

## Continue the diplomatic pressure on Myanmar

### MoU on Rohingya repatriation needed now

WE welcome the call by the delegates at the 13th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) to implement the Kofi Annan Commission recommendations and finalise the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bangladesh and Myanmar that would put in place a roadmap for the return of displaced Rohingyas to the Rakhine state. It is good to see the EU standing by Bangladesh's demand that Myanmar must make moves to demonstrate its willingness to take back its people.

While China has proposed a three-phase plan to be implemented through bilateral consultations between the two countries, we should keep our focus on the diplomatic front that involves the international community. Bangladesh has been taking the burden of about a million people on its soil, largely using its own resources. This is a situation that cannot be sustained much longer. Myanmar needs to demonstrate to the world that the regime has stopped the atrocities which precipitated large-scale exodus of the Rohingyas in the first place, and create conditions for the safe return of the refugees.

And it is only when we have a MoU in place that we can talk about the manner in which the Rohingyas may return to their homeland. We find it ironic that the democratic leader of Myanmar, till now, refuses to acknowledge Rohingyas as the country's nationals and chooses to talk about "terrorism and violent extremism." Our two countries need an agreement that would lay out timelines and conditions for the repatriation of Rohingyas very soon.

## HC's order against holding deceased's body

### A time-befitting directive

THE High Court on Sunday ordered hospitals and clinics not to hold any deceased's body to realise treatment costs. It also directed the health secretary and the director general of the Directorate General of Health Services to issue a circular in this regard and create a fund for paying the medical bills of such patients. We welcome the High Court's timely order.

The directive came after the hearing of a writ petition filed by the rights body Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh in 2012 when a report was published in a Bangla newspaper that a hospital in the capital did not hand over the body of a baby boy to his parents as they failed to pay the medical bills.

An icddr,b study in 2015 found that 6.4million people in Bangladesh get poorer every year due to dealing with excessive medical costs. But as our public healthcare facilities are inadequate, people often do not have any option but to go to private hospitals or clinics for treatment. There are widespread allegations against these private hospitals of providing wrong treatment and charging exorbitantly. What is more, if any patient dies while under their care, hospital authorities do not hand over bodies to the patient's relatives until the bills are paid. Poor patients are mostly the victims of such inhuman practice.

We hope our private hospitals will heed the High Court's directive and act accordingly. The government, meanwhile, should also oversee that the directive is followed through.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Don't perpetuate question paper leaks

It has been widely reported in the media that the question papers for this year's JSC exams too, were leaked on social media. The education minister has blamed some corrupt teachers for this leak.

What I fail to comprehend is how guardians could condone, if not encourage, their children's inclination to get a hold of leaked question papers. If our students become accustomed to this phenomenon, it will have catastrophic implications for society in future.

We hope that the authorities will bring to book those people who are responsible for the question paper leaks. Just blaming some teachers won't do. It is entirely unacceptable that the ministry fails to prevent leaks from occurring time and again.

Zabed Wali, *By mail*

### Education that we need

It is hardly a new thing that education and industry are among the most fundamental factors for a country to develop itself. As we consider education to be the backbone of a nation, it may not be an overstatement to say that industries are at the heart of national development. Unfortunately, however, we are not even concerned about our sheer inability to design our educational system as per the needs of our industries.

It explains why our universities are producing depressed and unskilled graduates who remain unemployed or underemployed for long, while local industries have to depend on expensive foreign expertise.

Shahedul Islam, *University of Dhaka*

## MATERNAL MORTALITY IN BANGLADESH

# Looking beyond the numbers

NAZNIN TITHI

A teenage girl named Zannat used to come to our house in Mirpur occasionally to help my mother with household work, some six or seven years ago. I'll never forget her ever-smiling face. She would come during Eid days, Shab-e-Barat, or Ramadan. I don't quite remember when she stopped coming to our house. A few years ago, I came to know from her elder sister that she died after giving birth to a baby girl. Her sister could not tell me the cause of her death. She said Zannat was never taken to any medical facility during or after delivery.

One or two years after Zannat's death, her elder sister (known to all by the name *Siddiqer ma*) also died after she gave birth to a baby girl, due to severe bleeding. She was in her early forties. The baby was delivered at home without the help of any medical practitioner. Her relatives said she had never gone to a doctor during her pregnancy.

In a span of five years, the two sisters had met untimely deaths due to childbirth related complications. Neither of these deaths were documented.

Recently, a leading Bangla daily has reported, based on their investigation, that the maternal mortality rate (MMR) in Bangladesh has not dropped in the last two years. In fact, it has increased. The report came as a big surprise in the backdrop of reports and discussions over the years that have made us think that Bangladesh has been doing quite well in reducing child and maternal mortality rate. We were hopeful that by 2030 Bangladesh would be able to reduce maternal mortality rate down to 70 per every 100,000 live births, which is the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) – 3. But now we have come to know that we have actually failed to achieve even the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) – 5. In order to achieve the MDG-5, the MMR should have come down to 143 per one lakh live births by 2015. Since we have failed to achieve the MDG-5 by 2015, it seems, achieving SDG-3 will be quite a challenge because in order to achieve that target, we would have to reduce MMR by 64 percent in the next 12 years (*Prothom Alo*, November 9).

According to WHO, the maternal mortality rate came down to 176 per 100,000 live births in 2015 from about 399 in 2000 in Bangladesh—the fourth highest drop in the region. And the

UNDP's Human development report 2016 has revealed that in 2015 the ratio was 178 in Pakistan and 258 in Nepal. Clearly, we did better when compared to some other South Asian countries, yet we still could not meet MDG-5.

The reasons behind this setback are many. Although we hear all the time that more and more expectant mothers are taking medical assistance during their pregnancy, there are still a large number of women giving birth at home, without any assistance from any birth attendant. Medical practitioners and organisations who work with

of pregnancy) and postpartum haemorrhage (severe bleeding after childbirth). According to the WHO, in 2015 there were an estimated 5,500 maternal deaths in the country, and postpartum haemorrhage was the main cause of these deaths. What is tragic is that such deaths are preventable. A study done by the *Lancet*, a UK-based medical journal, has found that there is a low-cost and widely available drug named tranexamic acid (TXA) which could save the lives of 1 in 3 mothers who would otherwise die from excessive bleeding after childbirth.

major challenge in reducing maternal mortality rate. For safe childbirth in rural areas such skilled medical practitioners must be made available at the upazila level.

As the daily *Prothom Alo* has reported, the number of maternal deaths could actually be much higher than the government estimates, as a large number of pregnant women remain unregistered. According to the abovementioned report, government officials working at the field level do not even register all the cases of maternal deaths. Also, there is little information



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PHOTO: STAR

maternal health have said at a roundtable held at *The Daily Star* in 2016 that in Bangladesh only 42 percent of deliveries are attended by skilled birth attendants, and only 38 percent of deliveries take place at medical facilities. And the percentage of home deliveries stands at 63 percent. Therefore, Bangladesh needs well educated and trained midwives to attend to the expectant mothers who do not even go to see a doctor during the entire period of their pregnancy.

The two major causes of maternal death in the country are eclampsia (high blood pressure during the advance stage

Moreover, early marriage is another reason for the increase in the maternal mortality rate. The risk of death from pregnancy related complications are extremely high among girls who get pregnant before 18 years of age. Thus, if we want maternal mortality rate to drop child marriage must be prevented. Also, annulment of the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 is a must. Because under this provision, a girl can be married off even if she is not 18 under "special circumstances."

In addition, a dearth of doctors, nurses and other skilled health care workers in rural areas still remains a

about expectant mothers who live in remote areas. Therefore, registering pregnant mothers across the country and bringing them under antenatal care is very important in order to reduce maternal deaths.

The cases of Zannat and her elder sister are blatant examples of deaths not documented. If these deaths are any indication, there must be countless such cases throughout the country. A country that has a long way to go before we can claim we have done enough to reduce maternal deaths.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Inequality comes to Asia



LEE JONG-WHA

FROM China to India, Asian countries' rapid economic expansion has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in recent decades. Yet the income

distribution has lately worsened, with inequality now potentially even more severe in Asia than in the developed economies of the West.

From 1990 to 2012, the net Gini coefficient—a common measure of (post-tax and post-transfer) income inequality—increased dramatically in China, from 0.37 to 0.51 (zero signifies perfect equality and one represents perfect inequality). It rose in India as well, from 0.43 to 0.48. Even the four "Asian Tigers"—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—which had previously grown "with equity," have lately faced rising inequality. In South Korea, for example, the share of income held by the top 10 percent rose from 29 percent in 1995 to 45 percent in 2013.

This trend is being driven largely by the same forces that have fuelled Asia's economic growth in recent decades: unbridled globalisation and technological progress. Increasingly open borders have made it easier for businesses to find the cheapest locations for their operations. In particular, China's entry into global markets has put downward pressure on the wages of low-skill production workers elsewhere.

Meanwhile, new technologies raise demand for skilled workers, while reducing demand for their less-skilled counterparts—a trend that fuels the expansion of the wage gap between skilled and unskilled. Capital owners also reap major benefits from technological progress. In short, as the Nobel laureate Angus Deaton has acknowledged, by creating new opportunities for a certain group of millions of people, while subjecting an enormous number of people to wage stagnation, unemployment, and economic precarity, globalisation and technological innovation have helped to widen the gap between the haves and have-nots.

Exacerbating this trend, income inequality often goes hand in hand with

inequality of opportunity. With limited educational and economic prospects, talented youth from disadvantaged backgrounds end up running in place. As inequality becomes increasingly entrenched, it can erode the consensus in favour of pro-growth economic policies, undermine social cohesion, and spur political instability.

To avoid such a future, Asian countries need to change the rules of the game, providing opportunities for youth, whatever their background, to ascend the income ladder. Market mechanisms are not enough to achieve this. Governments must take action, complementing their pro-growth policies with policies aimed

rule of thumb in combating today's inequality should be that simplistic egalitarian policies are not a permanent solution—and may, in fact, have adverse long-term consequences.

Consider the Venezuelan government's decision, in the late 1990s, to implement populist redistributive policies, without addressing the economy's overreliance on the oil industry and lack of competitiveness. That choice has pushed the country to the edge of bankruptcy, while fuelling large-scale social unrest and political turmoil. Venezuela's national catastrophe should serve as a warning to everyone.



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at ensuring that the gains are shared much more equally and sustainably.

To be sure, some Asian governments have been attempting to tackle inequality with progressive redistribution policies. For example, South Korea's government recently announced that it will raise the minimum wage next year by 16.4 percent, to 7,530 won (USD 6.70) per hour, and up to 55 percent above its current level by 2020. It will also raise tax rates for the highest income earners and companies.

But, while such measures have strong public support, they could end up hurting the economy, by reducing business investment, for example, and impeding job creation. In fact, the first

The best way to enhance both equity and growth is effective development of human capital, which not only supports higher incomes today, but also ensures intergenerational mobility tomorrow. This requires enhanced social safety nets and redistributive tax-and-transfer programmes, as well as access to quality education for all.

The good news is that many East Asian economies are already investing more in public education, in order to expand opportunities for all population groups. But more must be done.

Asia needs to improve further the quality of its higher education as well, reforming curricula to ensure that young people are getting the

knowledge and skills they need to prepare them for the labour market. Meanwhile, the labour market should be made more efficient and flexible, so that it can match people with the right jobs and reward them adequately. As technology continues to transform the economy, life-long education and training is needed to enable workers to keep up.

Promoting the participation of girls and women in education and economic activity is also important. Furthermore, governments should create an environment that fosters small innovative start-ups. And, of course, they should sustain pro-growth policies

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that boost overall job creation and reduce unemployment, while rejecting barriers to trade or innovation.

In today's charged political environment, there is a growing temptation to reject globalisation and embrace populist redistribution policies that could end up doing far more harm than good. Asia's leaders must do better if they are to realise the true promise of "growth with equity."

Lee Jong-Wha is Professor of Economics and Director of the Asiatic Research Institute at Korea University. His most recent book, co-authored with Harvard's Robert J Barro, is Education Matters: Global Gains from the 19th to the 21st Century. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2017. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)