it or not, some policy makers do not consider services as exportable, perhaps because they are not tangible and do not occupy space in shipping containers. In a recent meeting of policymakers, a top government functionary commented that since remittance sent by the expatriates was being paid to their relatives, the gain is theirs. If such is the perception of our top officials, then we have a problem!

This is not the space to educate on how the remittance benefits the country.



Going abroad, thanks to manpower exports.

Bangladesh Bank knows it all as it is paying the bills for imports even after paying in full to the receivers of the remittance. It is no surprise that policy makers rate RMG as the top export earner because their product is tangible, while remittance by expatriates is not. Such a peculiar belief is fuelled by the media management of BGMEA, while the inept BAIRA lagged behind. Though BAIRA contributes three times more in net foreign exchange earnings and three times more in employment generation for the country, BGMEA is the "blue-eyed-boy."

The government's belief that fixing of migration cost is a panacea to all ills associated with manpower export may prove counter-productive. Many years back, the government fixed Tk. 50,000 as migration cost, then Tk.84,000 and now Tk.39,000. Such exercises did not have the desired effect in the market.

Moreover, this has dampened the trade, distanced it from government, and forced the agents to unholy means to circumvent the condition. This is not a logical scenario.

Like every other economic activity, migration cost is result of interaction of variables, both domestic and international. The challenge is to identify such variables, take the private sector along, and design strategies to control or contain the variables.

Unless the manpower export sector is addressed with the right perceptions, its image uplifted, its stigma removed, and the variables affecting migration cost are controlled, we may be forcing the Golden Goose to sink, and the resultant economic fallout can be devastating.

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## This austerity is all eyewash

A single decision would ensure greater comfort, cheaper fuel, environment protection and less corruption; replace the lot with CNG vehicles. Will anyone do this? Your guess is as good as mine, but my guess is "no."

M.J. AKBAR

THAT inimitable 20th century intellectual and sleuth Hercule Poirot listed an unforgivable sin in his moral code: overlooking the obvious. The media dust storm over that hobgoblin, austerity, stimulated surely by low TV ratings as much as by high-mindedness, has obscured the most obvious of questions. Who got the money?

Travel is a minor percentage of government expenditure, but every little drop helps, presumably, in a drought. However, where is the money saved by humbler travel going? Has a special austerity fund been created to collect drops from the comfort-squeeze on politicians? Or is the government, which picks up most of the bill, simply retaining the money in its common fund, the bulk of which goes to pay the salaries of *babus*? As is well known, the biggest beneficiary of government is government.

The cost of MPs' tickets, as well as for pricey hotels when Parliament committees go on tour, is paid by Parliament.

Have the chairman of Rajya Sabha and speaker of Lok Sabha placed the unspent cash in escrow, reserved for the families of farmers still committing suicide in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh?

The Congress Party pays for Rahul Gandhi's travels, as indeed is appropriate. When he takes a private plane, the bill is in more lakhs than one can readily count. When he takes a train, the bill is zero, at least to the Congress: government pays for security. Does the Congress pass on what it has saved to *rabi*-wrecked farmers in south Bihar? One does not know. A little illumination would be most helpful.

Two and half ministers (Nandan Nilekani has cabinet status but not ministerial position) were ordered out of five-star hotels and into more modest *bhawans*. (One of them promptly told the world that innumerable friends had offered him a place to stay. He should dine out as often as he can. The third law of Delhi's physics says that the number of friends varies in direct proportion to your perceived level of power.)

Between the three of them, they are now saving a minimum of Rs. 60,000 a day. Have they adopted a village in Jharkhand with the money now denied to five-star hotels? Or is this cash further strengthening their already well-nourished personal bank accounts? Here is a subversive suggestion. Why not make them contribute an amount equal to their hotel bills to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund?

If they can spend Rs. 60,000 a day out of their pockets for a comfortable bed and a cup of coffee, they should be able to spare a bit of small change for the drought-afflicted. The truly outstanding irony, of course, is that when the three get their official homes, they will enter a world beyond the dreams of the most luxurious hotel in the world.

America's cabinet members would salivate at the prospect of acres of plush lawn in the heart of Washington, around a glorious colonial bungalow fitted with contemporary amenities, as a personal playground. Chinese cabinet members would probably get jailed for fantasy, or shot for corruption. The Indian minister has a home that is the envy of avarice. Who pays for it? Actually, you. If you pay tax, that is.

Grandeur is the only definition of power in Delhi, and bitter feuds erupt over a potential address. Any successful social climber in impoverished India's capital will ask for your address before

he, and of course she, asks for your name. But it is only fair to note that if there is one man who has a right, in this system so heavily layered by hypocrisy, to raise the issue then it is the man who set off the austerity fireworks.

Pranab Mukherjee has, without any doubt, the worst bungalow in Delhi. He was allotted this residence when an MP, and has not changed it despite being entitled to far more glamorous acreage. That is one reason why, when Pranab Mukherjee talks, his peers listen. The second reason is that he runs most parts of the government.

Now for a little, closely guarded secret. The big ticket in travel costs is not high in the sky but closer to the ground. Somebody should tot up the fuel costs of the thousands of very austere cars allotted to ministers, MPs and bureaucrats. Fuel theft is rampant. A single decision would ensure greater comfort, cheaper fuel, environment protection and less corruption; replace the lot with CNG vehicles. Will anyone do this? Your guess is as good as mine, but my guess is "no." If you want to know the identity of a murderer in any Agatha Christie-Poirot page-turner, answer a simple question. Who got the money? If you want a way out of the complex labyrinths of Delhi, ask the same question.

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