

## Massive building collapse in Savar

Rescuing the trapped now top priority

WE are hugely jolted by utter shock and grief at the tragedy that befell the occupants of the nine-storey building which collapsed Wednesday morning at Savar. The death toll has risen above 100, while over 600 are reported to have been injured. It is feared that that the casualty figure may rise further.

What saddens us still is that the lives of several hundred others are hanging in balance as they remain trapped in the collapsed structure.

The rescue operation carried out by the army, Rab, fire-fighters and civil defence units is being severely constrained in absence of appropriate equipment in their hands. They are racing against time to save as many of those trapped people as feasible with their limited capacity.

This is a wake-up call for the authorities concerned to have adequate measures in place to improve the existing infrastructure of the agencies responsible for meeting such tragedies.

It is worthwhile to note that the misfortune was not completely out of the blue, since experts had already issued warning about a possible disaster after cracks were detected in the building's walls. Accordingly, the garment factories and the bank had been closed since Tuesday.

What puzzles us is why the predictable collapse of the Savar building should have been associated with such enormous human tragedy? Why those who fell victim to the tragedy were allowed to enter a building that was already declared hazard-prone?

Why had the local administration and those in charge of managing the building not sealed it off beforehand?

Clearly, the avoidable human tragedy has been due to unpardonable callousness on the part of those who were supposed to keep the building closed to workers and visitors.

Reports have it those employees were compelled join work at the garment units in the tragedy-stricken building. If that is the case, then the culpability of victims' employers becomes more serious.

The dreadful memory of a similar building collapse in 2005 in which some 70 workers of Spectrum Garments lost their lives has not yet been wiped off the memory.

How many more such disasters with incalculable loss of human lives will be necessary to make all those concerned to be more respectful towards human lives?

The government should mount a survey to identify the other such defective buildings in and around the city and take measures to retrofit them, if only to save similar misfortunes in the future.

## Politics turning anti-people

High time to cry a halt

THE photographs of broken vehicles and news of injuries and deaths on the front pages of newspapers are abundant these days. The Daily Star reported the death of 3-month old Salma, whose CNG was attacked by pickets during the March 28 hartal in Comilla. Little Salma died Monday morning, her blood is on the hands of those pickets who attacked her CNG, but we wonder if the news of Salma's death will ever reach their ears. And if the news does reach their ears will they feel responsible, will they feel guilty, will they think about how anti-life their and their mentors' politics has become?

And then there are the stone throwers. Photos along with experience sharing of the victim of a damaged car was also on the Daily Star's front page yesterday. The owner of the car told the Daily Star how out of nowhere, one hour before the end of the daylong hartal on April 8, a stone broke his windshield. As though calling hartals and slowing down the pace of lives for the majority of the population was not enough but extra measures of destruction needed to be taken for those who dared to be out, dared to try to live a normal day-to-day life.

Politics is about governance, and there is no governance if the people count for nothing. Yet today our politics has no consideration for the common people, it is anti-people politics at best at this moment. Yet the strength of this country lies with the people, some would call our people our biggest asset. So how many bullet like stones will pierce through the glasses of our cars and CNGS, how many little lives will be lost before the people behind the politics realize they are destroying the spirit and soul of what could

# Budget 2013-14: Caring for children

MAHFUZ KABIR

PRE-BUDGET consultation has already started, and there have been many interesting demands and responses by the finance minister afterwards. Business associations and civil society groups placed their long-standing demands.

However, we did not come across any demand from the most critical part of the population, the children. Perhaps it is because they do not constitute a vote bank, which matters in politico-economic considerations and making fiscal decisions. Adequate, need-based and equitable public investment on the children is indeed instrumental toward sustainable growth and socio-economic development through increased supply of human capital.

This is also likely to convey positive message to their voter guardians. Children constitute about 62 million of the total population. This indicates that securing children's socio-economic rights are integral to Bangladesh's present and future economic and social development. The government is committed to children's development through formulating national policy documents and strategies and through signing of regional and international conventions.

The government is also committed to children's rights and development under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Medium Term Budgetary Framework gave importance to children's education, health and nutrition, safe environment, drinking water and sanitation, child protection, and children's development through public investment in line with the Sixth Five-Year Plan.

Despite all these commitments, the gap in children's rights to equitable social services is significant. Poor children are deprived of basic social services. Around one-third of the primary school children cannot complete primary cycle. There is considerable geographical disparity in terms of education, infant and child mortality, immunisation and nutritional indicators. The most deprived children are living in urban slums and on the streets. This implies that there is a drawback in translating national budget into children's wellbeing.

The country has achieved substantial progress in increasing and sustaining net enrolment in primary schools from 85% in 2000 to 94% in 2010 and achieving gender parity in both primary and secondary school enrolment. Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia, after Sri Lanka, that has achieved gender parity in education.

Despite impressive progress, there are some unfinished and emerging inequities that must be dealt with to sustain past progress and put the country on the path of middle income growth with equity. For instance, the issues of quality of learning; attendance, retention and performance of children in primary and secondary schools; and disparities based on geographic locations are concerns for the

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government, development partners, parents and indeed all stakeholders.

Enrolment of children in pre-primary schooling, considered to be the foundation of and key to primary education, is dismally low with significant variation among geographical regions, between rural and urban, and between slums and non-slums within urban. Only about 13.42% of children aged 5 or older enrolled in pre-primary school in 2010, which means that about 2.56 million pre-school aged children are not enrolled in pre-primary schools. Net primary enrolment ratio was 94% in 2010, which implies that about 1.18 million children of 6-10 years old did not enroll in age specific appropriate grades. Of those enrolled, 33.8% (6.64 million) do not complete the full primary schooling cycle. About 52.6% (9.75 million) of secondary school age children dropped out in 2010.

Education gets the second largest allocation after public administration. But despite positive growth in national budget, the share of the education sector budget as per cent of the total budget is decreasing. The ratio of education budget to GDP has remained

static at around 2% over the years. This means, education sector investment has been declining for the last four years in proportion to the overall national growth. In nominal terms, the size of the total budget, on average, grew annually at 28.7% while education budget increased at 20.1% per annum (except -0.13% growth in FY2011-12) between FY2008-09 to 2012-13.

Nominally, the per child education budget had been estimated at Tk. 2,898 in the provisional budget of FY2012-13, an increase by, on average, 10.7% per annum from actual expenditure of FY2009-10. Conversely, per capita national budget increased from Tk. 6,836 to Tk. 12,458 during this period. The average annual growth in per

capita national budget was about 27.4% during this period. Also, the annual per capita national budget growth was higher than the per child national education budget during this period.

The government introduced some social safety net measures to mitigate the impact of poverty and other bottlenecks that hinder children from poor families and/or areas from enjoying the public investment. These, however, seem to be ineffective to reach the goal due to their inadequacy and lead to a very high opportunity cost. For example, the amount of primary stipend per student has remained same, Tk.100 per month for a single child and Tk. 125 for two children from the same family, over the ten years since inception in 2003.

As a result of inflation, the worth of the primary education stipend amount decreased substantially, as the real value of Tk. 100 in 2003 came down to Tk. 51 in 2012. The impact of the programme in terms of reducing dropout in primary schools remains questionable due to very high opportunity cost of schooling for children living in poverty. Thus, wealthier children are

more likely to benefit from education investment due to inverse relationship between poverty and education.

This backdrop calls for a further look into the pattern of budget allocation and addressing the gaps in public investment. In particular, the following aspects require attention for the upcoming 2013-14 budget:

- Education budget should be increased at least proportionately as growth of national budget as per cent of GDP. Education budget per child should grow at least at the similar rate of per capita budget growth;
- Fiscal attention must be paid to increased coverage of pre-primary schooling, which is currently abysmal. The budgetary provisions for pre-school (\$300 million over five years) in PEDP-3 should be implemented with attention to equity issues by ensuring effective coverage of children in vulnerable groups, like urban slums, remote locations and other marginalised populations;
- Special fiscal incentives have to be provided to attract and retain nearly 7 million dropout children at primary level. Budget for the projects on dropout and working children will have to be increased as per the National Education Policy and other national documents;
- Necessary fiscal adjustments are needed towards more efficient, effective safety net programmes in education, with attention to the deprivations of children and their families. For instance, budget on stipend for students with disabilities has to be reviewed upwards and needs to cover all children with disabilities;
- New schools (pre-school, primary and secondary) should be established in *chars* and *haors* and areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, with adequate safety net measures to sustain full completion;
- Special fiscal attention should be paid to the schooling of children engaged in child labour as the current budgetary allocation is far less than the requirement.

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# Building resilience to natural disasters and economic crises

NOELEN HEYZER

BUILDING resilience to multiple shocks is one of the most urgent development challenges facing Asia and the Pacific.

Economic crises and natural disasters are more frequent, and respect no boundaries: they devastate wide areas, impact all sectors of economic activity, and endanger every community. They inflict deep and lasting damage on the poor who are least able to withstand their onslaught.

Recognising this as the increasingly serious "new normal" for Asia-Pacific, a record number of heads of state and government, senior ministers, and regional policymakers are gathering this week in Bangkok for the annual session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

One of their main topics of discussion will be to agree on actions to build the resilience of countries and people across the region, enabling them to better withstand, adapt to, and recover from multiple shocks. As global economies have plunged further into turmoil, the impacts on the people of Asia and the Pacific have combined with food and fuel price increases, and a series of devastating natural disasters.

While increased connectivity has brought unprecedented opportunities, it has also amplified the reach and impact of these shocks. A single incident, which might once have been localised and managed in isolation, will now have interrelated regional and global consequences. Floods in Thailand, for example, trigger supply chain disruptions around the world. For policymakers, this is often

uncharted territory. Building resilience to overlapping shocks calls for a holistic approach, which tackles interlinked vulnerabilities rather than each one in turn. This requires new, more sophisticated tools for decision-making that change attitudes towards risks and uncertainty, well before shocks hit.

In other words, building resilience calls for bolder actions, through partnerships between governments, the private sector and local communities, as well as collective actions at the regional and international levels.

**The threats of tomorrow will come at any time, from anywhere, without warning, and with increasing frequency. Countries that build systems of early warning and early action are investing in the security of our region's most valuable resource -- its people and their assets.**

Governments must invest in both prevention and preparedness, which is more effective, and less costly than recovery efforts. Prevention can be as straightforward as updating building codes and retrofitting unsafe buildings, or as far-reaching as coordinating regional monetary policy, devising a regional framework for common norms on social protection, and strengthening the management of cross-border river basin ecosystems.

Governments must also support the poor and disadvantaged, who have fewer resources or buffers against multiple shocks. Although most economies of the region appear to have recovered relatively quickly from recent shocks, this superficial evidence of economic resilience masks deep underlying social vulnerabilities.

While financial institutions are "too big to fail," the poor must not be seen as being too small to matter. Each shock erodes capacity to cope with the next disaster or crisis, often pushing poor families into vicious cycles of chronic hardship, sometimes for generations. This is why better social safety nets need to be created or strengthened, with the response flexibility to cushion the blows of multiple shocks.

Local communities and their local governments need to be empowered,

not only because they are at the forefront of recovery efforts, but also because they can change administrative cultures and build political will for greater investment in disaster risk management. Above all, during such shocks, public spending which benefits the poor must be protected, by law if necessary.

Governments cannot afford to simply apply the same macroeconomic stop-gap measures for stability which they have in the past. The new normal calls for new solutions which factor in the impacts of natural disasters, balance short-term macroeconomic stability with long-term development, and build capacity across all sectors and at all levels of government.

Likewise, a new economic governance pact between government and

business is needed, in which business becomes more accountable by raising its own risk-awareness. When shocks envelop economies ensuing job losses often result in legacies that affect human development long after GDP growth resumes. Risk-aware business must therefore be part of the solution for building resilience in Asia and the Pacific.

Finally, governments must protect critical sectors. Improving financial market supervision and regulation, for example, will reduce the potential for future crises. Protection of critical infrastructure -- schools and hospitals, energy and communication systems -- is particularly important. For a region at such high risk, additional investment in resilience is not a choice, but an ethical obligation.

By working together, governments in Asia and the Pacific can produce solutions that are greater than the sum of individual country actions. This requires a new regional framework for resilience-building that rebalances economic, social and environmental systems, with priority given to the role of government working in partnership with its stakeholders, as the planner of long-term development.

The threats of tomorrow will come at any time, from anywhere, without warning, and with increasing frequency. Countries that build systems of early warning and early action are investing in the security of our region's most valuable resource -- its people and their assets.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 25

**1982**  
Israel completes its withdrawal from the Sinai peninsula per the Camp David Accords.

**1983**  
American schoolgirl Samantha Smith is invited to visit the Soviet Union by its leader Yuri Andropov after he read her letter in which she expressed fears about nuclear war.

**1988**  
In Israel, John Demjanuk is sentenced to death for war crimes committed in World War II.

**2007**  
Boris Yeltsin's funeral the first to be sanctioned by the Russian Orthodox Church for a head of state since the funeral of Emperor Alexander III in 1894.