

Accord railway the importance it deserves

Lack of maintenance and oversight responsible for accidents

THE accident in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila on June 23, in which four people lost their lives and over a hundred others were injured, points incontrovertibly to the abject lack of maintenance and oversight of the railway tracks and rolling stock across the country. The railway secretary mentioned two possible reasons for the derailment of the Upabari Express: misaligned carriage wheels or faulty lines. Other likely reasons are the excess speed of the train at the time of the accident and overloading of passengers. We hope the inquiry would be able to specify the reasons.

Railway remains the most neglected of all public mass transport systems in the country, although the sector has tremendous potential. The sector is incurring losses on a regular basis because of its depleting resources, a lack of investment, manpower crisis, mismanagement and corruption. Post-independence, Bangladesh Railway could hardly expand its network. Presently, there are 2,877 kilometres of railway network across the country. Although we have heard that the government has prepared a master plan to expand the railway network to 4,700 kilometres, we haven't heard of any concrete action being taken as of now.

What this latest accident has proved is that the railway administration is not even capable of properly maintaining the existing railway networks and other technical matters. If the reasons are its limited manpower and a lack of resources, the government should address these issues with urgency. Since the railway minister vowed to make the sector more service-oriented and pro-people earlier this year, we would like to know precisely what steps have been taken by the ministry to make that happen. In order to make train travel safe for the passengers, railway should be run by efficient people and corruption in the sector should be eliminated.

Recrudescence of dengue

Authorities must take swift action to prevent it

IT is ludicrous that those in charge of making sure this country remains liveable need to be nudged into action for the most routine affairs, such as ensuring cleanliness and protecting residents from public health hazards. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, dengue fever is making a major comeback with the number of infected people having more than doubled since last month, compared with the same period last year. About 155 people were infected with dengue last month and 586 more till the 23rd of this month.

This is news in part because after last year's catastrophic dengue prevention failure—when a record 10,148 people were infected and 26 of them died—one would have expected the city corporations and relevant health departments to learn their lesson and be extra careful this year. Instead, as reports indicate, preparations are still either in their ideation phase or too insufficient to have an impact, despite the increasing human pileup at hospitals.

What alarms us is the disclosure, by an official of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), that dengue fever in Bangladesh is now an endemic disease, meaning it will remain in the country throughout the year. This calls for extreme caution, judicious policymaking and coordinated implementation of anti-dengue projects on the part of the different agencies involved. It's important to destroy the sources of Aedes mosquito on a priority basis. The DGHS is reportedly planning to introduce a laboratory-bred mosquito, called Ulbalkia, to thwart the spread of dengue virus. But the project has been in development since last year and no significant progress has been made yet. There are also the challenges of climate-change effects, intermittent rain, and varying patterns of weather that can contribute to a dengue outbreak, as well as the lack of cleanliness, which has become a characteristic feature of Dhaka. The administration must find a solution for all these problems and find it fast, before more people get infected.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadystar.net

Wilful defaulters should be punished

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal disclosed in parliament a list of the country's top 300 loan defaulters who have gobbled up Tk 50,942 crore. There are 1.7 lakh loan defaulters in the country in total who have eaten up an astounding Tk 1.02 lakh crore. The amount of NPLs makes up about 20 percent of our national budget which is an extremely bad sign for the economy.

The actions of these defaulters have created anarchy in the banking sector and they have helped consolidate a toxic culture of defaulting on loans. They shamelessly use taxpayers' money to lead a lavish lifestyle at home and abroad and do not even bother to try and repay their loans on time. In my opinion, they are the real public enemy.

It is true that insufficient collateral against these loans, depositing the same asset to more than one bank and overvaluation of collateral assets increase the risk of loans going bad.

These wilful defaulters give the whole business community a bad name. But no one seems to be bothered about taking severe action against them. In Bangladesh big loan defaulters even get the privilege of having their loans rescheduled several times whereas such opportunities are non-existent for small and medium enterprises. Loan defaulters should be handed down exemplary punishment as they would in any country that cares about the wellbeing of its economy.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By email

Think before donating to orphanages



LAILA KHONDKAR

WHILE working in Liberia during 2013-2014, I along with the team had an opportunity to support the government in implementing their

deinstitutionalisation policy. This had several components: reunifying children living in institutions (popularly known as "missions") with their families, supporting the parents with a start-up capital and basic training on business skills, developing capacity on positive parenting, etc. As a result, children were able to live in families and attend local schools while earlier most parents had sent them to "mission schools" so that they could access education. Parents did not even know that there, the quality of education was poor and the living condition was not better than that of their own homes.

I was reminded of the experience in Liberia during the month of Ramadan in London. Why? In Bangladeshi television channels, there were charity appeals, and most of those were asking the public to donate to orphans in Bangladesh. Posters, leaflets, and direct fundraising initiatives were also there with a call to support orphans in different parts of the world. We see various initiatives to collect funding for orphans in many countries during Ramadan and throughout the year. Those who are donating to orphans or any other form of institution have good intentions. But is this the best way to support children?

According to the report "Keeping children out of harmful institutions: Why we should be investing in family-based care" by Save the Children, institutions are unsafe and unfit for children. Children living in institutions are at increased risk of violence, abuse, and neglect by staff, officials, volunteers, and visitors responsible for their care. Once in a while, the media in Bangladesh reports cases of children living in institutions trying to commit suicide and/or making escape attempts. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Institutionalisation has serious negative impacts on children's physical, cognitive and emotional development. After six months of institutionalisation, without the right support, babies and toddlers are at risk of never reaching full recovery ("The Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care", Kevin Browne, 2009). Institutionalisation affects a child's entire life. Institution-leavers can be very poor, and they are more likely to be affected by mental health problems, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, high-risk sexual behaviour and criminal behaviour.

Poverty, disability, war, natural disaster and social exclusion are primary drivers of institutionalisation. For many parents, putting their children in institutions may seem like the best way to ensure their access to basic services such as education and healthcare. Children from ethnic

minorities, children with disabilities, children living with HIV and children born out of wedlock are more likely to be placed in institutions. Globally, between 80 percent and 96 percent of all children inside institutions have living parents. This means they would be able to remain with family if the root causes were addressed.

In many settings, childcare is not regulated and anyone can set up an institution. This means it can also become a business. For example, 90 percent of orphans in Nepal receive funding solely from outside the country. There are institutions that actively recruit children because they are paid based on the number of children in their facilities. In Liberia, initially we faced a lot of resistance from the "mission" authorities, as they thought our efforts would end the livelihood of their staff.

violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. When families are unable or unwilling to protect children, the state must invest in a range of alternative family-based care options (e.g. kinship care, foster care, adoption) for children. The decision to place children in any type of alternative care arrangement must be done after thorough assessment of the individual child as well as the options available. The child's views should be heard and the "best interest of the child" must be considered in the decision-making process.

The International Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children were endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in November 2009. The guidelines should be utilised by governments to improve care and protection through strengthening and reforming national child protection systems. This includes strategies, laws



Women care for children at the Mother Teresa orphanage in Old Dhaka.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

and policies, workforce development, resource allocation, developing minimum standards, and strong monitoring mechanisms. Several countries including Indonesia, Georgia, Liberia, etc., have utilised the guidelines and made significant changes in moving towards family-based care system from unnecessary institutionalisation.

All types of alternative care must be developed, regulated and maintained in line with international standards. The guidelines are clear about the fact that institutions should be used as a last resort. This is applicable in both development and humanitarian contexts. When children are placed in institutional care, it must be time-limited, meet the specific needs of the individual child, and follow quality standards.

There is still widespread public

This provides a good opportunity to the states and civil society members to review progress made in preventing unnecessary family-child separation and providing appropriate alternative care.

The states should consider if they are investing properly to strengthen families and establishing or maintaining a range of alternative care that meets quality standards within a functional child protection system. Before donating to an orphanage or any other form of institution, the general public should think twice: is it possible to support the child in a family-based environment? Will public donation contribute to protecting the "best interest of the child" or will it benefit the institution?

Laila Khondkar is Head of Advocacy and Policy-Child Protection, Save the Children International.

Environmental migration and non-migration: A new scientific discourse

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

PEOPLE migrating from one place to another—whether within the same country or across international borders—is a complex phenomenon, in which pull

factors (such as job-seeking) and/or push factors (such as environmental degradation) can play important roles. Recently, the impacts of climate change have been included in this hypothesis, as a major environmental push factor, which has drawn a great deal of interest from political as well as scientific circles.

I was recently invited to be the closing keynoter speaker as well as a panellist for the opening public event of a three-day scientific conference on "Environmental Non-migration" which unpacked why anyone migrates or doesn't migrate. The conference consisted of around 50 senior and early career scientists from around the world who shared some of their cutting-edge research on this new and emerging scientific area of research.

This scientific conference was organised by the Technical University in Dresden (TU-D) in Germany, which is ranked among the 11 Centres of Excellence by the Excellence Initiative of the German Council of Science and Humanities, and the German Research Foundation.

Unpacking what is meant by non-migration versus migration boils down to the reasons why people choose to migrate, and also whether such migration (international or within the nation) is meant to be permanent or temporary. This speaks to the existing phenomenon of migration.

In this context, what climate change does is impose limits on the ability of people to continue their traditional livelihoods (such as pastoralists, farmers or fishermen) by forcing them to migrate. In scientific spheres, we refer to this category of migrants as being forcibly displaced due to climate change and the estimates of their numbers, over the next few decades, are in the many tens of millions.

So, while it is still difficult to differentiate between climate change migrants and other types of migrant today, it is quite clear that

revelation that it is not only taking place around different parts of the world, but it also concerns different academic disciplines (from geology of coasts, and hydrology of rivers, to even social sciences and international law). Thus no single discipline is able to tackle this issue alone; multidisciplinary research will be essential going forward. It is good news, therefore, that the outcome of the conference was creating the "Network on Environmental Non-migration" that will continue to connect scientists working on different aspects of the topic.



What climate change does is impose limits on the ability of people to continue their traditional livelihoods by forcing them to migrate.

PHOTO: AFP

very soon there will be many millions of climate change migrants around the world, with a significant number in South Asia and Bangladesh in particular.

What struck me about the scientific scholarship on this emerging phenomenon was the

Finally, I would like to mention with great pride that I witnessed some excellent contributions from Bangladeshi scientists in this international conference. The main organiser, Dr Bishawjit Mallik, is himself an emerging Bangladeshi expert

in the field. And among senior scholars who attended the event, two of them—Dr Mustafa Anwar from Australia and Dr Sonia Akhter from Singapore, recognised as experts in their respective fields—are of Bangladeshi origin.

Additionally, Bangladesh was the country with the highest number of papers (by young scholars) that were chosen for funding support to attend the conference. From a total of 40 submissions and 20 selections, seven Bangladeshi young scholars' research papers were selected by the organisers. It was somewhat unfortunate, however, that many of the young scientists selected and invited to attend the conference—from different nations including Bangladesh—did not get visas from the German embassy in their respective countries, and hence could not attend in person.

And during the final evaluation of the papers by the young scholars, the "best paper" award was given to Zakia Sultan from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman University in Gopalganj who delivered an excellent presentation.

Her research looked at the complexity of intra-family decision-making to migrate or not migrate in the coastal parts of Bangladesh where traditional rice fields have been replaced by shrimp farms. Her findings made it clear that every family is unique and intra-family decision-making reflects a nexus that isn't easily predictable. It is therefore a great pleasure to be able to say that Bangladeshi scholars, both senior and young, are making a mark on the world map by proving their skills in conducting important and innovative research studies in topics of global importance. We should all be proud of them.

Dr Saleemul Huq is the Director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh. Email: saleem_iccad@iub.edu.bd