

State must show firmer commitment

Bringing an end to violence against women and children

IN the first 18 days of this year alone, 23 incidents of rape and attempted rape were reported in a leading Bangla daily. Of the victims, 15 are children, and among them was a two-year-old child. As incidents of rape, gang-rape, attempted rape, murder after rape and all forms of violence against women are on the rise across the country, according to various human rights organisations, we need to look at why we are not being able to stop the alarming rise of these incidents.

According to Ain O Salish Kendra, in the last five years, around 4,000 women and children were victims of rape and attempted rape. What is so disturbing is the fact that among the victims, 86 percent are children. And among the incidents where the victims were murdered after rape, two-thirds of the victims are children.

All information regarding the rape incidents is sent to different ministries concerned including the home ministry, according to police headquarters sources. One wonders, what do the ministries do with this information? Do they take any action to stop such outrageous crimes? And although the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs runs some programmes to address the issue, the impact of their programmes has so far not been visible. Also, the government needs to monitor whether the one-stop crisis centres (OCCs) established to provide rape victims with treatment, rehabilitation and legal assistance are run efficiently. In addition, the awareness-raising programmes of the government need to be strengthened in order to prevent our children from falling victim to this crime.

Finally, the government needs to overhaul the existing laws, amend the laws where needed and come up with fresh laws if necessary to deal with these cases. The low conviction rate in rape cases (only three percent among five tribunals in Dhaka in the last 15 years) is an indication that the laws are not enforced effectively. And as experts believe, we need to formulate a specific law for the protection of our children. Needless to say, all these would be possible only if the government undertakes vigorous measures to fulfil its political commitment to eradicate violence against women and children completely.

Strictly enforce medical waste management

The consequences of laxity will seriously affect public health

ONE needs hardly restate the importance of proper medical waste management (MWM). Yet apparently, this matter of public health has not gotten the attention it deserves from the related quarters. Improper handling or a complete lack of management of disposable medical equipment and toxic chemicals used in the treatment of patients, is a threat not only to the patients but also to the hospital staff and the public in general, not to speak of its serious impact on the environment. Studies have shown that outbreaks of infectious diseases are often facilitated by the disposable waste that helps transmit the diseases.

A picture carried in this paper on January 19 depicts a cleaner employed by a private hospital carrying empty plastic bottles used for holding toxic chemicals to be sold in the open. Had there been a proper management system including strict control on the use and carriage of these materials, such a situation could have been averted to a great extent.

The problem has been compounded further by the exponential growth of private healthcare service in the country, particularly in the capital city. And when profit becomes a predominant motive of any enterprise, cutting costs becomes a means of realising that. Thus, the propensity to reuse equipment and the unwillingness to invest in an efficient disposal system and oversight mechanism.

The situation demands immediate attention of the Ministry of Health and the Directorate General of Health Services. One of the DG Health's responsibilities is to exercise oversight on all hospitals and healthcare providers. It should make the provision of adequate MWM facilities mandatory for all hospitals and clinics. Punitive actions should be taken against those that fail to meet the requirement, including cancellation of licence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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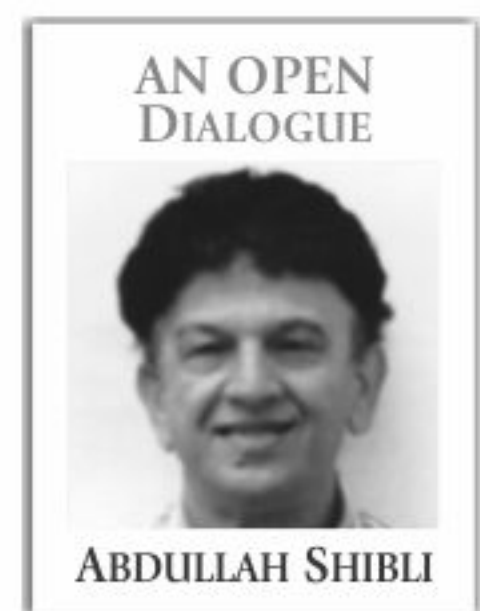
For a fair DUCSU election

The Daily Star has recently published an editorial titled "Make DUCSU centre of all campus activities." The student union of Dhaka University, one can remember, was once called the "mini parliament." It launched the career of a number of prominent political leaders. Some of the most consequential events in our history—such as the language movement, six-point demands, mass uprising—that led to the creation of Bangladesh were led by the DUCSU leaders. Even after Bangladesh came into being, DUCSU continued to play a vital role, and contributed to the fall of Ershad's military regime. Regrettably, it was after the restoration of democracy in early 90s that the premier student union of the country ceased to function and no elections were held ever since.

It took 28 years and a Supreme Court instruction for the university authorities to finally pay heed to calls for an election at the DUCSU. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that former and current students of DU are eagerly waiting for this election. However, the authorities must ensure that it reflects the aspiration and will of the students. It must not be marred by any irregularities. It must be an inclusive, credible election that would set an example for the politicians to follow. Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

AL ELECTION MANIFESTO

The challenges to ensure safe water for all



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Awami League Election Manifesto 2018 promises that many of the modern civic amenities I enjoy in Dhaka city or my ancestral home in Sylhet's Darga Mahallah will be available in every village. While I am not sure if all of the basic needs that I expect in these cities—such as running water, sanitary toilet, or electricity—will be available on demand in each of the villages by 2023-24, it is great to know that the new government will turn its attention to this matter and make it a priority.

Clean and safe drinking water is a basic human need and right. Clean water implies that water is free of E. coli and arsenic, 50 parts per billion. A recent World Bank report on water supply, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) warns that clean water remains a "stubborn gap in Bangladesh's development." Only a little over 50 percent of households can access clean water that is within 30 minutes of walking distance. It is difficult to obtain reliable and current data on the number of deaths and the cost of illnesses that can be attributed to the lack of clean drinking water. In a study published in August 2018 in the prestigious "The Journal of Infectious Diseases", the authors estimate that there are at least 100,000 cases and approximately 4,500 deaths each year from cholera. The majority of these deaths occur in children. According to WaterAid, a British NGO, "Over 2,000 children under 5 die a year from diarrhoea, caused by dirty water and poor toilets." According to Water Project, another international NGO, "With a staggering 60 percent of the population that has to endure unsafe drinking water, the nation is in danger."

The downside of this switch has been that our groundwater remains "stubbornly contaminated" with dangerous microbes, heavy metals, or salt.

In an op-ed published in this newspaper and based on the above-mentioned WASH study, Syed Mansur Hashim reports that 75 million people, roughly half of our population, are at the risk of

contracting the most serious diseases because they are drinking unsafe water. The report cites two seemingly contradictory case studies of two children living in very different environments but having a common issue: both are affected by unsafe drinking water contaminated by E. coli bacteria. I thought I ought to share a paragraph from the WB study with my readers since it paints the contrasting scenario so vividly:

"Shilpi lives in a small house in a farming village near the Bay of Bengal. She has just begun primary school, though both her parents are illiterate. Her home recently received its first electric power but remains without running water. Therefore, her afterschool chores include walking half a kilometre to collect water from a well by a cow pen. The water is contaminated with E. coli bacteria. Nadia lives in a flat in Bharidhara, an

sword. The transition from surface water to groundwater played an important role in the rapid decline in morbidity and mortality from waterborne diseases.

The downside of this switch has been that our groundwater remains "stubbornly contaminated" with dangerous microbes, heavy metals, or salt. The World Health Organization (WHO) alerts that 35 million people in Bangladesh are exposed on a daily basis to elevated levels of arsenic in the water they drink, which will eventually threaten their health while shortening their life expectancy. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that its figures show that approximately 43,000 people die each year from arsenic-related illnesses in Bangladesh. Its research finds that, depending on the progress of ending exposure, between 1 and 5 million of the 90 million children estimated to be born between 2000 and

clean water and sanitation for all as stated in SDG6.

In a World Bank blog, co-authored by the Principal Coordinator for SDG Affairs at the Prime Minister's Office, it is mentioned that "Bangladesh has still a long way to go to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of providing universal access to clean water and sustainable sanitation by 2030." But how do we fix these problems? It behoves the government to closely examine the WASH study for a list of issues that bedevil our water and sanitation sectors. For example, the study indicates that financial allocation for the overall sector development is insufficient. The WASH budget, as a proportion of national and LGD budget, has been declining since 2007. The estimated total budget gap is about 47 percent to meet just the government's envisioned water targets by 2025.



PHOTO: STAR

affluent neighbourhood of Dhaka. Her parents are university graduates who hold well-paying jobs. She has just begun primary school. Her home has air conditioning. Hot and cold running water are available at the turn of a tap. The water is still contaminated with E. coli bacteria."

So what accounts for this state of affairs? The primary source of drinking water for almost 90 percent of the population is groundwater extracted by some form of tube well. "However, tube wells do not necessarily filter out all contaminants, cannot always withstand natural disasters, and are poorly regulated. As a result, many citizens are sometimes unknowingly consuming unsafe water with either faecal bacteria, arsenic, salinity, or other contaminants." When we switched from drinking surface water—from ponds, rivers, and streams—to groundwater many decades ago, it proved to be a double-edged

2030 will eventually die due to the exposure to arsenic in drinking water.

When you come to think of it, many of the 21 election-time pledges made by Awami League are closely tied to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the UN. Take the case of SDG6, which calls for governments to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all." SDG6 has eight targets—six of them are to be achieved by the year 2030, one by the year 2020, and one has no target year. Each of the targets also has one or two indicators which will be used to measure progress. In total, there are 11 indicators for SDG6.

The first three targets relate to drinking water supply and sanitation. The SDGs are also interlinked. WASH experts have stated that without progress on Goal 6, the other goals and targets cannot be achieved. In other words, accomplishing the other SDGs will require assuring

"An appropriate mix of policy changes, gradual and time-bound institutional changes, implementation of regulations and effective citizens' participation to ensure improved water quality and maintain service standards is needed to overcome many of these constraints to achieve the goal of safe universal access."

Experts have also called for increased budgetary allocation for disposing of waste in urban centres. Another study recommends that "in order to make a significant impact, the government needs to reinvestigate the arsenic policies established in the 90s and change the maximum exposure amount from 50 micrograms to 10 micrograms (as recommended by the WHO)."

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Brexit Deal lands Britain in a political mess



FROM A BYSTANDER

MAHMOOD HASAN

THE British House of Commons on January 15 voted to reject Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit Deal by 432 votes to 202. The vote came after 200 speeches spread over eight

days of fractious debate. Just before the voting, Theresa May passionately appealed to members of the House of Commons saying, "I ask members on all sides of the House to listen to the British people, who want this issue settled..." The choice was plain: support her imperfect deal, the only one acceptable to the EU, or face the cliff edge of a no-deal Brexit. May hoped that dissenters will eventually vote for her deal. Yet, 118 members of the Conservative Party voted against their prime minister. Theresa May's Brexit Deal is now effectively dead. The vote has been described as a crushing, historic defeat for a sitting British prime minister. Indeed, it is historic as the defeat margin of 230 is unprecedented in recent history for a sitting government in parliament. Clearly, lawmakers and the people are now seriously divided over the Deal. Thousands of protesters gathered outside the parliament to shout at each other—illustrating how unsettled Brexit remains even more than two years after the referendum of June 2016.

May's debacle immediately sparked a no-confidence motion from opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who called the defeat "catastrophic" and asked the house to "give its verdict on the sheer incompetence of this government." Evidently, Corbyn is out to capitalise on Theresa May's predicament and force a general election.

In March 2017, Theresa May invoked article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty which gave Britain two years to complete the exit agreement. Despite having negotiated painstakingly with Brussels and grueling debates within Britain over the past two

years, the defeat of the Deal is no surprise. Over the past months, many from within the Conservative Party as well as Labour Party leaders have been vociferous against some of the provisions of the agreement. Theresa May's obduracy has landed her in this situation. She has persistently refused to listen to her party colleagues and also did not bring the opposition Labour Party members on board her plan.

May had three broad options: Hard Brexit, Soft Brexit and No-Deal. She actually opted for a mix of hard and soft provisions. The Hard Deal meant that

Ireland. In other words, it means that Britain will continue to be tied indefinitely to many EU laws, which is firmly opposed by the hardline Brexiters.

Theresa May, on January 16, survived the no-confidence motion moved by the opposition Labour Party. She got 325 votes against 306—a close call. Conservative MPs who voted against the Deal rallied behind Theresa May to keep her minority government afloat. The Conservatives have 317 seats in the parliament of 639, and require 320 for a simple majority. The Democratic Unionist Party



British Prime Minister Theresa May speaks during a confidence vote debate after the parliament rejected her Brexit deal, in London, Britain, January 16, 2019.

Britain will give up all access to the single market and the customs union. Soft Brexit means retaining access to the single market and customs union. No-Deal means crashing out of EU without any link to the Union. Hardline MPs of both parties want a clear cut-off with EU.

The "Irish backstop" became the centre of acrimonious debate as it provides for a soft border between the Republic of Ireland (a full member of EU) and Northern Ireland, a part of Britain. It is essentially a legally binding insurance policy to ensure that there is no hard border between Ireland and Northern

of Northern Ireland with 10 seats actually propped up Theresa May's government, though they voted against the Deal.

Theresa May has promised to return to parliament on January 21 and try a fresh approach to get support from across the aisle for a "common cause". Even if a consensus is reached in parliament, there is no guarantee that EU will agree to reopen negotiations. Actually, Brussels has clearly said that there was no scope of renegotiation over what has already been agreed. Under the present chaotic situation, it is extremely unlikely that May will be able to present a Plan B that will

appease the rebels. It appears that Theresa May has become a lame-duck prime minister.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said, "...The risk of a disorderly withdrawal of the UK has increased." French President Emmanuel Macron said, "Maybe we'll make improvements on one or two things, but I don't really think so because we've reached the maximum..." German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "We want to limit the damage and there certainly will be damage... but we are also ready in case there is no such orderly solution." Clearly, EU leaders are not ready to solve Britain's domestic issues and stop defending European interests.

As a no-deal Brexit seems increasingly likely, many economists and business leaders have cautioned that such an exit would be catastrophic for Britain. Uncertainties will prevail causing harsh economic and humanitarian consequences on both sides of the English Channel.

What, then, are the options for Theresa May and Britain? A renegotiated deal with EU—very little chance. A second referendum? Now that May's government survived the trust vote, the Labour Party may push for a second referendum. But May said such a move would subvert the democratic process. What happens if the second referendum votes to stay with the EU? Would that resolve the current crisis? No one knows. Change in the leadership of Conservative Party—easing out Theresa May and bringing in a hardline Brexiteer as prime minister? Can the Brexit date be pushed farther down, say, six months from the existing date of March 29, 2019? An extension of the exit date would require the unanimous agreement of the 27 members of EU. That may not be easily forthcoming.

Many Brexiteers had thought that the divorce plan after 45 years of marriage with EU would be easy. It certainly is not. For now, Britain is in a political mess.

Mahmood Hasan is a former ambassador and secretary of Bangladesh.