

Worst humanitarian crisis since WWII

Urgent need for concentrated global effort

IT is a matter of grave concern that, according to a UN estimate, twenty million people are facing starvation in Yemen, North Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria. These are the conflict prone regions that have witnessed civil war, foreign invasion, a breakdown of civil order and the rise of militancy. We are appalled that this crisis, which has been built up over a period of time, has been allowed to continue. Clearly, enough has not been done, as a UN official told the Security Council, that without immediate help, death and severe malnutrition would plague the regions for a long time.

It is indeed disturbing to note that man-made disasters like war and famine continue to bleed nations while international politics fails to come to a consensus on how to reach a stasis in parts of the Middle East, Northeast Nigeria and vast swathes of Somalia. This is degenerating into a grave humanitarian crisis due to shortage of essential supplies like food, water and electricity. This is especially so in Yemen where two-thirds of the country's population remains hungry and do not know where the next meal will come from. The situation is the same in the other three countries where without any collective and coordinated effort on the part of the global community thousands will simply starve to death and many more will die from disease.

We urge the international community to infuse immediate aid to these four war-torn and famine ravaged countries. Also, it is important to devise a long-term strategy to prevent further food shortages and outbreaks of the disease in the areas. It is indeed appalling that in this era of globalisation and scientific breakthroughs, fellow human beings should die of hunger and shortage of food. The shame is on us all. The world should act immediately.

A boost for our navy

Enhancing our defence capability at sea

THE reality of today's conflict-ridden world is that it is prudent for every sovereign nation to have some sort of security preparation. The formal commissioning of twin submarines by Bangladesh, therefore, is as much a part of such measures as it is to enhance our navy's ability to defend the country in case of need. This is especially important at a time when our maritime boundary has significantly expanded thanks to two international verdicts. The challenge for Bangladesh is to be able to control and utilise the seabed resources within this vast area. Because of this expanded territory in the sea, Bangladesh is in a strategically important position in the South Asian region and of interest to India and China as well as Myanmar. Relations between these countries as well as others such as the US are constantly undergoing change which makes it wise for Bangladesh to be strong in terms of its defence capability.

Bangladesh is a peace-loving nation and as our Prime Minister, while inaugurating the submarines, has pointed out, while we do not have any intention to be engaged in any war, we must be ready if there are any attempts of aggression against us as was the case with Myanmar a few years back. The commissioning of the two submarines is part of the government's endeavour to strengthen the Bangladesh Navy so that it is adequately equipped to control and protect our expanded maritime boundary and its commercial and environmental interests.

Pollution plays havoc with children's health!

NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THANKS to the World Health Organisation (WHO), we now have a clearer picture of what indoor and outdoor pollution is doing to our children's health. Let's take a look at the facts. 280,000 children (under 5) die in Bangladesh annually due to pollution. Worldwide the number of child casualties is 17 lakh. That means nearly 17 percent of all children dying due to pollution are Bangladeshi. How did we get here? It didn't happen in a day, but it also didn't take 100 years. Two reports by WHO, 'Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children's Health and the Environment' and 'Don't pollute My Future', unveiled recently shed light on the gloomy subject. And it's not just the WHO reports that are raising alarm bells on the adverse effects of pollution on children's health. According to a report published on March 7 in this paper, Professor Abul Kalam Azad, director general of Health Services said, "In Bangladesh, the level of outdoor air pollution is high because of construction work and increasing number of vehicles. Besides, use of fossil fuel contributes to indoor air pollution."

The most common causes of death for children under 5 in the country are: diarrhoea, malaria and pneumonia — all preventable deaths that can be mitigated by reducing environmental risks, i.e. by increasing better access to safe drinking water and cooking fuels. Now, the typical response from the government would be that it is doing the best it can given the difficult circumstances which rapid urbanisation brings. But is that truly the case? Is enough being done to stop the wholesale destruction of the major rivers that feed the capital city and beyond? Is it not a fact that the authorities have failed miserably to tackle the Hazaribagh relocation since 2009 (that's when the ruling party came to power)? Is it not a fact that despite numerous reports, both by government bodies and

international organisations, we chose to ignore the health hazards of untreated toxins being dumped into the Buriganga river (which happens to supply the bulk of Dhaka city's water supply) with the excuse that the tannery industry is an emerging export sector, one with the potential to become the next RMG-like miracle? Are we not now witnessing the destruction of yet another major river, the Dhaleshwari thanks to our pathetic lack of planning with regards to faulty design of the CETP (central effluent treatment plant) that has no de-salinisation component to render useless the tonnes of salt used in the tanning process at Savar tannery zone?

bodies that are understaffed and prone to graft, allowing for wholesale pollution of the air.

The effect of such a relaxed outlook towards pollution is taking its toll on children whose immune systems are simply not designed to cope with such high levels of toxicity in the air. When we couple that with household air pollution, we can begin to comprehend why Bangladeshi children are dying by the hundreds of thousands. According to media reports, 89 percent of households use solid fuels, mostly wood, agricultural waste and cow manure for cooking and space heating. As per a UNICEF report titled "Clear the air for children: The

awareness campaigns that could effectively tackle lack of awareness of health hazards.

At the end of the day, we should remember indoor pollution affects not only children's developing lungs but has the potential to permanently damage their brains. With that knowledge, it is time to give equal importance to mitigating indoor pollution as mitigating outdoor pollution is a much greater challenge for the government. Before we start talking about retrofitting brick kilns we should be talking about making watchdog bodies effective and free of graft. Before we start blaming tannery industries, we should be going back to



SOURCE: ELISSAGOODMAN

Let us move on to other major polluting agents. Bangladesh, Dhaka in particular, has been undergoing major infrastructure development for the last few years. There is heavy duty construction of flyovers and an ever increasing number of vehicles in a city that suffers hours and hours of traffic gridlock. The capital city is ringed by a host of traditional brick kilns that spew out black smoke where low-grade coal is the primary source of fuel. Air pollution in Dhaka has gone through the roof thanks primarily to weak regulatory

impact of air pollution on children", Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world.

The government has a strategy called 'Country Action Plan for Clean Cookstoves' that aims to achieve 100 percent clean cooking solutions by 2030. Under the plan, it intends to distribute improved stoves to more than 30 million households by 2030 -- a noble aim that could be achieved if it took help from non-state actors like non-government organisations and print/electronic media in long-term, sustained nationwide

the drawing board and finding out why shoddy planning failed to take into account the de-salinisation in an effluent treatment plant for a tannery zone. It is time to take responsibility for a lack of planning and implementation of existing laws that are there to protect public interest, and as in this case, public health. Today's healthy child is tomorrow's healthy adult. A fit adult, sound of body and mind, is an asset to the nation. A sick adult is a burden for the state. Simple really!

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CHILD MARRIAGE RESTRAINT ACT 2017

Why did we take a step backwards?



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

BANGLADESH has always been a country of promise, hope and progress, amidst the common plight faced by a developing nation. It has been a country

which has achieved innumerable successes in social development and economic advancement. Yet today, we are collectively ashamed as we take a terrible step backwards in relation to protecting our girls from the horrors of child marriage.

President Abdul Hamid signed the controversial Child Marriage Restraint Act

not specifically cater to girls only, it is a well-established statistical fact that the burden of child marriage has historically fallen on girls. This recent parliamentary bill has simultaneously institutionalised child marriage, caused a severe negative impact on the frail children's rights that we do have in our country, and signalled to many in our community, that there is a legal route to getting young children married off. This is indeed a shameful event for this country.

Whilst many media outlets have highlighted the statistical evidence to showcase the negativities surrounding this Act, one needs to look at it from a broader picture. In a country which has made outstanding strides in reducing infant mortality rates, enhancing primary education for girls, increasing female participation in the national labour force

plight of young girls in this country.

UNICEF reports indicate a surge in child marriages in recent years, with current data suggesting that 18 percent of girls are married off before the age of 15. To put it into simpler terms, imagine your daughter being married off before she even takes her O-Level or SSC examinations. At a time when we as a country should be mustering up our courage to put a halt to these practices, our government seems to have made a terrible blunder.

And when the proponents of this institutional architecture mention these so-called special cases, they are effectively alluding to instances of teenage pregnancy or senseless reference to her honour. How can we protect the 'honour' of a child, if we are telling her that our legal provision allows for her to be

land, does not have a miserable impact on the future of our girls.

An interesting statistic shows that for each additional year a girl in rural Bangladesh is not married, she will attend school an additional 0.22 years on average. On a broader scale, the impact of even greater education enrolment for girls in our country, for the future of a sustainable Bangladesh, is more important than ever before. The associated tremors of child marriage such as torture, trafficking, sexual abuse and mental health, are of course core concerns for Bangladesh to address immediately.

As such, rather than enforcing a misguided law, one hopes that the Bangladeshi government directs tangible state resources towards the monitoring and prevention of child marriages in rural Bangladesh. Education and information outreach through state-level programmes will surely go a long way in improving the knowledge of parents in regards to child marriage. And most importantly, we cannot and must not let poverty and inequality be the root cause of parents forcing their children into an unholy alliance, that too at such young ages. It is our societal responsibility to protect our girls, and we need to do more to ensure that our government is not forced to take such a drastic step that may very well endanger many bright future entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, artists and lawyers of the next generation.

Female leadership at the highest echelon of our state has been present since 1991. It is indeed a proud achievement for us. Nevertheless, that is not the only side to the story of women's rights in our country. The horrors of child marriages are real, and today we ponder whether we have taken the biggest step backwards in our fight against this brutal practice. Our girls, and not those who treat them as commodities, are in need of greater protection. Prevention, not legal institutionalisation, is needed. The effects of the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 will be seen in the days to come, and one only hopes that our misgivings are proven wrong by the government. But if indications are to be trusted, then this is, in no uncertain terms, an approach in the wrong direction, especially considering how far we have come in the last 46 years.

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In a country which has made outstanding strides in enhancing primary and secondary education for girls, child marriage remains a huge scar in the face of modern Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

2017, which essentially formalised legal ambiguity in relation to courts allowing child marriage in certain so-called special cases. It allows a Bangladeshi child to get married in exceptional instances with parental consent and judicial authorisation, before reaching the minimum age limit as stipulated by law. Ironically, this bill introduced in 2017 by a government known for its efforts to ensure greater rights for women, is surely more regressive in its foundational structure than the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Although this particular Act does

and intensifying maternal health resources, child marriage remains a huge scar in the face of modern Bangladesh. The government is right when it says that the sad reality is that many young girls are married off in rural Bangladesh illegally, and there are difficulties to constrain this. Yet, it is equally surprising to see that when this government has had the commendable guts to publicly come out and say loud and clear that there is a huge problem, rather than tackling it head on, it has institutionalised a highly contentious and backsliding measure to "address" the

married before she is 18, and have a child at the same time when she herself is still legally a child? How can we reduce population growth and enhance progressive youth enhancement projects if we are telling our girls that the judicial system has a way to legitimise a forced act associated with the horrors of child betrothal, a severe misinterpretation of cultural and religious doctrines and a highly backward practice? It is no secret that Bangladesh has one of the world's highest rates of child marriages, and one sincerely hopes that such a scheme, that too approved by the highest offices of the

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Achieving the 2021 Vision for Bangladesh

To achieve the target of becoming a middle income country by 2021, it is crucial for Bangladesh to integrate all aspects of climate change into its planning and delivery of services to the citizens and ecosystems. There is an absolute need to strengthen the Ministry of Environment and Forests with appropriate expertise to address the high level of pollution and its related industrial, legal and implementation management issues, agriculture, land, and social management issues, afforestation and conservation of ecosystems, and water-related issues of marine systems, static and flow, etc. The government, along with general population, must be increasingly conscious about these matters.

Intaz Ali
University of Dhaka

Growing pulses in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has progressed tremendously in growing rice and potatoes to fulfill our staple food needs. It is now time to focus on growing different varieties of pulses, a common food item that serves as a source for protein for our countrymen. The few million tonnes of pulses being imported to meet domestic demand eat up a large chunk of the foreign currency reserves that Bangladesh needs for other development purposes. Instead, we can take assistance from our neighbours in India to grow high yield pulses here.

The authorities need to motivate farmers and support them by providing good seeds, fertiliser, pesticides and professional advice. It would not be difficult to locally grow enough pulses to cater to Bangladesh's needs. The government should design and implement a three-year programme to increase the growth of pulses in Bangladesh.

Md. Ashraf Hossain
Bashabo