

## SDGs reflect universal aspirations

### Fulfill the pledge for common action

THE world has adopted a bold new agenda to end poverty and preserve the planet. The ambitious 15 year plan, adopted unanimously by 193 member states of the UN, comes with great challenges, the biggest of which is funding the efforts to realise the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are accompanied by 169 specific targets. Implementing the goals is expected to cost a whopping \$3.5 trillion to \$5 trillion every year until 2030. Member states will therefore have to now work out the details of how this huge amount will be raised. This will no doubt, involve significant financial commitments from international financial institutions as well as sincerity of all nations to spend available funds as efficiently and as transparently as possible.

For Bangladesh specifically, it is laudable that the country has made significant inroads into several areas of social development. This includes decreasing child mortality, increasing enrollment of girls in school, successful disaster management, achieving food self-sufficiency and reducing extreme poverty. It is however, important to acknowledge that it is not enough to just meet goals that are measured in numbers – the ultimate target has to be to bring qualitative strides in each area of development.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks in the way of realising SDGs is widespread corruption in every sphere of development. This is true of most developing nations that all too often are held back by poor governance. Most of these countries, Bangladesh included, are working hard to fight poverty through innumerable projects and programmes. But unless there is a sincere effort to eradicate the systemic bottlenecks, such efforts will be nullified and the prospect of meeting the SDG targets will be all the more difficult.

## Patients suffer on Eid again

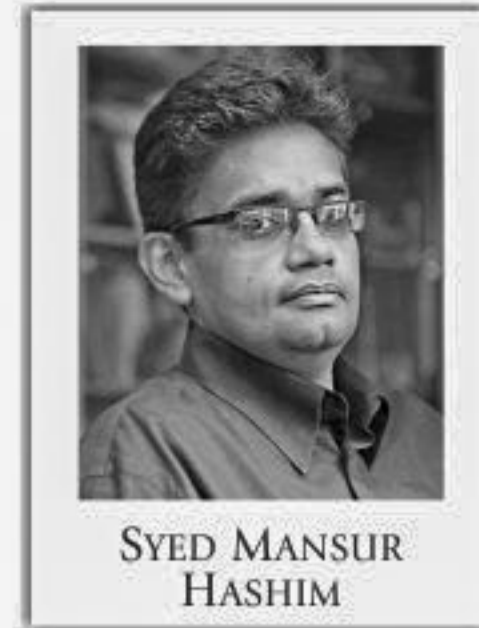
### Why are hospitals understaffed?

A report published in this daily yesterday revealed firsthand accounts of the untold sufferings of patients at government hospitals had to endure during the Eid holidays. With most doctors and nurses having gone on leave for Eid, patients in some five major hospitals reported upon had to wait in long queues and resort to emergency services as outdoor services remained closed on Thursday and Friday. At Dhaka Medical College Hospital, basic facilities such as X-ray at the emergency were unavailable which forced critically injured patients to look for other alternatives. Unfortunately, this dismal picture has become something of a routine every Eid holiday.

It is incomprehensible as to why the hospital administrations kept these hospitals understaffed, even if it was for a short period of time. That patients who travelled to the capital with the sole purpose of seeing a doctor should be turned away by officials and told to come back when hospital activities returned to "normal" is unacceptable. The lack of access to the most rudimentary facilities such as X-ray, and that too in the emergency section, is baffling. Furthermore, the statement of a relevant official that he was unaware of any anomaly in the hospital services during the Eid holidays sheds doubt on the sincerity of the higher-ups about delivering proper services.

Healthcare services, being a basic need like electricity and water, should be prioritised accordingly by health officials. On major holidays, special arrangements should be made so that adequate staff is ensured at all times. It is of paramount importance that the issue of staffing, along with proper maintenance and availability of equipment, is given due attention.

# Pope with a difference



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POPE Francis brings the message of reconciliation to some of the most contentious conflicts and trouble spots in the world. It is a difficult path he has chosen. On the surface, he has advocated for justice, peace and mercy from those who hold power. His style of engagement is a major departure from his

predecessor. Given the tight political rope one must walk in global politics, Francis is doing rather well. And he has already made his mark on some of the issues that have been grabbing international media headlines of late. As is evident from his speech at the United Nations, Pope Francis has outlined three priority areas for action: compassion for marginalised people, with particular emphasis on refugees; peace and security; and surprisingly enough, an environmental programme. All three areas fall squarely into what the Church espouses as core values.

The Pontiff has used symbolism and presence on the ground to speak out for the exodus of refugees from Africa to Europe. He has taken up the cause of Muslim refugees fleeing in their hundreds of thousands from Africa and the Middle East (to avoid war and famine) to Europe. Indeed, his first foreign trip was to the island of Lampedusa in 2013, an island in the Mediterranean off Italy to commemorate those who had drowned while trying to swim to shore. The visit by the Pope, his impassioned speech "to reawaken our consciences" ultimately impressed the Italian government into mounting a mission that aided in the rescue of some 150,000 refugees and a clamping down of smuggling rackets.

Pope Francis, it appears, is a man on a mission. Under his stewardship, the Church is in the process of taking a more proactive role for the benefit of refugees. From what has been reported in international media, it is understood that he has asked all Catholic communities in Europe to accommodate at least one refugee family. This is a major departure from the past. This is political action on the ground and it fits squarely with the new line of thinking that the Church should be engaged in spreading Christ's message to a worldwide audience. Given the flurry of visits and speeches the pontiff has been making over the last two years, it is a policy that seems to be working.

There is also full-scale behind-the-scenes diplomatic flurry. In late 2013, the Pope wrote to President Putin on the eve of the G-20 summit in Geneva where a non-military solution was sought in Syria. A decade earlier, Pope John Paul II had made a similar appeal to the United States on the eve of the Iraq invasion; an appeal that had gone unheeded in 2003, was not repeated as the United States backed off from bombing Syria. A

more unlikely scenario is Iran, a nation with which the Vatican has maintained unofficial lines of communications since the days of the Shahs. As reported by *Foreign Affairs* in an article recently, "Three U.S. bishops met with four leading ayatollahs in Iran. They were hosted by the Supreme Council of the Seminary Teachers of Qom, Iran's spiritual center. With backing from the Holy See and a blessing from the U.S. State Department, the participants used the four-day session to establish a dialogue on nuclear weapons and the role of religious leaders in diplomatic engagement." Such activity comes in very useful as a backup measure when usual diplomatic relations sour.

This of course is not the first time the Vatican has

document made available prior to COP21, it is society's orientation towards short-term financial gain and consumerism that has led to the steady destruction of the environment. It is interesting to note that the Pope has deliberately skirted sensitive issues, pointing out that neither capitalism nor market economics are to blame for the situation; rather emphasised the need to have "transparent dialogue" on environmental policy at all levels of decision making. This is political dynamite. Needless to say, political cartoonists have taken swipes at the pontiff's statements, as global leaders and the parties they represent are suspicious of the motives behind such utterances.

