

## Cost of living high in jail!

### A probe is in order

**A**N overcrowded jail system in Bangladesh is hardly news. What is news however is that the average prisoner incarcerated is spending Tk 30,000 a month for food and other services which s/he should be getting free from the State. Investigative journalism by this newspaper has revealed a system of ripping off inmates by charging exorbitant sums of money for staying in the country's premier jail. Everything has a price. Tk 16,000 goes to pay for space to sleep without botheration and sufficient water for latrine purposes. The rest Tk 14,000 is spent on food like dairy, fish and meat.

We are simply dumbfounded to learn that inmates must pay "extra" to get a chance to get clearance from jail authorities to allow for visitation rights. Indeed, there is also a system by which relatives or close ones may send money to inmates upon paying a "fee" to authorities, because without that money, survival in the jail is quite impossible where every item must be purchased at a ludicrous sum. It is very convenient for jail authorities to rubbish this report while others to simply make themselves unavailable for comment.

But the sad reality is that we have a major systemic problem here and the State simply cannot pretend it is not happening. What is then happening to the budgetary allocation the State provides for prisoners' maintenance? We expect a thorough investigation into the matter to unearth the racket that is managing this malpractice and a reform of the system that is long overdue needs to be implemented.

## Anthrax Alert!

### Take immediate measures to contain it

**W**E note with alarm that the number of people infected with Anthrax is already 87 and counting as health officials are predicting more cases in the coming weeks. The recent outbreak is attributed to consumption of meat of animals which were infected with the disease. The worrying part is that it is hard to tell how many animals are infected and being slaughtered and sold in the market. Exposure to infected animals and consumption of their meat are prime causes of contracting the disease that can lead to fatalities.

Bangladesh is not unfamiliar with anthrax – outbreaks have occurred quite a few times in previous years with the government setting up surveillance teams and procuring vaccination for animals at risk of contracting the disease. It is therefore not clear why these animals were infected in the first place – were they not vaccinated? Secondly it is obvious that there is little or no monitoring of the quality of meat being sold in the markets especially in the villages where poor people may unknowingly buy cheaper meat which is infected.

Now that the disease has manifested itself again there is no reason to beat around the bush regarding taking immediate steps to combat this terrible disease that can cause pneumonia, blood infection and death. Containing the outbreak should be the primary objective of the government. This will include making villagers aware of how the disease is contracted so that they avoid handling or consuming infected meat, maintain proper hygiene and treat skin abrasions; making sure cattle owners vaccinate their animals; treating animals with antimicrobial drugs; ensuring proper disposal of carcasses of animals that are suspected to have died of anthrax in deep pits and monitoring and treatment of persons infected.

# Why is the education budget not larger?

MANZOOR AHMED

**T**HE new budget for 2016-17 to be presented in the national Parliament on June 2, according to the pre-view given by the Finance Minister, will top Taka 3.4 trillion or US\$43 billion. In absolute taka amount, this is five times larger than ten years ago. How is education, often proclaimed to be of highest importance for the nation, faring in the new budget?

If you were to visit a government primary school in a village, or even one in the capital, you would often be struck by the shabby and unsafe buildings and classrooms, dirty toilets, no boundary walls to protect the premises, no library or a classroom book corner, and no safe playground.

Not immediately visible is the fact that if all the children enrolled were to come to the class, there would not be enough space in the class for everyone. Three quarters of the schools run in two shifts, limiting learning time to less than half of the international standard of a thousand hours in a year.

On average, a teacher handles 50 students, when it should be no more than 30. Can it be denied that much more should be spent on primary education and at other stages of education?

A Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) budget trend analysis pointed out that over the last seven years, the education budget allocation has remained stuck at around 2 percent of GDP, one of the lowest in the world. As share of the total government budget, it has actually declined in this period from around 15 percent to below 10 percent in the most recent year. Grapevine suggests the trend will not change much.

The redoubtable Finance Minister and the energetic Planning Minister do not deny the need for more funding in education. They argue that in absolute amounts the education budget has increased more than five times in the last seven years. Then, they ask, if more funds are allocated, will these be used efficiently and produce the desired results?

On both counts, they have valid points. But despite the absolute increase, per student spending in primary and secondary education, around US\$ 100 per year, is one-third of the average spending by our South Asian neighbours. We take pride in expanding access and enrollment, but we have paid a price in unacceptable quality. Minimal quality cannot be maintained when essential inputs in teachers and facilities are below a threshold of minimal requirements.

The other question about ensuring that more funds produce better results is indeed critical. Significantly larger funds are not likely to be used effectively within the existing organisation and management structure for teachers, pedagogy and accountability of institutions.

Take the case of the teachers. Education is a labour-intensive sector. Expenditures for teachers add up to 80 to 90 percent of school budgets. A manageable class size and student-teacher ratio in primary schools requires the number of teachers to be doubled. About 10,000 teachers retire or leave the system every year. They also have to be replaced.

At the secondary school, there is a crisis of teachers for compulsory subjects such as English, Math and Science. We need to have 50 percent more teachers in high schools who are also trained and qualified for these subjects.

If the present structure and patterns of recruitment,

preparation of teachers and management of personnel are continued, it would be impossible to recruit and employ enough new teachers – certainly not those who would be appropriately trained and qualified. Teaching is now the last choice as an occupation for talented young people. We need a ten-year plan with several key elements.

A national initiative has to be taken to bring in and keep bright young people in teaching. Education should be a subject as part of the four-year undergraduate degree; talented students should be recruited competitively with the inducement of stipends; a quality education course should be introduced in hundred degree colleges; essential standards and teaching facilities must be ensured in these colleges.

At the same time, a national teaching service corps should be established with attractive status and remuneration, which can absorb the graduates of the new course. Thus in ten years, a nucleus of talented and

track record of commitment and capacity.

Vocational-technical school is planned for every upazila. This may be a huge waste if it means replicating current vocational secondary-higher secondary schools without ensuring quality teachers and equipment, market-responsive curriculum, and strong school level management.

Degree colleges under the national university, which serve three quarters of tertiary education students, supply the nation's primary and secondary teachers and produce most mid-level staff in the public and private sectors. The poor quality of the colleges has created a vicious cycle of quality and efficiency deficits all around. A good start towards change would be a college quality standards project in a hundred colleges, where the proposed education course may be introduced.

A nationwide network of community learning centres needs to be established with NGOs and



PHOTO: STAR

motivated teachers can be created in the schools all over the country.

Budget making and management for education with quality and equity can be strengthened by Upazila and district-based planning and management of school education. This could be the focus of the education law, under consideration, in line with the stated Education Policy 2010 objectives and the constitutionally required role of local government bodies.

Huge investments are needed to make the schools a child friendly place for learning and a place of pride for the community. Infrastructure funds can be better spent through local arrangements involving community and parents, rather than through the central Engineering Department of the Local Government Ministry.

Second chance non-formal education programme for at least four million out-of-school children of primary school age should be funded. But this can work only if a partnership is built with NGOs, which have a proven

community collaboration as the base for youth and adult literacy, life and livelihood skills development, and hubs of IT-based learning.

Coordinated attention to school education needs pre-school to grade 12 to be under one ministry, like everywhere else. A permanent National Education Commission with some clout is needed, as proposed in Education Policy 2010 to track and push reforms.

A radical shift in the size and nature of the education budget is not expected immediately. But can a process of change begin with funding for innovation and trial along the line suggested above? With support and encouragement from decision-makers at the top, the challenges of out-of-box thinking and action may be taken up through collaboration and partnership of government agencies, NGOs, and academic/research institutions. This collaboration must be supported and funded.

The writer is professor emeritus at BRAC University.

# Invest in intellectual excellence

AHMED A AZAD

**T**HE demand of public university teachers to have discriminatory provisions in the eighth pay scale rescinded and revised has been provisionally met, and the recommendations of the cabinet committee will most likely be accepted by the government. The teachers deserve our heartiest congratulations on their well-deserved victory. However, I am sure that their year-long movement was less about personal gain and more about improving the quality and relevance of higher education in Bangladesh.

In an opinion piece, "Question of status over academic excellence", published in TDS (January 19, 2016) at the height of the teacher's movement, I asked if mere restoration of parity with senior public servants would result in qualitative improvement in higher education. Will this stop the migration of teachers to more lucrative positions outside academia, and will it stem or reverse the intellectually debilitating brain drain? University academics have the responsibility to produce well trained professionals, researchers and teachers; is it not their duty to also ensure that their students employed outside academia are also happy with their circumstances? Can academic excellence in universities be achieved in isolation without improving standards at all levels of education? In my previous column, I welcomed the support that university teachers received from their students, colleagues and large sections of society, and hoped that they would use their new found unity across party lines to forge a united front with other teachers, students, professionals and researchers, and together with the government, strive to bring about structural changes required to achieve the development objectives of Vision 2021 and 2041.

Intellectual capital should be the corner stone for the socio-economic development of Bangladesh, and the biggest investment that Bangladesh can make in its own future would be to develop excellence in higher education underpinned by a strong science and technology base. This is not possible without priority funding of education at

all levels, and the production of trained workforce relevant to the economic needs of Bangladesh. The expenditure in the education sector in Bangladesh is grossly inadequate for narrowing the ever-increasing knowledge and technology gap with advanced nations and for keeping pace with international trends and standards. Bangladesh spends less than 0.4 percent of GDP on R&D (90 percent of this for salaries and overheads), which is grossly inadequate for international competitiveness in research and innovation or to meet its long-term socio-economic objectives.

Bangladesh has over 400,000 students enrolled in tertiary institutions but still has a huge shortage of trained professionals. Even with such shortages, there is very substantial graduate

polymakers and industry leaders in Bangladesh may wish to consider for improving the quality of education by strengthening the science and technology base, and to use research and innovation to improve productivity and international competitiveness.

Total education funding for the foreseeable future needs to be doubled to at least 20 percent of the annual budget allocation, or at least 6 percent of annual GDP, of which a fourth should be reserved for higher education with emphasis on postgraduate research and innovation, and the training of teachers, researchers and professionals. The R&D expenditure (excluding salaries and institutional overheads) should amount to at least 2 percent of GDP till such time that the gap with developed countries is

designated Research Universities. A large pool of doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships should be created to provide a critical mass of full time researchers in academic and research institutions. The rich pool of NRB academics and researchers could be encouraged to help develop and support research capacity in Bangladesh.

A National Research and Innovation Council (NRIC) should be established to support postgraduate research, various research fellowships, academia-industry partnerships and technology transfer. To pool and coordinate resources and activities, the NRIC could be jointly managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology and the UGC or the Higher Education Commission.

The NRIC should support and coordinate research in areas of national priority and provide special funding through National Collaborative Research Programmes to multidisciplinary collaborations between researchers from academia, research institutions and industry. The NRIC should establish, for all S&T-based researchers, a National Platform for Cutting Edge Technologies (such as in contemporary biotechnologies and IT) for bridging the very wide "R&D chasm" that exists between discovery research and product development. The NRIC should also house a one-stop Technology Transfer Office to provide support and advice on matters such as IP generation and protection, regulatory guidelines, academia-industry partnerships, and drafting of commercial contracts.

Industry funding for research, and partnerships with industry, could be encouraged through tax concessions to companies investing in development research in academic and industrial research institutions. Adequate funding of education and R&D, coordinated scientific research in areas of national priority and academia-industry partnerships will prove to be the main instruments for Bangladesh's sustained economic development.

The writer, a retired Professor of Medical Biotechnology, provides pro bono support and advice to academic and industry colleagues to help develop biotech research capacity in Bangladesh. Email: aazad1945@gmail.com

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unemployment and underutilisation of local skills, a real cause for alarm when tens of thousands of graduates from neighbouring countries are required to fill middle and senior technical positions in Bangladesh. This is clear evidence that there is a huge disconnect between what is required and what is produced in the higher education sector in Bangladesh. There is an urgent need to determine the type and numbers of professionals required now and in the middle to long term, and to accordingly restructure higher education so that it is need-based to produce adequate numbers of highly trained teachers, professionals and technologists for full employment in the different economic sectors.

Here are a few suggestions for structural changes that senior academics,

substantially narrowed.

Most universities and institutions of higher education should concentrate primarily on producing well-trained teachers for different levels and types of education, and for producing technology, health and agriculture professionals. (Teachers who take on additional teaching loads should not be disadvantaged for lack of research productivity). An incentive scheme could be instituted to reward active researchers based on research productivity (publications, citations, patents), and for successful technology transfer to industry.

Research funds in the higher education budget should be substantially increased for supporting postgraduate and postdoctoral research, and for adequate funding of a limited number of

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Turkey's reaction over Nizami's execution

The withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador to Dhaka after the execution of Motiur Rahman Nizami, the infamous war criminal and one of the architects of the genocide of 1971, comes as no surprise.

Turkey and the Ottoman Empire have a long history of religious oppression on both Muslims and non-Muslims. The present Turkish government has deviated from the founding principles of Kemal Ataturk. So, it's no wonder that they will side with perpetrators of genocide.

Dr. SN Mamoon  
Dhaka

### Ominous sign

It would be unwise to think that only religious extremists are behind the recent killings. I think there is more to it than meets the eye and a very sinister plan is being hatched to destabilise our country. We all should remain very alert in this situation.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong