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Another fire that could have been avoided

Rehabilitate the residents of razed Mirpur slum

THE Mirpur slum fire, which razed thousands of homes to the ground on Friday night and rendered their occupants homeless, is a monstrous exemplar of rapid, unplanned housing of the sort being seen in Dhaka and the disaster that it can cause, often with fatal consequences. Details about the fire are still emerging but initial reports suggest that it may have originated from a short circuit. Whatever may have been the source of the fire, questions remain as to how it spread so quickly over such a vast area and whether or not it was stage-managed, as some have speculated. The three-member probe committee, which has been formed to investigate the fire and submit a report within 15 working days, is expected to shed light on these questions and put speculations to rest. The more pertinent issue at the moment, however, is that of the rehabilitation of the fire victims.

The slum was home to mostly low-wage earners, including garment workers, rickshaw-pullers, housemaids and day labourers. Their loss of homes meant that they are now headed into an uncertain future and many families, stripped of all their belongings and despite the temporary shelter offered by the government, might end up living on the streets. Measures should be taken so that they are rehabilitated properly. But there are bigger problems at hand. The Mirpur fire is the latest in a long list of slum fires as well as fires occurring in more developed areas of the city, owing to unsafe housing schemes. Such unplanned housing—without any system in place to detect and suppress fires, among other eventualities—has been known to boomerang on the very residents. We have seen this too many times.

This is, without a doubt, a clarion call for the government and city-planners to undertake a major overhaul of our existing housing policy, especially with regard to low-cost housing and the expansion of slums known for their decrepit, closely packed housing units. The government must make its housing policy more reflective of the dangers of such unplanned urbanisation. It cannot ignore this situation any longer while its human cost continues to rise.

No. of dengue patients at around 50,000!

Terminals and hospitals major breeding grounds

THE return home for hundreds of thousands of people from the holidays may not be a joyous one, as transport terminals have been identified as areas that are ripe for Aedes-mosquito-breeding. Despite repeated assurances about cleanups by city authorities, our reporters have found discarded tires and plastic containers littered around Mohakhali and Gabtoli bus stands. The same goes for the Tejgaon truck terminal and Kamalapur Railway station.

Sadly, many hospitals, where people are flocking to in thousands to get treatment for dengue, are a den for garbage—both inside and out. Water gathers in puddles during the rainy season and the crux of the problem is two-fold: not enough is being done by the concerned authorities to clean up these trouble spots where mosquitoes can breed and there is a general lack of awareness among the people to do what needs to be done in the vicinity of their abode.

We are a nation of people where no one takes responsibility for their lack of action. Authorities spent a few weeks at the outset of the dengue outbreak issuing preposterous threats of taking people to task for not keeping their homes/business establishments clean. As the dengue menace grew, it was found that the city corporations had been lacking in both equipment and medicine to tackle the crisis. Now, the number of dengue patients is nearing the 50,000 mark and dengue infestation has reached every corner of Bangladesh. The worst part of this whole scenario is that we are being told that dengue is now “endemic”, which means it will be with us round the year.

Instead of making wild claims of a breakthrough in fighting the Aedes mosquito, the authorities should be taking steps to allocate financial resources to have mobile teams of people, working round the clock, in shifts, to find and eradicate these infestations in transport terminals, in and around hospitals, as people return to the city. Precisely how are hospital services to cater to hundreds, or thousands, more new dengue patients in the coming days and weeks? We need concrete plans of action and their implementation instead of empty promises as

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Surge in remittance inflow

Bangladesh has managed to garner a sum of USD 716.2 million through remittance during the first nine days of August right before Eid-ul-Azha—which is the second highest source of foreign currency earnings for Bangladesh, second only to the readymade garments industry. Money sent by non-resident Bangladeshis makes up about 12 percent of Bangladesh's GDP. We have millions of expatriate workers who can greatly benefit the economy if they remit their hard-earned money through formal channels.

The highest remittance inflow in a single month was recorded before Eid-ul-Fitr at USD 1.75 billion. Supervision and monitoring by the central bank to check illegal “hundi” transaction, reduction in interest on the dollar in the local market, and a two percent incentive for remittance inflow contributed to the surge.

The Bangladesh government should monitor the causes of this remittance inflow and should take pragmatic steps in order to enable high remittance inflows in the coming days.

Md Zillur Rahman, by email



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

IN recent weeks, there have been a flurry of diplomatic activities in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, starting with the high-level visit of Myanmar delegation led by Myint Thu, Myanmar's Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Cox's Bazar. The repatriation of the Rohingyas was a major topic at the 2019 meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) held recently in Bangkok. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees also visited Bangladesh and Rakhine state. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was in Japan and later in China to press hard the Rohingya repatriation case, where she was assured that Beijing would “do whatever is required” to help resolve the Rohingyas crisis.

So, are we facing a turning point when it comes to the Rohingyas' repatriation? Myanmar officials held talks with Rohingya leaders, including women from the refugee community in Cox's Bazar, to convince them to return to Myanmar. The Rohingyas fled a brutal military crackdown in 2017 that included mass killings and gang rapes executed with a genocidal intent. Hundreds of Rohingya villages were completely burned down by the Myanmar army, forcing people to flee across the Naf River to Cox's Bazar, which now hosts around 1.2 million Rohingya refugees and is home to the largest refugee camp in the world. These refugees continue to live there as a stateless people. The Rohingyas still fear for their safety if they return to Myanmar, where the Muslim minority population faced decades of oppression and discrimination as they are perceived as outsiders and illegal immigrants. In addition, the Myanmar government confined tens of thousands of Rohingyas to camps in the western Rakhine state since violence swept the region in 2012.

It is difficult to assess what the delegates have achieved through the talks in which the Myanmar officials took a strong stance against citizenship for Rohingyas and promised to provide only ID cards to them as “foreigners” in Myanmar. The fundamental demands of the minority group are recognition as ethnic Rohingyas, citizenship, and guarantee of security by the international community. Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a repatriation deal in November 2017, but so far, no Rohingyas have volunteered to return. Another much-

publicised repatriation move was stalled in November 2018 when none of the Rohingyas agreed to return.

Myanmar is now facing strong international pressure to allow the Rohingyas to return home to Rakhine with full citizenship rights and security. However, Myanmar is being stubborn and to date the country has failed to demonstrate any real flexibility or moderation in dealing with the crisis and reaching an acceptable solution. The UN and a number of human rights groups

held accountable for the genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes that it has committed against the Rohingyas, the situation inside Myanmar will not see any significant change required to build confidence among the refugees to return. If they do, the returnees will remain vulnerable to the same violence that caused them to flee Myanmar in the first place. Repatriation without addressing the root causes will amount to sending the Rohingya refugees back to the same deathtrap that they had narrowly escaped

no concrete measures have been taken to facilitate their return to Myanmar, although Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen expects repatriation to begin by September 2019. There is still no guarantee of citizenship for the Rohingyas, which they have been denied since 1982. Indeed, Myanmar has shown no sign of taking seriously a single demand made by the Rohingya refugees as prerequisites for their return—demands which have also been echoed by rights groups and the international community.



Rohingya refugee children carry supplies through Balukhali refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, October 23, 2017.

PHOTO: HANNAH MCKAY/REUTERS

have openly come out with statements that Myanmar lacks even minimal preparation for the safe and dignified return of the Rohingya refugees. The UN has also complained that progress in addressing the refugee crisis has been far too slow.

The recently-held 34th Asean Summit in Bangkok has not been very helpful either, as the regional body, in its own internal assessment report, failed to acknowledge the Myanmar military's atrocities and the ongoing human rights abuses against the Rohingyas. In the spirit of an honest broker, Asean should stop turning a blind eye to the actions of its own member country, Myanmar, and support the legitimate repatriation process of the Rohingyas. Unless Myanmar is

and risks them being re-victimised.

Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad in a recent statement called for an end to the genocide against Rohingyas and urged for them to be granted full rights as citizens of Myanmar or provided with territory so that they can form their own state. PM Mahathir's remarks on the Rohingyas angered Myanmar. While Mahathir's proposal for a separate state received mixed reactions from the Rohingya diaspora and lacks clarity, his statement was factual when he said that Myanmar had committed genocide. The international community must not forget the horrors that the Rohingyas face today in their own country.

Meanwhile, two years after the mass influx of the Rohingyas to Bangladesh,

A pragmatic approach that can facilitate the return of the Rohingyas to their homeland with dignity and rights requires understanding and empathy. Finding a sustainable “win-win” solution, which can satisfy all parties involved, will be difficult. The challenge lies in striking a balancing act for the resolution of the current impasse over repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. We need to understand what the Rohingya refugees expect and where their priorities lie and find a sustainable solution accordingly.

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Are we really aware of the challenges the youth face?

TASMIAH T RAHMAN

ONE in three of Bangladesh's 170 million people is aged between 10 and 24 years, and the country is well in place to reap the benefits of this demographic dividend; or so we hear. However, challenges are manifold, including how we think the “youth” feels about what they should be focusing on. While I work with adolescents and youth every day, reaching about 1.5 lakh youngsters through BRAC's skills training programme, I hear many stories of struggles. Addressing these struggles may just be the key in arming the youth for the future. A formal youth panel discussion has given me some much-needed perspective in this regard.

The panel discussion, with nine young panelists from various socioeconomic backgrounds, was organised by BRAC Skills Development Programme to mark the World Youth Skills Day in July. The participants comprised of project-based-training graduates employed in informal jobs, technical and vocational trainees and graduates, as well as university students. The questions that the youth raised, if taken into account, can help address the challenges associated with enabling them to be ready for the next frontier.

Class struggle and the fourth industrial revolution

It was very clear to us from the beginning of the panel discussion that institute-based technical and vocational training graduates, informal training graduates and mainstream undergraduate students have very different needs. While Rubel (not his real name), a mobile phone repair technician, was asking where he might find relevant information to enhance his technical skills, undergrad student Arif talked about the challenges they faced in staying relevant in a world where artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are gaining more significance every day.

So, the next question that Rubel asked was an obvious one: “What happens to us when the machines take over?” and his question led to a deafening silence that was felt by all, as we understood that the existing education system is an example of the class struggle in Bangladesh. This is more apparent in Dhaka, where a disadvantaged child hardly has the

opportunity to seek formal education, where they will at least be able to learn about AI but cannot—due to lack of access and financial support. Unless we look at this challenge through an equity lens, we will never be able to answer Rubel's question.

Humayun, an HR major student, observed that although human resource management was a popular field of study, human work may soon be replaced by advanced technology, providing a holistic analysis of the situation. However, this will also decrease the need for HR professionals.

The struggle is more prominent for Ishita, a girl who comes from a disadvantaged background and wants to be a motor-cycle mechanic. She has been

system is too lengthy and is not relevant to the job market. Students are gaining theoretical knowledge but practical skills are not being taught in schools. So, there is a mismatch between the curriculum taught in universities and the job market requirements, which is leading to higher unemployment.

We are still going very much by the book and teachers are repeatedly asking the students to solve the same set of problems that others before them have done. This discourages creative thinking among students because they already have access to all the existing answers. Hence their analytical abilities are not being enhanced enough to make them ready to face the challenges presented by the ever-changing job market.

than giving them the liberty to choose their preferred subject of study based on their own career interests. Although she is studying IT, she is pursuing her dream of becoming a culinary artist by initiating a home-based food business. She did so because there are no schools in Dhaka which offers an undergraduate degree in culinary arts. Meha added that the society does not consider this to be a sustainable career choice.

For Mukta, the reality is that training is unaffordable, so she went for the free training that NGOs provide through donor funding. But as it was free, her family questioned its credibility.

Solutions suggested by the youth
BRAC has created access to training for disadvantaged girls, whereby more than 40,000 girls have received training. Over 7,000 were trained in nontraditional occupations such as motor-rewinding, lathe machine operation and motorcycle repairing, among others. BRAC has reached out to 4,703 people with disabilities, providing assistive devices to some to facilitate mobility. But it is of utmost importance to change the mindset of people about the available diversity when it comes to the types of employment available which cannot be project-bound, short-term and quick. There has to be a long-term solution where the government, businesses and NGOs come together to create an environment where the youth have the freedom to choose their own career and flourish.

Besides changing perceptions about the types of jobs the youth are engaged in, the need for diversifying skills is essential for the youth to be ready for the future world of automation, because traditional jobs may become irrelevant in the years to come. Thus, a skills inventory made with youth groups with diversified skills required in the future will help the youth cope with the changing job market.

The education system should be transformed so that academic curricula correspond to market-oriented practical skills, by including technical as well as life skills from very early on. This will enable students to be exposed to practical skills alongside academic curricula. Last but not the least, a changed mindset about skills training is needed to stay relevant in the job market.

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told that she is not fit for this occupation.

Rokeya faces a different kind of dilemma: as a person with disability, she needs a wheelchair to reach her workplace. Rokeya said people with disabilities face additional stigma and are perceived to be less competent because of their disability. Even if the educational institutions offer access, she is unsure if she will be able to get a job sitting on a wheelchair. So, women and girls and those with disabilities have to struggle on multiple additional layers.

Are we teaching the 'wrong' way?

According to BRAC's Youth Survey 2019, as much as 34 percent of the male youth of the country described unemployment as the major obstacle in their lives. According to the youth panelists at the panel discussion, the current education

“I want the ‘other’ kid to be an entrepreneur, my kid will study computer science”

Many graduates are not leaning towards entrepreneurship as they lack the right set of business skills. Teaching entrepreneurial skills to students while they are studying will help them choose their own career track early on in their lives. This will also generate further employment. However, negative perceptions surrounding entrepreneurship, and uncertainties about finding employment opportunities after receiving skills training as opposed to receiving formal education, are discouraging many students from choosing these paths.

Meha mentioned that the society creates pressure on the youth to choose from a fixed set of disciplines, rather