

## DU's college re-affiliation fiasco

*Urgent govt intervention needed*

**T**HE Dhaka University's decision to re-affiliate seven Dhaka-based government colleges from the National University in 2017 has had the unfortunate effect of aggravating the very problems that they had hoped to address. The growing frustration of the students of both Dhaka University and those seven colleges at the university's failure to alleviate their sufferings, soon led to street protests. The situation has not improved: results are not being published on time, exams are not being held regularly, and classes at DU are being disrupted regularly.

One might ask, why the problems though. For one, the decision to re-affiliate the seven colleges seems to have been made without any preparation and executed in haste. Secondly, lack of resources, especially manpower, has only added to the burden on the existing DU staff. Over the last two and a half years, sufficient staff have not been recruited to handle the needs of the 2.5 lakh students of the colleges. Thus, the fate of these students along with that of the 43,385 students of DU now seems uncertain. Furthermore, the concerned authorities, instead of working together to address this crisis, have resorted to playing blame game to avoid shouldering responsibility.

It is unfortunate that even after two years, the authorities have not been able to even initiate the task they had been entrusted with, let alone making any progress. Only recently, a 10-member committee has been formed to resolve the crisis although it's puzzling why it has taken so long to do so. Among other initiatives, a separate wing can be created under DU with a set of staff dedicated to handling the needs of the college students. It is high time the education ministry stepped in to find a sustainable and effective solution to this problem, especially since the academic future of nearly 3 lakh students are at stake. With youth development being a priority for the government, this should be an immediate concern to address.

## Speed up post-flood rehabilitation efforts

*Release funds immediately to reduce displaced people's sufferings*

**I**T is very unfortunate that the flood victims of Sirajganj have yet to receive any assistance from the government to rebuild their houses washed away by the devastating flood. According to Sirajganj Relief and Rehabilitation Office, over 3,079 families of 408 villages in five upazilas were displaced by the recent flood. These people are still living in the flood protection embankment, open fields and roads, which were also badly affected. These flood victims—day labourers, farmers, fishermen, small businessmen, etc.—have lost all their belongings and need urgent help to rebuild their homes and start afresh. Those who borrowed money from local money lenders at high interest rates to rebuild their homes do not know how they would pay off the debt since they have lost their livelihoods. But as this daily reported on August 19, no help from the government has reached them as yet.

We always hear from the government that Bangladesh has attained laudable success in managing natural disasters such as floods and cyclones. But it is clear from this year's experience that in terms of flood preparedness, we still have many shortcomings. Reportedly, relief and rescue operations were not carried out promptly in many affected areas and there were delays in releasing funds for such efforts. And now that the flood water has started receding, we have come to know that the fund for rehabilitation has not been allotted by the government yet. Such delays in releasing funds will only increase the sufferings of the flood victims.

Natural disasters such as floods are unavoidable but we can manage and reduce the risks associated with them by planning ahead. We hope the government will make proper plans to rehabilitate the affected people by ascertaining the actual losses and immediately allotting funds for this purpose.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Stumbling blocks in the freelance market

Freelancing is a thriving sector in Bangladesh with many opportunities and is a growing hub for the nation's youth. Yet, the sector is facing hindrances due to many complications.

The biggest bottleneck is that most of the credit/debit cards available in our country are not internationally recognised or accepted; as a result, Bangladeshi freelancers find it difficult to create accounts in PayPal, Payoneer, etc. They also face issues while receiving payment and that works as a disincentive. The second drawback is that there are no comprehensive government training programmes for the new and aspiring freelancers in our country. While Dhaka holds a few initiatives, these are not widely available across the country. Thirdly, freelancers must be proficient in English communication skills in order to join the global freelancing sector. Without being competent in this, they will not be able to keep pace with the global market. Moreover, high-speed internet is vital for the growing freelancing market which is not available in most of the local areas in Bangladesh.

For freelancing to grow and sustain, the government should look into the shortcomings pragmatically and take necessary steps to address them. After all, young people can greatly benefit from it.

Md Zillur Rahman, by email.

# Getting a rotten deal on rawhide

### NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

**T**HE recent debacle over the purchase of rawhides after Eid-ul-Azha raises some important concerns. The government had fixed the prices of rawhides of cows and buffaloes at Tk 45-50 per square

foot in the capital city of Dhaka and Tk 35-40 elsewhere. The price of the rawhide of castrated goats was fixed at Tk 18-20 per square foot, while it was Tk 13-15 for that of non-castrated goats. This year, some 1 crore animals were sacrificed across the country. Forty-five percent of these animals were cows, bulls and buffaloes, according to rawhide traders.

All well and good. Comes Eid. Animals have been sacrificed. The first link in the supply chain of rawhides is the seasonal traders. They bought hides at varying prices, depending on the locality. When it came to selling them to merchants, the prices being quoted by wholesalers (merchants) were a pittance and that didn't even match the cost price of what the seasonal traders had paid for. In the midst of all this chaos, we were confronted with confusing statements coming from top ministers. That didn't help matters at all for the seasonal traders, because the merchants were not buying at the government-fixed prices. The authorities tell us that these rates were fixed after talking to merchants and tanneries.

We know from media reports that rawhides worth some Tk 100 crore have been dumped, which is a colossal loss for both traders and the economy at large. Every year, we see a scramble for rawhide collection because it is a source of income for many madrassas, where the sale of such rawhide brings in revenue. This year, thanks to lack of foresight coupled with mismanagement, the whole rawhide business model has been turned on its head. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on August 16, "some 35 percent or more than 1 crore pieces of rawhide were thrown away after this Eid, mainly due to slack market monitoring by the government, a syndication of some tanners and merchants, and merchants' lack of capital to buy rawhide."

We have had conflicting statements

issued by the Bangladesh Tanners' Association (BTA) and the Bangladesh Hide and Skin Merchants' Association. According to the merchants' association, the tanners pay their dues in phases, and only cleared Tk 30-35 crores before Eid, which created a cash flow problem. The norm (according to the merchants) is for the tanners to pay "at least 40 percent of the dues every year before Eid-ul-Azha." Some merchants even stated that tanners only paid around five percent of the outstanding amount

crores! This cash shortfall was bound to have an effect on procurement, and it did.

The other issue, of course, was lax monitoring by the government. As per a report published in this paper on August 18, a senior secretary at the commerce ministry had stated that there had been no such monitoring system in the past, "so we could not predict such a situation." He went on to say that things ought to get back to normal as tanneries had agreed to buy rawhides from August

to-date information about the probable number of animals that would be sacrificed during Eid, and also keep tabs on the entire supply chain of this trade—from sacrifice to sale to tanneries?

There is no use crying over spilled milk. The next Eid-ul-Azha is a year away and there is much work to be done in the meantime. In the absence of strict monitoring and law enforcement against attempted syndication or price manipulation, this sad episode will repeat itself next year. Merely talking



In the absence of strict monitoring and enforcement of law against attempted syndication or price manipulation, problems in the rawhide industry will continue to persist.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

before Eid was celebrated on Monday last week. The merchants wanted the remainder of Tk 400 crore in unpaid dues (Tk 35 crore paid by tanneries). Tanneries, on the other hand, have refuted this allegation stating that around Tk 140 crore had been paid in advance. That still leaves more than Tk 250 crore in arrears, and whatever may be the actual figure in terms of unpaid dues, it still runs into hundreds of

19. The question that comes to mind is why we do not see any such mechanism in place as Eid is a festival that takes place every year. We would like to know if the government is thinking of conducting any study/survey about the quantity of rawhides that the tanneries have in stock (the ultimate destination for rawhides) prior to next year's Eid. Shouldn't there be a dedicated cell in the relevant ministries and departments that will collate up-

about syndicates controlling prices is like blowing hot air. What the thousands of seasonal or small traders, who have suffered serious financial loss, want to see, quite justly, is legal action against these syndicate members so that they are discouraged from attempting to manipulate the prices of raw hide during next year's Eid.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

# The World Bank and Poverty

*Understanding what it actually costs a family to live on*

SHARAN BURROW

**T**HE World Bank claims poverty is decreasing around the world but UN research shows it depends on what you measure. If we are serious about reducing poverty, we need to start by properly identifying it.

The World Bank has repeatedly claimed that extreme poverty is on the decline. In its "Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report", it states that "the world has made tremendous progress in reducing extreme poverty. The percentage of people living in extreme poverty globally fell to a new low of 10 percent in 2015—the latest number available—down from 11 percent in 2013, reflecting continued but slowing progress. The number of people living on

inability to meet their material needs. Perhaps the most basic of these needs is food. The UN's 2018 figures on hunger show that it is on the rise globally. It estimates that 821 million people are currently going hungry. It is striking then that the World Bank considers millions of those living in hunger as living above its poverty line.

Regional snapshots also contradict the World Bank's poverty findings. While the World Bank estimates that 400 million people live in extreme poverty in the Asia-Pacific Region, a 2018 report from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific highlights that 520 million people in the region are undernourished, and 1.2 billion people lack access to basic

poverty has nearly been eradicated in the region, ECLAC figures show that nearly a third of people in Latin America are unable to cover the costs of basic goods and services, and one in 10 cannot even afford the basic costs of food.

So what is the World Bank's poverty line based on? The USD 1 a day indicator was set out in the World Bank's 1990 World Development Report. While the "dollar a day marker" was easily understandable to the public, it was primarily symbolic and not based on any estimate of the income people would need to live on. The poverty line has since been updated according to inflation and changes to the consumer price index, and it currently stands at USD 1.90 for the

It is estimated that if the Bank were to measure poverty on the basis of needs, international poverty rates would be considerably higher. The Bank has resisted such a call, arguing that the USD 1.90 poverty line is valid and meaningful as it corresponds to the median of the national poverty lines of the world's poorest countries.

What's really happening is the World Bank validates its poverty line largely on that basis of other World Bank-developed national poverty lines, a flagrant case of partiality and circular logic. Research by Professor Sanjay Reddy showed only 9 of the 87 national poverty lines cited by the Bank have been derived independently.

The Atkinson Commission on Global Poverty, which was set up to advise the Bank on global poverty measurement, set out several recommendations to improve its poverty monitoring and measurement. It recommended that the World Bank partner with other agencies to construct a basic needs estimate of poverty. This is entirely feasible and some regional agencies are already successfully doing it. Nevertheless the Bank argued against it, putting the onus for adopting a more accurate approach on individual countries and preventing the development of internationally comparable estimates.

The Bank's own Acting Director for Research Francisco Ferreira recently conceded, "there is significant room for arbitrary decision making" in setting the World Bank's international poverty estimates. He went on to argue that correcting against such arbitrary consequences is unfeasible as the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) poverty reduction target is based on World Bank poverty measures. For an international institution to argue that an inaccurate measure should be maintained because the international community is using it, highlights a profound lack of ambition and responsibility-taking.

The World Bank and the greater international community should not fear changing a measure that is not working. In fact, it is necessary in order to achieve the Bank's stated goal of poverty reduction.

Under-reporting poverty does not make it go away. Rather, inaccurate indicators make it harder to identify the policies that truly address it, such as raising wages, reducing precarious work, extending social protection coverage and enhancing access to essential public services such as health and education.

It is high time the World Bank moved away from an arbitrary indicator towards one that captures the cost of living, based on the real needs of people.

Sharan Burrow is General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Copyright: Inter Press Service (IPS)



Is poverty really decreasing?

PHOTO: STAR

less than USD 1.90 a day fell during this period by 68 million to 736 million."

**What are we measuring?** The World Bank's extreme poverty line of USD 1.90 a day is in fact not based on real estimates of people's cost of living within countries. This explains why it fails to capture the desperation experienced by so many.

As soon as we focus on people's lived experience, the picture becomes more stark. At a most intuitive level, we know that poverty is determined by a person's

sanitation. The World Bank also estimates extreme poverty in Latin America, at 4.1 percent, to be low, and suggests it has been declining over the last years. Meanwhile, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean's (ECLAC) 2018 figures indicate that both poverty (29.6 percent) and extreme poverty (10.2 percent) have been increasing since 2012.

ECLAC defines its poverty and extreme poverty lines based on the costs of food and other essential goods and services. While the World Bank claims that extreme

poorest countries. The Bank did develop additional poverty lines for lower-middle and upper-middle income countries, at USD 3.20 and USD 5.50 a day, largely to reflect higher prices in those countries.

**If it is broken, fix it**

The arbitrary nature of the Bank's approach to poverty measurement has critics abound and many have identified the need to move towards a basic needs approach. This would define the amount of money needed to cover food, housing, and other essential goods and services, including health and education.