

Error-filled question papers

A telling sign of the state of education

A look at the English-version primary terminal question papers for fifth graders for Bangladesh and Global Studies subject—which a news report published in this daily yesterday has revealed—confirms our worst fears about the state of education in the country.

One of the questions was: “What is happened in the people of this country as a result of ‘divide and rule’ policy of British?” Apart from the glaring grammatical mistakes in the question, all four answer options to this “multiple choice question” were correct but the students only had to pick one.

One gets the impression that children as old as 11 were first supposed to decode the unintelligible questions and the multiple choices filled with grammatical errors and then form an answer to questions which are far beyond their understanding in the first place. We would like to know the credentials of those responsible for writing these question papers. Because, if this is any sign of the condition of educators in the country, is there hope of churning out quality students? As it is, our education system seems to always be in the news for the wrong reasons—whether it is question paper leaks or problematic changes to textbook contents. We would also like to know who, if anyone, vetted these questions papers and the role of the National Academy for Primary Education in all this.

We hope the ministry of education takes this embarrassing incident as yet another indication of the need to reform our education system—and this includes recruiting quality teachers who at least have the competence to write error-free question papers suitable for fifth graders.

Bad loans getting out of hand

Why are ailing banks being bailed out?

THE banking sector's non-performing loan (NPL) ratio was 9.23 percent at the end of last year. This ratio currently stands at 10.67 percent as of September 2017. What is fast emerging as a pattern amongst loan defaulters is the use of courts to file writ petitions against banks as a ploy to not pay back loans taken by them. Banks on the other hand have been found to be sorely lacking in taking tough administrative and legal steps against the big loan defaulters. Volumes have been written on the issue of giving out loans to companies of dubious reputation and yet, year after year, scam after scam, banks have given out thousands of crores of taka with little hope of recovery.

We have in fact, wittingly or unwittingly encouraged the culture of defaulting on bank loans. And in the midst of all this, why is the government bailing out certain banks—that have continued to lose money year after year—without taking any constructive steps to rein in on their cumulative NPLs? Such banks have shown utter disregard in following established banking norms and display no intention to change their management practices.

The banking sector is in a state of disarray. With default loans climbing three times over a nine-year period, precisely what can we expect from Bangladesh Bank which is supposed to regulate and mitigate the anomalies in the sector? It is high time the central bank started playing the role of regulator by putting banks' boards on notice that this sort of behaviour will not be tolerated. Unless the central bank does this, there is little hope of restoring order in the financial sector and that is a very ominous sign for the economy at large.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Myanmar army chief's comment disturbing

The Myanmar army chief's remark that Rohingya refugees cannot return to their country until “real Myanmar citizens” are ready to accept them is deeply disturbing. It comes at a time when the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh are working on a repatriation deal. It's well-known that the military still holds sway over the country's so-called democratic government, and such a comment by its chief may have a negative impact on the ongoing negotiations.

But the fate of the Rohingyas cannot be decided by Myanmar alone, since it also involves Bangladesh. I think Bangladesh, besides pursuing its diplomatic efforts, should also focus on rallying international support for tougher measures including sanctions aimed at the country's military.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

Snakebites during floods

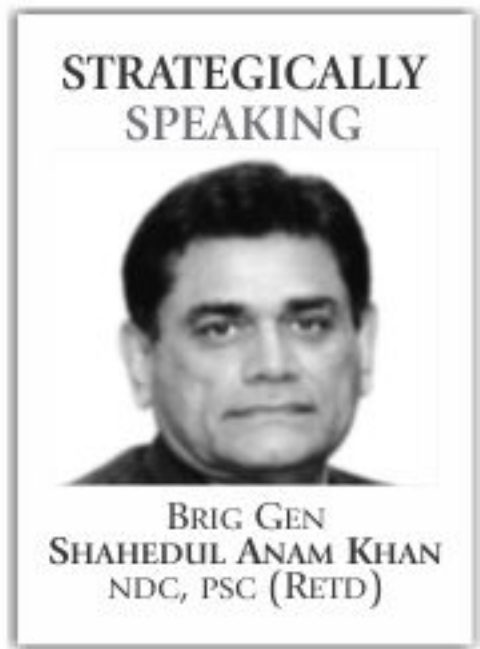
One of the most common challenges in South Asia during monsoon is flood. During a flood, there are usually two recurring, potentially deadly threats faced by the people: communicable diseases and snakebites. Although the outbreak of diseases is reported prominently, the incidence of deaths/injuries caused by snakebites is often neglected.

Once there is a flood, the authorities must ensure that, along with other humanitarian supplies and assistance, adequate anti-venoms are available in hospitals and clinics. We also need to make sure that victims can be sent to hospitals in case of emergencies such as snakebites.

Saikat Kumar Basu, By email

CHINA'S MEDIATION OFFER

How fruitful can it be?



THE two days of talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar commenced yesterday, whose outcome was not known till going to press. However, while the current talks revolve only around repatriation of Rohingyas, the wider aspect of the issue is being overlooked. Thus in the face of continuous resistance by some countries, and the collective international efforts to secure the return of the Rohingya refugees blocked, the Chinese offer to mediate between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and its three-stage plan for a permanent resolution of the problem, is a welcome development.

China had successfully engaged itself in mediation between the two countries in the past. We recall the unwarranted friction that developed between the two neighbours several years ago related to the presence of Burmese oil rigs in Bangladeshi waters in the Bay of Bengal. If the situation was defused, it was partly due to the role played by China.

Therefore, China's call for a long-term solution to the Rohingya crisis, and to resolve the issue of more than a million Rohingya currently in Bangladesh, consequent upon the state-sponsored violence on them by the Myanmar military, is an effort by a friendly country to see the end to the crisis and return of peace in Rakhine. The Chinese offer to act as a facilitator was followed a couple of days later by its three-point proposal at the ASEM meeting where China has suggested three definitive actions as preconditions for an end to the problem.

So far there has been no official reaction to the offer; perhaps the several points we will highlight below might explain why that is so.

To begin with, a simple question that emerges is, given China's fundamental stance on the Rohingya issue, how much will its effort to act as go-between prove effective? One might question China's credentials as an honest broker given Beijing's consistent support to Myanmar on the Rohingya question, not only this time but also in the past, when all efforts by the UN to come to a consensus resolution on Rohingyas were nipped by Chinese objection. This, we are constrained to suggest, has accorded a sense of impunity to the Myanmar military. China's position has, in effect, encouraged the genocidal attack on the Rohingyas if not endorsed it.

The second point is China's emphasis on the bilateral approach, insisting on the fact that negotiations should be between the two countries only. And this is what begs the question: What is there to negotiate?

The matter is crystal clear. A million people of a persecuted minority group of Myanmar have sought shelter in our land, and they must be taken back. There is nothing to negotiate, no give and take. So far it has been our lot to take, and now it is Myanmar's obligation to take back. The problem has been caused by one country and the solution is in its hand alone. Bangladesh

understandings have been very transient. The international community must be involved in whatever negotiation and understanding eventuate from the ongoing discussions. Any future agreement must not only involve the return of the Rohingya refugees, commitment to a permanent solution must be made by Myanmar, the framework for which already exists in the form of the Annan Commission recommendations, those being the outcome of an exercise done at the behest of the government of Myanmar. Anything less than an international commitment from Myanmar gives it the

conditions in the way of repatriation of the refugees, which it has tried even this time too. The fundamental reason for the crisis is Myanmar's own creation. The Rohingyas must be given back their rights including their citizenship.

Regrettably, strong language has not stopped the killings. That apartheid can and does exist in the 21st century would be unbelievable unless one saw the recent media reports on the Rohingyas in Rakhine. Their condition is worse than the people in the ghettos of Soweto. More tangible actions must be initiated immediately by the international community. Myanmar must



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PHOTO: AFP

has been the unfortunate sufferer. However, it would be nice if our Chinese friends told us what the points they think that should be the fare for the negotiating table are. On the other hand, the obvious fact is being overlooked. It is our belief that if there are two parties to the problem it is the government of Myanmar and the Rohingyas of Rakhine State. And it would be more apt if the Chinese were to focus on that and facilitate Naypyidaw and the Rohingyas to arrive at a long-term solution.

The “bilateral” focus is a Myanmar trap, and any endorsement of the idea is like throwing Myanmar a line to get a reprieve from the tremendous international pressure that it is facing. Bangladesh is very sceptical about this approach because bilateral

opportunity to give everyone the slip.

The three-point approach of China—cease-fire, repatriation, long-term solution—is a restatement of what Bangladesh has been calling on the Myanmar government to address for the last three decades. Each of the conditions stated therein is for Myanmar and Myanmar alone to fulfil. For example, the ceasefire; there is only one party that has done, and is doing, all the firing. And it is that party—Myanmar—that China should put pressure on to stop. The excuse of a coordinated insurgent attack on Myanmar security forces was a fig leaf to hide the barbarity that was to befall the Rohingyas. A bottled report of the UN that was eventually published had established that fact. And it is for Myanmar not to put

be prevailed upon to create conditions for not only the safe return of the Rohingyas but also their safe existence there, and the Myanmar military must be held to account for carrying out a genocide. As of now what faces the returning Rohingyas is at best ghettoisation and at worst death.

The world must not allow that to happen. And our common friends, who would really want to see these conditions created, must prevail upon Myanmar to create these conditions. Bangladesh cannot and shall not be made a party to the resolution and permanent solution to the problem. The ball is in Myanmar's court and one must not resort to subterfuge to pass it on to Bangladesh.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc (ret'd) is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

Talking about the unmentionable

The urgency of faecal sludge management



GLOBALLY, 2.4 billion people today do not have access to improved sanitation and 946 million still practise open defecation. It is estimated that only 26 percent of urban and 34 percent of rural sanitation and waste water services ensure hygienic separation of human excreta from human contact, and therefore can be considered safely managed (Hutton and Varughese, 2016).

Faecal sludge management (FSM), till today, remains a taboo issue, one that is hardly discussed or taken seriously. Why is it important though? A simple figure to start with will answer the question: Every year, Bangladesh wastes around Tk 300 billion due to inadequate FSM mechanisms. That is a huge sum, a sum that could otherwise be used for further development of the rapidly developing nation.

Every day, the global population produces 2.37 billion kilograms of faeces. In developed nations, it is treated efficiently and the treated products are reused to produce greater value for the environment and for the economy. However, in Bangladesh, inadequate and inappropriate treatment mechanisms continue to create more problems instead of opportunities.

To understand the situation in Bangladesh, let us take a look at the situation in Khulna as an example. In Khulna alone, 1.2 million kilograms of faeces are produced every day. Most people use latrines connected to septic tanks, a majority of which do not have soak pits. Many soak pits do not function properly.

Groundwater level in Khulna is high, which means that the untreated faeces stay in the water draining system. This exposes the environment to pollution, and puts our health in jeopardy. Untreated faeces in the open leave us vulnerable to an array of diseases that include anaemia, cholera, arsenicosis, dengue, diarrhoea, hepatitis, hookworm infection, malaria, trachoma, etc.

There are various ways by which this problem can be resolved. One way could be greater streamlining and well-

system finds out ways/roads to approach that household. Then a van visits the site to empty the septic tanks at the owner's request, at a fixed rate. The van carries sludge to already existing treatment plants where it is treated to be used for various purposes such as to produce fertilisers that can then be used in agriculture and aquaculture; produce biogas for energy; or be burned in a power plant for energy. Not only is the solution simpler, but has almost zero health hazards. What is more, such systems are not only available, but are

and implemented by SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, are contributing to dramatically improve the situation. In this way, not only will the environment be benefitted, but it would also benefit the residents by lowering their vulnerability to various diseases. The economy would benefit by employment generation and more business-like solutions, thus creating a win-win situation for all involved in the sanitation value chain.

However, in order to ensure smooth execution of plans, there is a dire need



Every year, Bangladesh wastes a mammoth sum of about Tk 300 billion due to inadequate faecal sludge management mechanisms.

SOURCE: MAFC.ORG

regulated FSM system to empty, collect, transport and treat the faecal sludge. The uses are manifold, if properly managed and utilised, both for one's health and the environment at large.

Ever wondered how faecal sludge can be put to better use, how it can result in income generation and to bring in business? Consider this—a GIS system has a map of the entire city that can spot every household; when owners make a request for emptying, the

also being set up within the country.

The recent launch of the Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management by the government is a building block of this system, which cannot go unmentioned. In the private sector, projects such as “Demonstration for Pro-poor Market-based Solutions for FSM,” a project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID),

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for a proper framework and a set of guidelines to ensure that the whole process runs effectively. With collaboration between the private and public sectors and a greater understanding and contribution within relevant stakeholders, not only can we help protect the environment, but also ensure sustainable solutions at large.

Syeda Samara Mortada is Business Development, Advocacy and Communications Advisor at SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.