

## Collaborative efforts for universal health coverage

*PM's proposal is rooted in practical concerns*

HEALTH is a fundamental right of every human being, yet it is not one enjoyed by everyone. Not just in Bangladesh, poor people everywhere—basically half of the world's population—lack access to essential health services. Although the world had set itself a target to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030—as part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—doing so would be extremely difficult because of the rising poverty and inequality in many countries. It is against this backdrop that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's proposal at the UN for collaboration among countries to accelerate progress in the Universal Health Coverage comes across as the right thing to do. One of the challenges facing poor and developing countries is the lack of resources to finance their healthcare schemes, as well as lack of proper health policies and inclusive development. One way to address this, as the PM has suggested, would be to forge partnerships at regional and global levels to mobilise resources for this purpose. That's easier said than done, however. But it at least serves as a vision worth taking forward.

This also calls for an assessment of the situation in Bangladesh where the poor are struggling to access healthcare. The government has established about 14,000 Community Clinics across the country to provide primary healthcare to rural areas, but many of those are in a perennially bad shape. Lack of physicians, nurses, adequate funds and equipment in many of those facilities is making healthcare inaccessible. These problems need to be fixed. Just establishing facilities without ensuring that they are run properly is not going to help improve Bangladesh's situation. Also, it's important that the government takes initiatives to make the rural areas self-sufficient in medical facilities. Poor budgetary allocation for health is a problem for Bangladesh, as is the general lack of accountability in the health sector. The persistence of all these problems means that a radical new approach is needed for the reforms that are being sought. That goes for both Bangladesh and the world in their pursuit for attaining universal health coverage.

## Heed their voices on climate change

*The youth have sent a message*

AN emotional and impassioned speech by teen activist Greta Thunberg in the opening session of the United Nations Climate Action Summit on September 23 drove home the message of the need to take drastic action on climate change or risk hastening the destruction of the planet. She spoke of the pollution and other extreme impacts on climate largely brought about by the inaction over fossil fuel emissions and the inability of the world's largest polluting countries, whose leadership are responsible for the increase in climate-induced changes that have affected large parts of the world since the Paris Agreement. The voices of the scientists have been drowned out by some of the most powerful leaders in the world who remain climate sceptics.

We wonder how the "catastrophic warming" that is causing extreme weather conditions like thawing of the permafrost and alarming sea-level rising at much faster rates than expected, can be ignored by people heading some of the biggest economies of the world. This young activist spoke for all the young people across the globe, and yes, in our unmitigated greed for profits, we continue to witness the biggest emitting countries continue to patronise fossil fuels despite calls for achieving a net zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.

A recent UN report has found that instead of falling, carbon dioxide grew two percent in 2018, reaching a record high of 37 billion tonnes. We wonder, if the latest round of talks on climate change will be yet another exercise in making hollow commitments, or whether the 14 nations that contribute 25 percent of the world emissions will step away from their earlier stance on not revising current climate plans by 2020. If they stick to their guns, then Greta's appeal to humanity to do the right thing will have fallen on deaf ears and we may have proven the scientists, who have predicted that the Earth will be reaching a point of no return in our lifetime, right.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Corruption must be uprooted

Our Liberation War was a war against corruption, discrimination and injustices. The people revolted against the ruling establishment in West Pakistan because it was crooked and oppressive.

After independence, Bangabandhu tried his best to lead the country in a progressive way. But he faced many obstacles from the corrupt bureaucracy, dishonest politicians and greedy businessmen. Even the relief that Bangabandhu managed to receive from abroad in those troubled times were hoarded by these crooks.

Corruption is the biggest obstacle that we face today. It is pulling our country back like nothing else. I want to thank the prime minister for taking action against the corrupt elements within her party and its affiliated organisations. We hope to see such action continue in the future.

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# The prime minister's crusade against corruption



IT is no secret that people in general share a common perception that corruption in the country has gone off the rails to the point of becoming nearly unbearable. While high corruption, mainly facilitated by some members of the ruling party of the day, has been a plague now for decades, the political reality of the last 10 years—with the Awami League dominating the political arena—that has elevated the power and influence of a few current ruling-party members, seems to have pushed corruption up to new extremes.

The correlation between the two should not come as a surprise—as history shows. Hence, the saying, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," is so commonly known. This is what makes the prime minister's recent comments, which most likely initiated the removal or arrest of individuals in high positions of the AL's various student wings, not only bold, but also commendable.

During a meeting on September 9, the PM expressed her dissatisfaction over the controversial activities of then Chhatra League President Rezwanaul Haque Chowdhury Shovon and General Secretary Golam Rabbani. On September 14, the two were removed from their posts. Citing AL sources, this newspaper reported on September 15 that the PM became furious when she was informed by Jahangirnagar University VC that the two demanded "four to six percent" cut from a Tk 1,445 crore project at the university—which one of the two admitted they wanted for their "Eid expenditure". As outrageous as this sounds, this attempted extortion was not a one-off event.

Before their appointments, Shovon and Rabbani lived in Dhaka University dormitories. Afterwards, the two reportedly started living in flats that cost Tk 70,000 and Tk 40,000 in rent, even though the BCL charter did not allow them to have any job or be involved in any business. Then how could they afford such high rents? And how did they afford owning their own separate Toyota Noahs? One likely answer: "through extortion", as even several BCL leaders of DU alleged Shovon's followers had set fire to equipment during a concert to celebrate Pahela Baishakh because Shovon was not given his cut of the sponsor's money.

The removal of the two top leaders of BCL immediately seemed to have sent a message. On September 16, this newspaper reported that Jubo League was going to hold a meeting in a bid to "rid itself of errand elements", where two key leaders of its Dhaka city unit were "summoned". The report said that this move was triggered by the PM expressing her anger over various allegations against some Jubo League leaders.

And lo and behold, on September 18, Jubo League Dhaka South Organising Secretary Khalid Mahmud Bhuiyan was

arrested by Rab for running a casino at a football club in Fakirerpool. After raiding the casino, they detained and sentenced 142 people and seized Tk 24 lakh, bottles of liquor, drugs, etc. According to Rab officials, crores of taka were being gambled in the casino every day.

Later, they raided another casino at Wanderers Club and recovered huge quantities of gambling materials, drugs and counterfeit currencies. Rab officials said two leaders of the ruling party affiliated organisations ran that casino as well.

What is interesting is that Fakirerpool Young Men's Club and Dhaka Wanderers

anyone".

Given the recent aforementioned events, these statements are indeed encouraging. However, the question still remains why actions against corrupt elements were not taken until the PM spoke out.

Aside from the fact that these corrupt individuals had garnered enormous power, or were being protected by others that are influential, the fact that they continued to commit crimes until now shows: i) That corruption has become so embedded in society and across various government hierarchies that it has become institutionalised; and ii) That our public institutions, as they currently

bought earlier in the year from Indian companies—with loans from the Indian government—for Tk 475 crore, many were faulty. And as the Minister of Road Transport and Bridges Obaidul Quader explained, "there must have been experts among those involved in bringing buses"—which rules out incompetence being the cause that led to such wastage, and points to corruption instead.

All this paints an extremely grim picture. As while, on the one hand, there are a few incidences to celebrate in the fight against corruption, on the other, we see countless more popping up, left, right and centre.

This is why we hope the PM would



People hide behind blackjack tables as Rab officials raid Fakirerpool Youngmen's Club in the capital.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Club, where the casinos had been running, are both located just behind the Motijheel Police Station, separated only by the walls of a police barracks. Then why wasn't any action taken before? It seems highly unlikely that it was because law enforcers didn't know.

According to one official of the Bangladesh Football Federation, the "police were silent" as "they were beneficiaries too", and because the "police don't have the power to catch them without the permission of the highest authorities". The only explanation why that could be is that those running the casinos, or the casino business itself, were being protected by even more powerful and influential quarters or individuals.

Responding to this suspicion, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader said, "action will be taken if it is found that the 'casino business' was being operated with support from any political leader or anyone from the administration." And the PM herself gave similar hints when she said, "I have taken action against Chhatra League and Jubo League. I won't spare

stand, are failing as a result—since this kind of corruption is supposed to be rooted out through existing mechanisms, and not have to wait for the PM's intervention.

However, when corruption does become this institutionalised, the only way out of its vicious cycle is through courageous interventions—as made by the PM in recent cases.

That corruption has become rampant is visible also from another angle. Around the same time that all this happened, this newspaper reported that Tk 57 lakh crore out of a Tk 1,500 crore project titled, "Sustainable Forests and Livelihood", had been spent with project officials failing to select even the project site. It was discovered that officials had attended multiple trainings abroad, bought five cars for Tk 2.5 crore, etc., but had made zero progress in the project that aims to improve the lives of 40,000 people—meaning all that money spent just went down the drain.

In another case, it was found that out of 600 buses that the government

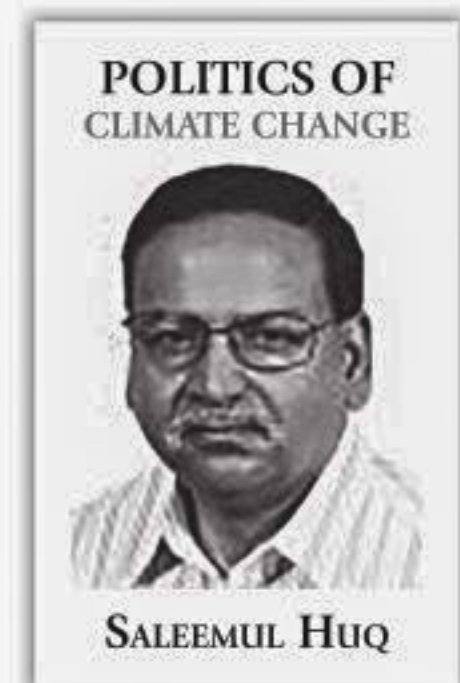
follow up on her words that no one will be spared when it comes to corruption. The only way to effectively battle corruption at this stage is to extend the net that has been thrown on corrupt BCL and Jubo League members, across the ruling party and all organisations affiliated to it. And also across different government organisations and ministries.

It is only when action is taken against criminals in all these different organisations that the environment of impunity that has been established over the years, can be brought down. Once that begins to happen, public organisations may finally function in a way where corruption gets addressed through their own mechanisms, as they should—instead of government officials and law enforcers turning a blind eye to corruption, or actively helping to cover it up.

Realistically, only then should we expect there to be a real turn in the tide in the crusade against corruption.

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# Coming transformation on climate change in the US



undermining efforts in the US to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

However, joining Greta Thunberg on the climate strike and march in New York on Friday, along with more than 200,000 young people from the US, has given me greater hope that president Trump may not represent the people of the US when it comes to climate change and that the presidential and congressional elections in 2020 will see a big change in the US.

Let me try to explain my reasons for this sense of optimism.

Firstly, it is quite clear that there is a very big divide amongst young people in the US who really do understand the climate change emergency and are pushing for action. They are the voters of the future and can change the political landscape if they vote in large numbers in 2020. They were out on the streets of every major US city on Friday showing their determination.

Secondly, the Democratic party has taken a major step forward in recognising that the climate change emergency is real and each and every one of the presidential candidates have pledged to take it seriously. They have all come out in support of the Green New Deal. Indeed,

they held a single topic debate on climate change and how each of them will tackle it, which would have been extremely unlikely even a few years ago. In fact, Senator Bernie Sanders has adopted the most far reaching position on global climate justice.

Thirdly, many states, led by California as well as cities led by New York are developing their own strategies to tackle climate change and abide by the Paris Agreement on their own.

from fossil fuel companies and towards renewable energy. In fact, it is quite self-evident that coal investment is now dead and even states and cities with Republican governors and mayors are allowing significant investment in both solar as well as wind energy as they are cheaper and less polluting, as well as generating good green jobs.

Finally, the most important part of the realisation and acceptance of climate change is that the people can see the



Led by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, young activists and their supporters rally for action on climate change on September 20, 2019 in New York City.

PHOTO: DREW ANGERER/AFP

California by itself is the 8th largest global economy and has adopted a policy to become carbon neutral by 2045.

However the most important change that is visible everywhere in the US, particularly with regard to investment in energy and technology, is the move away

reality of adverse climatic impacts such as hurricane Dorian, rain and flooding in Texas and wildfires in California. In cities like Miami which is very vulnerable to sea level and sea side properties, some of the most expensive have become uninsurable and hence have dropped in value.

It is of course difficult to predict what will happen in the 2020 elections but there is no doubt that one of the biggest issues that Democrats and Republicans will fight over is climate change.

In the next week the United Nations Secretary General has called the Climate Action Summit where world leaders from governments, cities and companies have been invited to come with plans not speeches. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is one of the invited leaders but President Trump has not been invited, which is causing some embarrassment for the public in the US.

The objective of this summit is to encourage countries and others to step up their ambitions to tackle climate change beyond their commitments under the Paris Agreement, while at the same time shaming those countries like the US and Australia, who are failing to even meet their Paris Agreement commitments. This is a significant move for the UN Secretary General to actually shame countries for failing to take action.

During the rest of the week there will be other events including a major Youth Day with Greta Thunberg and youth from around the world.

On the following Friday the school children will have another climate strike around the world to give their reflections on the achievement of the summit.

There is also a major global climate change communications week by all the leading global and national media outlets which will be carrying news and articles on climate action around the world.

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