

Hospitals being too far away, is probably the single-most common problem that health sectors in the developing world are dealing with, and this contributes majorly to infant mortality. Children are rushed to the hospitals when it becomes necessary to save their lives—but often it happens only when treatment is long overdue. Because many babies fall out of the spectrum of routine medical screenings, mothers miss out early warning signs. Just as common are home deliveries, with the resultant babies staying out of the health system until much later in their lives.

So when a researcher in Uganda invented a technique to detect malnourished babies from the comfort of homes, the genius lay in its simplicity. She made a card—a simple laminated card—with a picture of a foot on it. If the baby's sole is smaller than the picture on the card, then the baby needs medical help.

No fancy weighing scales are needed. A baby's growth can simply be measured by placing the foot on a card.

"A considerable percentage of the babies who die, do so in the first seven days, so early screening and intervention is necessary," says Dr Elizabeth Nabiwemba, one of the researchers from Makerere University School of Public Health who invented the card. According to UNICEF statistics from 2015, 20 babies out of every 1000 die within the first week of their birth in Uganda.

The university is located in the capital of the country, Kampala. About 120 kilometres away, in a village beyond the river Nile in a district called Iganga, her words could not ring truer.

Nabirye Amina had delivered a pair of twins on the roadside. One of the twins died almost immediately. The other is a healthy two-year-old today whose foot was routinely measured throughout infancy.

"I felt the labour pains come when I was only six months pregnant. I climbed behind a motorbike-driver to go to the hospital, but felt a membrane tear on the road. We had to stop the motorbike on the road," she says.

The mother described the harrowing day, seated outside her tiny, barebones, two-room house. The generous woman had offered all her sitting stools to the outsiders who came to talk to her, and was herself sprawled out on a couple of mossy bricks laid out on the damp earth despite being heavily pregnant.

"The baby came, and while a couple of women passing by were helping me with it, another followed," Amina says. Before the young mother could process what had truly happened, the second baby had died. She cut the cords with a sterilised blade she was carrying on her and waited by the road until the father came and took the surviving baby to the hospital. Amina quietly returned home, clutching her dead daughter.

The baby who was born three months premature would not have survived without community health workers popping by every so often with the foot measurement card.

# A PAPER CARD TO SAVE A BABY

ZYMA ISLAM  
back from Uganda



PHOTOS: ZYMA ISLAM

## ENDEAVOUR

"I had to take my daughter to the hospital where she was kept from December until February and given supplementary feeding," says Amina.

There is ample scientific associating pre-term labour with poor nutrition and underage pregnancies, meaning those who are using the card because they cannot afford constant hospital care are statistically also the ones who are most likely to need the card. Amina, for example, is the second wife of a man who works as a labourer and is married to three women. Amina claims to be 30 years old, has four children already and wants seven in total.

"My husband's first wife has five children. I want seven so that I can have more children than her," says a shy Amina confessing her yearning for marital bliss. What is alarming is that the twin that survived is barely a year old and Amina is already heavily pregnant.

A research by Every Premie-SCALE, a USAID project, stated that eight percent of pre-term births are caused by mothers having less than two years in between babies. The project also calculated that 9,830 pre-term babies die every year in the country that sees only 1,665,000 births annually. The percentage is similar to that of countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, while both India and Pakistan have double the rate.

Fighting the many causes of pre-term birth is hard. Till then a card can save a baby. ■

## PERSPECTIVE

Tucked in a remote corner at the tip of the Northern Territory (NT), Australia, lies a little known city called Darwin—first named in 1839 by John Lort Stokes after his former shipmate and evolutionist Charles Darwin. Home to the majority (a little over 140,000) of the meagerly populated state, Darwin is famous for its native wildlife, stunning lightning storms and Aboriginal art and culture.

But the capital of the NT is far from a sleepy backwater and is more than just an "exotic" tourist haven. If you, as a non-Australian, thought otherwise, you would be forgiven for doing so because Australians themselves have very little idea about the NT and Territorians (as residents of the NT are known) are used to being snubbed by politicians, entertainers, and their own countrymen down south.

When you look closer, you see an emerging pattern of migration from Bangladesh to this quiet city in the outback—especially in the last three to four years. The number of immigrants of Bangladeshi origin in Darwin is modest—no more than a thousand. Many of them are first or second generation immigrants who moved here from big cities like Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The rest of them are students at Charles Darwin University, the only university based in the NT, and the driving factor behind the number of Bangladesh-born immigrants almost



PHOTO: COURTESY

# DARWIN: THE PORTAL TO ASIA

NAHELA NOWSHIN

On the flipside, however, the Northern Territory's state sponsorship programme that grants five extra points on some visas is a marked departure from the federal government's policies. (Many Bangladeshis opted to migrate to the NT for this reason alone.) The message is clear: the north wants more people and the south wants less, which explains why migrants from our region are eyeing the population-starved NT due to it being an easy entry point.

Beyond the stories of economic development, immigration and people-eating crocodiles, however, is a larger, more complex dynamic. Darwin is a key defence hub indispensable to both Australian and American security interests. When North Korea recently claimed that it had launched long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles, which reportedly landed in the Sea of Japan, Darwin was in the direct line of fire. Although US military presence in Darwin is nothing new, escalating tensions between the US and North Korea and the increasing militarisation of Darwin have given the latter renewed geopolitical importance.

This is not the first time that the city has been a flashpoint of conflict between larger powers. The Japanese bombed it in two waves during WWII—now referred to as "Australia's Pearl Harbor". Now, as the Australian government shifts its focus to the long-ignored, under-developed north, a huge burden of charting its future lies with migrants. With western countries tightening their borders, Northern Australia (and Darwin still undergoing its post-war transformation) remains an exception to the norm.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.



Bangladeshi Student Association in Charles Darwin University on Open Day 2017.

PHOTO: COURTESY

doubling in Darwin in the last four years.

A woman in her early 40s whose father came to Australia from Bangladesh in the 1960s tells me that Bangladeshis here have carved out a little, tight-knit community of their own. They find little joys in organising *pitha utshabs* and celebrating national observance days like *Bijoy Dibosh*. She tells me that far from feeling alienated or isolated, the Bangladeshi diaspora crave the hassle-free, laidback lifestyle in Darwin—a far cry from the chaotic urban life in Dhaka. As one of the largest cities in the Top End and hailed as Australia's "gateway

to Asia", Darwin (and the NT as a whole) is integral to the country's future economic development. Despite comprising over 50 percent of the country's landmass, Northern Australia hosts only 5.5 percent of Australia's total population of 24 million. The discrepancies between Northern and Southern Australia are too large, which is why the Australian government is looking towards the north to lead the growth momentum and ease the pressure on big metropolises like Sydney and Melbourne in the south.

In all this, immigration to the NT from South and Southeast Asia will play a

crucial role and Australia's immigration policies reflect this north-south dichotomy in light of the Turnbull administration's overhaul of the migration process. The raft of proposed changes to citizenship laws that include increasing the permanent residency requirement (from one year) to four years and tougher English proficiency tests, and the controversial move to do away with the 457 visa programme—an employer-sponsored skilled migration visa that allowed foreign workers to live with their immediate family—are a clear sign that the immigration issue is high on the agenda.

### ABOUT TOWN

**6TH NATIONAL YOUTH THEATRE FESTIVAL**  
Organiser: People's Theatre Association  
Sep 30-Oct 5, 5-9 pm, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy

**EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING THROUGH FUN AND GAMES WORKSHOP**  
Organiser: Kids Time  
September 29, 9.30 am – 3 pm, Light of Hope, 5/12, Block D, Lalmatia

**DIFFERENT IMAGES OF MEN PHOTO EXHIBITION**  
Organiser: ActionAid Bangladesh  
September 30, 11 am–8 pm, Drik Gallery, Dhanmondi