

Rising above the sea of "yes-men"

Why tax solar panels?

It will discourage solar power projects

IT is befuddling why the National Board of Revenue (NBR) has decided to slap value added taxes that would amount to a 27 percent levy, on the import of solar panels. This is at a time when Bangladesh is set to explore and develop its solar power possibilities through numerous projects. These include solar home systems, solar irrigation and solar power plants in various parts of the country. So far most of these projects have been successful and offer an exciting alternative to non-renewable energy sources that have already wreaked havoc on our environment.

So when it is obvious that we need to expand our solar power projects, why has the NBR decided to impose this punishing tax on the import of solar panels? Apparently it is to protect local producers. But at a time when we need to accelerate our solar power development to meet part of the exponential demand for energy in our country, protectionist policies are hardly the way to go. The fact is that locally we cannot produce solar panels fast enough and at prices that will be cost effective. The only way we can maintain the pace of growth of this energy source in multiple arenas is by importing the solar panels at affordable prices. The 27 percent levy will basically become a disincentive for those trying to develop solar power for various uses. To give an idea of the impact of this punitive tax: Around 52 lakh solar home systems that cater to 12 percent of the total population in off grid areas will become less affordable. So will the 999 solar irrigation schemes and mini-grids that have already been established. It will discourage innovations like installing solar panels on a school's roof so that children can charge solar lamps at school and take them back home where there is no electricity.

Thus, given the need and demand for solar power, not to mention the benefit of having a continuous green energy source, this levy is counterproductive to say the least.

Death due to medical negligence

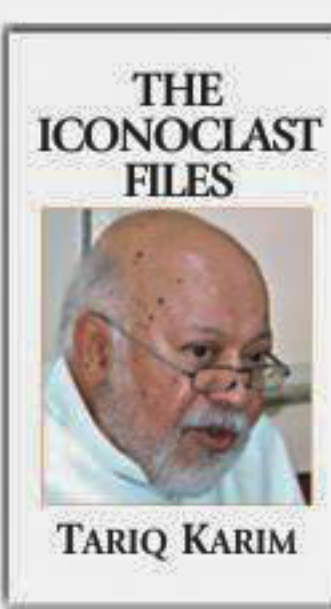
Take measures to improve patient safety

JUST two days after the unfortunate case of a three-year-old succumbing to alleged wrong treatment in a private hospital in Chittagong, two more patients died in separate hospitals in the city. In both cases, bereaved families accused the medical staff, especially attending doctors, of unsafe or negligent medical care. Sadly, the country's healthcare sector, both private and public, are being accused of irregularities with many hospitals suffering from understaffing, corruption, negligence, and lack of basic hygiene resulting in a sizeable number of preventable deaths every year.

Add to that the fact that often hospitals reportedly use medicines past their expiry dates to treat patients. During a recent inspection drive by security officials, a prominent private hospital in the capital was found to be using expired re-agents (identification chemicals) and other medical materials.

The situation is further aggravated by the absence of a proper monitoring and feedback evaluation mechanism. Often families are left in the dark about the basis for a certain surgical procedure being prescribed or ongoing developments of a treatment. They have no way of being certain that their patients will get the best treatment they deserve or holding the medical staff accountable in case of an unwanted occurrence. Who will they go to when something like this happens? What price can be there for a life cut rudely short by greed and negligence?

The government should take these issues into consideration and take necessary steps to ensure patients' safety. A lot of the problems existing in our health sector would be gone if a proper monitoring and evaluation system supervised by an independent commission, as suggested by Transparency International Bangladesh, was put in place.



TARIQ KARIM

IN Shakespeare's great tragedy *King Lear*, a powerful man comes to a tragic end because he surrounds himself with flatterers and banishes the friends "who will not varnish the truth to please him." Noted Dutch

social psychologist Roos Vonk described how ingratiation operates: "People in high-power positions are flattered a lot, so they don't get realistic feedback from others... They get a very unrealistic image of themselves. They find it difficult to tolerate people who disagree with them, and they don't need to tolerate them, because they have high power—they can always find people who will agree with them." This could well describe the culture of sycophancy that has defined the leadership paradigm in South Asia for long.

The adherence to this culture of sycophancy goes hand in hand with the adherence to personality cult in leadership that perhaps is at the heart of our malaise. The divisions in our society have been exacerbated by the competing cults of personality among our leadership, each contesting cult tending to cull the chaff of "nay-sayers" (dissenters or independent voices) from the wheat of "yes-men" (self-serving sycophants) that leaders prefer to surround themselves with. This twin scourge has almost destroyed the integrity of our core institutions, transforming them instead into viciously inclined and malignant toll-seekers solely engaged in exploiting and relentlessly extracting from society, instead of working for societal progress

There was no dearth of sycophants always hovering around Mandela, urging him to assume more powers, and to continue staying in power for ever. But this great man was quite adamant in ignoring such flattery and ill-advice.

and national advancement. As human beings, all men and women are fallible. Leaders are also, after all, ordinary mortals, prone to fallibility. But they are accorded status as leaders because people expect them to rise above the foibles of ordinary mortals, to rise above themselves, to translate to a higher plane the analogy of parents who make sacrifices at their own cost in seeking to secure better lives for their progeny.

In my professional nomadic wanderings, the words of one man who had to take a long walk to freedom, traversing almost three decades of imprisonment, still ring out clearly and resonantly in my mind today, more than two decades after I first heard them spoken. I had the rare privilege, then, of



Nelson Mandela flanked by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini and Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi at Hluhluwe Game Reserve in Northern Natal, April 30, 1995. PHOTO: AFP

being present at and witness to the proceedings of the 50th national conference of the African National Congress at Mafikeng, South Africa on December 18, 1997. At that Congress convened to elect new leadership, I witnessed at close quarters the seminal role of grassroots party workers exercising their untrammelled right to choose their leaders at local and national levels. In his valedictory hand-over speech, Mandela, addressing his successor, among other things stated: "Let me assure you and the people of our country that, in my humble way, I shall continue to be of service to transformation, and to the ANC, the only movement that is capable of bringing about that transformation. As an ordinary member of the ANC I suppose that I will also have many privileges that I have been deprived of

over the years: to be as critical as I can be; to challenge any signs of 'autocracy from Shell House'; and to lobby for my preferred candidates from the branch level upwards." Having said the above, "Madiba" (as Mandela was endearingly and reverently addressed by his countless admirers) deliberately put aside his prepared text for a few moments to ringingly assert words to the following effect: "My President, for you are from today the President of my Party and I am just an ordinary foot soldier, let me assure you of my loyalty to your leadership and decisions; but let me also assure you that even as an ordinary foot soldier of the Party, I reserve the right to criticise you when I observe you making mistakes. Do not surround yourself with

myself." A nation is truly blessed when it has a parent of the almost superhuman qualities of head and heart at its birth, who stays around long enough to help the child learn to walk and imbibe the important values that make life meaningful, and who knows how important it is to lead from behind, like a shepherd guiding his flock to safety out of the wilderness.

There were many divisions within the political fabric of South Africa's struggle for independence. As Chief Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Zulu Party (once mortal enemy of Mandela's own African National Congress prior to independence), frankly shared with me when I was meeting him in his office in the South African Parliament in Cape Town, the world should logically have witnessed rivers of blood flowing in South Africa following independence that would have dwarfed other horrific instances of blood-letting in the African continent or elsewhere in our times. But that did not happen, because its leadership had the wisdom and foresight to make a conscious effort to rise above their personal animosities, bury the hatchet in their hitherto visceral political contestations and come together on a common platform, ideological differences notwithstanding, in quest of a larger goal—the consolidation of the foundations of their newly redefined "rainbow nation". That former bitter adversaries, who literally and figuratively had sought each other's blood until very recently, were able to forge together a united nation almost overnight after reaching their goal of independence, will always remain an outstanding example of political accommodation and reconciliation in the annals of modern politics and nation-building.

Bangladeshis may have wrested democracy at the macro level for the nation, but until the practice of democracy also translates to the micro-level, to within the political parties and at the local levels of government, our democracy is at best very dysfunctional and incomplete. It will need higher standards of leadership than has been manifest so far, for us to graduate to a higher and more functional level. Mere demagoguery makes politicians, but the litmus test of true leadership is the ability of a politician to rise above mere rabble-rousing demagoguery to encompass a broader vision that seeks the common good of all the people they lead at the expense of his own personal advancement, and when he will place the nation above party and self.

But until that happens, the past shall not be past.

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"Anti-drug drive" threatens development

RUTH DREIFUSS and JOSÉ RAMOS-HORTA

ONE of the most densely populated countries in the world, Bangladesh faces formidable challenges to eradicate poverty and provide sustainable development to its communities. Yet the country has been successful in the past decade in rising to these challenges. According to the World Bank, the country's economy grew in 2016 at just above 7 percent, the fastest in 30 years, with average incomes for the poorest 40 percent of households growing 0.5 percent faster than for the country as a whole between 2005 and 2010. Many health indicators, such as immunisation coverage, tuberculosis control, maternal and child mortality rates, and life expectancy have been improving steadily. And there have also been considerable gains in access to education.

What could imperil this promising trend towards poverty eradication and human development? Certainly the aggressive campaign initiated by the authorities against illegal drugs, primarily affecting consumers and low-level dealers, and characterised by a lack of due judicial process that has led to more than 130 extrajudicial deaths. This campaign is reminiscent of the on-going crackdown in the Philippines—and deeply concerning.

This notion of waging a "war on drugs" is foreign to Asian countries. It was a construct launched by the Nixon Administration in 1971—the same year Bangladesh suffered its horrendous war of independence—to reach the unrealistic target of a drug-free America. This has resulted in prison over-crowding and overdoses epidemics in the urban and rural poor US populations, and in unimaginable violence and militarisation of the security sector in Central and Latin America, which accounts for incalculable human lives.

So while we certainly acknowledge the deep concern with the presence of methamphetamine in Bangladesh, similar "anti-drug" tactics in the Philippines have provided no positive lasting results—and cost many thousands of lives. The violent repression initiated in Thailand in 2003,

which also neighbours the precursor producing countries, failed so abjectly that the current military regime called for reform in 2016, and has now even moved towards the partial decriminalisation of use and possession.

Tragically, experiences elsewhere have shown that the people most affected by brutally repressive drug policies are the poor and vulnerable. The "anti-drug drive" therefore promises sadly not to reduce in any lasting way the presence of drugs

When the poorest communities are affected, this undermines attempts to lift the country further out of poverty or to achieve national cohesion.

An effective drug policy is admittedly complex and there is no one-size-fits-all. Different countries have adopted different policies as required by the particular challenges they face. But there are some common approaches that evidence has shown to be effective, notably by focusing on health, safety and people's rights.

members of society, thereby taking part in and benefiting the economic development of the country.

Effective drug policy also involves reforming the criminal justice system and prioritising law enforcement towards large-scale trafficking, the upper-levels of the illegal market and the corruption their huge benefits can fuel. It particularly requires that law-enforcement measures be guided by respect for human dignity specifically in



Several young men, who according to Rab are suspected drug dealers, are handcuffed and tied together on the side of a road in the capital's Geneva Camp area. PHOTO: COLLECTED

and associated harms, but rather to undermine the relation between security forces and the most marginalised in society, and increase the level of insecurity and violence.

This further weakens the trust and relationship between the state and its representatives, with the population they are to serve. This is particularly true when among those targeted by the crackdown are many who have a substance use disorder, which requires support and care, or who have engaged at the low end of the drug trade due to a lack of economic options, for their own survival.

This implies providing a range of drug prevention and treatment options to the fullest extent that the health system in Bangladesh can support. In the meantime, authorities should rely on cost-effective harm reduction services, which play an instrumental part in curbing public health epidemics such as HIV or Hepatitis C. These services should remain easily accessible without fear of legal coercion, and should be protected by authorities to allow people who use drugs of attaining physical and mental health and becoming integrated

relation with the most vulnerable and marginalised populations in communities and regions.

Not only are these measures far better aligned with Bangladesh's goal to end poverty, but they will also help address the root causes of drug use and trafficking, and therefore be far more effective on the longer term than the brutal approach which is currently favoured.

Ruth Dreifuss is former President of Switzerland and Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy. José Ramos-Horta is former President of Timor-Leste, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Migrant workers need govt help

The fact that there is so much controversy surrounding the recruitment of migrant workers from Bangladesh to Malaysia calls for immediate government attention. According to media reports, a syndicate led by a Bangladeshi businessman has been making windfall profits by way of exploiting our workers.

The remittance that these workers send back to Bangladesh is essential for our economy. Without it, our balance of payment will suffer immensely.

The least that the government can do for these workers is protect them from being exploited by criminal syndicates.

Md Mazumder, By-email