

Why maternal mortality is not declining

ISHTIAQ MANNAN

MATERNAL mortality has not declined in Bangladesh. The 2016 Bangladesh Maternal Mortality Survey (BMMS), the third of its kind, revealed that the current maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is 196 per 100,000 live births, which was 194 in 2010. The survey indicates not only the performance of our health sector; it also reflects poorly on how women are treated in our society.

The survey was conducted by the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with technical support from international agencies. It involved a massive scientific investigation collecting data from 300,000 households all over the country. Unfortunately, since the embarrassing results of the survey were made public, there has been little effort from the ministry officials other than denying the stall in MMR decline. No substantive counterargument was presented either.

Bangladesh's recent progress in health indicators has been impressive. We achieved the Millennium Development Goal 4 related to child survival. Over the last seven years, delivery in health facilities and care-seeking interventions in maternal complications increased significantly. Unfortunately, these achievements have not translated into a reduction in maternal mortality, leaving Bangladesh perplexed in a paradox. Citing global lessons, experts had earlier cautioned that “business as



PHOTO: REUTERS

Monowara holds her 22-day-old grandson Arafat, as she walks through a mustard field on the outskirts of Dhaka.

usual” and dependence on contextual factors only (like education, communication, remittance, etc.) would not work for the last mile, and such a stalling effect could happen. The ministry did not heed the warning, and consequently, 42,000 mothers died in the last seven years. These deaths are unacceptable because 90 percent of them were preventable.

There are plausible reasons to

believe that our health system has grossly underperformed in at least four areas that contributed to the current situation.

Vast majority of mothers are still deprived of essential care

More than half of the maternal deaths are due to haemorrhage and eclampsia. Solutions are known and financial provisions are available in the health sector programme. We simply failed to deliver. For example,

every mother needs to consume two tablets of misoprostol within 10 minutes of delivery and that should substantially prevent postpartum haemorrhage. Only 17 percent of the mothers have received this so far. Despite having a large fleet of more than 150,000 health workers, both from the government and non-government organisations, the system failed to reach the mothers with tablets that would cost Tk 24

only. What is evident is the lack of prioritisation, proper planning, insincerity of the health workers, and inefficiency of the managers of different levels. This is just one of many similar examples.

Health facilities are not equipped to provide standard care

Be it public or private, health facilities largely do not meet quality standards. Only 3 percent of all facilities meet minimal standards of normal delivery care. Shortage of appropriately trained manpower, absence of manuals and guidelines, and lack of equipment and essential drugs impede quality care. Only 39 percent of the facilities have doctors available 24 hours to provide life-saving emergency obstetric care (EmOC). While a woman can die of haemorrhage within two hours, the huge number of health human resources are simply not available at the right time in the right place. Aspirations for reduction in maternal mortality thus remain elusive.

Fundamentals of maternal health programming are not prioritised

Fifty-three percent of our mothers give birth at home. It's hard to provide them with standard care and support unless they are brought under high-quality facility level care. Only three percent of those mothers receive skilled care at home, leaving the vast majority with no one to help if any complications arise. We have not yet been able to establish a functional referral system which is a key prerequisite to EmOC. As a result, maternal deaths taking place on the way to a hospital have risen to

19 percent from 13 percent in 2010.

In order to ensure referral-level care, we need round-the-clock presence of specialists to perform emergency caesarean section at the EmOC centres, many of which are now non-functional owing mainly to non-availability of anaesthesiologists. While more than a hundred countries in the world allow nurses to be trained to provide limited anaesthesia, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare hasn't yet done so.

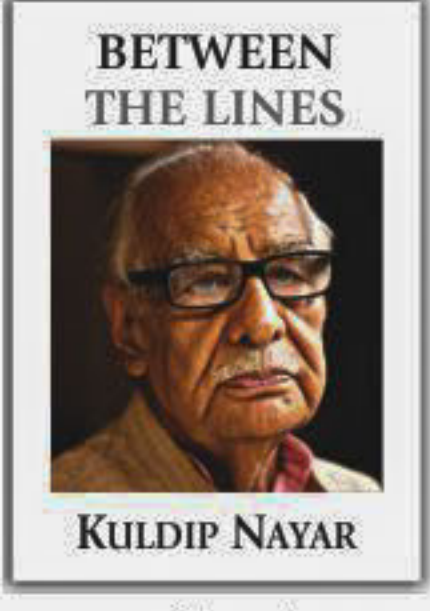
Accountability is absent

Mothers have died in their thousands—and they still are—from preventable causes, and yet no one is held accountable. It's rare to find a health system that has near-zero accountability like ours. The ever-rising tendency for unnecessary caesarean section is a perfect example. As opposed to a WHO recommended maximum range of 15 percent, our C-section rate is now 31 percent of which three-fourths are unnecessary. Public or private, the health sector falls far short of being “regulated.”

Bits and pieces of maternal health interventions, best practices, skills, and strategies are available in the country. What's absent is ambition, strategic thinking to connect the discrete dots, and most importantly, action on the ground. It appears that the health leadership failed to understand the “business unusual” needed for the last mile towards ending preventable maternal deaths by 2030, as have been committed by nations of the world including us.

Ishtiaq Mannan is a public health specialist.

Trumping up a new warning



KULDIP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES

THERE may be a grain of truth in the statement by US President Donald Trump that his country has “foolishly” given USD 33 billion in aid to Pakistan in the last 15 years. But he is wrong when he says that America has not got anything in return. Understandably, Pakistan could not repay in dollars. Nor did Washington expect that. But Pakistan offered bases in its country for the US to operate militarily.

President Trump is unnecessarily harsh when he says that his country got nothing in return except lies and deceit and also when he referred to leaders as fools. During the cold war when the world was divided into two blocs, Pakistan was on the side of America. Rawalpindi was a part of Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), a least successful alliance made up of unlikely allies like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom in 1955.

The purpose of CENTO was similar to that of the much better known—and far more successful—North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), mainly to contain the Soviet Union and prevent its expansion into the Middle East. Treaty members had to agree to mutual cooperation and protection. But, perhaps most interestingly, given the then political situation many of these countries found themselves in, they also had to agree not to interfere in each other's internal affairs.

As the group's original name the Baghdad Pact suggests its first headquarters were in Baghdad. However, an Iraqi military coup in 1958 resulted in Iraq's withdrawal from the group, which in turn resulted in a name change to CENTO and the headquarters shifted to Ankara, in a less fundamentalist Turkey. The organisation stayed out of the Six-Day and the Yom Kippur wars, although Iraq was an active belligerent in the former and provided combat support in the latter. However, it had pulled out of the organisation at that time.

CENTO also did not intervene in the India-Pakistan war of 1965 or during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, claiming that it was an anti-Soviet pact, not an anti-India one. The organisation was finally disbanded in 1979 after it was unable to prevent the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 or the Iranian Islamic revolution.

Justifiably, Pakistan could not accept Trump's tweet and it immediately reacted when Foreign Minister Khwaja M Asif

wings, made most of the situation and stepped in to defend Pakistan by saying that the world community should acknowledge its all-weather ally's “outstanding contribution” to counter terrorism, a day after the US President lashed out at Islamabad for providing safe havens to militants.

China, showering praises on Pakistan, said that Islamabad has made enormous efforts and sacrifices for the fight against terrorism and has made very outstanding contribution

partners. We stand ready to promote and deepen our all-round cooperation so as to bring benefits to the two sides,” said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman. It was expected because China is currently investing heavily in Pakistan as part of the USD 50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) over which India has raised objections as it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. During the first ever trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and

Pakistan of sheltering Taliban militants, leading to a long running spat between the two countries. China is seeking to mediate between the two neighbours through the trilateral mechanism.

Yet, the analysts point out that the US was mounting pressure on Pakistan as it has firmed up an alliance with Beijing by allowing heavy Chinese investments in the strategic CPEC corridor providing China access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

But with common interests, it was natural for China and Pakistan and lately Afghanistan, to enhance communication and exchanges. After all, China believes that Pakistan and Afghanistan are closely linked geographically. Understandably, the three reached consensus on several issues, including enhancing cooperation on counter terrorism and fighting against terrorism in all forms and manifestations.

It was expected that India would welcome US President's tough message to Pakistan on terrorism. “The Trump administration decision has abundantly vindicated India's stand as far as terror is concerned, as far as the role of Pakistan is concerned in perpetrating terrorism because end of the day terrorist is a terrorist... terror is terror and it does not spare any single nation, any single country, any single region,” Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Jitendra Singh said.

It is apparent that President Trump is unfolding a new American policy. This is far-right as compared to President Clinton's left-of-the-centre. The old values are no longer relevant. And Donald Trump is taking Washington back to the conservative era. India may have to oppose the US President because its left-of-the-centre policy comes into conflict with what Trump is advocating.

Meanwhile, it remains to be seen whether or not Pakistan can sustain itself without US aid. Islamabad has said that it is computing the total aid received from the US so as to return the amount. But it is obvious that Pakistan cannot.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist

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The old values are no longer relevant. And Donald Trump is taking Washington back to the conservative era.

PHOTO: AFP

to the global cause of counter terrorism. “The international community should acknowledge that,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said in Beijing when asked about Trump's criticism of Pakistan. He also added that China was glad to see Pakistan engaging in international cooperation, including counter terrorism, on the basis of mutual respect so as to contribute to regional peace and stability.

“China and Pakistan are all-weather

Afghanistan last week, Beijing had announced plans to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan which shares close ties with India.

However, former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai, has welcomed Trump's outburst, while calling for establishing a joint US-regional coalition to pressure the Pakistani military establishment to bring peace to not just Afghanistan but the entire region. Afghanistan, too, had accused

QUOTABLE Quote

MARGARET ATWOOD, THE HANDMAID'S TALE
Canadian poet, novelist and literary critic

When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32“-- been real!”	4Wish undone
1Car count	33Music genre	5Fruit-filled pastry
6Accords	34Workout unit	6Out of style
11Computer data	35“-- Miserables”	7Completely
12Apportion	36Equal: Prefix	8Like some security
13Cattle drive critter	37Lot sight	TVs
14Skiing site	38Criminal handle	9Outdid
15Storage spot	40Hot spot	10Boosts
16Naval initials	42Exact copy	17Ladies of Spain
18Spring site	43Decree	23Bear's lair
19“1-- Rock”	44Airs	24Objective
20River of Scotland	45Is overly fond	26Toppled
21Snaky fish	DOWN	27Fragrant flowers
22Blush	1Keep from practicing	28Verdi opera
24Says further	2Punctual	30Spooky gathering
25Tuneful	3Lenient college policy	31Small herrings
27Beef cut		33Levitates
29Negligent		39DirectorLee
		41Commotion

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	A	B	L	E		G	H	A	N	A
A	G	A	I	N		L	U	R	E	S
P	O	S	E	D		O	N	T	O	P
					E	N	L	I	S	T
T	E	L	E	S		S	L	A	B	
A	M	I	D	S		T	B	A	D	E
F	I	N	I	S		H	L	I	N	E
F	L	E	E			M	U	D	D	L
Y	E	S				P	U	N		L
						W	A	S	A	B
B	A	S	I	C		T	A	N	G	O
A	L	I	C	E		I	M	E	A	N
T	A	N	K	S		C	A	S	T	E

BEETLE BAILEY

THERE'S A BIG BUG IN HERE!

STOMP ON IT!

GREG! MOPT WALKER

NOT WITH MY FOOT!

YOUR FOOT!

BABY BLUES

GAME! IT'S CALLED CHECKERS, WREN.

(AND IT'S CALLED CHECKERS, WREN.)

YOU CAN WATCH, BUT BE CAREFUL NOT TO MESS EVERYTHING--

JUMP! JUMP! JUMP! JUMP!

I GET WREN ON MY TEAM FOR THE NEXT GAME!

AGAIN!

--UP