

Buy from farmers, not millers

Govt. rice procurement policy short-changing the farmers

THE government's ongoing food grain procurement policy to help farmers has had the opposite results. Under the programme, the government is buying only 1.5 lakh tonnes of paddy from farmers, which is less than one percent of the total estimated production of around 1.96 crore tonnes this boro season and 13 times less than the 11.5 lakh tonnes of rice—equivalent to about 20 lakh tonnes of paddy—it is buying from millers. This means the ones who are actually benefiting from the programme are millers, not the farmers the programme is intended to assist.

Government agencies have claimed that it is buying the bulk of its products from millers as it lacks storage space for paddy, which requires more space than rice, and this problem is yet to be resolved because of policy issues. Under this setting, millers are buying rice at a low price from farmers and selling it at a high price to the government. And in the process, they are making a profit of Tk 5,850 per tonne, whereas farmers are making a loss of Tk 9,000.

The entire state of affairs is simply absurd. Given that this is a yearly affair, why hasn't the government fixed its policy issues? Don't policymakers recognise the urgency of the situation? Why are they still making policies that are counterproductive? Moreover, in the absence of storage space, why did the government even initiate this programme without any pre-planning? Did it not know that buying the bulk of its produce from millers will not benefit the farmers? If not, then what that means is that the ministry didn't even bother to consult those its policy was intended to help which is just ridiculous.

This string of bad decisions by the authorities has done nothing but waste public resources. We call on the government to immediately fix the mess and to buy from the farmers directly.

Alarming rise in C-section rate

C-sections should only be done when absolutely necessary

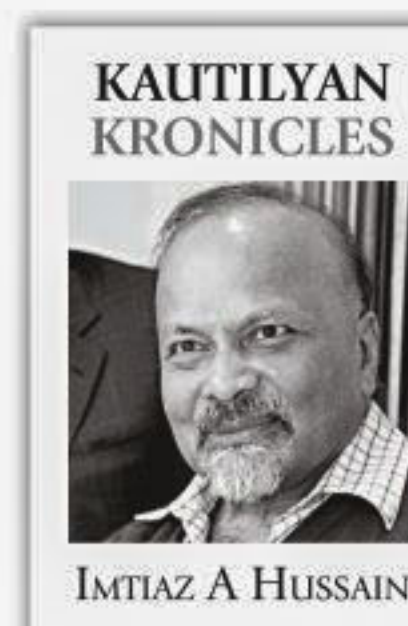
WE should be concerned at the recent revelation made by Save the Children regarding C-sections: 77 percent of C-sections carried out across the country last year were medically unnecessary. The rate of C-section is more than 31 percent in the country which is way above the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended range of 10-15 percent.

But the sad truth is, while C-sections are carried out unnecessarily on women hailing from affluent backgrounds, women who are poor and who are in desperate need of the procedure do not have access to it. While C-sections should be performed only when it is absolutely necessary—when severe complications arise and the life of either the mother or the newborn or both is at risk—in Bangladesh it has almost become a norm for doctors to go for C-sections without any valid reason. This is because performing surgeries means money. It is estimated that the total expenditure on C-sections last year was USD 483 million. Yet, every day 15 mothers die due to pregnancy-related complications, according to Health Directorate data. Needless to say, many of these deaths can be prevented through performing C-sections.

Since unnecessary C-sections put both mothers and babies at risk—it increases the likelihood of infection, excessive bleeding, organ damage and blood clots—such medically unnecessary practices must be brought to an end. The government needs to formulate proper regulations regarding this and have the necessary funding for ensuring better maternal healthcare services. It needs to address the need for more accredited midwives who can not only support natural childbirth but also reduce the burden faced by the doctors. Lastly, all expectant mothers, regardless of their social status, should have access to right information and maternal healthcare services so that they can make informed decisions on how they choose to give birth.

GPA and beyond

Time to break out of old pedagogical models



KAUTILYAN KRONICLES

IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

"GRUMPY" was her name.

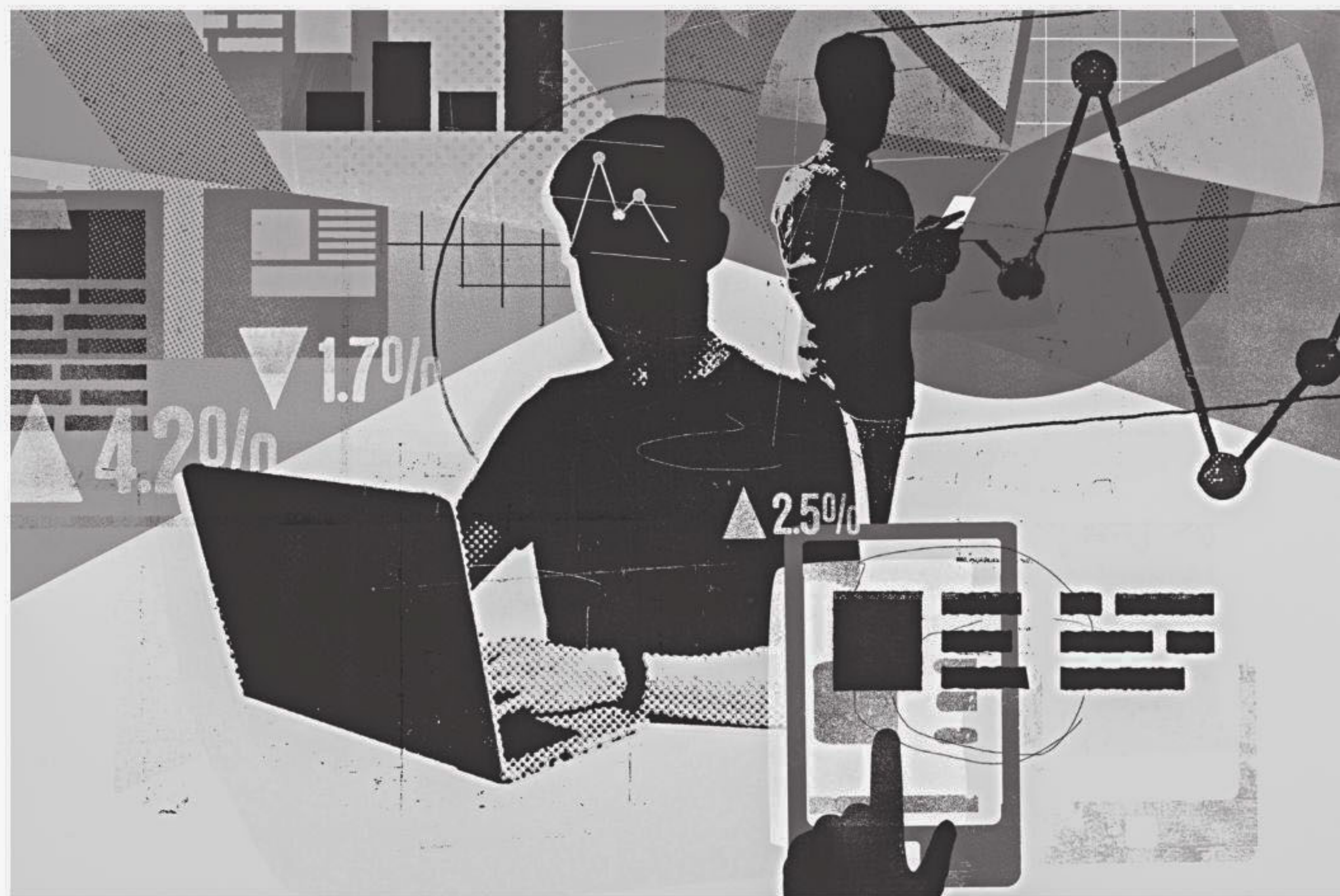
In the flower-filled month of May, the world's most famous cat of the same name bid her ever-cheering audience a sad adieu. Perhaps not the best of analogies, but it highlights grumpiness in another area, that, fortunately, we can do something about.

This is all about undergraduate education, to which no single solution may ever evolve, but unless addressed now, while we can, it could turn a sprightly country unusually sick. One approach, the one advocated here, is to reformulate an ancient grading system to conform more with 21st-century lifestyles, given how the moment is moving more tectonically across human history than anything in any other era, bedevilled, as it undoubtedly is, with more problems than any technology previously produced.

Beforehand, however, it might be better to appraise the setting, with classrooms serving as the playground. In the unavoidable transition from a very, very long innings of lecture-based sessions to an inevitably participatory classroom, there has to emerge consciously-driven teacher-training efforts demanded by the same two factors that accompanied the First Industrial Revolution in England two and a half centuries ago: adjusting to the new technologies, and partly because of those technologies, education coming down from the ivory-tower to face the new recruits, students from less privileged middle- and lower-classes, at their levels.

Though the growing need for specialised factory workers seems unstoppable, educational gates to broader education had/have to be opened for the public. Just as the beginning of church-driven education had to yield to secular needs in Western Europe (and the United States), as with Cambridge, Harvard, Oxford, among others, the possible shift in the hitherto colonised world from the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century (as exemplified by Kemal Ataturk, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and among Hindus, Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, among scores of others), may be heralding the Buddhist/Hindu/Muslim renaissance today. Not only is the playground shifting, thus inviting local idiosyncrasies, but the targeted audiences shifting from what might be called "elites" to the "masses" requires more adjustments.

Now that mass production was in vogue, given the late-18th century Industrial Revolution, another factory need was a large market, across time larger ones, or more of them (typified by the expansion of towns and cities during the 19th century across the western world spilling into a "scramble" outside Europe, for instance, to capture African real estate). Herein began the diversification of education from the arts, humanities, law, medicine, and theology during the European Renaissance, to what we today call the advent of "business" schools from the early 19th century, a Sorbonne



SOURCE: WWW.EDUTOPIA.ORG

here, a Wharton there, or "social science" education, until the 20th century was replete with them.

Their emphases (marketing, financing, advertising, and eventually entrepreneurship, on the one hand, or economics, politics, and sociology, on the other, among others) not only institutionalised professional schools, but also led these to overtake their liberal counterpart in spite of the stalwart efforts of the founders of social sciences pedagogy: Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and so forth, towards the end of the 19th century. Wars and enormous transitions (of colonies gaining independence, then following their colonial power's education system), and the growing need for non-business services, such as what Florence Nightingale embodied, nursing, were accompanied by the technological shifts from factories and "hard" wares towards the Internet-driven Third Industrial Revolution utilising "soft" wares by World War II. The rest has been a staggered history of the rest of the world to the classroom-entailed changes these brought. We are in the thickest of grips to that adaptation (since it is moving a lot faster than ever before).

Whereas previous education was anchored upon a fixed factory-driven production-dominated paradigm, today's must quickly adjust to the fast-moving Fourth Industrial Revolution contraptions (highlighted by artificial knowledge, and robots/drones usurping regular teaching functions). If not now, at one very near moment, every university will be asking: Why not impart 101 classes online? It will be cheaper, far superior (since the burden to teach 101 classes more or less affixes the teacher that role permanently, given how the

scope to proceed to the doctoral level for students is vanishing amid the spiralling costs of recruiting teachers), and supplies tools against some of today's greatest educational threats: plagiarism, copy-paste, and other devious practices.

An appropriate measurement of student performances amid the first two industrial revolutions was the grade-point average (GPA), a tool not only more attuned to measuring production, but also reflecting the unnecessary standardised competition that is depriving today's students from harnessing their inherent interests and talents. As societies moved into a service or post-industrial society, this GPA reliance has, thankfully, become less meaningful: services require skills that can be gotten outside the classroom, and the information/software age today no longer requires complete education, thus it does not impose increasingly staggering costs.

It would be unfair to single Bill Gates out in this context, but whether he did it consciously or not, a paradigm has flowed from him that a burgeoning proportion of today's undergraduates can relate to. Instead of the GPA measurement, universities may better capture the "best" talent in any student by cultivating issues they are most comfortable in rather than overloading them with more and more knowledge from their grandparents' days. This would not only reduce that "grumpy" classroom feeling, but also the attendant "stress" a larger proportion of students complain of today. Such a setting would unwittingly spark a spate of innovative juices that might otherwise have remained bottled up, but which we might also never have envisioned at all, or during our "peak" life years. In our search to "sell" more, we have relied upon prior pedagogical practices, but to capture

many of the non-materialistic nuances today, such as environmental peace, human rights, drug-controls, travel and tourism, and so forth, we need to "sell" less and consolidate more. Education dents the financial health of parents, but they stubbornly (and rightly) cling on to it as one of the "old" values of catering for their children to the very end. Without this feeling, we may get lost.

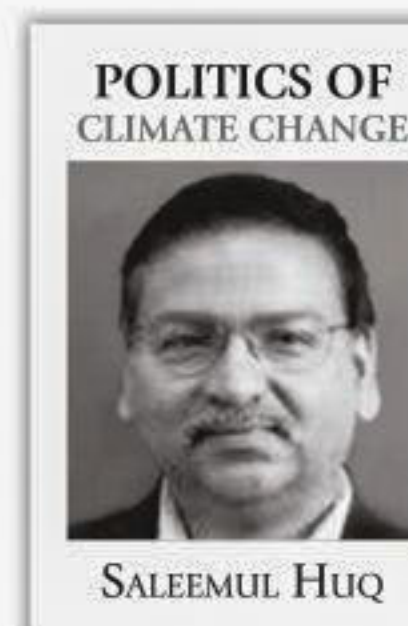
Pressures need not be financial alone. No greater a proportion of parents face the threats of drugs and the revolutions of rising expectations of children than in this post-Internet era. If universities cannot play their part in converting "grumpy" students (an increasing proportion of whom don't even know if they will have a job upon graduation), the resort to drugs can only widen now; with universities booming, job-creation may be receiving lesser attention. That jobs themselves have been getting shorter in span than ever before also complicates the "pie in the sky" image of a college degree wedded to a job. We cannot leave our future generations flying in the sky, so to speak, without first training them the lessons of being grounded first.

Like Bangladesh itself, education is changing, but unlike the unordered early 1990s when private universities stormed the academic terrain, today's transition deserves better planning. Many universities have played "frontier" roles thus far, but with an old pedagogical model. It is time to distill new wine in the old educational bottles than to pour "old wine" into new bottles. A far bigger future audience counts on it. This is not the time to disappoint them.

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Graduating out of LDC status

What Bangladesh should keep in mind



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Least Developed Countries (LDC) group constitutes 47 countries, mostly in Africa and some in Asia (including Bangladesh), officially recognised by the United Nations

(UN). Countries belonging to the group are entitled to duty-free access to developed country markets for their goods and are recognised under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the most vulnerable countries to climate change. At the same time, they are also eligible to receive Official Development Assistance (ODA) from developed countries bilaterally as grants.

Most of the LDCs have an ambition to graduate out of LDC status over time and doing so involves an official process of formally applying to the UN which will then carry out a review. If the UN feels the application for graduation is valid, then they will give the go-ahead and announce a two- or three-year period to monitor progress before the country is allowed to officially graduate.

Bangladesh applied for graduation last year and has been given the green light to proceed. This means that we will be reviewed in 2021 and if all goes well, we will be given the go-ahead for another three years, at the end of which we will graduate in 2024. It is hoped that as we have stepped on an escalator that will take us to middle-income developing country status by 2024, we do not falter along the way.

This gives us a few years to prepare ourselves for graduation from the LDC group.

The LDC group in the UNFCCC



Even if Bangladesh graduates from LDC status, we will still remain one of the most climate-vulnerable countries.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

is currently chaired by Bhutan which recently held a strategy meeting in Bhutan followed by a meeting in the UK to prepare for the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit in New York in September this year.

The first point to emphasise is that the LDC group has very successfully changed its narrative on climate change from being victims to becoming leaders. This is through three major LDC-led initiatives: one on mitigation, one on adaptation and resilience, and the third on capacity building. This package of three major LDC-led actions will be the main message to the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit.

As Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is one of the leaders of the LDC countries invited to the Climate Summit, she will be expected to raise this position of the

LDC group and not just of Bangladesh alone.

The second important point for Bangladesh when it comes to graduation is that we will lose our access to grants from developed countries and become dependent on loans from the international financial markets. While this is to be welcomed, it is nevertheless going to be a big challenge for which we have to prepare ourselves very quickly.

One of the opportunities in this regard is that even if Bangladesh graduates from LDC status, we will still remain one of the most climate-vulnerable countries so we will continue to get access to global climate change finance. However, the rules and mechanisms for accessing such climate change finance from global sources are not easy, and we have had very limited success so far, so getting better at

it is a high priority.

I often give the analogy of playing football versus playing cricket when it comes to comparing ODA and climate change finance. Both games are played by teams of 11 players and involve a ball, but cricket is a far more complicated game than football; so assuming that we will automatically be good at cricket because we are good at football is obviously wrong. However, that does not mean that we cannot become good cricket players over time (as the Bangladesh cricket team has demonstrated) but it needs practice and learning.

The third and final point relates to the question: what should our future relationship with the LDC group be after we graduate? Do we simply say goodbye to the other countries and go our own way or should we seek to retain our relationship with the countries still in the LDC group?

There are a number of other LDCs that are also expected to graduate out of LDC status by 2030 and thus it's an issue for all the LDCs under the UNFCCC going forward.

At the recent LDC group meeting, the idea of renaming the LDC group under the UNFCCC as the Group of 47 (G47) came up (as these countries would all still be vulnerable to adverse climate change impacts). Thus even if a country graduates from official LDC status, it would remain a part of the G47.

Bangladesh should give serious consideration to this issue and extend a hand of friendship so that South-South knowledge-sharing with other LDCs can be a reality going forward. Tackling climate change can become one of the priority topics on which we can offer our support to others.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure safety of expatriate workers

The contribution made by expatriate workers towards building up foreign exchange reserve for Bangladesh over the last two decades has been tremendous. However, due to persistent political turmoil in the country and other issues, many of them are facing threats to both their livelihood and survival.

Recently, a boat carrying around 60 Bangladeshi migrants capsized on its way to Italy from Libya. This, naturally, made headlines worldwide. The frequency with which such tragedies are occurring is mindboggling. As of May 8, at least 443 migrants either died or went missing in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Europe this year. The figures were 2,299 in 2018 and 3,139 in 2017, as recorded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The sad state of affairs in which Bangladesh's migrants are in is in sharp contrast to the country's much-vaunted economic progress. For a country to be worthy of global respect, it is not just economic growth that is necessary; the quality of life of the citizens is also important.

As things stand now, there is an urgent need to review existing policies and programmes to ensure the safety of Bangladeshi migrants. In order for any assessment to be effective, it needs to include all stakeholders including the regulatory bodies as well as local and international organisations working on migration. Bangladesh must take better care of its citizens and address issues that are pushing a section of them to make perilous journeys by sea.

Dr AT Rafiqur Rahman

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