

## Liver transplant at Birdem

*We have done it, we can do more!*

**T**HE specialists at Birdem Hospital have conducted the first ever liver transplant surgery in Bangladesh, which is indeed a milestone. It is all the more significant for a country, which does not yet have a modern and sophisticated healthcare system.

Liver transplant is a very costly and complicated process for which local patients have to go abroad and spend crores of taka. But, thankfully, our doctors have let us know that patients will not have to spend more than Tk 35 lakh for liver transplant to be conducted locally in future. It is a great development for the health sector as a whole.

The successful liver transplant at Birdem shows what our specialists are capable of achieving, when they get the right kind of training and logistical support. The team of 24 surgeons has actually done what was unthinkable only a decade ago.

However, it is clearly not enough to have talented doctors only. Most of our hospitals will not be rated high enough, compared to any modern hospital abroad, when it comes to infrastructure and other facilities. Obviously, modern medical equipment are costly and fund constraints stand in the way of what we have to do to upgrade the existing facilities. But the Birdem doctors' remarkable feat should be an eye opener. They have made it clear that investment in this sector will pay rich dividends and help us save valuable foreign currency.

The general mood of frustration with the services provided by the public hospitals and doctors is far too evident in our context. Patients do not seem to have enough confidence in our doctors. Of course, they alone are not to be blamed for such a state of affairs. The doctors themselves are also responsible for their none too high standing in the public eye. However, the Birdem surgeons have accomplished something which should leave little doubt in our minds that they are not lagging behind the doctors of the developed world.

We can ill afford to ignore the truth that we are living in a competitive world. So, any achievement that brings us closer to international standards is a solid step forward that enriches the nation. Another point that must not be overlooked is the need for lessening our dependency on other countries. This, we must bear in mind, is a world of bridge building, where knowledge societies interact and knowledge multiplies by exchange rather than keeping it as an exclusive preserve of any one country. The Birdem surgeons have given us something the benefits of which are quite tangible.

We congratulate the doctors and wish the first liver transplant patient of the country a long and happy life.

## Sad demise of the Bangladesh Observer

*Marks the end of an era*

**W**ITH the closure of the Bangladesh Observer, the curtain has been brought down on an institution that introduced English journalism in the country some six decades ago. The paper had sunk into atrophy due to a long-drawn dispute between its owners and the employees. The journalists and other employees of the paper remained unpaid for long 11 years. Finally, an order from the High Court expedited the demise of the paper through partial payment of salaries and other dues to its employees.

The shutting down of The Bangladesh Observer marks the end of an era of journalism that was known for its ideology, commitment and ethics. The people once looked up to the columns and editorials of the paper for guidance. The Bangladesh Observer, for example, earned recognition even beyond the national boundary for the quality of its news reports, editorials and columns. In the great Language Movement of 1952, too, the newspaper took a strong stance in favour of the student community's demand to declare Bengali a state language. The paper's first editor Abdus Salam was highly regarded in every social circle not only for his outstanding editorship and scholarship, but also for his personal integrity. But the most important reason for which The Observer should be remembered is the pioneering role it played as a nursing ground for the future journalists of the country. Many of the journalists, who had their first training in The Observer, as it was popularly called for short, did also play the role of a vanguard in establishing other newspapers.

For a couple of decades, largely due to ownership disputes, the paper fell on evil days and became a shadow of its former self. But in all fairness, it must be said that even during its declining phase, it could still hold a section of its dedicated readership. But on the whole, few of general readers missed the paper's presence.

While the demise of the Bangladesh Observer will be saddening news for the journalist community and the industry, mostly for the nostalgic reason, there is another reason for all to regret the loss. That is about the fact that unlike in our neighbouring India and many other countries where centuries old media houses and other institutions still survive, here we have fewer such instances.

Though The Bangladesh Observer had some chance of becoming one, ultimately it got lost in the wilderness.



## Why reactive, not proactive?

We wonder why is it that so many people holding high offices descend on the disaster sites after the damage has been done when they should have been there much before, to identify the risk of disaster and order corrective measures to preempt that. Why is it that we are moved to act after lives are lost and not before.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

**W**HO will take responsibility for the Nimtali deaths, or for the deaths of those that were buried alive under a multi-storied building in Begunbari that collapsed on them while they were asleep, only a few days before Nimtali happened, or for that matter the deaths caused by similar disasters in the past? I dare say, it is the state that is responsible for the security of its people. And it is those who are particularly entrusted to ensure it that must bear the primary responsibility.

But no heads have rolled, not even one person, at least not to our knowledge, have been asked to explain why the tragedies, this and the past ones, have occurred, and why so many lives had to be lost. The usual passing the buck, between RAJUK and the DCC, make them appear like truant children who have forgotten to do their homework; their assurance that such tragedies will not be repeated sound like promises of errant kids to be more mindful in doing

their homework in the future. And as certainly as not, homework never gets done, and as surely as ever, tragedies continue to occur, buildings continue to tumble, and people continue to die. That is our lot and it is worthless to complain. Those that we elect to serve us are not beholden to us; on the contrary we must thank them that we are alive at all.

The comparison may appear odious but the fact is that the deaths, in Begunbari and Nimtali tragedies combined, outscore the number killed in terrorist attacks in the country in the last five years.

The cause of the Nimtali fire, and the manner in which it was transmitted, has been established. While fires can be accidental, as was perhaps the case in this instance, what caused the rapid spread and so many deaths is the highly combustible chemicals that were stored on the ground floor of the building. Seeing the pictures on TV, the spread of the blaze matches the description of a napalm bomb; those that were able to escape from the houses that were set ablaze, or were on the streets when

the fire broke out, were overtaken by chemicals that were moving like burning lava.

As usual, the politicians were on the spot in a whiff, some to gain political dividends than to be of any substantive help; their spokesperson, however, not failing to make particular mention of the time of the night the leaders visited the spot. In fact they were in no position to help at that time. One wonders whether they realise that, if anything, their presence on the disaster site as well in the hospitals with a large retinue, who are equally incapable of delivering anything worthwhile, is more of an encumbrance to the rescue operation and to the hospital staff.

We wonder why is it that so many people holding high offices descend on the disaster sites after the damage has been done when they should have been there much before, to identify the risk of disaster and order corrective measures to preempt that. Why is it that we are moved to act after lives are lost and not before.

It is a pity; whatever action that is being taken now, and will be taken in the future, may help rectify the situation, but will mean precious little to those that have survived the inferno or have lost their near ones in the fire; in most cases it is both, and it may appear like a cruel cynicism, but those families that have perished entirely are perhaps luckier, since there is no body to mourn for or to be mourned by.

The post accident reaction of the admin-

istration is predictable. The commiserations expressed cost very little and are dispensed at random. The monetary help is a pittance, and in any case means little to the families; is there anything that can ever recompense for the loss of a son, or a mother or a sister? I was taken in by the reaction of a woman who had lost everything and everybody in the fire. Refusing to accept the money, she said that she would rather the government removed all chemical godowns from the area, which would ensure her safety.

And the DCC and RAJUK go into hyperactive mode after every such disaster. Now they have closed down dozens of chemical godowns in old Dhaka, a dozen dangerous buildings have been earmarked for demolition we are told, and a list will soon be made of all the dangerous buildings in old Dhaka.

And all this begs the question. Why could not these be done earlier? Why were the dangerous buildings allowed to come up in the first place, and they did not sprout up in a matter of weeks or months? Where were the agencies and the people who are entrusted to prevent transgressions, all this while?

We need proactive measures not reactive actions. The deaths in Nimtali may have been caused by fire, but there are many that are culpable for the deaths. They must be held to account.

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## Budget night

Yet another expansionary budget can be expected this year with an ADP of Tk 38,500 crore, being 35 per cent higher than the revised ADP of FY2009-10. We assume that the energy and infrastructure sectors will get the deserved priority in this year's budget.

SYEED AHAMED

**T**ONIGHT is the night of all nights for every citizen who has any interest in or is affected by the annual national budget. The finance minister is probably going through the last minute preparation before presenting the budget for FY2010-11 this evening.

Consumers and businessmen remain in suspense to see the impact of the budget on prices and taxes. Yet, there is a larger community out there, for whom it's probably just another day of struggle with their inadequate family budget.

Nonetheless, every citizen contributes to the national budget, and tonight's budget will affect everyone -- directly or indirectly. Hence, economists and policy analysts are gearing up for rigorous post-budget analysis that scrutinises the impact of budget proposals on the public and the republic. I know for a fact that some leading civil society institutions in Dhaka are planning a sleepless night tonight.

The suspense of last year's budget night was somewhat curtailed by the prior leaks

of budget information. But as we argued at that time, some organised revelations during pre-budget consultations can help the budget better reflect public demands and expert opinions.

This year, the finance minister has kept such leaks to a minimum. But thanks to his mid-term and pre-budget reports on last year's budget performance, some macro- aspects of the new budget are quite predictable.

A post-budget reaction predicted deficit financing and public private partnership (PPP) as the most uncertain features of last year's budget. The fiscal deficit was managed through an under-performed Annual Development Program (ADP), but the PPP turned from being uncertain to unrealistic.

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Mitigation of existing infrastructural crisis in the power sector will require

government to actually spend a bulk amount on these sectors. Therefore, traditional under-performance of ADP may not be enough to keep the budget deficit within reach.

As such, we assume that the finance minister will opt for increasing tax rates in some areas (potentially, for luxury items). While we expect the finance minister to tell us what amount the government wishes to spend on energy sector, we are also interested to know how that money will be spent, whether in rental power plants or in energy subsidy.

The public private partnership (PPP) -- for which Tk 2500 crore was allocated in the last budget -- failed to live up to its hype, making no substantial achievement. Before the last year's budget, we argued that mere budget allocation is not enough for PPP, and it is essential to have a well-defined legal and institutional framework for the regulation and implementation of PPP projects.

But in the mid-term budget review, the finance minister has informed us that such institutional set up could not be completed. As a result, "desired level of progress under PPP project" could not be achieved, and the PPP budget allocation was slashed in the revised budget.

Tonight, in addition to the budget allocation, we expect the finance minister to offer a trajectory with clear modus operandi for the implementation of the PPP scheme.

Last year's budget had some good, bad,

and uncertain features. We appreciated its plan for growth recovery, economic devolution, and pro-poor taxation that raised tax on luxury consumptions while reducing tax on raw materials and essential commodities.

But we also criticised the budget for allowing black money to be recycled at a lower tax rate. Since that provision failed to generate any significant investment, and the government has repeatedly criticised the opposition for using similar provisions before, we hope the finance minister will withdraw that provision from this year's budget.

A block allocation of Tk 3,100 crore was required in the last year's budget for the National Pay Scale 2009. But as it was argued in last year's post-budget analysis, block allocations for development programs often cause double jeopardy by allowing corruption when spent and by stagnating development expenditures when kept idle. We hope that tonight's budget will be less dependent on block allocation.

In an atypical yet positive move, the opposition has offered some budget proposals. We wish these proposals were formally offered at relevant parliamentary committees. To further this initiative, the opposition should now join the post-budget parliamentary debates, and create public support for their proposals to be added in the budget.

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