

PM's unequivocal support for Rohingyas

Gear up all relief efforts

WE welcome Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's statement that Bangladesh will stand by Rohingya refugees fleeing state-sanctioned violence and persecution in Myanmar. The premier made these remarks during her visit to a registered Rohingya camp at Kutupalong Bazar in Ukha, Cox's Bazar on Tuesday. One of the most significant steps undertaken thus far is biometric registration of the incoming Rohingya refugees.

And whereas world leaders are yet to do their part to pressurise the Myanmar government to bring an end to the sufferings of the minority, we are heartened to see that many countries and international organisations along with the Bangladesh government have come forward to step up relief efforts for the Rohingya people. However, what we need now is to coordinate all our relief efforts—a sentiment echoed by the prime minister herself. We feel that in order to deal with the large number of refugees it may be worthwhile to set up an inter-ministerial task force with a minister as its head and preferably headquartered in Cox's Bazar, to coordinate the relief work and to ensure that there are no irregularities and that aid is evenly and fairly distributed.

With the increasing number of refugee arrivals, both national and international relief efforts are expected to heighten; therefore, coordination among the civil administration, and all other agencies is of paramount importance to ensure timely delivery of life-saving aid.

Two lakh refugee camp children at risk

Much more needs to be done!

UNICEF stated on Monday that some 200,000 children housed in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar are at serious health risk as the camp population has crossed 370,000. Housed in makeshift structures, these children have arrived having survived an ordeal that has left them hungry and weak and in need of immediate relief. Their needs go beyond simple nutrition as thousands of children have suffered the trauma of having lived through conflict, many being separated from parents or having witnessed the brutal deaths of family members and close ones.

While the politics of recognising or condemning Myanmar's treatment of this minority group rages on internationally, this large and vulnerable group is in need of safe drinking water and basic sanitation which Bangladeshi authorities working in cooperation with various UN agencies are struggling to meet. UNHCR has started to airlift emergency relief materials for the Rohingya refugees but these supplies will provide aid to meet the needs of only 25,000 refugees. Plans are being undertaken to increase emergency aid to about 120,000 refugees in total, which basically means the vast majority of refugees will not be covered.

The influx of people from Myanmar shows no signs of letting up and the Bangladesh government, despite its best efforts, is overwhelmed and overstretched both in terms of resources and manpower to handle this humanitarian disaster. It is time for consolidated action of all national and international agencies to stave off serious health issues that now exist in the camps. This requires international commitments by the global community, for the sake of humanity, to deter a disastrous health epidemic that threatens refugees, particularly children, who are stranded on Bangladeshi soil.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Focus on Rohingya women's health

It was good to see that international aid agencies have come forward to meet the humanitarian needs of the Rohingya refugees. However, an often-ignored issue in the refugee camps is women's health. Lack of menstrual hygiene, for example, may lead to deadly diseases; so I think feminine hygiene products, among others, should be distributed in the camps to ensure a healthier environment.

Aid agencies should arrange for better toilet facilities and install tippy taps for the refugees to wash their hands. In addition, they should allocate funds to enable local partners and communities to effectively tackle the ongoing refugee crisis.

That said, the crisis is not for Bangladesh to solve alone, so other countries should also come forward and provide humanitarian assistance.

Namia Akhtar, Germany

Unfair practices in admission tests

High-school leavers will sit for admission tests in various public universities starting this Friday. In recent years, the universities came under fire because of the news of different kinds of unfair practices taking place in the tests, such as leakage of question papers, etc.

Last year, for example, question papers for a number of tests at Dhaka University and Jagannath University were leaked. If this sort of practices continues, qualified students will be deprived of their rightful place in universities. Unfortunately, the authorities seem to be doing little to stop the illicit practices.

Rashidul Hasan, Jagannath University

Making Dhaka more liveable



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

I wrote an opinion piece for *The Daily Star* (August 17, 2017) titled "Shanghaiing" Dhaka arguing in favour of further expansion and development of Dhaka as a global city. In the same

week, coincidentally, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) published its Annual Global Liveability Report 2017 and ranked Dhaka as the fourth least liveable city in the world. Melbourne has been ranked as the most liveable city for the seventh year in a row with an overall rating of 97.5 out of 100, just enough to push off Vienna (97.4) and Vancouver (97.3) from the top spot. The report ranked 140 cities based on their quality of life across five broad categories (and sub-categories) with varying weighted average such as (i) stability (25 percent); (ii) healthcare (20 percent); (iii) culture and environment (25 percent); (iv) education (10 percent); and (v) infrastructure (20 percent) for a total of 100 (ideal score).

While such ratings are subject to dispute, the indicators nonetheless reflect the quality of life and social and cultural enrichment (or lack thereof) in the countries covered by the survey. The least liveable city in the world today, with perhaps few disagreements, is the Syrian capital Damascus (30.2), given the horror and hardship people have experienced in recent years and the ongoing conflict in that country. Lagos, Tripoli, Dhaka, and Port Moresby complete the bottom five in the list.

The concept of liveability simply considers cities around the world that provide the best or the worst living conditions. As evident from the 2017 report, cities from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand dominate the top 10, reflecting their improved infrastructure, good education, better environmental management, healthcare and low personal risks. It is no wonder that Dhaka was ranked 137th with an overall rating of 38.7. The top scoring cities in the global ranking share a few important commonalities that are worth noting: (i) they are generally mid-sized; (ii) located in wealthier countries, and (iii) have a relatively low population density. Lower density is often linked to lower crimes, improved risk management, better social infrastructure, higher employment rate, and improved social and economic conditions.

Dhaka is without question a densely populated city (with 43,500 people living in every square km)—one of the most populous in the world—with an estimated 15 million people in the metropolitan areas, and perhaps close to 20 million in the total urban agglomeration. The city continues to experience a steady influx of migrants—about half a million new migrants every year, according to the World Bank—to slums and *bastees* without any well-thought-out action plan for housing, transportation, and other basic infrastructure and civic and social amenities required for a megacity of this magnitude.

I lived and worked in Dhaka from

footpaths, and this would be about 30 percent of the total population of the city, deal with sanitation and water issues on a daily basis, things that we take for granted in major cities globally.

Many in Dhaka may not find it one of the least liveable cities in the world. No doubt the city has its own history, life, character, beauty and charm. With its characteristic chaos, it functions every day. However, regardless of EIU's ranking, there is no denying the fact that living conditions in Dhaka must improve and improve for all city-dwellers, particularly the underprivileged and disenfranchised urban poor. Rajuk, the capital development authority, has not paid any serious attention to the problems of

make Dhaka more liveable for everyone.

Rajuk, in partnership with city and local governments, must address slum upgrading and rehousing for the poor; otherwise Dhaka cannot improve its image as a liveable city—it will only demonstrate a nastier side of the character of the city and its administration. One must remember that the urban poor did not appear out of nowhere; with their labour and contributions to the city, they are a vital and integral part of what made Dhaka today.

Finally, there are other equally pressing needs that the city must urgently address, including improved transportation system and provisions for mass transit; more accessible, green,



PHOTO: STAR

1966 to 1979 when it was possible to travel at ease around the city by rickshaw without any traffic jam. The city expanded enormously in all directions in the last 40 years. I still visit Dhaka two to three times a year for work. The struggles for getting around in this traffic-clogged megacity are an exhausting experience. The footpaths and walkways are mostly taken over by shops and kiosks. Its crowded streets, traffic chaos, slow-moving rickshaws, shanty towns/markets, poor sanitation, air pollution, smog, waterlogged streets and poor waste management posing serious health risks are a reminder that the city is in trouble. Many who are forced to live in slums and on the

housing and settlement for the urban poor. About one-third of the city population—the slum dwellers—live without water, proper sanitation, public services or legal security.

The city planners must understand that poverty in Bangladesh is rapidly shifting from rural to urban areas due to forces of globalisation, rapid urban growth rate, and increased poverty and deprivation among the most vulnerable groups in the city. The development of model towns by Rajuk is perhaps needed, but those housing schemes are increasingly the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and powerful elites. The city needs to address the housing need for the urban poor to

clean and safer public squares, parks, playgrounds; protection of the wetland and natural water bodies in and around Dhaka; and better security. Dhaka also needs very dynamic urban governance with vision and pragmatism, sound institutions, culture of integrity, and involvement of the people and community as stakeholders in urban planning and development. Dhaka must be made more liveable. The challenge of making Dhaka more liveable should now be considered a national priority.

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Our children are in school But can they read?

SHAHIDUL ISLAM and JOHN RICHARDS

BA NGLADESH can celebrate the International Literacy Day with pride. Since 2000, we have significantly increased enrolment and now nearly all children of an age to be in an early primary grade are in school. Everyone—parents, teachers, officials and political leaders—can take credit for this achievement. But enrolment is not enough. Can our children read?

Bangladesh is unfortunately a major contributor to the global total of some 250 million children who cannot read.

Unfortunately, the country's education officials seem content to continue "business as usual." Given these assessments, however, this is not a time for business as usual.

We should not try to make the problem disappear by adopting an unrealistically low benchmark for literacy. Proven early grade reading interventions are available to tackle reading problems. Literacy is ideally conceived as a continuum—from the ability to read road signs in Dhaka to the ability to read Tagore. However, managing school systems requires use of

big advantage over those countries, such as India, where multiple languages are spoken.

Capitalising on the fact that we have one primary language, we can easily adopt better teaching techniques for reading. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board has been working hard to introduce supplementary reading materials in primary grades. It is important to note here though, the supplementary reading materials must match children's reading levels.

We lack two important elements essential for improving children's

non-readers. ASER surveys ask primary school students to read a short story at grade two curriculum level.

The literacy benchmark associated with EGRA is reading fluency, measured by the number of words read correctly per minute. EGRA is also a literacy or reading diagnostic tool for teachers to use in their classrooms. If conducted over a nationally representative sample of early primary grade students, EGRA assessments are of immense help in adopting better reading interventions.

World-renowned reading expert Helen Abadzi suggests reading 45-60 words per minute as a threshold for literacy in early primary grades. Some organisations in Bangladesh that work with primary school students follow this prescription, while others use different thresholds. Unfortunately, no agencies have a number, tested by empirical studies, to confidently claim that reading at a particular fluency guarantees that a child will be able to read with comprehension. There is a role for the Government of Bangladesh to determine an appropriate literacy or reading benchmark for a Bangla reader. This benchmark must not be so low as to imply little effort is required to become literate; nor must it be so high as to imply all children must reach high school levels in primary school. Settling on an appropriate fluency benchmark will also help in assessing various reading interventions. Of course, the fluency benchmark for children with disabilities will be different.

Currently, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is developing its fourth primary education development programme, for the next five years starting in 2018. It is an ideal moment for the country to determine an appropriate literacy benchmark for early primary grade children and make a commitment that by the end of this primary education programme all graduating primary school students will be able to meet, or preferably exceed, this level.

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Over the last two decades, all governments in Bangladesh have given education the highest priority in planning and budgeting exercises. Despite our efforts, adult literacy hovers around 60 percent, and this includes Bangladeshis whose level of literacy is minimal. They can write their names perhaps, but not much more. Using both national and local surveys, assessments of primary students indicate that at grade five no more than one quarter of children can reasonably be classified as able to read "at grade level."

administratively simple criteria that establish acceptable benchmarks at different grades. Without such benchmarks there is always a danger of lowering expectations to the point that children graduate from primary school not able to read and write as adults.

Bangladesh is admittedly faring better than many countries where 50 percent of children cannot read a single word after several years of schooling, partly due to the lack of teaching materials. In planning to improve literacy among Bangladeshi children, the country has a

reading skills—adequate teaching time and testing. Let's not confuse testing with our existing public examinations. More time needs to be devoted to the teaching of reading in early primary grades. Children also need more practice in reading, guided by their peers or teachers. In order to measure the results of teaching activities, Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) provides a measure in terms of reading fluency. There are tools to assess reading ability. For instance, ASER in India is a highly popular tool for identifying readers and