

## Malls and markets under fire risk

### Implement Fire Service recommendations

It is extremely alarming that out of 1,126 private and government-owned malls, supermarkets and kitchen markets in the capital, 1,080 were found to be noncompliant with mandatory fire-safety standards, according to an inspection report by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence. That means a staggering 96 percent of the commercial establishments surveyed have been operating for years without fire-safety clearance and licence posing serious risks to public safety. And when the inspection was extended across the country the number rose to an even higher 98 percent.

Why were these enterprises allowed to run for all these years? That's because the Department of Fire Service, unfortunately, does not have the authority to force them to follow the fire safety rules or shut them down when they are in violation. It has to depend on other departments such as the city corporations, district administration and police. How long that can take given the complex bureaucratic tangle is anyone's guess. The Department of Fire Safety has, in the past, put forward formal requests to these authorities to ensure that commercial establishments be compliant but to no avail.

Markets and malls that fail to install fire safety equipment and provisions are serious accidents waiting to happen. The Gulshan market fire in January should come as a wake-up call to authorities as well as business owners. Businesses must have basic fire safety facilities and installations including fire detection and alarm systems, extinguishers, hose reels with water connection, safe spaces, trained in-house fire fighting team and fire escape route. Companies should be trained on fire safety measures and the city corporations should cancel trade licences of those who break the rules.

## Illegal posterage continues unabated

### Authorities must act decisively

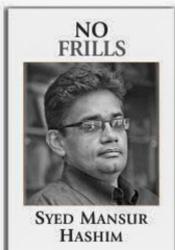
DHAKA is becoming drearier by the day. As the capital loses most of its natural scenery, more and more unpleasant sights such as film posters and haphazard advertisements on walls and elsewhere are being put up everywhere. Not only do these objects look ugly to the onlooker, but they are, at the same time, illegal. As such, the authorities have repeatedly asked people to stop this practice. Yet, posterage across Dhaka continues unabated.

Is this not illustrative of how little we care about how Dhaka looks and, thus, about our city in general? Why are people putting up posters everywhere without considering the fact that it is ruining the view of their own city and without fear of any repercussions? And why are the authorities not taking any actions against those who are putting them up?

Part of the reason is that besides commercial posters, political posters particularly before elections too are common sights. And although the parties themselves have a responsibility to refrain from doing so, the authorities seem not to care when they do not abide by the rules. When political parties are allowed to rampantly post posters haphazardly all across the city, how can the ordinary people then be prevented from following suit?

The mayors of Dhaka should learn from cities like Kolkata and Delhi which both have their fair share of political activity including election campaigning but have managed to keep their landscape free from the ugliness of posters of candidates. The authorities should warn those who are putting such posters up, whether for commercial or political purposes and if that does not work, they should be heavily fined.

# Backlog in aid utilisation



NO FRILLS  
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ACCORDING to a leading English daily on February 18, the government has lying idle USD 35 billion in unutilised foreign aid money. The debt-servicing costs for such a huge amount are becoming a burden for the national exchequer. Beyond that, there are multiple repercussions for the economy that occurs as the various development projects fall behind schedule. That undisbursed aid money had increased by more than USD 10 billion over the course of a year (the figure stood at USD 21.95 for FY 2015-16) points to our inability to implement programmes on time.

Economists and experts alike have been pointing out the need for the government to increase its capacity to utilise these billions of dollars for some years now, but apparently such advice has fallen on deaf ears at policy level. As the government undertakes more and more mega projects, it is natural that financial assistance from bilateral and multilateral agencies is sought for capital expenditure. What we know from data furnished by the External Relations Division (ERD), ongoing foreign assistance has increased by 17.44 percent to USD 21.95 billion from USD 18.69 billion in FY2015. This huge jump, albeit welcome, has not been matched by performance of the State agencies. But then this is hardly news. Inefficiency at personnel level has been a nagging problem for some time and now that we have a whopping USD 35 billion sitting idle, it can no longer be ignored.

So, precisely what is the government doing to alleviate this crippling lack of progress? As reported in the media, we are informed that a task force led by the finance minister has been working for the last one year to "expedite the pace of foreign-aid utilisation". A laudable effort, but let us be realistic here. Today, Bangladesh is set on a course that will effectively transform the infrastructure landscape of the country. We are looking at multi-billion dollar projects, finance for which has been obtained through development partners and financial institutions like the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), etc.

To compound the problem further, China has come on board with USD 40+ billion in foreign investments

and loans to finance many of these projects. Add the Indian line of credit for upgrading railway, and we have a situation on our hands. As highlighted many times before, today, for Bangladesh, it is no longer a question of finding the requisite finance but the capacity to implement projects either undertaken or envisaged. The worrying sign for both the ministry of finance and economists is that grants constitute a minuscule percentage of the aid basket. Yes, we have been able to obtain soft loans that carry a decent 'grace' period before we have to start making repayments. However, the Chinese credit line is not so gracious and the terms

will notice utilisation growth was over 15 percent." Little solace there because the problems of underutilisation remains a basic reality and yet, the annual development programme budget keeps getting inflated every fiscal year to include projects that do not get off the ground, but for which the government keeps asking for external finance. As pointed out by development analyst Dr. Zaid Bakht, "Due to the inefficiencies of the government agencies and sometimes tougher fund-release procedures of the development, partners slow down the implementation of the project."

The different viewpoints expressed by policymakers and development analysts clearly present different areas of concern and opinion. We witness the inclusion of many new projects in the annual national budget every year despite the doldrums State agencies find themselves in with ongoing projects. There is concern about the manner in which foreign agencies disburse funds; the conditions that are given do not necessarily help set the pace for on-time disbursement of resources. And when this happens, the government ends up paying commitment fees to lenders of these monies that remain unutilised, which is a burden for the national exchequer.

Obviously, things cannot go on like this indefinitely. Is it not time, we got our act together on certain basic realities? It is very easy for people in power to put the whole burden of fault on lending agencies, but is it also not a fact that our agencies have not been able to utilise funds that have been cleared by those same lending agencies? The time has come for the various agencies, both domestic and foreign, to sit down and streamline the procedures for lending of funds and their proper utilisation on time. It is natural for lending agencies to set tough parameters for fund utilisation which have everything to do with transparency and act as a guard against attempted graft.

To put it in a nutshell, there is a sea of disagreement between the government and its foreign partners that revolve around procurement procedures, bottlenecks at policy level and fund disbursement procedures; and it is up to the government to negotiate on the set rules of business to get things moving in the right direction. At the same time, we need to get our house in order, and that means putting the right man for the right job in the right place if we really want meaningful progress on the rate of implementation.

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are certainly far above what the WB, ADB, or JICA for that matter, have or will offer. Hence, putting this matter off for "posterity" is not really an option for a government that hopes to do another term in office.

Getting back to ERD data, we are informed that government agencies and ministries have utilised a paltry USD 1.32 billion of external aid from the available USD 14.26 billion in the current fiscal year. Now this brings forth the question of planning. Precisely, why are we committing ourselves to projects which we have no hope to get off the ground (within stated time frames) given our obvious lack of capacity in the present? The Financial Express recently reported, quoting the ERD secretary, "Actually our year-on-year aid utilisation is not that bad. If you look over the last few years, you

# Creating a knowledge-based workforce

M A SATTER and M R SATTER

THERE are shortages of skilled and highly skilled workforce in Bangladesh, a fact confirmed by a large number of expatriates being employed in top positions of private businesses. The labour force working in agriculture, garment and knitwear industries, and those working abroad earning remittances is a mix of unskilled and semi-skilled personnel. Earnings from these sectors of the economy may be coming to a physical limit because of skill shortage. Similarly, technology transfer to Bangladesh has its limits at least in the high-tech product and service range due to lack of highly specialised knowledge workers.

To achieve a target of middle income or even higher, it will be necessary to develop human resources that can create value added products and services through innovation and research. The fact that the potential contribution of well-educated human resource for economic development far outweighs that of other resources such as agriculture, mineral and petroleum has been demonstrated by several South-East Asian countries which, despite relying the most on their human resource, achieved the status of a first world economy within a matter of few decades.

Creating a knowledge-based workforce will require careful planning for reform across the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. The overall objective of planning should be to raise the quality of education. Quality education may be referred to having internationally recognisable standards in terms of curricula and extra-curricular learning, innovative teaching and learning processes, assessment and feedback, and student outcomes, including high ethical and moral values.

To improve the quality of tertiary education system, we need to look at three basic objectives of education. We first need to prepare students in a domain of activity by imparting relevant knowledge, methods and skills to perform in real situations. Second, we should focus on scientific and industrial research. Finally, we should adapt to behaviour conforming to ethical standards and codes of practice.

These basic objectives have broad implications on parameters such as curricula design, teaching and learning processes, assessment methodologies, student outcomes and research. Thus, they must conform to internationally approved standards by accreditation process, and must be continuously monitored to assure quality improvement.

Quality assurance is basically a two-level validation process. The first level focuses on the internal activity of an institution to ensure that the education process achieves the educational objectives as defined by the mission of the institution. Specifically, quality assurance should ensure that the curricula are relevant and optimum to the needs of the country; the faculty



Knowledge based workforce.

profiles are satisfactory; the capability of the teaching and learning process is satisfactory; and there is sufficient evidence for achievement of student outcomes including ethical values. There should also be evidence of substantial faculty research output and collaboration with industry. Each university/institution of tertiary education should set up a quality assurance team, comprising of senior academics and administration. Among other things, one of the mandates of the team should be to adopt and execute the philosophy of continuous improvement of educational quality.

The second level validation process is to accredit an institution and/or its academic programmes by an independent and reputed accrediting agency. The validation process starts with an institution submitting a comprehensive self-assessment report to an accrediting authority for independent validation. The external validation process is fairly extensive and evidence based. It takes into account almost all activities of an institution and its programmes, including staff and student welfare.

Bangladeshi universities and institutions have their engineering and technology programmes accredited by the Institution of Engineers of Bangladesh (IEB). The Board of Accreditation in Engineering and Technological Education (BAETE) has been established recently by IEB to accredit engineering and technology programmes, and will work

independently from IEB. This board represents Bangladesh in the Washington Accord as a provisional member with the possibility of becoming a full signatory in the future. The Washington Accord initiated in 1989 is an international accreditation agreement for recognising undergraduate engineering academic degrees of signatory countries, which include India, Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, the US, the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. The agreement stipulates substantial equivalence of academic contents in programmes accredited by any of the signatory countries. Graduates of an accredited engineering programme are recognised by all signatory countries to practice engineering profession. Engineering programmes of countries with provisional status are not, however, recognised by any of the Washington Accord signatories.

There is no rationale for the tertiary education sector not to opt for quality assurance except perhaps complacency. Some may argue that 'quality is costly', but it is a mere perception. One should consider the cost of inferior education. In fact, quality assurance would improve efficiency and reduce operational and maintenance costs. With committed leadership in the top management, quality can be improved, utilising internal resources and savings from the maintenance fund needed for low quality education.

Accreditation can bring many benefits to universities, as accredited universities get recognition for quality education and

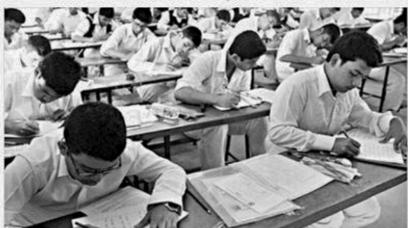
have greater enrolment of top students. Students gain confidence about the standards of their education. Sponsors are assured of quality education, and would be willing to pay high tuition fees which translate into larger revenue for the institution. The nation will benefit from knowledgeable and skilled workforce with innovative and entrepreneurial qualities, and moral values. There will be better planning, better infrastructure development, and better services. General productivity level will improve, directly contributing to internal wealth creation and thus higher GDP. Graduates of accredited programmes will find highly paid jobs abroad, thereby contributing to higher remittances.

Undoubtedly, there is potential for accelerated development through quality education, but several challenges remain, including the shortage of skilled and highly skilled workforce. We thus urge institutions and universities to establish internal quality assurance systems and opt for internationally recognisable accreditation of their academic programmes, especially in engineering and technology. Furthermore, to ensure quality assurance universities should undertake research on real issues in cooperation with industry and government agencies.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Question paper leak: A menace in Bangladesh

Leak of examination papers has become a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. Merely doing some research on Facebook can help you get your hands on question papers prior to an exam. A TIB report mentions 63 allegedly leaked JSC and PES exam question papers leakage between 2012 and 2015. This year's ongoing SSC exam debacle is yet another example.

What is happening to our education system? What will our next generation learn? What will be the future of our hopes?

Lack of proper monitoring is the main reason behind these disasters, in addition to lengthy recruitment processes, unhealthy competition among institutions, lack of proper training among teachers, and abuse of IT resources. These trends are destroying the reserve of intelligence, creativity, and ethical standards in our society.

The govt. should look into the matter seriously. The application of 'The Public Examinations (Offences) (Amended) Act, 1992' should be implemented with upper hand. Public awareness should be increased among the common people. We have to make students understand the adverse effects of these practices.

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