

High-cost rental power for three years!

Rental power cannot be a substitute for our own generating capacity. We made mistakes in the past by not increasing our generating capacity. Let us learn from our mistakes and use our meagre resources judiciously.

ABDUL MATIN

IT is reported that the cabinet purchase committee in its meeting on April 29 approved two rental deals for 300 MW of power to ease the present power crisis by August. The power ministry had earlier initialled contracts with British Aggreko for installing 200 MW power units in Khulna and Ashuganj, and with local Desh Energy for a 100 MW unit in Siddhirganj. The plants would operate on diesel.

When the contracts were initialled, the purchase price of electricity was not announced and, as a result, there was a lot of speculation on the matter in the local press. Now we have more information available, not only on the purchase price but also on the monthly subsidy the government will pay to Power Development Board (PDB) to cover the loss. This will stop further speculation on prices. This will raise more serious questions on the wisdom of signing of three-year deals with the rental companies.

Aggreko will sell power to the PDB at Tk.14.4 per kWh and Desh Energy at Tk.13.32 per kWh. The PDB will sell it at a rate of only Tk.2.37 per kWh, incurring a loss of Tk.10.95 to Tk.12.03 per kWh. To make up the loss, the purchase committee in principle decided to provide the PDB a monthly subsidy of Tk.200 crore. During the contract period of three years, the total amount of subsidy will thus be Tk.7,200 crore for the two deals.

After three years, the rental companies will take back their power plants and PDB will be obliged to replace them by building additional 300 MW of generating capacity that will cost approximately Tk.2,200 crore more.

Bangladesh is facing a serious power crisis now. The shortfall in the supply of electricity during the peak period is estimated to be 2,000 MW, which is about one-half of the present available generating capacity. As a result, we are experiencing several hours of load-shedding every day. The crisis had been created by the past successive governments, which committed a series of mistakes by delaying the much needed power projects.

As it takes 3-4 years to build a conventional steam power plant or a combined-cycle power plant, the government has decided to buy electricity from foreign and local rental power companies who have readily available diesel power generators, which can be installed within a matter of months at any location. It is reported that PDB may buy 500-1,000 MW of rental power to overcome the present crisis.

Normally, rental power is used for short periods only during an emergency or as a stand-by facility for any big sporting event, international conference, exhibition etc. Use of high cost rental power for years by a utility appears to be a rare and expensive luxury.

There is nothing wrong in buying rental power for a short period and at a

reasonable cost.

It is understood that the government has taken this step out of desperation, even though there were cheaper alternative methods of solving the present power crisis, for example, by utilising the captive (in-house) power plants in various industries by subsidising the extra cost of fuel they would thus incur. What worries us most is the high purchase price and the duration of the contracts for the rental power.

Recently, I came across some interesting information on modern diesel power plants. The two-stroke slow-speed diesel generator sets now available in the market have very high fuel efficiency, around 50 percent, compared to combined-cycle plants. These plants can operate on any fluid fuel like natural gas, fuel oil or diesel, and are available in sizes up to 70 MW at an estimated cost of Tk.100,000/ per kW, including buildings, transmission line, substation etc. Unlike other plants, these generating sets, which are designed for continuous base-load operation, can be built in 12 months and have a life expectancy of 25 years.

Why should the government go for a three-year contract for 300 MW of rental power, paying a subsidy of Tk.2,400 crore per year, whereas we can buy three diesel sets with a total generating capacity of 210 MW with the same amount of money? Instead of going for a three-year contract, it would be wiser and more advantageous to go for a one-year contract only.

With the amount of subsidy that will thus be saved by not continuing with the deal for two more years, i.e. Tk. 4,800 crore, the PDB will be able to buy and install six units of 70 MW diesel generating sets with a total capacity 420 MW within a period of 12 months, if ordered now. If furnace oil is used instead of costly



AMADULL HOQ/DRIK NEWS

It is better to own than rent.

diesel, these plants can generate electricity at a much cheaper rate because of their high efficiency.

As a matter of fact, the government could have taken such a decision a year ago, and have the plants delivered by now. They could thus avoid buying power from rental companies and save Tk.2,400 crore annually. Having been practically indecisive for the first year in

office, the government is now rushing for contracts for power plants.

Whatever the government does, it must do so prudently and in the best interest of the country. After all they are dealing with public money. No government has the right to waste public money by paying subsidies for high-cost rental power for three years when better and cheaper alternatives are

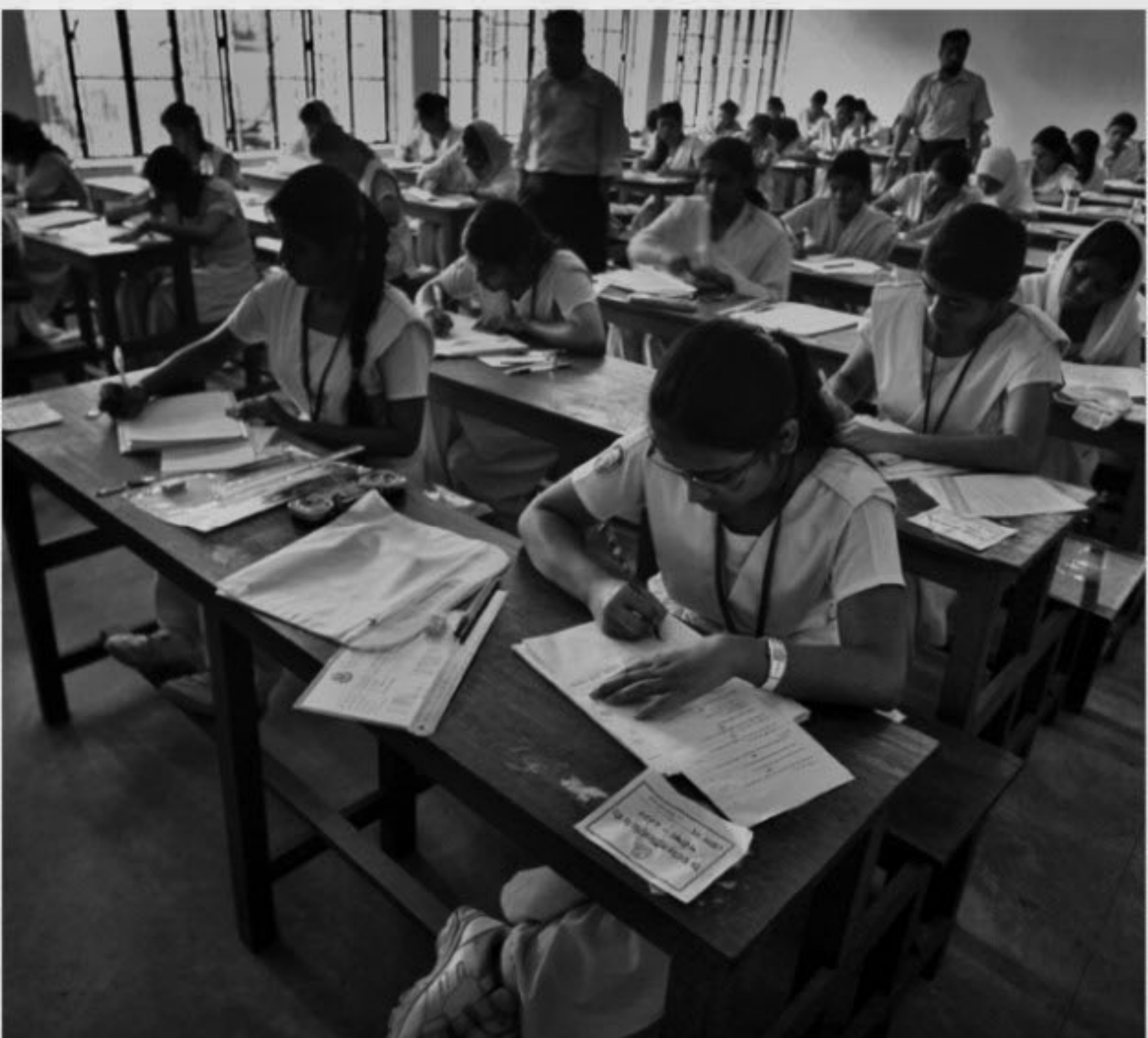
available.

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Dr. Abdul Matin is former Chief Engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

What price education?

New initiatives including donor-assisted activities, such as the new program for primary education, must come under the budgetary planning framework and should be a subject for public dialogue.



A.M.AHMAD/DRIK NEWS

MANZOOR AHMED

THE finance minister has been holding extensive consultations regarding the priorities and size of the 2010-11 budget to be presented to the Parliament in June. Among many critical concerns, which have strong advocates and deserve attention, the need for education should not get lost.

The right signals must be given in the 2010-11 budget in line with the government commitments, its longer term vision and the education policy objectives, which have raised popular expectations. The new budget is an opportunity to set the tone for the sixth plan (2011-15) and the perspective plan (2011-21) now under preparation.

The ideas that have recently emerged from extensive discussions and discourses regarding education priorities in the new budget, and within a medium-term financing framework, are reasonable and workable and must be considered seriously.

The allocation for education went down to under 2 percent of GNP in the first budget (2009-10) of the new government. Tk.14,000 crore allocated for education is 12.6 percent of the budget compared to around 14 percent in recent years. Setting a negative trend is unacceptable.

The draft education policy has provided a scenario for financing. It has argued that with 6 percent growth of the economy, a 4.5 percent share of GDP, at the least, for public education would

provide essential resources for implementing the policy in the next decade. This must be the framework for the sixth plan period; and 6 percent of GNP for public education, endorsed internationally as the minimum benchmark, should be the goal for the perspective plan.

The finance minister has put the likely size of the new budget at around Tk.132,000 crore. A reasonable size of the education budget, in line with objectives and priorities that have emerged from education discourse, has been estimated to be between Tk.22,000 and Tk.24,000 crores. The lower figure would be under 16.5 percent of the national budget and still under 3 percent of GDP -- a reasonable target to aim for.

It is, of course, not enough to allocate more funds. These have to be used effectively and for the right purposes. Along with incremental provisions for on-going programs, some bold initiatives must find a place in the budget. These include, in respect of basic education:

- A formula based on child population in each upazila, and a coordinated upazila plan from preschool to grade eight should be used for budget allocation. The new budget can provide for experimentation of this decentralised approach in one or two upazilas in each division, involving local government, education stakeholders and community organisations.
- The criteria for quality with equity for children anywhere and in any type of institution, with attention to the deprived -- extreme poor, those with

special needs, ethnic minorities, and other marginal groups -- should be developed and applied for budgeting and monitoring expenditures. This should be linked with the upazila-based planning mentioned above.

- To increase learning time in primary schools, mid-day meal, with option of a cooked and hot meal with community and parents' involvement, should be initiated on a substantial scale, with the aim of extending this to all schools within a short time.

- Attracting and keeping talented and capable young people in the teaching profession is a vital necessity for reversing the decline in the quality of education. Educationists have proposed that a proper pre-service teacher education program should be started in at least a hundred degree colleges, making education a concurrent qualification along with the regular degree.

- Talented people should be attracted to the new teacher education program with stipends and assurance of recruitment into a National Teaching Service Corps with attractive remuneration and status. To make this work, the teaching quality and infrastructure of the selected degree colleges must be improved to meet required standards.

- The government pledge to make the country "free of illiteracy" by 2014 is a noble aim that must not be allowed to become a symbolic gesture, which will haunt it with accusations of failure and wastage. The goal should be to bring young adults into a relevant learning program including literacy, further learning and productive skills by promoting a nationwide network of community learning centres. Local government and community organisations should be encouraged to take the lead in this, and it can be an area of public-private partnership. Rural IT centres and community radio can be linked with these learning centres.

One way of augmenting resources for education is to introduce an education tax along the line of the Indian levy of 3 percent on all taxes (2 percent earmarked for primary and 1 percent for secondary and higher secondary), which is put in a non-lapsable permanent fund.

An upazila education fund in each upazila pooling education levy and other contributions may be considered. The public will not grudge paying a little extra for education, if the funds are used effectively and transparently.

It is not known what the two Ministries of Education are proposing for the new budget. New initiatives including donor-assisted activities, such as the new program for primary education, must come under the budgetary planning framework and should be a subject for public dialogue. The education authorities could have followed the lead of the finance minister in this regard. Perhaps it is not too late to do so.

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed is Senior Adviser at the Institute of Educational Development, Brac University.

The battle can be won

Raising awareness and educating women about this disease are also highly advisable. Women should have a support group once they are diagnosed so that they can combat this disease and win the fight against it.

ZEENAT KHAN

I just came back from attending a funeral service. My friend of last ten years, Dorothy, lost her fight with breast cancer. Her funeral was held at a Baptist church in Southeast Washington, DC, of the Anacostia district, which is known as America's hidden shame. She was an African American woman, a single mother of a thirty-six year old handicapped daughter.

Dorothy had a lot of friends, and was well liked by many people. At her funeral there were a lot of people in attendance. During the service some of her friends talked about her generosity, her spirit and her willingness to help others.

Dorothy was a breast cancer survivor for thirty-four years. She had a radical mastectomy (removal of the entire breast) done and remained cancer free since then. She needed to take Novadex, a drug to reduce the chances of a recurrence. For the last ten years she had no health care coverage and had no access to advanced mammogram. She just put her faith in God and prayed that her cancer would not come back.

She was not spared, the cancer did come back in her other breast after many years, and she had no clue. By the time she could afford to go to a doctor after her friends helped her, the diagnosis was grim. Her cancer was in stage four. Her church stepped in when she could not take care of herself. She took her last breath in a hospice a few days ago.

Breast cancer is claiming the lives of women all over the world. It is the number one killer of women in developing countries. In a country like Bangladesh, it is estimated that breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women. In our society, women's health issues are not given priority. In most developing countries there is a stigma surrounding breast cancer that makes it difficult to be diagnosed.

Breast cancer is neither "contagious" nor "infectious." In Bangladesh many women die each year without any treatment. If detected early breast cancer in most cases is a preventable disease; it changes the patient's prognosis significantly. Months of oversight results in the spreading of the disease to all the other major organs, and at that time even the most aggressive treatment does not work. The stigma is a barrier that eventually leads to a very ghastly diagnosis and, in turn, death.

First and foremost, we need to remove the stigma that is attached to

breast cancer. The Bangla word for breast is *stan*, and to this day it is still a taboo word and is not a part of our daily vocabulary. Society's ignorance about treatment of breast cancer makes it an untreatable disease. Women's shyness in refusing to talk about such a subject makes it virtually impossible for others to know that they need treatment. In a lot of cases women simply do not open up to anyone even if they feel something is out of the ordinary.

There may not be any treatment available even if a woman decides to ignore social taboo. No yearly check-ups are available to the masses, nor is there any practice of monthly self-examination by checking for lumps or tumours. Some Dhaka city hospitals have cancer treatment facility. Only the privileged people can afford the treatment. There is no help for the poor rural women. The cancer institute and the research hospital centre are unable to meet the very high demand.

Only some private care clinics have a mammography machine, which detects cancer from a screening. The cost of a routine examination is very high. After the detection of a malignant tumour in a breast, a woman's survival rate increases only if she can get a mastectomy done.

A real lumpectomy is less costly, depending on the stage of the cancer. There is more after that. The follow-up

care with radiation therapy or chemotherapy is a must, which is time consuming and the cost is exorbitant.

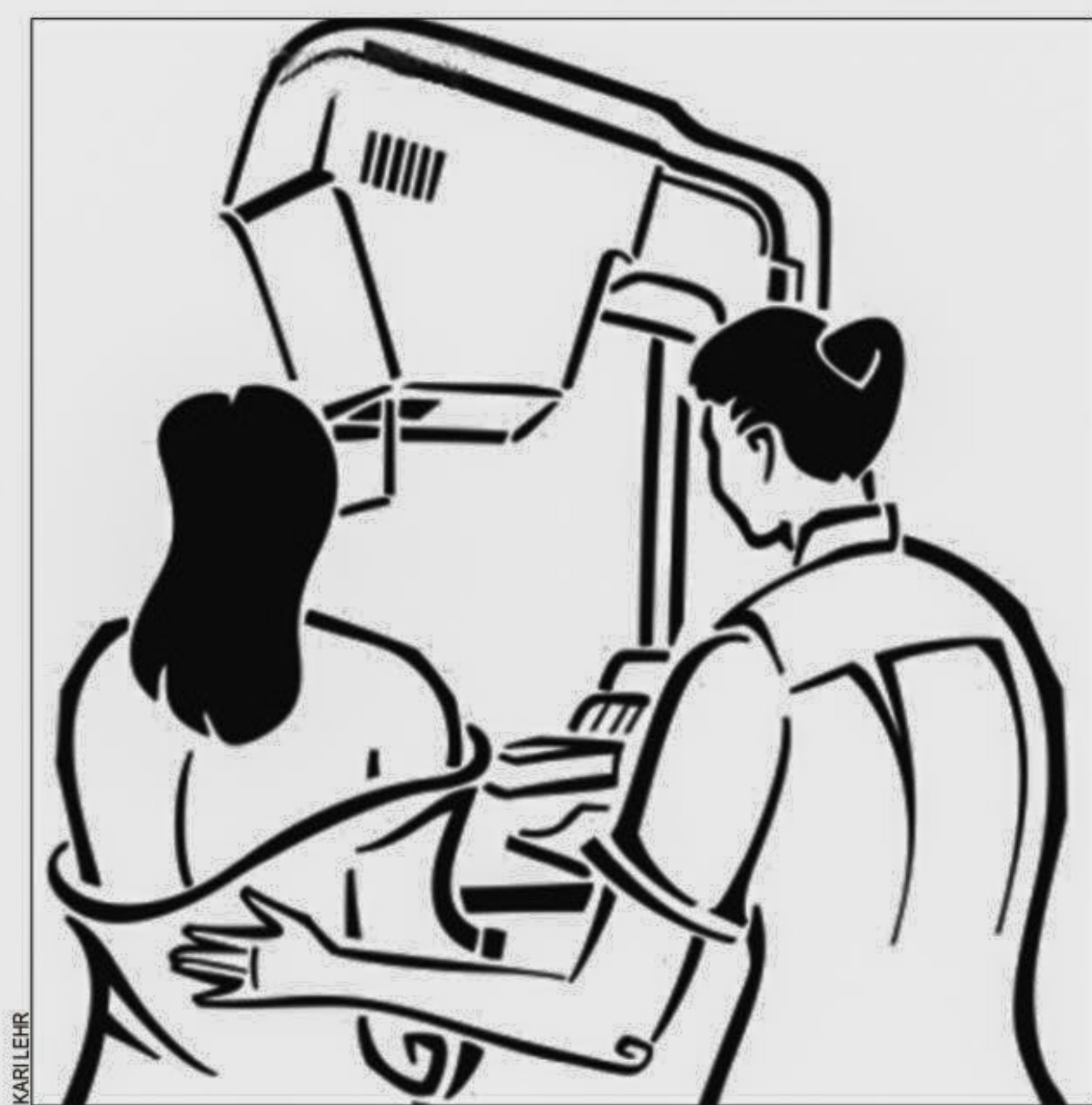
Unless our Bangladeshi pharmaceutical companies make affordable cancer drugs and the health ministry sees to that each woman with breast cancer gets treatment, the number of deaths will increase at an alarming rate.

According to a 2008 report, 22,000 women in Bangladesh are attacked by breast cancer every year and 70 percent die from lack of treatment. The health care people must educate all women about the importance of monthly self-examination. Society should change its outlook and should see the disease as just any other fatal disease unless it is treated.

To reduce the risk of breast cancer, an open-minded society where women's health issues are not ignored is needed to tackle this disease. Putting women at ease when they want to talk about this disease is another way that we should adopt in order to keep this dreadful disease under control. A woman should not be stigmatized or made to think that it is the end of her life when she has breast cancer.

Recently, when nurses in rural Mexico were training women how to examine their breasts for cancer they objected and didn't want to learn. They said: "Our men would leave us." Raising awareness and educating women about this disease are also highly advisable. Women should have a support group once they are diagnosed so that they can combat this disease and win the fight against it.

Zeenaat Khan is a fiction writer based in the United States. She wrote this piece in memory of her friend Dorothy.



KARLEHR