

Help improve quality of education

PM calls on critics, opens textbook distribution

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday called upon those who criticise the standard of education in the country to come forward for further improvements of its quality.

"I would like to tell those who raise a question about the standard of education in the country that nothing happens overnight," she said.

In this connection, she also said no problem would be solved by mere speeches. "I think the critics should come forward with how it [problem] could be solved," she said, adding the quality is changing and everything is changing in the changing world.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina poses for a photograph with students after opening the free textbook distribution programme for the academic year 2017 at the Gono Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

Rights situation remains alarming

ASK says in its annual report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The overall human rights situation in the country was as alarming last year as it had been in the previous years, said rights body Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK).

Though the country witnessed a continuation of economic and socio-cultural developments, there wasn't much progress on civic and political fronts, according to an annual report released yesterday by the ASK. The report on human rights situation was based on media reports and ASK's own investigation.

As per the findings, extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, killing in political violence and repression of minorities increased last year.

Subversive activities by religious fanatics including the Gulshan cafe and Solakia Eidgah attacks added to the situation.

For these reasons, an atmosphere of terror is prevailing in society, Nur Khan Liton, acting executive director of the ASK told The Daily Star, referring to the report.

The report, however, praised the Supreme Court verdict asking the authorities to stop misuse of Section 54 and -167 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the High Court verdict declaring the 16th constitutional amendment illegal as positive steps towards ensuring people's civic and political rights.

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TANNERY RELOCATION

Deadline missed again

Just 35 of 154 tanners moved to Savar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Only 35 tanneries out of 154 have been relocated to Savar Tannery Industrial Estate from the capital's Hazaribagh within the December 31 deadline.

Syed Abul Maksud, vice president of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa), said they want a clear explanation from the government about why only 35 factories were shifted to Savar within the time limit.

He was addressing a press conference organised by Buriganga Riverkeeper, a green platform, at Dhaka Reporters Unity yesterday.

The government should have organised a press conference in this regard, Maksud added.

Sharif Jamil, joint secretary of Bapa, said several units of the industrial estate, including the solid waste management plant, chrome recovery plant and salt purification plant, were yet to be built.

As a result, the Dhaleswari river near the estate was being polluted by the waste from tanneries, he alleged.

Sharif demanded the government take immediate steps to construct all the units of the industrial estate at the earliest.

Talking to The Daily Star, Director Abdul Qaiyum of the tannery relocation project said the authorities will not extend the relocation deadline.

"We are facing difficulties in running the CETP in Savar as a minimum of 10,000 cubic metres of waste is required to run it perfectly. But we are receiving only 3,000 cubic metres of waste everyday from tanneries," he said.

A minimum of Tk 500 crore is required for setting up the salt treatment plant, Qaiyum said, adding that the construction of the chrome recovery plant will be completed soon.

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How logical is the hike?

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Hefty overtime bills Wasa has been paying its staffs made the Anti-Corruption Commission to move and ask for accountability.

Almost all of the 3,500 lower tier employees of Dhaka Wasa drew more than twice the amount of their basic salaries as overtime in 2015-16. They drew Tk 56 crore as overtime while their basic wage was Tk 27 crore.

On top of that, there are customers' complaints from one neighbourhood or the other about Wasa supplying stinky water.

Even though the rate of "system loss" in Wasa's supplied water has dropped in recent years, 20 percent water is still being wasted. It was as high as 36 percent a decade ago.

Dhaka Wasa Managing Director, Taqsem A Khan, said they were setting up new pipelines, replacing old ones and the system loss would come down to seven or eight percent soon.

Dhaka Wasa, in July, increased its water price by five percent for both residential and commercial users. In

November, water prices were increased by 17 and 13 percents for residential and commercial users respectively.

With the latest rise, per unit water now costs Tk 32 for commercial use.

Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) Chairman Ghulam Rahman said it was illogical to increase water bill by 22 percent and 18 percent for residential and commercial uses in a year.

"The price hike will affect the people of low and middle income groups," said Ghulam, demanding a logical review of the pricing.

The CAB chief also demanded formation of a committee or authority, like there is for electricity and gas, to adjust the price of water in a transparent and accountable way.

Asif Ahmed Porag, a resident of Ulan of Rampura, said they earlier had to pay Tk 3,000 for water but now they have to pay additional Tk 1,700.

"There is no justification for increasing the water price 22 percent in a year, as for the last three months

we are getting stinky water," he said, adding that Wasa should ensure its supply first before increasing the price.

Arif Hossain, a resident of Mirpur-12, Block-D, said all tenants of his five-storey building have expressed resentment at the sudden abnormal hike of the water tariff.

A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) research in July last year said, "Lack of public participation in the decision making process, absence of necessary principles for effective water governance, including transparency, equality, accountability, legitimacy and legality, were among the major challenges for Dhaka Wasa."

The report titled "Integrity in Water Management of Bangladesh: Present Perspective and Development Potential" emphasised on ensuring good governance in the water sector as it observed that clients did not get proper remedies despite filing complaints with Wasa.

Dhaka Wasa MD Taqsem was quick

to rationalise the hike, saying, "Who will pay for the investments we made [in water sector]? Our target is to take the Wasa to breakeven."

To make the water supply sustainable and to repay loans, the price adjustments were needed, he said.

Taqsem further added that Wasa's Board had the power to increase 5 percent price a year. But as it felt the necessity of increasing water price more than that, it appealed to the government which approved it.

Dhaka Wasa Chief Engineer AKM Shahid Uddin said they subsidise Tk 18 for every unit of water. He said they heavily depend on electricity to supply the water and as the prices of electricity increased several times, the production costs of water also went up.

According to Wasa Act 1996, price of water would have to be the same or more than the production cost. They said if Wasa kept increasing the price gradually then it would be easier for consumers to cope with and for Wasa to minimise the gap between the production cost and price.

2016 good, 2017 to be better

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its collapse in December 2010, have begun to make a turnaround, helping nearly 30 lakh investors get their confidence back.

Policy reforms, investment in research, mechanisation and use of high-yielding crop varieties have driven growth in the agriculture sector.

The outlook for 2017 has become brighter as the number of consumers and businesses as well as government expenditure are set to rise.

Still, there are a number of challenges, not only in achieving higher growth but also in sustaining the current growth rate.

Static private sector investment, weak institutional capacity, poor governance, deteriorating banking sector and lack of skilled workforce remain big challenges this year.

Economists and businesses say that 2016 has been a successful year in terms of macroeconomic stability -- be it gross domestic product (GDP) growth, per capita income, inflation, export, import or poverty reduction.

The apparel industry, which accounted for 80 percent of the total exports worth \$34.24 billion in fiscal 2015-16, hopes to earn more this year, riding on its investments in renovating factories and improving working conditions.

"We were busy investing and correcting our factories in 2015 and 2016. Now we are on a strong footing to take the challenge," said David Hasanat, chairman of leading garment exporter Viyellatex Group.

According to him, the sky would be the limit if political stability lasts and labour issues are handled properly.

David is not at all concerned about

the energy crisis, especially shortage of gas, as there are alternatives that have to be explored by the entrepreneurs.

Meghna Group of Industries, a leading manufacturer of consumer goods, also had good business growth last year despite shortage of gas supply.

"We are doing well keeping pace with the rise in purchasing power of consumers. Changing lifestyle and food habits have also contributed to our business growth," said Mostafa Kamal, chairman and managing director of Meghna Group of Industries.

The group is setting up three economic zones to back up its expansion, he said.

Anis A Khan, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, said the overall economy would be better this year than that in 2016, and is expected to be stable with little possibility of price inflation.

Referring to the banking sector, he said most of the financial institutions are likely to be profitable this year. However, rising nonperforming loans still remain a threat.

"Cyber security will be a high priority area for banks in 2017 following the cyber attacks last year," said Anis, also chairman of the Association of Bankers Bangladesh.

But despite all these good signs, Bangladesh faces formidable challenges in moving to a higher growth path of 8 percent plus GDP and earn the status of a middle income country.

The foremost challenge lies with the stagnant private investment followed by weak institutional capacity to implement development projects.

Though the size of the budget has been increasing steadily, the quality of spending remains a big question to

analysts.

Though public investment has increased to nearly 7 percent of GDP from 5 percent several years ago, private investment remains static at 22-23 percent for over five years.

"Macroeconomic stability was there in 2016, but we didn't see any significant effort to boost private investment," said Prof Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

According to him, a key challenge would be to get out of this static state of private investment trend, which can be addressed by strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring good governance.

The issues of implementation capacity and good governance came to the fore after multilateral donors such as the World Bank and countries including China have shown interests to invest billions of dollars in Bangladesh, he said.

The manufacturing sector, which accounts for 30 percent of the country's GDP, badly needs skilled workforce to go for value-added and diversified products.

Also, the Bangladesh economy embraces 2017 with some other challenges that include declining remittance and rising nonperforming loans from the domestic side. Volatile global and gulf region politics, and troubled European economy pose threats as external sources.

Bangladesh Bank statistics show remittance inflow was \$12.65 billion from January to November last year, down by 9.31 percent from \$13.95 billion in the same period in 2015.

Following the European Debt Crisis and depreciation of different currencies against the US dollar, the pace of

recovery of the European Union economies -- the primary destination of Bangladeshi exports -- will be critical in 2017, according to analysts.

Three major incidents in 2016

BB CYBER HEIST

In one of the biggest ever bank frauds, cyber criminals stole \$101 million from Bangladesh Bank's account with NY Federal Reserve Bank in February last year. The incident came to light several days later.

Of the stolen money, \$20 million was recovered from Sri Lanka that acted promptly. Later, about \$15 million was recovered in the Philippines and returned to Bangladesh.

TERROR ATTACK

On July 1, a group of Islamist terrorists stormed the Holy Artisan Bakery in the capital's Gulshan, and killed 20 hostages, including 17 foreigners. Two policemen were also killed.

The militant attack suddenly made Bangladesh a scary place to do business. However, the government's quick and stern response to the attack helped foreigners and local businesses regain their confidence.

MEGA DEALS WITH CHINA

More than two dozen deals involving \$25 billion were signed between Bangladesh and China during the landmark visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in October last year.

The agreements and the MoUs provide for enhanced cooperation in infrastructure development, energy sector and counter-terrorism. The two countries also intend to partner in the development and promotion of economic zones.

China also plans to shift its excess manufacturing capacity and capital to Bangladesh.

GREEK AMBASSADOR'S MURDER IN BRAZIL

Police say wife's cop lover behind killing

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Greece's ambassador to Brazil was murdered in a plot hatched by his Brazilian wife and her police officer lover, who confessed to the crime, officials said Friday.

The envoy, Kyriakos Amiridis, 59, was killed on Monday by the officer, Sergio Gomez Moreira, Rio homicide division chief Evaristo Pontes told a news conference.

Amiridis's charred body was found Thursday in Rio in his burned-out rental car, a day after his wife, Francoise de Souza Oliveira, declared him missing.

Oliveira, 40, and Moreira, 29, both admitted to having an affair, police

said.

The pair are in custody, along with Moreira's 24-year-old cousin, Eduardo Tedeschi, who allegedly also took part.

According to the homicide division chief, Oliveira denied participating in the murder itself, but confessed she knew of the crime.

FAMILY VACATION

Amiridis, who was named ambassador this year, had been on a family vacation with his wife in the north of Rio de Janeiro since December 21. They had been due to fly back to the capital Brasilia on January 9.

His wife had originally told police that he had left the Rio apartment they were staying in, taken the car and not returned.

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French workers win

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rights of employees to ignore their smartphones.

Overuse of digital devices has been blamed for everything from burnout to sleeplessness as well as relationship problems, with many employees uncertain of when they can switch off.

The French measure is intended to tackle the so-called "always-on" work culture that has led to a surge in usually unpaid overtime -- while also giving employees flexibility to work from outside the office.

"There's a real expectation that companies will seize on the 'right to disconnect' as a protective measure," said Xavier Zunigo, a French workplace expert, as a new survey on the subject was published in October.

"At the same time, workers don't want to lose the autonomy and flexibility that digital devices give them," added Zunigo, who is an academic and director of

research group Aristat.

The measure was introduced by Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri, who commissioned a report submitted in September 2015 which warned about the health impact of "info-obesity" which afflicts many workplaces.

Under the new law, companies will be obliged to negotiate with employees to agree on their rights to switch off and ways they can reduce the intrusion of work into their private lives.

If a deal cannot be reached, the company must publish a charter that would make explicit the demands on and rights of employees out-of-hours.

Trade unions in France which see themselves as guardians of France's highly protected workplace and famously short working week of 35 hours have long demanded action.

But the new "right to disconnect", part of a much larger and controversial reform of French labour law, foresees no sanction

for companies which fail to define it.

Left-leaning French newspaper Liberation praised the move in an editorial on Friday saying that the law was needed because "employees are often judged on their commitment to their companies and their availability."

Some large groups such as Volkswagen and Daimler in Germany or nuclear power company Areva and insurer Axa in France have already taken steps to limit out-of-hours messaging to reduce burnout among workers.

Some measures include cutting email connections in the evening and weekends or even destroying emails automatically that are sent to employees while they are on holiday.

A study published by French research group Eleas in October showed that more than a third of French workers used their devices to do work out of hours every day.

Around 60 percent of workers were in favour of regulating to clarify their rights.

But computing and work-life balance expert Anna Cox from University of College London (UCL) says that companies must take into account demands from employees for both protection and flexibility.

"For some people, they want to work for two hours every evening, but want to be able to switch off between 3-5 pm when they pick their kids up and are cooking dinner," she told AFP.

Others are happy to use their daily commute to get ahead before they arrive in the office, she explained.

Furthermore, the world of work is changing as rapidly as technology, with more and more employees working remotely or with colleagues in other time zones.

"Some of the challenges that come with flexibility are managing those boundaries between work and home and being able to say 'actually I am not working now'," she said.

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