

Disease and hunger in Thanchi

Address the crisis now

IT is distressing news that thousands of people in Thanchi, a remote hilly upazilla of Bandarban, are facing an acute food crisis exacerbated by the onslaught of malaria. Brac, which has been working in that area has helped to reveal this humanitarian crisis that must be addressed immediately.

The number of affected is around 20,000, with children being the most vulnerable, according to Brac officials and the food crisis was mainly as a result of a cyclone last July that prevented farmers from jhum cultivation and storing the harvest. High transport costs and poor communications prevented them from selling seasonal crops to the market, worsening the situation. Many people have ventured deep into the forest in search of food and contracted malaria, making them weaker and even less able to find sustenance.

We are appalled that this crisis, which has built up over the year, has been allowed to continue. Clearly enough has not been done. Although the government has sent supplies of rice to be distributed, only those with NID cards are eligible for this relief; many of the people in Thanchi do not have such cards.

The government must therefore take immediate steps to provide food, medicine and treatment of Malaria to these people who are living in famine-like conditions. At the same time it must devise a long-term strategy to prevent further food shortages and outbreaks of the disease. Helping the people to market their crops, providing alternative income generating opportunities, addressing malnutrition and providing NID cards to inhabitants, all have to be incorporated in the efforts to make sure that people of these areas are not afflicted by hunger and disease in the future.

Unfit buses getting facelifts

Authorities need to be vigilant ahead of Eid

AN estimated 70 lakh people leave Dhaka to celebrate Eid outside the capital, the majority of whom use buses for transport. The rush of road transports ahead of Eid is a major business opportunity for transport owners. In this context, it is frightening to read that ahead of the upcoming Eid, hundreds of unfit buses are being given superficial facelifts to avoid compliance issues.

About 29 percent of public transport vehicles including buses that ply the roads during Eid are unfit according to the Bangladesh Passenger's Welfare Association. Only last year 40 lives were lost in road accidents ahead of Eid holidays. Accidents on the road due to fitness issues of vehicles and risky driving are much too common in the country; one can easily understand how much more a risk it poses during the mad rush during Eid and other holidays.

Instead of repairing the buses, owners seem to be content to keep the repainting, welding and mending at a minimum in order to evade the eyes of the police. Hiring drivers who do not have proper papers, training or a license is also a common practice that increases during this time to cope with the demand.

The primary blame lies with the transport owners, who are engaged in this practice which is not only unethical but potentially life-threatening. However, the road transport authorities are failing to address the issues. Ahead of the upcoming Eid, we strongly urge the government and the relevant authorities to be vigilant in this regard so the celebrations are not marred by loss of lives that could have been prevented.

Children's pain and mis-education to continue?

MANZOOR AHMED

THE ill-advised decision taken in 2009 to subject children to a high-stake public examination at the end of class 5 is to continue. The cabinet decided on 27 June that both the Primary Education Completion examination for class 5 and the Junior School Certificate examination for class 8 should continue until further scrutiny.

Primary and Mass Education Minister Mustafizur Rahman, facing widespread complaint of parents and educators about the adverse effects of the grade 5 public examination on students and the teaching-learning practices in schools, asked for cabinet approval to abolish the examination; specially since primary education is to be extended to class 8.

The decision-makers, concerned about rocking the boat, sent back the proposal "for further scrutiny," according to Cabinet Secretary Muhammad Shafiqul Alam. Both the PEC and JSC exams would continue "until adequate infrastructural development was made and teachers were trained for the major changes in the primary education system," said the Cabinet Secretary.

The cabinet decided to ignore the continuing criticism of the public examination that has spawned a massive upsurge of private tutoring, coaching centre and guidebook business; pushed the cost of primary education beyond the means of many parents; generated question leaks and corruption among teachers and school administrators; and has been a cause of great anxiety and mental pressure on children and parents.

Education experts have raised at least three major objections to a high-stake national public examination for primary education – it diverts attention of teachers and students from learning to preparing for the test; grading a small minority as winners of "golden five" wrongly labels the majority of children as "not good enough," and quality is best achieved by focusing on teaching and teachers in the classroom, rather than on



PHOTO: NEA.ORG

a public exam. Should we not have any assessment of children's learning in primary school? This is a loaded question. We had before 2009 in-school annual and half-yearly examinations, without the hoop-la of PECE, through which we all came through. What many countries also do is to have tests of essential skills in reading, writing and arithmetic, say at grade 3, 5 and 8 levels, to find out how the school system is doing. These are standardised tests based on essential competencies, not for all subjects and all textbooks, and not meant to give a grade or label to individual students.

A National Student Assessment

process, a two-hour examination of Bangla and Math to assess the learning of foundational skills, already exists for primary and junior secondary levels on a sample basis, the scope of which can be widened.

So would the sky have fallen, if it was decided that PECE would not be held in 2016? Hardly. We simply could go back to what existed before 2009. One issue raised is that scholarships are awarded to students based on the PECE results. This looks like the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

A solution would be to have a student population-based quota for scholarships in each upazila and use the NSA

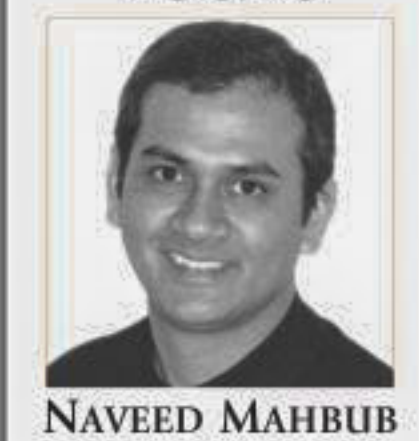
instrument for class 5 students to select scholarship awardees. This test could be held in January, after the school year has been completed by class 5 students, not to interrupt regular school activities.

The abolition of PECE would spare our children some of the pain and mis-education they suffer. This itself would not solve numerous problems of education, including how the extension of primary education to grade 8 should be managed. But these other problems should not be an excuse for not taking the right decision on PECE.

The writer is professor emeritus at BRAC University.

Penny Wise, Euro Foolish

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

THE mighty British pound falls like a pound of bricks. Hey, it's not called ounce, is it?

But this gives me hope. After a month of consuming nothing but greasy food during iftar, I can now drop a few pounds by going on the Brexit diet.

Brexit – to be penny wise, euro foolish or to be euro wise, pound foolish.

But the 'stay' camp had become complacent. After all, Europe is *Hotel California* – "you can check-out anytime you like, but you can never leave". But when Boris Johnson begins to sound and even look like Donald Trump, Brexit opponents realise that Europe is Colgate Toothpaste – you can squeeze it out anytime you like, but you can never go back in.

Panic bells start to ring. Even I get an email (ok, a mass one) from British MP Rushanara Ali urging ME, someone who can barely walk through Heathrow Immigration unscathed, to vote for 'stay'.

The outcome of the referendum reflects the passion of the average Brit – "Care for a cup of tea with Brexit?"

It's no cup of tea though to carry out the divorce proceedings after what the world and especially many British voters thought as the unthinkable Titanic.

Europe tells Britain: "Leave as soon as possible!" I picture Zee Bangla drama serial's repeated scene of the head darting from right to left with the sound of thunder as background music.

Hey, stop rushing! It'll take time for British Airways to retrofit its aircrafts with emergency Brexit doors while

many a British voter completes Googling 'EU'.

Britain and Europe perhaps have always made strange bed fellows. What will be stranger though is Britain now going back to its bed at home, only to discover that Scotland is in bed with Europe.

he'll leave by October instead of saying he will correct the situation and needs another 45 years in office to do that.

The euphoric Boris Johnson says it's a battle won without firing a shot. Tragically, a shot WAS fired at Jo Cox... London's Mayor Mr. Sadiq (they've

'Biscuit' – Britain's exit from direct air cargo flights originating in Bangladesh? Never underestimate what happens in this little country of ours. For that matter, I hope there is no referendum here on Sylhet, called, uhm, never mind, because I



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PHOTO: CHRONICLE.COM

But the psyche of the average voter gives Donald Trump immense hope. Perhaps Brexit is a preview of the movie *2016 US Presidential Elections*, which in itself is a sequel to the movie, *Enter the Cameron, Brexit the Tiger*.

Speaking of the star who started it all, David Cameron announces from Downing, er, Downing Street that

got one with that name too?) wants the cosmopolitan London to remain in EU as the new Lesotho.

And finally comedian Naveed Mahbub's reaction: I wish the Eurosceptics were around in 1757 after the fateful Plassey Battle.

But the writing has been on the wall for quite some time. Remember

already always have to tell my tell my half-Sylheti wife, "Thank you for travelling all the way from Sylhet to Bangladesh."

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ABC Radio's Good Morning Bangladesh and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com

COMMENTS

"36 killed' in Istanbul airport attack" (June 29, 2016)

Mustafa Kamal

Nothing can justify the killing of innocent people.

"Ensure better civic services" (June 28, 2016)

Mayen Uddin Tazim

Thanks to the government for this initiative to provide better services to the citizens. In many cases, the service providers remain inactive and even involved in corruption, which hampers the way of the smooth delivery of services.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Salute to Shamim Ahmed

I am really glad to read the news "Selfless love for the helpless" published on The Daily Star on 27th June, 2016. It is truly encouraging that in this day and age, there are people like Shamim Ahmed who work silently for the helpless people to give them a better life, even when most of us overlook these mentally distressed

people on the streets, avoiding our responsibilities.

We urge the government to do everything possible for this neglected section of the society and inspire people like Shamim Ahmed by giving them due recognition.

Juel Rana
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Withdraw tax on meditation

The budget for the fiscal year 2016-17 has proposed tax on meditation courses which is not only illogical but also an immoral decision. Meditation is a self-development programme and is treated as alternative healthcare technique in the western world. By learning meditation techniques, people can get rid of psychosomatic diseases. The government's guidelines for hypertension

titled "National guidelines for management of hypertension in Bangladesh" encourages people to do meditation to curb hypertension. In our country, more and more people are learning meditation for their physical, mental and spiritual development. People who practice meditation, yoga and relaxation techniques, are less dependent on doctors and hospitals and need to spend less on

healthcare.

We hope that the government will realise the importance of meditation and withdraw the imposition of tax on that so people can avail that chance to get peace and develop themselves physically, mentally and spiritually at affordable costs.

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