

Rice prices soar amid flash floods

Farmers suffer, big millers cash in

FLASH floods in the greater Sylhet region have taken its toll on farmers and created a shortage of paddy for small to medium-sized rice mills. The haor areas in northern Sylhet account for nearly 10 percent of the total cultivation area of about 4.8 million hectares this year and the flooding has adversely affected about 140,000 hectares. The mills usually stock up near the end of the season, which isn't happening this season due to unexpected floods and only the big millers are well stocked with paddy. What it all boils down to is a rise in retail prices of coarse rice in Dhaka by nearly 6.5 percent over a week and there is upward price rise of such rice in other parts of the country.

Although farmers in the north have sustained losses, by Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) estimates, the loss of paddy is miniscule in terms of total paddy production. Then why are we seeing such a sharp increase in price? The shortage may be the outcome of hoarding and price manipulation since only a fraction of mills has enough paddy stock to be turned into rice. Whatever may be the case, it is imperative that the government take steps to stabilise the price of this essential commodity. If there is indeed any hoarding going on, authorities must act swiftly against these parties. There may be need to reduce the import duty on rice in the short term to compensate for any crunch in supply. Finally, farmers' losses need to be made bearable through soft loans so that they can tide over the current situation and be ready for next season's sowing.

145 children raped in three months!

Prevent this ghastly trend

A picture published in this paper on March 11 epitomises our failure to protect children from abuse and the culture of impunity that rules supreme regarding this issue. It shows a group of child-right activists holding placards that read grim statistics: 145 children have been raped in the first three months of the new year, and in the first couple of months, 50 children were killed. Given the societal taboo that exists centring rape and molestation, there is a possibility that a lot of such cases have gone unreported.

This points to a disturbing rise of violence and a breakdown of moral values. Not only that, conviction rate under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 between 2001-2014, according to a study, has been less than 1 percent. Such sad statistics speaks volumes of the state's failure to protect the weak and the vulnerable.

This, after all, is not a mere law enforcement issue, this malady is criminal and social in nature and it should be handled as such. A speedy trial process in case of child rape can act as deterrent to potential perpetrators. It is also important to give the affected families legal and emotional support, as instances of out of court settlement in such cases is extraordinarily high. This is especially important in cases where the victim comes from a lower income background. Also, it is crucial to sensitise the society to take a comprehensive approach to tackle such heinous crimes.

What is mine is not thine

RUBANA HUQ and VESTAL MCINTYRE

A South Asian woman is often subjected to innumerable rituals. In Bangladesh, for the majority of the population, if a baby girl is born, the *Azaan* (call for prayer) is quietly whispered into her ears. In the case of a baby boy, the *Azaan* is loud as it is meant to announce his arrival with pride. During a girl's *Aqiqah* (christening), a goat is sacrificed, but when it comes to a boy, the number of goats becomes two. In case of inheritance, while the wife inherits only an eighth of her husband's property after death and the daughter gets only a fifth (as the daughter is assumed to inherit from her husband's as well), no one really mentions that upon a wife's demise, her husband too inherits one-fourth of her property. These are only a few instances of unjust inheritance laws that are prevalent in South Asian societies.

In reality, empowerment and equality have been in public and academic discourse for quite a long time. Somehow every South Asian woman has the same pain to digest and the same struggles to address. And in case women in the region ever come together to discuss these issues on a public forum for dialogue, at the first opportunity, they put their heads together and often ask the question, "How do we make it there?"

In Nepal, two weeks ago, at such an event featuring women leaders, policymakers and international researchers from groups such as Evidence for Policy Design (EPOD) at Harvard Kennedy School, there were many stories to listen to and ponder. Apart from the lack of employment opportunities for women, the issue of women owning little or no property struck a deep chord amongst many of us. What stood out was the realisation of South Asian women being handicapped by laws that stain the moral fabric of the society.

During the panel discussions, it appeared that Nepal had progressed quite a bit. While Nepal has the highest female labour participation in South Asia, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka are following in Nepal's footsteps. It was also clear that India, Pakistan and Afghanistan were the lowest in the ladder. What was

disappointing was that India was the only South Asian country that has a downward trend of female labour participation. It was also pleasantly surprising to discover that in Nepal, almost 20 percent of women own land or homes and while 27 percent of urban Nepali women have fixed assets, almost 19 percent of rural women own the same.

This hasn't been an easy road for Nepalese women however. Nepal too had to go through the decades-long struggle to achieve equal inheritance rights for women.

The first steps in Nepal were to

exclusion from inheritance impacted overall development by limiting women's broader economic opportunities. Since Nepal was still a Hindu state and not a secular one when the struggle had begun, activists like Malla had no option but to challenge the state, religion, and culture. Malla says, "It wasn't easy."

The strategy she and her movement used was public litigation – a class action lawsuit. Nepal's high court ruled that the law was indeed discriminatory and issued a directive to the government to change it. Malla and her team celebrated, believing change would come quickly,

Constitution in 2015. Today, Malla believes that the number of women owning lands and houses will "triple in the upcoming census."

In Bangladesh, for Hindu women especially, property rights are meagre in comparison to male members and their religious counterparts. No single piece of legislation has been enacted to reform traditional laws in order to broaden the scope of Hindu women's property rights. Bangladesh, a country with around three million female readymade garment workers, cannot subject women to bias, when the Constitution assures equal rights for both men and women. If women contribute a major portion to the production of food and still remain invisible as female farmers in the bigger picture of prevention of food insecurity, then there is no choice for the society but to correct the dent in its psyche. Above all, the plight of all women, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, in Bangladesh must change. Most unfortunately, the practices continue because many within us resort to laws of convenience. This may be explained better with the next example.

A friend in Dhaka was recently complaining about a male family member – who was atheist – having turned to Shariah law when it had come to inheriting the property his father had left. He knew that it was his father's wish that his daughters would have equal rights to inheritance. But in this case, the man fell back on a discriminatory law that he didn't agree with but that benefitted him financially.

There are countries where only fathers can pass citizenship on to their children. There are places that allow disproportionate abortion of female fetuses. There are courts in some lands that arbitrarily deny women custody. There are women survivors of spousal rape. There are countries in South Asia where schools for girls are burnt down and closed forever.

Thus, it is perhaps not unreasonable to assume that even globally, religion and rituals are used as tools to suppress the rights of and discriminate against the better halves of the world.

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After a decades-long struggle, women in Nepal were finally guaranteed equal inheritance laws in 2015 under the new Constitution.

convince those within the women's movement that property rights were the right battle to wage (as opposed to fighting solely on equalising girl's education) and to research the existing laws and their economic effects, in order to better argue for their reversal. At the turn of the millennium, Nepali law dictated that a woman had to be 35 years old and unmarried in order to inherit property. A research study by Sapana Pradhan Malla, a jurist before the Supreme Court of Nepal, found that

but it took seven years for the bill to enter Parliament – and even then, change was gradual. The first amendment in 2002 dictated that a daughter had equal right to inheritance as a son, but she had to return the property upon marriage. The second amendment in 2006 allowed her to keep her property upon marriage, and the third amendment nine years later removed discrimination based on marital status. Finally, equal inheritance rights were guaranteed in Nepal's new

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Dalai Lama factor in Sino-Indian relations



SHASHI THAROOR

RELATIONS between India and China haven't been particularly warm in recent months. But they have lately taken on an icy chill, with Chinese leaders furious over the Dalai Lama's visit to the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as its own. On April 8, over loud protests from China's government, the Dalai Lama addressed devotees from far and wide at the historic monastery in the border town of Tawang, where the sixth Dalai Lama was born more than three centuries ago.

India and China view both the Dalai Lama and Arunachal Pradesh very differently. From India's perspective, the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhist community, and so has the right to minister to his followers at the great Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Tawang. And, because Arunachal Pradesh is a state of the Indian union, what happens there is India's decision alone.

In China's view, however, Arunachal Pradesh is not really India's. Yes, it officially belongs to India, but only because of the McMahon line, a boundary drawn by British imperialists in 1911, which China no longer accepts (though China did settle its boundary with Myanmar along the same line). The Chinese government refers to Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet.

In any case, says China, the Dalai Lama is not a spiritual leader, but a political one. And, given his support for Tibetan self-rule (Chinese officials angrily call him a "splittist"), his visit to a sensitive border area is being viewed as a deliberate provocation.

According to China's spokesman, allowing the Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh could harm bilateral relations, with India "facing the consequences." China has also summoned Indian Ambassador Vijay Gokhale to register a formal protest.

India, for its part, has taken a conciliatory approach. The Ministry of External Affairs first attempted to assuage China, stating that "no additional colour should be ascribed to the Dalai Lama's religious and spiritual activities." And, in the face of China's increasingly intemperate fulminations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government reiterated its respect for the "One China" policy, urging China's government not to generate "artificial controversies."

But China has not been mollified. Instead, when the Dalai Lama arrived in Arunachal Pradesh, Chinese official media declared that China might be "forced to take tough measures." The *Global Times*, an English-language tabloid published by the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece the *People's Daily*, took a particularly belligerent tone. Citing China's GDP, which is "several times higher than that of India," and its military capabilities, which "can reach the Indian Ocean" – not to mention its proximity to troubled Kashmir – it asked, "if China engages in a geopolitical game with India, who will win?"

The same *Global Times* editorial

diplomacy," so much so that a country's attitude toward him affects almost "the entire relationship" with China.

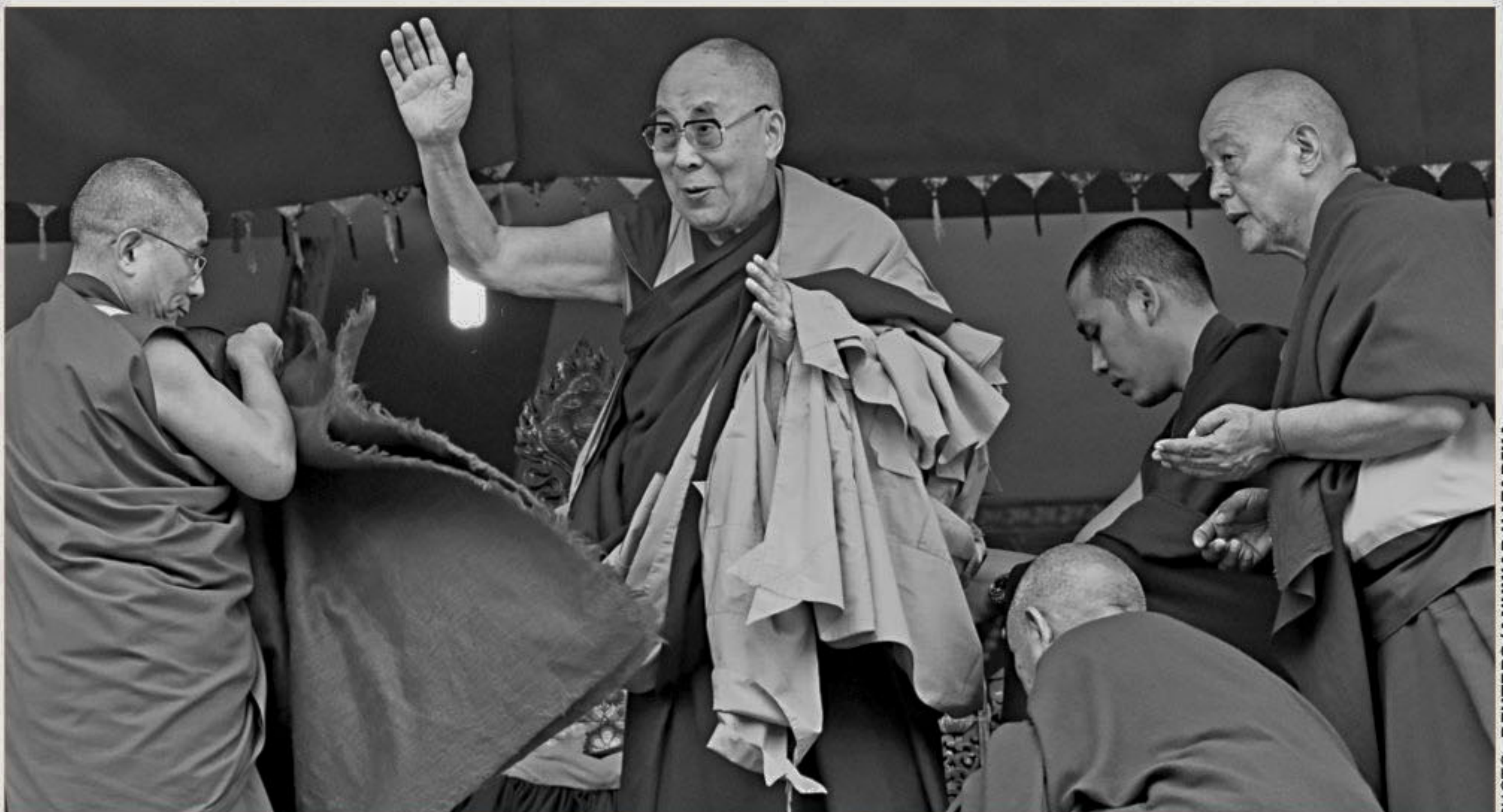
Yet surely China must recognise that it has not, in recent years, given India's government much reason to accommodate its sensitivities. In fact, it has responded to Modi's efforts at outreach with a series of insults.

For example, in 2014, Modi not only welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping to his hometown, Ahmedabad, on his own birthday; on that same trip, he also lifted the previous government's restrictions on Chinese investments in sensitive sectors of the Indian economy, such as ports and telecoms. Chinese soldiers promptly crossed the disputed

is disputed, yet its government completely ignored India's objections to the violation of its sovereignty.

Against this background, China's expectation that India will respect its sensitivities is a bit rich. Yet China's arrogant approach is not new. In fact, its reaction to the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh is of a piece with its behaviour in the South China Sea, where China insists that sovereignty should be determined according to its "nine-dash line."

China expects other countries to fall into line when it makes such a demand, as the Philippines has done under President Rodrigo Duterte. And China has proved willing to turn up the heat on



Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama waves to his followers before delivering teachings at the Thupsung Dhargyeling Monastery in Dirang, in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, India on April 6, 2017.

stressed that this visit by the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh was different from his previous six – the last of which was in 2009 – because he was "received and accompanied" by India's junior home minister, Kiren Rijiju. India sees nothing unusual in Rijiju, an Arunachal politician, being present for a major spiritual occasion. In democracies, such public events involving popular religious figures are common, and politicians often enjoy the attention they attract by attending them.

But China prefers to use Rijiju's attendance as evidence that the event is, in fact, political, suggesting that India is using the visit as "a diplomatic tool to put pressure on China." The fundamental point, the *Global Times* stressed, is that the Dalai Lama "is a highly politicised symbol in China's

frontier with India in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, going so far as to pitch tents on land that India considers its sovereign territory.

That mini-crisis was followed by a series of policy setbacks that reflected China's scant regard for India's sensitivities on various issues. China opposed India's bid (strongly supported by the United States) for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It blocked India's request to name Masood Azhar, the head of Jaish-e-Mohammed (a Pakistani terrorist group), to a United Nations Security Council blacklist, despite support for the move from the council's 14 other members.

China has also built a "China-Pakistan economic corridor" through Pakistan-controlled parts of Kashmir. China itself recognises that the territory

those that don't, such as Japan and Vietnam.

But India is somewhat bigger than China's other regional neighbours, and is made of sterner stuff. Rather than escalate the conflict over the Dalai Lama's visit further, China's leaders should allow passions to subside and relegate the episode to yesterday's news. If they don't, and instead move to follow through on their threats, they may well discover that India, too, has cards to play.

The writer, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2017. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Defence pact with India

The positive side of a defence pact is that a country signing the agreement with another larger country need not spend as much on its military anymore. For example, Canada has a defence pact with the US, so they spend a small percentage of their GDP on military expenditure. Instead, they invest in social welfare projects.

We hope that the Bangladesh government will henceforth cut down substantially on its military spending now that a defence pact is in place with India. They should channel the saved funds towards developing the health and education system, as well as other pressing social issues.

 A.K.M. Ehsanul Haque
 Dhaka

Medical college for Kurmitola General Hospital

The Kurmitola General Hospital, equipped with 500 beds, was set up at Kurmitola near Dhaka cantonment three years ago. Within this short span of time, it has earned a name in serving poor patients.

There is a lack of qualified physicians in the country. We need more and more doctors to serve our 160 million population. Meanwhile, a medical college needs a hospital to teach students how to apply their medical education outside of the classroom. It is my suggestion that introducing a medical college with the Kurmitola hospital will prove beneficial for the society. As the hospital is in Dhaka, acquiring qualified faculty members will also be relatively easy. I therefore urge the government to consider this proposition on an urgent basis.

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 Central Bashabo