

Heed UNCAT committee's recommendations

Secret detention, torture and enforced disappearance must stop

THE recommendations that the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT) committee has come up with recently in regard to Bangladesh are well overdue. The committee has expressed concerns about allegations of torture against law enforcers, and secret detention and enforced disappearance of citizens. Despite the fact that Bangladesh is a signatory to the UNCAT Charter, it took the country 20 long years to submit its first-ever report, which the committee noted with regret.

On the other hand, the committee has commended the government for taking some laudable steps—and rightfully so—such as amending eight laws, including the Custodial Torture and Death (Prevention) Act 2013 and the Prevention of Cruelty against Women and Children Act 2000.

The committee expects a progress report from the government in exactly a year from now, with due priority on three things which should receive serious attention: i) HC directives on custodial torture and death have to be followed; ii) independent bodies must be allowed to inspect the places of detention and carry out investigations on allegations made by detained individuals; and iii) NGOs assisting the UNCAT committee must be protected.

The UNCAT committee pointed out the prevalence of torture, arbitrary arrest, secret detention, enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings in the custody of Rab—a law enforcing body that has proven to be above the law. Numerous accounts of family members of victims have revealed instances of plainclothes men picking up people from their homes without showing a warrant and illegally detaining them without producing them before the courts, in clear violation of the law. In many cases, those arrested remain in custody for weeks or months before being shown formally arrested or released while some remain “disappeared”. Between 2009 and 2018, at least 507 people have become victims of enforced disappearance, according to the International Federation for Human Rights.

The UNCAT committee has put forward 77 recommendations which the government should take into account. The committee has also urged the government to take steps to ensure that law enforcers stop these illegal practices and publish a list of all acknowledged detention centres. An independent probe commission dedicated to investigating allegations of torture, enforced disappearance, etc., must also be formed—and this, we believe, ought to be considered as a priority by the government if it wants to strengthen its image in the international arena.

Celebrating Eid-ul-Azha

May altruism reign supreme

AS we get ready to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha, the second most important festival in the Islamic calendar, we hope that it will go beyond simply observing ritualistic practices and that we put more emphasis on the spiritual side of the day.

This day is meant to symbolise the supreme sacrifice of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) who gave up his beloved son to honour the wishes of his Creator. It was a test of faith and the act itself an expression of great sacrifice. The true message of Eid-ul-Azha is the act of surrendering oneself to the divine will, a message that has sadly gotten diluted in our modern-day observation of Eid.

This year we are observing Eid at a time of floods and an unprecedented outbreak of the dengue fever that has spread to nearly the whole country and many families are not going to be able to celebrate Eid in the manner they would like to. We should show restraint in our display of extravagance, keeping in mind the hardship thousands of people are going through due to circumstances beyond their control. Let us break from the past and not indulge in a show of our worldly riches; rather focus on how we may help those in need.

Our prayers are with all our fellow Muslims who are not able to partake in the sacrifice, especially as the rich-poor divide widens in our society. We pray that the injustices suffered by fellow Muslims lessen with time and the fundamental inequality that divides our society is forgotten on this special day as we lend our hand to help those less fortunate than us. Eid Mubarak to all our readers!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Raise awareness to reduce tobacco consumption

Everyone is well aware of the detrimental health effects of smoking. According to a study conducted this year, 1.4 percent of Bangladesh's GDP gets wasted due to tobacco consumption, while it also contributes to 13.5 percent of fatalities. Growing accustomed to smoking is also usually the first step towards acquiring the habit of consuming drugs. The government, time and again, has tried to discourage smokers by imposing high tax on tobacco and is now aiming to make the country tobacco-free by 2040.

Taxation on tobacco could potentially reduce the demand for tobacco products and increase the production cost which could eventually limit the supply as well. But it has been found that cigarettes and raw tobacco product sales have, in fact, increased. The tobacco market in Bangladesh is the eighth largest globally and considering its market potential, Japan Tobacco acquired Akij Group Tobacco last year which could prove to be in conflict with the government's 2040 goal.

Thus, taxing tobacco should not be the only way to control smoking. Other awareness campaigns should be implemented to curb tobacco consumption. The government should consider launching programmes through the mass media as well as targeted marketing campaigns to try and discourage people from smoking.

Md Zillur Rahaman, by email

MUNICIPAL FINANCING

Revenue base has to be improved to overcome emerging issues



NAWSHAD AHMED

CITY corporations and Paurashavas constitute the municipalities in Bangladesh. There are 331 municipalities comprising of 11 city corporations and 320 Paurashavas in the country. The

recent demand by municipal employees for payment of their arrear salaries and benefits laid bare the inherent weaknesses of the urban local bodies. As reported by *The Daily Star* quoting government sources, a total amount of Tk 692 crore has piled up as arrear salaries of the municipal employees. Over 35,000 employees of 260 municipalities did not receive their salaries for up to seven years. Of them, 6,000 staff did not receive salaries for five years, about 12,000 for two years and around 5,000 for a year, as per the Bangladesh Association of Paurashava Services (BAPS).

Sound financial management of local government bodies is essential for the long-term health and sustainable development of urban areas in any country. Local governments around the world are playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of basic public services. But local authorities also face great challenges in funding infrastructure development and maintenance and ensuring a decent level of service delivery. Most urban local bodies in Bangladesh are increasingly facing complex financial challenges as a result of rapid urbanisation. It is widely believed that adequacy of its own revenues is key to a local government's improved ability to deliver public services, thereby leading to increased accountability of local officials to their constituents.

Local government strengthening should receive high priority in line with the government policies. The “Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021” duly recognises the critical role of local government institutions (LGIs) for establishing good governance and promoting local development, and envisions devolution of power, functions, and fiscal authority to



Municipality employees demonstrate in front of the capital's Jatiya Press Club to press home their demands, including regular payment.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

LGIs over the long term.

Bangladesh experienced sustained urbanisation for the last three decades fuelled by strong economic growth. The country has achieved respectable economic growth over the last two decades with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate averaging 6-7 percent per annum that reached 8.1 percent in 2018-19. The country aims to reach “middle-income” status by 2021 from its current status as lower middle-income. Accordingly, its Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-15) and Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) envisage: i) GDP growth of more than 8 percent per annum from fiscal year 2020 by mobilising higher domestic and foreign investment and harnessing the labour force by making the most of the demographic dividend. In addition, the plans strive to raise the productivity of capital and labour by adopting new technologies and stimulating the widespread application of digital technology to meet the objectives of the Perspective Plan (2010-2021) and

Vision 2021; ii) accelerated growth of employment to absorb the new entrants to the labour force; and iii) moving people from low-productive agriculture to more productive manufacturing sector.

The economic growth has been accompanied by structural transformation. The contribution of agriculture to GDP reduced from 30 percent in 1990 to 16.11 percent in 2016, while the contribution of the urban sector to GDP increased from 37 percent to 66 percent over the same period. As a result, the percentage of people below the poverty line declined from 56.6 percent in 1992 to 22.7 percent in 2016.

Bangladesh is rapidly urbanising and great pressure is exerted on basic urban services, particularly in the Paurashavas. The percentage of population in urban areas rose from 15 percent in 1980 to 37.5 percent in 2016. The urban centres are characterised by poor infrastructure and low level of urban services. For example: i) road space is inadequate and not well maintained, and traffic congestion is severe; ii) drainage systems are not well planned, the drains are not cleaned regularly and do not function satisfactorily; iii) water supply is inadequate and unsafe; iv) solid waste management practices are weak; v) street lighting is unsatisfactory; and vi) pollution levels of water, air, soil, and noise have increased.

The municipalities lack adequate own-source revenues to finance new investments and operations and maintenance. The current sources of revenue for municipalities are: i) central government fiscal transfers from the GoB's Annual Development Programme (ADP); and ii) own-source revenues, e.g. holding

tax and rates, fees and income from leasing and renting of Paurashava assets. Collection performance for the major source of revenue, the holding tax, ranges around 30 percent to 40 percent. The municipalities will continue to depend on the financial transfers from GoB to meet investment and recurrent expenditures for the foreseeable future. However, government resources and municipalities' own income are not adequate to finance necessary infrastructure and services such as roads, drains, water treatment plants, street lights, solid waste collection and disposal, and regular salaries of municipal staff.

The revenue base of the Paurashavas in general is weak and revenue potential has not been fully exploited. However, the revenue performance of the local bodies varies from one Paurashava to the other. Table 1 provides an idea about the actual annual own-source revenue collection of five Paurashavas but their names have intentionally not been mentioned here.

Inadequate infrastructure and services are a perennial issue for urban local governments. Without proper infrastructure facilities, the urban environment rapidly deteriorates, risking the health of the people. The municipalities depend heavily on intergovernmental fiscal transfers for preparing their revenue and development budgets. This situation is not desirable. For delivering improved services and infrastructure, own-source revenue generation should be given high priority by the local bodies.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed is an economist and urban planner. He has worked previously as a UN official in Bangladesh and abroad.

Transforming education, transforming youth

The importance of introducing life skills in Technical and Vocational Education and Training

EIKO NARITA

AROUND the world, August 12 is celebrated as the International Youth Day. This year's theme, “Transforming Education”, highlights efforts to make education more relevant, equitable and inclusive for all youth, including efforts by youth themselves.

Without a doubt education and training have the power to change a life and a country. As a country transitioning into middle-income status, Bangladesh anticipates to reap its demographic dividend, given its large youth population. But a demographic dividend is not a given, it requires good health, education and decent work as a requisite. The government has therefore rightly put an emphasis on education and skills development, with the specific emphasis of improving the quality of education in relation to employment and economic

development.

Reforming Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), to ensure Bangladesh's competitiveness in the global market and reduce poverty, has resulted in an increase in the number of students enrolling in TVET programmes where students are equipped with technical skills and knowledge of trades. But in an era of changing contexts, such as technological innovation, demographic changes and globalisation, technical skills are no longer enough. Young people need to possess “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable them to deal effectively with the demands and challenges in everyday life.” These abilities we speak of are referred to in numerous ways by different sectors: life skills, transferable skills, soft skills.

Just as a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, these “life skills”, regardless of how they are referred to,

enhance young people's abilities and help them achieve their full potential. WHO has identified a set of skills that is regarded as core: creative-thinking, critical-thinking, communication, interpersonal relationship-skills, decision-making, problem-solving, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress. Unlike technical and vocational skills, life skills are applicable to all contexts and stages of life. Whether at the workplace or in personal life, life skills are critical from interactions with others to decision-making.

Why should life skills play a central part of a technical and vocational curriculum? Life skills help youth to further apply the technical and vocational skills they achieve in their lives, to become more responsive, creative and confident as they build life competencies. Life skills are also highly sought after by employers. In addition to the technical

expertise required for the job, employers often look to hire those with ability to work in teams, communicate effectively and solve problems. In fact, with a constantly evolving labour market, life skills are sometimes even seen as more important than technical skills. Life skills make youth more employable.

At UNFPA we are aware that Life Skills Education is not prioritised in Bangladesh's TVET programmes. Its application is neither systematic nor standardised, and there is little policy guidance and quality control. As a result, topics and content of life skills modules in existing vocational programmes differ markedly between organisations and providers, and are often not delivered effectively. This is why UNFPA, as the UN agency responsible for ensuring all young people meet their full potential, works closely with the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) to establish minimum standards for Life Skills Education and ensure that it becomes a standard component in all TVET programmes. Transforming education by foregrounding life skills and ensuring youth have opportunities to develop these skills is also aligned with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Programme of Action (PoA). The importance of investing in young people and equipping them with life skills, highlighted 25 years ago at the ICPD, is just as valid today for Bangladesh.

On this International Youth Day, where we commit to making education more relevant, equitable and inclusive, UNFPA wants to transform education to not only meet the targets of SDG 4 but also to meet the full spectrum of demands of the labour market and unleash the potential of the young in Bangladesh. Together with NSDA and other key partners in the skills development arena, UNFPA aims to help equip Bangladeshi youth with life skills, so that they can live to their fullest potentials.

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