

# The long road to better health

*If we are serious about making health facilities more accessible and reducing inequalities, increasing public health expenditure is essential*

## Myanmar's offer for repatriation

*There must be immediate halt to persecution*

THE proposal by the government of Myanmar to take back the Rohingyas is a positive development. We welcome the move but of course nothing has been said precisely about how this repatriation is to take place. We understand that a joint working group will be set up between Bangladesh and Myanmar to work out the modalities of repatriation that include a verification process. But before we get to the subject of Rohingyas returning to their homeland, three imperative conditions must be fulfilled by Myanmar. Firstly, the flow of Rohingyas from that country must be halted immediately. Thousands of people are still streaming over the border to Bangladesh every day, and unless Myanmar takes steps to halt the ongoing military action in Rakhine State, the refugee crisis will not end. As much as we would like to believe the Myanmar government's position on the displaced community's repatriation, its sincerity will be tested if the persecution of the Rohingyas stops immediately. Despite claims by the Myanmar authorities that no military action has taken place in Rakhine since September 5, there has been ample evidence to the contrary.

Secondly, the Myanmar authorities must ensure a stable, congenial condition in Rakhine to generate a sense of safety in the minds of the Rohingya to motivate them to return. Bangladesh is already hosting more than 500,000 of Myanmar's minorities since the brutal suppression that has been termed by the UN as "ethnic cleansing". Unless the hostilities against an unarmed civilian populace end, the exodus will continue and there cannot be any repatriation.

Thirdly, there must be a timetable for completing the repatriation, and the UNHCR should be party to the MoU, as it was back in 1993, to facilitate repatriation of Myanmar nationals.

## Siddiqur compensated with a job

*Now punish those responsible for his condition*

WE are happy to know that Siddiqur Rahman, the third-year student of political science at Government Titumir College, has been given a job of a telephone operator at the state-owned Essential Drugs Company Limited. His eyes were damaged when a policeman shot a teargas canister at close range on July 20 this year during a demonstration staged by the students of seven Dhaka University affiliated colleges.

It was good to see that after the incident, the government took the responsibility of his treatment and sent him to India as per the directive of the prime minister. The doctors in India tried in vain to restore his eyesight. Now that he has completely lost his eyesight, the government has compensated him with a job.

As Siddiqur has entered a new chapter of his life by taking up the job, the questions that we cannot keep away from our mind are: What will happen to the dreams that he had as a student? Will those dreams remain unfulfilled? Is he destined to be a telephone operator for the rest of his life? And, most importantly, does he not deserve justice? Therefore, while we appreciate the government's good gesture, we wonder what has happened of those policemen who were responsible for Siddiqur's misfortune.

In order to make sure that this type of incident is not repeated in future, there is no alternative to making examples of those who were responsible for Siddiqur's condition. Thus, we strongly urge the government to bring the unruly policemen to justice quickly. Is it too much to ask?

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Preserve the sanctity of Shaheed Minar

The Central Shaheed Minar is the ultimate symbol of our glorious Language Movement, which paved the way for our liberation movement. However, it is shameful that we have not been able to preserve the sanctity of this place.

The state of Shaheed Minar all year round speaks volumes of the extent of neglect. Hordes of people are often seen sitting around the monument (as there is no boundary) and sometimes even on the dais. It has also become a business place for various hawkers. Though the notification of rules and regulation has been posted, no one bothers to obey it. On-duty police officers also are least bothered about preventing violation of rules.

The authorities should increase awareness among the public and penalise those who break the rules so that the sanctity of the monument can be preserved.

Tamzid Hossain, University of Dhaka

### Boro crop as a solution to rice shortage

Floods have damaged Aush crops across the country resulting in great economic loss. The season of Boro crop is coming. And we need to make full use of it.

The farmers should be given support during this season as they have already suffered badly during this year's floods. The affected farmers should be given assistance in the form of seeds, fertilizers, agricultural equipment and supply of water. A bumper production of Boro crop may solve the problems of the unavailability and unaffordability of rice in the market.

Shafkat Rahman, By email



SELIM RAIHAN

THE Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have 17 goals and 169 targets. Goal 3 aims to ensure health and well-being for all at all ages by improving reproductive, maternal and child health; end the epidemics of major communicable diseases; reduce non-communicable and environmental diseases; achieve universal health coverage; and ensure access to safe, affordable and effective medicines and vaccines for all by 2030. There are 13 targets and 26 indicators under this goal.

Better health of the population is important since it contributes to the development of human capital and promotes economic growth. With better health, people enjoy higher life expectancy, become more productive and save more. The cross-country evidence suggests that income and health are highly correlated. Countries with higher per capita income tend to also have

*Public health expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) is only 0.8 percent in Bangladesh which is one of the lowest in South Asia.*

higher life expectancy at birth, and improvements in numerous other health-related indicators. Access to better health facilities affects the inequality status between countries as well as within country.

If we look at the state of some leading health indicators, Bangladesh has made considerable progress between 1990 and 2015. Especially, the progress in maternal mortality, infant and child mortality and life expectancy are noteworthy. In 2015, Bangladesh's status was better than India



A few patients at a ward in Itna Upazila Health Complex in Kishoreganj. Most of the beds here remain empty all year round due to the lack of healthcare facilities.

PHOTO: Collected

and Pakistan in the cases of child mortality, infant mortality and life expectancy at birth. In the case of maternal mortality, Bangladesh was better than Pakistan. However, in all these indicators, Bangladesh was considerably lagging behind Sri Lanka, China, and Malaysia.

To achieve the targets under Goal 3 by 2030, Bangladesh has to reduce the maternal mortality ratio from 176 to less than 70, reduce the under-5 mortality rate from 37.6 to 25, and reduce infant mortality rate from 30.7 to 12. Also, since Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) of the SDGs is closely linked to Goal 3, we see that despite notable progress between 1990 and 2015, Bangladesh was far behind Sri Lanka, China, and Malaysia in 2015. However, in the case of improved sanitation facilities, Bangladesh was ahead of India. In order to achieve 100 percent access to improved water and sanitation facilities by 2030, Bangladesh has to make definite progress in the next 13 years.

There are numerous challenges for Bangladesh in achieving the aforementioned targets by 2030. Public health expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) is only

0.8 percent in Bangladesh which is one of the lowest in South Asia. For this reason, the share of out-of-pocket health expenditure in total health expenditure in Bangladesh is one of the highest in South Asia. In 2015, this ratio was as high as 67 percent in Bangladesh in comparison with only 32 percent in China or 35 percent in Malaysia. In South Asia, Sri Lanka has the lowest ratio of 42 percent. This suggests that the burden of health expenditure heavily falls on the households in Bangladesh where the government has taken much lesser share.

One interesting question could be, with the low ratio of public health expenditure in GDP how can Bangladesh make noticeable achievements in some health-related indicators? There is evidence that over the past few decades, Bangladesh opted for low-cost solutions to some vital health-related problems. Also, widespread activities of NGOs created some necessary awareness. The large inflow of remittances too played an important role in increasing the capacities of the households for high out-of-pocket health expenditure.

However, in future, such options are

likely to be limited as health systems in Bangladesh are increasingly facing hard and multifaceted challenges. This is due to the new pressures originating from an aging population, rising prevalence of chronic diseases, and the growing need for intensive uses of expensive and critical health-related equipment. Furthermore, financing health-related problems through out-of-pocket expenditures increases inequality within society, as this places a huge cost burden on the poorer people and thus keeps the vicious cycle of disease-poverty alive. Investment in health is thus not only desirable but also an essential policy priority.

Therefore, Bangladesh has to increase public health expenditure as the percentage of GDP from its current meagre level of 0.8 percent to at least 2.5 percent in the coming years and make such spending more efficient. Also, efforts need to be in place to deal with growing expectations of the people and to reduce persistent inequalities in access to better health facilities.

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# Moving from development finance to climate finance

## POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has declared her intention to make Bangladesh graduate from being a Least Developed Country (LDC) within the next

few years and the government has already formally notified the United Nations of this intent.

LDC is a UN-recognised category that brings with it certain privileges such as access to grants and low-interest loan funding under Official Development Assistance (ODA) from the developed countries. Bangladesh, as an LDC, has been getting several billion US dollars

status, into lower-middle-income status, we will no longer be eligible to receive these concessional ODA funds and will have to take loans on open-market interest terms.

This means that we need to start planning for this transition straight away. Below are some ways in which we can plan to cope with the time without ODA and possibly replace it with climate finance.

Firstly, while we have been the recipient of ODA to the tune of several billion dollars a year, the total amount of global ODA from the rich countries—around USD 100 billion—is, in fact, shrinking. This is for a combination of reasons including the fact that giving ODA is difficult to justify during times of economic austerity in richer countries as well as

graduating from LDC status, ODA would be shrinking anyway.

On the other hand, the world of global climate finance is in fact growing with the upcoming pledged replenishment of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to the tune of USD 100 billion a year, starting from 2020. These funds will be given to developing countries to tackle climate change, either for mitigation or adaptation, and will be in the form of grants or low-interest loans.

So even if Bangladesh is no longer an LDC, and hence no longer eligible for ODA, it will still remain a climate vulnerable country, and hence remain eligible for climate finance to tackle climate change.

However, the rules of accessing climate finance are not the same as accessing ODA, and hence Bangladesh

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teams of eleven players and involve a ball, but cricket is a much more complicated game. So to assume that since we are good football players we will also automatically be good cricket players would be wrong.

The government of Bangladesh appears to understand this game, and through the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance (MoF) has been capacitating not only the public-sector institutions but also private-sector companies and NGOs to let them know how they can apply to access climate finance from the GCF.

There has already been some initial success as the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) has been awarded USD 40 million as grant from the GCF, and another proposal from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is under consideration by the GCF. However, our aim should be for Bangladesh—through public-sector entities as well as the private sector and NGOs—to apply for and successfully compete to get hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars a year, from the GCF from 2020 onwards.

If all the stakeholders are able to equip themselves to be able to play their respective roles properly, this should indeed be achievable.

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Two people using a raft to transport their sheep back home. Excessive rainfalls and onrush of water from the hills caused unusual floods across the haor region of Sylhet and left thousands stranded early this year.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

each year in such concessional ODA either through low-interest loans from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank or as grants from bilateral donors such as UK, Germany, USA, Denmark, European Commission and others.

the rise of right-wing political parties who explicitly oppose giving ODA. President Donald Trump, for example, has already slashed the US's proposed ODA through USAID and other UN bodies. Hence, even if we were not

has to learn to play by the rules of the "climate finance game" in order to get access to these funds. At a simple level, if accessing ODA is like playing football, then accessing climate finance is like playing cricket! Both games are played by