

Act promptly to combat the outbreak

Return of diphtheria in Rohingya camps

WE are alarmed to know that diphtheria, a highly contagious disease, has made a sudden comeback in Bangladesh. According to our report, the first case of diphtheria was reported in November in a Rohingya refugee camp in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar. As of now, the outbreak has killed 27 Rohingya children while 2,700 others have been infected with the disease. Five Bangladeshi children have also contracted the disease.

A long-forgotten bacterial disease in most parts of the world, there has been no reported case of diphtheria in Bangladesh for the last 35 years. Because of our efficient vaccination programmes, we thought that it had been eradicated for good. But now it seems to have made a comeback.

The Rohingya children living in the overcrowded camps as well as Bangladeshi children living in and around the camp areas are at high risk of getting infected as this disease can be transmitted from person to person through droplets from coughing and sneezing and physical contact. Thus we think this outbreak should be declared a public health emergency and a large-scale vaccination programme should be carried out to contain the spread of the disease.

However, it is reassuring that the government had responded quickly by launching a vaccination programme on December 12. We hope that this programme covers all the children in the camps, and the 2,700 Rohingyas who contracted the disease get proper treatment. We believe that proper coordination among the government and the local and international agencies is key to successfully combating the outbreak of the disease.

Joy for schoolchildren

Textbook printing a great success!

DESPITE seemingly insurmountable odds, the government has started the free distribution of 35.42 crore copies of textbooks to more than 4.37 crore students nationwide. While it is a matter of great joy for children to receive a full set of textbooks free of charge, the government should be commended for getting the job done in a timely fashion. Making available such a huge number of textbooks to so many students at both primary and secondary schooling level is no mean feat, especially in light of the fact that there were so many problems in the content selection.

What is interesting to note is that efforts have been taken to introduce Braille books for visually impaired students. That we are taking cognisance of the fact that there are students with special needs in the schooling system is heartening. Indeed, the needs of the ethnic minorities have not been left out of this year's textbook printing which goes to reinforce the notion that we are a culturally diverse society that is inclusive in its outlook.

It was a test case for the government and it is encouraging to see that there is an equally vocal force that remains committed to a pluralistic society. The ministry should be thanked for the timely distribution of the textbooks which is the largest of its kind over a seven-year period.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Power of ICT

The *Star Weekend* published an article titled "ICT can drive away graft" on December 28, 2017. First off, I would like to thank *The Daily Star* for introducing ICT Awards to inspire information technology-based companies. Arguably, ICT is one of the most important sectors in Bangladesh right now and has the potential to change the country rapidly. As the *Star Weekend's* article emphasised, the use of ICT can pave the way for solving our everyday problems.

Bangladesh has experienced considerable growth in the ICT sector over the years, but we have some limitations. In my opinion, for the ICT sector to grow smoothly, the government must ensure that speedy internet is available everywhere at a lower cost. It should take steps to set up digital labs, establish a proper environment, inspire people and stop the brain drain. Only then can we expect a boom in this sector.

Mohib Billah Baschu, *By email*

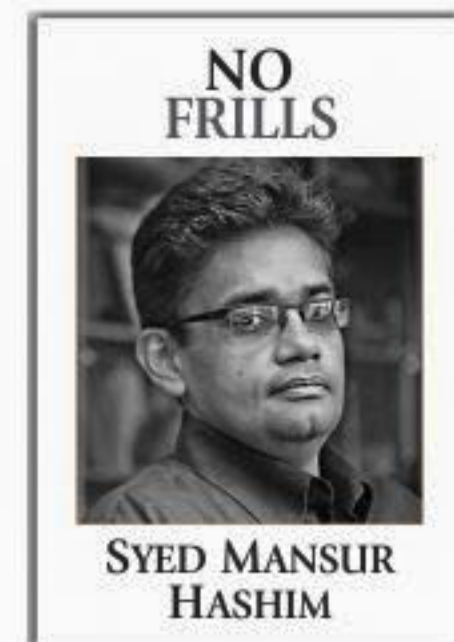
Lucy Helen should be given citizenship

The *Daily Star* published a feature report titled "A Briton with a Bangladeshi heart" on December 30, 2017. Lucy Helen, the lady in question, partook in numerous humanitarian works in our country during the liberation war. She is currently teaching English for free at a school in Barisal.

In light of the above facts, we request the government to award her Bangladeshi citizenship. With her decades of service, she has earned this, to say the least. She is so in love with this land that she wishes to be buried in Bangladesh. We should respect and honour our true friends.

Shafkat Rahman, *By email*

No good news in the Middle East



NO FRILLS
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

Middle East politics is the recent Lebanese experience.

The Lebanese are having to deal with the presence of the Hezbollah and Israeli and Saudi wariness about the Shia group and its principal ally, Iran. The Lebanese do not have any particular love for the State of Israel which had invaded the country in 1982 in the midst of a civil war that was fought along sectarian lines and ended up with the emergence of the Hezbollah as a dominant force in Lebanese politics.

All this is history of course. Today, a fragile coalition government is in place and the recent attempts to interfere with local politics have shown that Lebanon could once again become the centrepiece of yet another proxy war among Sunni and Shia players in the region. As the Syrian conflict draws to a close, Lebanon sits with the Hezbollah in government—a militia that was at the forefront of all Shia groups which fought alongside the Assad regime against not just the IS, but other, more moderate Sunni opposition groups that had the blessings of major Sunni powers including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

Today, there is talk of Iran's militias making bases in Syria. Although this is more hearsay than fact at this point, it would be premature to rule anything out at present. That country is a mess. Years of war have left Syria bereft of infrastructure, which will take billions of dollars and years to rebuild. Millions of people have been displaced and hundreds of thousands killed. The peace that is sought by most Syrians may be some way off as former coalition partners differ greatly as to what a post-conflict Syria should look like. It would be futile to think that the thousands of Shia fighters who fought against Sunni extremists like the IS and other like-minded groups would pack up and leave without having some sort of guarantees at the negotiating table.

Yet, Lebanon, a country that managed to stay largely insulated from the war in neighbouring Syria, finds itself embroiled in rising tensions between KSA and Iran and the fears of becoming a proxy battleground are not far-fetched. The Hariri incident has left a mark in the collective Lebanese psyche—Shia and

THE Islamic State (IS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (an al-Qaeda affiliate, known earlier as the Nusra Front) have effectively been ejected from Lebanese territory by the army there. The latest twist in



A fighter from the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement holds the Lebanese and the party's flag during a press tour in a mountainous area around the border town of Aarsal last year.

PHOTO: AFP

Sunni alike.

For Israel, Hezbollah is an entity that has no right to exist. Of all the opposition to Israel, Hezbollah represents a threat which has survived Israeli onslaught and, in light of the Syrian conflict, this group has found itself thrown into the limelight. That the group now has a president in Lebanon must make Israeli policymakers squirm. But to decapitate Hezbollah, one would have to take on Iran. Iran is also the arch-nemesis of KSA and other Sunni-dominated ruling houses of Arab nations. A setback for Hezbollah in Lebanon could be the first step against a war with Iran.

With President Trump painting crosshairs on Iran and its proxies, we have divergent interests coming together on the Hezbollah question. If we look at the group's capabilities today, a recent report by janes.com outlines the situation as follows: "Hizbullah has greatly expanded its capabilities since 2006 in terms of force strength, weaponry, equipment, training, and experience. All of this, plus more than four years of battlefield experience in Syria, led the Israeli think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies, to conclude in January that Hizbullah was the 'most determined and best trained' force threatening Israel and therefore the 'gravest military threat' the country faced....Since 2006, Hizbullah has built

its capabilities in readiness for another conflict with Israel. Jane's assesses that recruitment soared from around 3,000 full-time and part-time fighters in 2006 to more than 25,000 fully trained and active combatants in 2017, with perhaps another 20,000–30,000 reservists."

On the other end of the spectrum, the investigative report by BBC titled "Raqa'a's Dirty Secret" blows wide open the West's collusion with SDF and some Kurdish factions that allowed thousands of hardened IS fighters to leave the city with their families and heavy weaponry. When the news hit, there was denial at first and then damage control mechanisms deployed in an effort to first downplay the whole incident. The news was, in fact, largely ignored by major international outlets.

It would be naïve to think that the US game plan in Syria will allow it to go for reconstruction under Assad. It would be safe to assume that a large contingent of Raqa'a fighters have reached the safe haven of territory still controlled by the IS. Assad remains a thorn on the side of the West and certain Arab nations—and one shouldn't be surprised at the continuation of a low-intensity war kept alive in Syria to bleed Assad's forces and irritate Russia. Should such a scenario emerge, the Hezbollah forces presently engaged in Syria will remain bogged

down there indefinitely.

Despite all the bluster coming out of Tel Aviv, there is no major reason to think another war is imminent in the Middle East. Wars are both expensive to fight and impossible to control from faraway capitals. Given the possibility that the Syrian conflict is now going to evolve into a proxy war, Hezbollah will probably think many times over before engaging into an open warfare with its arch enemy Israel.

Similarly, there is little to indicate that the US will get into any serious military confrontation with Iran, because that would inevitably draw in Russia and China which have serious strategic and economic reasons to do so. What will in all probability happen of course is what has been stated earlier. We will be seeing the emergence of low-intensity insurgency through a series of proxy wars all across the Middle East that will involve hiring of mercenaries to do the bidding of foreign powers. Keeping the entire region disturbed indefinitely is an excellent way to keep orders for military hardware rolling in while making it very expensive for Russia to maintain a regional presence.

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Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

JSC AND JDC EXAM RESULTS

Symptoms of a troubled future



SHIFAT ARA

THE pass rate of Junior Secondary Certificate and Junior Dakhil Certificate examinations hit an all-time low in 2017 at 83.65 percent, a 9.41 percent dip from 2016. This is a weary situation for Bangladesh—a country with one of the highest populations in the world and known for producing lowly-paid unskilled labour in the international arena. Although government officials have no evidence so

memorisation rather than creating a truly learning environment for them. This is especially true among the urban, middle and upper-middle class. This has caused their creativity and intellectual growth to be stunted. There is in fact evidence that children are performing poorly in areas where intellectuality and creativity are prime and memorisation unfeasible such as mathematics and English.

If not parents, then the coaching centres do the same thing, by handing out notes for children to memorise and regurgitate in the answer sheets. Corrupt school teachers often give out undue favours to students who take private tuitions from them, which is a major breach of their employment contract.

make amends.

Another issue that bothers me is the issue of morality. How and why are children getting access to leaked question papers? Who is handing out question papers to these children of impressionable age? What will they learn if they are not incentivised the right way and what will their future be like? We are living in a nation where teachers and coaching centres are handing out question papers to examinees. In 2017 the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) submitted a report to the cabinet concluding that there is a syndicate of school staff, Bangladesh Government (BG) Press employees and government officials who are involved

of such corrupt teachers and staff who are ruining children's futures for monetary gains.

The phenomenon of question paper leaks in public examination is a cancer for our society. It will leave a lasting impact at the individual and the national level. The government has been tolerant on this issue for far too long and stern measures are needed to be taken urgently. The ACC's report on the issue contains some effective means by which corruption in the education sector can be mitigated. On the issue of question paper leaks, the ACC recommended employing honest and meritorious teachers in the preparation of questions, ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest for anyone involved in the whole process, from preparing to distributing question papers, among others.

Most of these recommendations should have been implemented proactively by the education ministry a long time back to address this issue at an early and controllable stage. Rather than playing the blame game, the government and the education ministry should now take immediate initiatives to correct the wrongdoings of corrupt government officials and school teachers.

It would be the equivalent of playing with fire if we allow these problems to linger in the education sector. As a nation, we urge the government to take corrective steps to ensure that corruption in examinations be controlled and a strong monitoring committee be formed to oversee the doings of coaching centres and private tutors. The government should also charge corrupt individuals under the Public Examinations (Offences) (Amended) Act 1992 to send a message to the bigger syndicate that is involved in this crime. Certain responsibilities also lie with parents. Parents should nurture morality among young children, encourage learning (not memorising) and create an environment for them to explore their curiosities and gain knowledge.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way the views of Swisscontact-Katalyst.



There are a number of factors behind the poor results of JSC and JDC examinations, including rote learning methods and a culture of question paper leaks.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

far as to why many examinees have not done so well this term, there are quite a number of reasons that are just waiting to be identified.

I would like to begin with a problem of a different nature—the problem at home. Parents are increasingly becoming over-involved in their children's education and imposing the habit of

The lives of students have become a quest for passing examinations with little or no regard to "real" education and learning. Its impact will be evident in the future. This approach will never work for them in situations that require analysis and solving complex problems and in the distant future, securing decent jobs. But by then, it is going to be difficult to

in question paper leaks. I fear that the loose morals of corrupt school teachers will pass on to the children and have damaging effects in shaping their personalities. Students who are working hard to excel in education will be highly demoralised by those who are taking a short cut to success. The education sector should be swept clean