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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Housing for garment workers

A welcome move

THE deal between the central bank and the BGMEA to finance low-cost housing facilities for garment workers is a right step towards addressing a problem, which has been long overdue.

It is regrettable that the garment workers, whose hard labour brings a very large chunk of our hard currency, live in extreme squalor in the city slums as their employers cannot provide them with decent living quarters. And even these squalid shanties eat up a large portion, around 13 per cent, of their wages as house rent. Worse yet, any general increase in their wage is offset by about a simultaneous hike in the monthly rents of those slum hovels. Hopefully, the move to build low-priced dormitories will go a long way towards ending the RMG workers' suffering.

As the report goes, the central bank will cover 60 per cent of the costs for building the dormitories, while the factory owners will bear the rest 40 per cent. Thankfully, arrangements are also learnt to be in place to provide government land at a nominal price to the factory owners for building the workers' hostels.

While commending the move, we would like to add a cautionary note. It is that utmost care has to be taken to ensure that the fund and the land to be so organised to solve garment workers' housing problem reach the right people and are not misused by any vested quarters. Also, the arrangement shouldn't be a symbolic one, but should be able to resolve the housing problem of the majority of the garment workers.

JU's decrepit building

Address the safety of students immediately

JAHANGIRNAGAR University's Arts building is more than a sore sight; it is a source of constant danger for more than the 300 students, teachers and administrative staff who use it on a regular basis. Plaster falling off the ceiling is one thing, but when a structure has become dangerous with certain sections of the ceiling caving in, urgent action is required. According to University sources the building, constructed in 1972, has structural flaws that soak in rainwater causing new cracks in the building. Apparently, the vice chancellor's request for repairs back in September has not yielded results.

Although it would be prudent to move classes to the new Arts building, this has not happened because the new building does not have the requisite examination and seminar halls. We are perplexed as to why the decrepit building has not been repaired. And if it is beyond repair, why has no expansion work commenced in the new one to address the shortcomings?

Precisely what sort of message does that give out to students of a major public university? That their personal safety is a non-issue? The case of the Arts building is one that needs to be addressed immediately before a major disaster happens. Surely no one wants a repetition of the Jagannath Hall disaster in 1985 that left 39 students and employees dead due to a roof collapse. God forbid, were such an incident to occur in the Arts building, the number of casualties might be far greater.

Cumbersome certification process endangering road safety

RIDWAN QUAIUM

ON November 10, the BRTA with police assistance cracked down on vehicles plying in Dhaka as many of them are unfit and endangering safety of the road users. In addition to unfit vehicles, a bigger issue that needs to be addressed is drivers driving without driving licenses or with fake licenses because this is also one of the main reasons for the road mishaps in the country.

Before addressing the above two issues one needs to clearly understand why these anomalies are occurring. In developed countries, vehicle owners have to renew fitness certificates for their vehicles annually. In the USA, there are several certified stores in each city that provide the fitness certificates. Depending on the time of the day it may take around fifteen minutes to about two hours to get the vehicle checked, pay the fee and obtain the certificate.

Getting a vehicle fitness certificate in Bangladesh is quite cumbersome and time consuming. Sometimes it takes an entire day, which discourages many owners from obtaining or renewing the fitness certificates of their vehicles. In developed countries, the process for obtaining a driving license is also transparent, straight-forward and quick. At first, one needs to take a computer or written test that tests the examinee's knowledge of traffic rules and traffic signs. Upon passing the exam, one obtains a 'Learner's Permit,' using which one can drive with another licensed driver by one's side. After that, one takes the actual driving test. Upon passing the exam, depending on the location of the test, one can obtain driving license on the spot or by mail within two weeks. The fee for all these is nominal.

Taking the driving test and obtaining a license in Bangladesh is also cumbersome and time consuming. One may have to wait for a few months to get driving license. To expedite the process one often has to use unethical and illegal means, which forces people to drive without driving license or with fake licenses. To address these issues, it is important to make getting fitness certificate and driving license straightforward and quick. In addition, the administration may also consider doing the same for paying traffic fines to encourage more people to pay the fines.

The writer is a transportation engineer in Thailand.

Dhaka streets: Off-limit to BNP activists?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

IT is considered daft to posit a question whose answer is only too obvious. But at the risk of being considered stupid one would yet like to ask and at the same time say that what one had been hearing that as a part of the government policy to render BNP even more ineffective it would be prevented from holding meetings or congregating in any large number in the capital is all but true.

Obviously, giving political space to the BNP is not an option for the AL which has been amply demonstrated by it being denied permission to organise a meeting at the Suhrawardy Udyan (SU) on November 8 as a part of their celebration of November 7, a day that has different connotations depending on one's political predilection. Given that not long ago the BNP was allowed to use SU for their meeting the message for the BNP from the government should be quite clear. But should that be the state of political affairs in the country? Ever since the AL was elected in 2008 the political space for the BNP has become gradually smaller. While that is nothing new in our politics, the AL is only returning the favour but with greater 'passion.'

It should be a matter of concern for all of us that political activity of the opposition parties has become increasingly circumscribed. And the AL is using the shoulders of the police to fire the political gun, particularly at the BNP. Apparently, the idea to face BNP's street programmes on the street has been given up, perhaps because of the possibility of violence that it might engender.

The ironic remarks of some of the more garrulous members of the AL betray their attitude towards the BNP. Thus the expression of relief from them that the BNP did not go for a hartal but instead chose to organise protest demonstrations for being denied the use of SU. However, this has validated the criticism that the decision of the government was political and that calling hartal on this ground by the BNP would have been justified. However, the protest demonstration in most parts of the country were scuttled

because of police action, and in Dhaka, true to its policy of disallowing any space to BNP, the government prevented any gathering or procession in the capital by the extremely effective police. This is quite in contrast to the way the disgruntled elements of the Chhatra Dal had brought out large processions with banners, particularly in the vicinity of the party office in Paltan, without being disturbed by the police.

It looks as though the police have become the final arbiter of who should do politics and how. The last time the BNP was allowed to use the SU it was made conditional on several provisos, and that is the issue that we would like to flag here. Should the police really be the authority to allow something that has been already guaranteed by the constitution?

The right to assemble is one's fundamental right and no one, but no one, can prevent a group or a party from doing

so provided that is done within the bounds of law. It should not be so much an issue of seeking permission of the police to assemble as to inform them of the programme only so that necessary action can be taken by them to facilitate holding of the programme including arranging necessary security of the area. And if a so-called permission has to be taken, it is of the PWD, which does not own the

Udyan, but is responsible for its upkeep and development. We have not heard the DMP's explanation as to why permission was denied to BNP. It can certainly not be for security reasons simply because nothing substantive has occurred since the AL was allowed to hold a meeting at the same venue only on November 3. It can certainly not be on account of traffic problem because the government party is known to have held meetings in a spot like Gulistan crossing, and one does not know if necessary permission of DMP was at all sought or given for those.

The government should realise that any trace of democratic gloss on the current political situation, with a unique parliament, is wearing away fast, and no matter the so-called chits of approval from abroad that the government flaunts to justify the January 5 elections the situation should be causing qualms to a political party that constantly wears the band of democracy on its sleeve.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.



Ebola and inequality

BUSINESS & FINANCE



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

THE Ebola crisis reminds us, once again, of the downside of globalisation. Not only good things -- like principles of social justice and gender equality -- cross borders more easily than ever before; so do malign influences like environmental problems and disease.

The crisis also reminds us of the importance of government and civil society. We do not turn to the private sector to control the spread of a disease like Ebola. Rather, we turn to institutions -- the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States, the World Health Organization (WHO), and Médecins Sans Frontières, the remarkable group of doctors and nurses who risk their lives to save those of others in poor countries around the world.

Even right-wing fanatics who want to dismantle government institutions turn to them when facing a crisis like that caused by Ebola. Governments may not do a perfect job in addressing such crises, but one of the reasons that they have not done as well as we would hope is that we have underfunded the relevant agencies at the national and global level. The Ebola episode holds further lessons. One reason that the disease spread so rapidly in Liberia and Sierra Leone is that both are war-ravaged countries, where a large proportion of the population is malnourished and the health-care system has been devastated.

Moreover, where the private sector does play an essential role -- vaccine development -- it has little incentive to devote resources to diseases that afflict the poor or poor countries. It is only when advanced countries are threatened that there is sufficient impetus to invest in vaccines to confront diseases like Ebola. This is not so much a criticism of the private sector; after all, drug companies are not in business out of the goodness of their hearts, and there is no money in preventing or curing the diseases of the poor. Rather, what the Ebola crisis calls into question is our reliance on the private sector to do the things that governments perform best. Indeed, it appears that with more public funding, an Ebola vaccine could have been developed years ago.

America's failures in this regard have drawn particular attention -- so much so that some African countries are treating visitors from the US with special precautions. But this just echoes a more fundamental problem: America's largely private health-care system is failing. True, at the top end, the US has some of the world's leading hospitals, research universities, and advanced medical centers. But, though the US spends more per capita and as a percentage of its GDP on medical care than any other country, its health outcomes are truly disappointing.

American male life expectancy at birth is the worst of 17

high-income countries -- almost four years shorter than in Switzerland, Australia, and Japan. And it is the second worst for women, more than five years below life expectancy in Japan.

Other health metrics are equally disappointing, with data indicating poorer health outcomes for Americans throughout their lives. And, for at least three decades, matters have been getting worse.

Many factors contribute to America's health lag, with lessons that are relevant for other countries as well. For starters, access to medicine matters. With the US among the few advanced countries that does not recognise access as a basic human right, and more reliant than others on the private sector, it is no surprise that many Americans do not get the medicines they need. Though the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) has improved matters, health-insurance coverage remains weak, with almost half of the 50 US states refusing to expand Medicaid, the health-care financing programme for America's poor.

Moreover, the US has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty among the advanced countries (which was especially true before austerity policies dramatically increased poverty in several European countries), and lack of nutrition and health care in childhood has lifelong effects. Meanwhile, America's gun laws contribute to the

highest incidence of violent deaths among advanced countries, and its dependence on the automobile underpins a high rate of highway fatalities. America's outsize inequality, too, is a critical factor in its health lag, especially combined with the factors mentioned above. With more poverty, more childhood poverty, more people without access to

health care, decent housing, and education, and more people facing food insecurity (often consuming cheap foods that contribute to obesity), it is no surprise that US health outcomes are bad.

But health outcomes are also worse in the US than elsewhere for those with higher incomes and insurance coverage. Perhaps this, too, is related to higher inequality than in other advanced countries. Health, we know, is related to stress. Those striving to climb the ladder of success know the consequences of failure. In the US, the rungs of the ladder are farther apart than elsewhere, and the distance from the top to the bottom is greater. That means more anxiety, which translates into poorer health.

Good health is a blessing. But how countries structure their health-care system -- and their society -- makes a huge difference in terms of outcomes. America and the world pay a high price for excessive reliance on market forces and an insufficient attention to broader values, including equality and social justice.

The writer, a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book, co-authored with Bruce Greenwald, is Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Unfit vehicles make roads a death-trap



According to a statistics of BRTA, around 33 per cent vehicles plying on the roads do not have fitness certificate. What a terrible situation! Nowadays we have to think twice before travelling from one place to another. Majority of our drivers do not have proper licenses or necessary skills to drive on the roads and highways. The BRTA and traffic police department are very much indifferent about this matter. Considering the number of road accidents it seems that we are living in a death valley.

May I request the authorities to take necessary steps regarding these vital issues?

M.G. Ferdous
Faculty member, Department of Entomology
EXIM Bank Agricultural University

America's Frankensteins

President Obama has authorized the deployment of an additional 1,500 troops to Iraq. The plan will more than double the current US force in Iraq and will reportedly cost \$5.6 billion.

The Islamic State is a Frankenstein of our creation. And as horrible as it is, the purposes behind the United States' policy in the Middle East must change to be one of preventing, rather than fostering, conflict. For decades now, we have supported various regimes in the Middle East that have been despotic, that have oppressed their people, or, in the alternative, we have supported these groups that have then morphed into these organisations like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. War is the national creed of America.

Ted Rudow III, MA
Palo Alto, CA, USA

Remembering Gough Whitlam

I'm writing to say thanks for publishing a valedictory piece by Harun Ur Rashid on 23/10/14 on Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister of Australia, who died on October 21, 2014. I'm a proud Australian and Gough Whitlam was a great Australian.

It was great to hear some news from home but it was even better to read of the genuine gratitude Bangladeshis feel for him and his achievements back in the 1970s. Despite being a keen historian, I wasn't aware that Australia had been the first western nation to recognise Bangladesh in 1972. That was typical of the great statesman ahead of his time.

Gough's funeral was attended by thousands (stopping the Sydney traffic) and watched by thousands more. He was bid farewell by a grateful nation and will be remembered forever in our great country. Thanks for including his obituary in your pages. It was much appreciated.

Greg Robinson
Baridhara, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Parasites' feast on ruling AL," published on November 10, 2014

Redgreen

Gangs of fake patriots and freedom fighters are minting money through these parasite organisations using the name of Bangabandhu and freedom fighters.

"National Monument architect Mainul passes away" (Nov. 10, 2014)

Earth Light

We are sorry to learn about the demise of the renowned architect Syed Mainul Hossain. May the departed soul rest in eternal peace.

"Kamaruzzaman's execution may take time: AG" (Nov. 10, 2014)

Akm Bari

Hasan Iqbal, son of Kamaruzzaman should be prosecuted for defamation of the Supreme Court. Like father like son. What else one can expect from the son of a war criminal who organised and killed hundreds of people to save Pakistan. Instead of repenting his father's criminal activities in 1971, he arrogantly blamed Supreme Court for its verdict.

"Poor show in education" (Nov. 7, 2014)

M Marzan

I am disappointed but not really surprised by the findings. The government should take urgent initiatives to solve the problems.