

A serious threat to public health

Ban on MBM laudable, but existing supply of infected poultry must be withdrawn too

THE government's ban on import and sale of meat and bone meal (MBM), a kind of poultry feed, is quite alarming for a number of reasons, including the fact that MBM poses a major public health risk. While we laud the move to ban the import and sale of MBM, we feel that some immediate steps should be taken by the government. Drives should be undertaken to withdraw the supply of infected poultry in the market. And investigations must also be launched to find out the extent to which the market is filled with MBM-affected poultry and just how long this dangerous product has been used as poultry feed in the country. Why did it take so long to ban MBM which is thought to have been responsible for the deadly mad cow disease and is known to contain extremely harmful chemicals and residues? Many European countries and even India have already banned it. Poultry is one of the most important sources of nutrition for the population and it should have dawned on the authorities sooner that, if left unchecked, MBM could have unimaginable public health consequences. The Import Policy 2015-2018 has clearly been violated as its provisions prohibiting import of poor quality MBM are not being followed. For instance, last year, the fisheries and livestock ministry discovered imports of low-quality MBM. Furthermore, it seems that hundreds of thousands of tonnes of MBM are pouring into the country through illegal means. So essentially, we have toxic poultry feed being brought in, that too in massive quantities. The authorities must ensure that the ban on MBM is strictly enforced which includes checking the flow of MBM into the country through illegal means. Customs authorities should also remain on high alert. The fisheries and livestock ministry should explore viable alternatives to MBM through consultation with experts and other stakeholders, and whatever the alternative, it must be remembered that the quality of poultry feed can never be compromised for the sake of public health.

State-owned banks must be freed of influence

High time policymakers cracked down on loan defaulters

STATE-owned banks have assessed that influential defaulters are to blame for the epidemic of loan defaulting and the continuously increasing bad loans. But the matter is not as simple as this frank admission makes it out to be. We have a few questions which we have been asking for some time now. How and why were these loans given in the first place? And why, despite repeated assurances of action against the defaulters, has no substantive action been taken against them? That undue influence and lack of due diligence in disbursement of loans is a major cause is known. In the recent past, even a list of top 100 defaulters was prepared, and according to these banks, 52 percent of the delinquent loans are stuck with these 100. So we know the prime defaulters; we know that there was a severe lack of oversight and in following procedure during disbursement, and that the loans were not always invested in the sector mentioned in the credit proposals. The lenders also point to the long-drawn-out process in the Artha Rin Adalat (money loan court) as an impediment to recovering these non-performing loans. But, reports about these irregularities over the last year have been met with denials from the administrative quarter. Ultimately, the lenders are correct. Fixing the problem would require that the pressure from political and influential quarters must stop. The commitment towards recovering these bad loans is laudable, and speeding up the judicial process is a must. But what we also need, similar to the identification of top defaulters, is investigation into who approved—and rescheduled, in many cases—these bad loans, and under whose influence. And our policymakers need to address the governance and management deficiencies, which have led to this state of affairs in the first place, by empowering the banks to be free from political influence, and ensuring regular oversight on procedures and the loans approved.

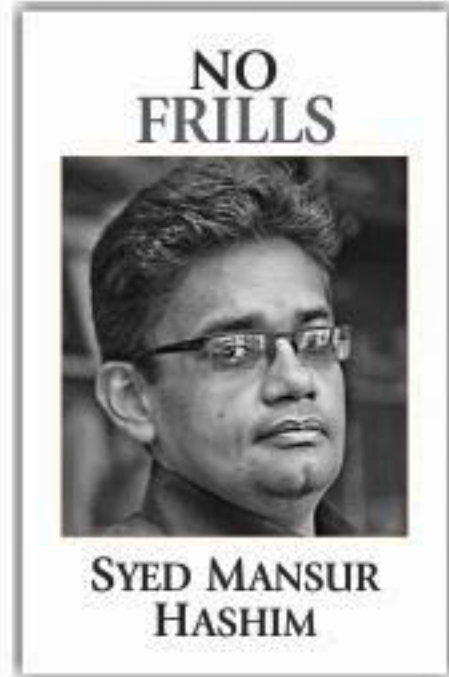
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's unbearable air pollution

For Dhaka city dwellers such as myself, the worsening quality of air is extremely worrying. As if the horrible traffic congestion wasn't enough, severe air pollution has made my daily commute to work infinitely worse. I am sure I am not the only one wondering why the authorities aren't doing anything to stop the air quality from getting worse. Dhaka is consistently ranked among the top cities in the world with the worst air pollution. This is one of the prime examples that show that our commitment to the SDGs, which include health and environmental aspects, is only on paper—not in reality. And we, the ordinary citizens, are simply helpless in the face of worsening air and overall quality of living. Tania Hossain, By email

The poverty we choose to ignore



ALL the focus of late has been on Bangladesh's upcoming graduation from the group of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to the lower middle-income group. Indeed, we have much to be proud of. As pointed out by a group of independent experts who form the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), which reports to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Bangladesh has achieved this qualification by fulfilling the main criteria, i.e. per capita income, human assets and economic vulnerability. And if in the next review—which is due in 2021—we can maintain the benchmarks, then full graduation will come around in 2024. Progress is being made on a number of regional connectivity arrangements like the Bangladesh-India-Nepal (BIN) and then there is the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) initiative.

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Upgrading the domestic communication infrastructure is also at various stages of completion including the much-needed Metro Rail (with Japanese assistance); the country has just signed a framework for the future development of an underground rail service. These are all facts. What is also a fact is that the rich-poor divide is expanding at a progressive rate. If we look at a recent government survey report titled "Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016",



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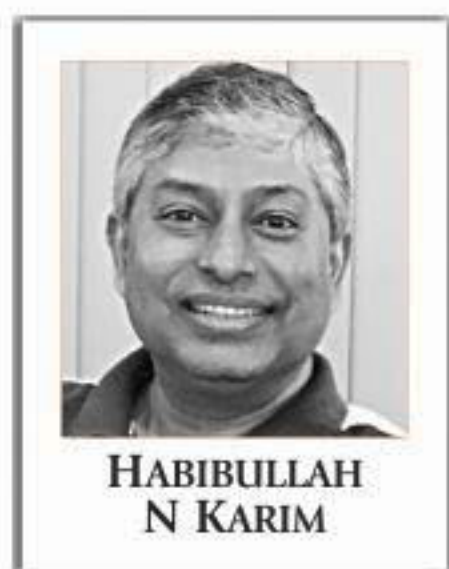
published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the poorest five percent had 0.78 percent of the national income in 2010, and now that share has come down to 0.23 percent. By contrast, the richest five percent, who had 24.61 percent of the national income in 2010, managed to increase their share to 27.89 percent in 2016 (over the span of six years). Yes, Bangladesh is on track to graduate as a lower middle-income country but it is also on a list of countries which have significant numbers of people who are categorised as the "ultra-poor". When we look at the World Bank report titled "Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing together the poverty puzzle," it says that many countries that have suffered high poverty numbers (like Bangladesh) are moving towards lower middle-income country status. "With this growth, most of the ultra-poor have also moved from being in low-income countries to being in middle-income countries, and nearly two-thirds of the world's poor people now reside in middle-income countries." And this is where it gets interesting: as more and more countries move from the low to mid-income status, so does the population share of poverty. "As of 2015, 5.5 billion people lived in middle-income countries as opposed to about 640 million in low-income countries, explaining why most of the ultra-poor—over 400 million—now reside

in lower middle-income countries." While Bangladesh has, undoubtedly, proven the international pundits wrong by refusing to suffer the stigma of "an international basket case", we find ourselves in an unenviable position where "half of the people living in extreme poverty in 2015 can be found in just five countries," including Bangladesh, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Nigeria). While we deserve favourable ratings from the rating agencies on the performance of the economy, Bangladesh also topped the list of countries that saw the quickest growth in the number of ultra-wealthy people between 2012 and 2017 (according to the World Ultra Wealth Report 2018), where the number of ultra-high-net-worth (UHNW) individuals rose by 17.3 percent during the stated period. To earn the title of UHNW, an individual must have investable assets worth a minimum of USD 30 million, excluding personal assets and property like primary residence, collectibles and consumer durables. As pointed out by the lead economist of the World Bank (Bangladesh) in a recent talk with Prothom Alo, the old model of tackling poverty was to increase GDP growth rate, the rationale being that higher growth rates would automatically reduce poverty, and the country has had a sustained six-to-seven-percent growth rate in the last decade.

Unfortunately, with this growth, we have also seen increased inequality and a decline in the rate of poverty reduction. While the government is gearing up plans to eliminate poverty by 2030, it is nearly not as simple as that. For poverty to be reduced drastically, poor people's participation in economic development has to be increased. That is not going to fall out of the sky. The government has to give special emphasis on increasing employment of the poor people. Agricultural productivity has to be increased, which will lead to a corresponding increase in labour wages. Looking beyond agriculture, the poor need to be brought under the purview of better education and quality healthcare so that they may join the labour force in greater numbers. For Bangladesh to reach the goal of "zero poverty", it is estimated that by 2030, Bangladesh will have to reduce poverty rate to three percent over the next decade, and as per BBS data, today the country has 11.3 percent extremely poor people. This is a huge challenge, so pragmatic policies will have to be adopted to prepare this large portion of the population to graduate from extreme poverty to a stage where they can enter the workforce as active players in the country's economic development.

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Dysfunctional superpowers on both sides of the Atlantic



THE greatest spectacle in the life of the US president—the annual State of the Union Address before a joint congress—is now uncertain as the continued non-essential-services shutdown of the US government is currently the longest on record at nearly a month. As House Speaker Nancy Pelosi urged President Trump to postpone the State of the Union address, the president pulled his rank as the head honcho and stopped a delegation led by the speaker of the house of Congress from flying to the battle fronts in Afghanistan just a couple of hours before departing on Pentagon-arranged military aircraft.



The US, under President Donald Trump (left), is currently mired in its longest government shutdown in history while the UK, under Prime Minister Theresa May (right), is embroiled in the never-ending Brexit drama.

protection services and even some airport security—in all, 800,000 government workers went without the usual bi-weekly pay-chequers earlier this month prompting widespread indignation and forcing cash-strapped workers to scavenge and borrow from any source they can. The capital of the 'Free World' now houses the largest soup kitchen (for the hungry poor) in the world. The shutdown even forced the US president to serve run-of-the-mill fast-food to a college football team invited to the White House upon winning the national championship. It's probably a matter of time before even visiting foreign dignitaries are served home-delivered pizza for lunch! Anybody watching any of the major global news channels will get the distinct impression that the US government is completely broken. That's a scary thought when you realise that the US maintains the



PHOTOS: AFP

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weather several "no-confidence" motions by the opposition and had to stomach a landslide defeat of the so-called Brexit Deal which even her own party men rejected. With ministers and other top government officials dropping like duck-pin bowling, Prime Minister Theresa May appears to sit atop the most chaotic British government in recent memory. France, another member of the UN Security Council's veto club, is roiled in populist opposition to the government reforms which opponents say are favouring the super-rich. The rough seas in the West are not a good harbinger for us either. Sooner or later, our exports will suffer a drop as the anarchic conditions in the US and the UK are bound to tamp down their economic growth. However, the silver lining is that the budgetary fiasco in the US can be easily overcome if one side of the political divide caves in—it would be interesting to see who blinks first. On the other hand, the Brexit situation will probably linger on until either the EU and the UK agree to come to the negotiating table once again or if the UK decides to hold another referendum to scuttle the whole Brexit enchilada. Compared to such rowdy political situations in the West, thank goodness that the waters are calm on the eastern front all the way from Japan to the Indian sub-continent. We must thank our lucky stars for a well-functioning government. God forbid if we have to order fast food in case of any shutdowns—we will certainly go hungry as no fast-food deliveries would be able to negotiate their way across the traffic gridlocks paralysing the capital.

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