

# A distressfully uncertain future created by the latest US foreign student guideline

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## Flawed beneficiaries' list hampering cash distribution

*Corruption, weak targeting and inefficiency are to blame*

FTER the government imposed a countrywide shutdown in late March, it announced a number of stimulus packages to help people and businesses cope with the economic shocks of the pandemic. As part of this, the government allocated Tk 1,250 crore for the 50 lakh poor families whose earning members have lost their jobs because of the lockdown, and the fund disbursement began on May 14, ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr. However, it is frustrating to learn that around two months after the government started the programme, it has managed to disburse funds among 16.16 lakh targeted people only while a staggering two-thirds of the 50 lakh poor families are yet to receive the cash support (Tk 2,500 each) because of several flaws in the beneficiaries' list.

Just before the fund disbursement started on May 14, *The Daily Star* ran a report that there were anomalies in the list and that the beneficiaries' NID numbers didn't match with those in the EC database. Two months later, that problem still exists while many other new problems have also been identified by the finance ministry.

Reportedly, the government's information and communications technology division and the disaster and relief management ministry together compiled the list of the potential beneficiaries from across the country and sent it to the finance ministry. When the finance ministry cross-checked the names of the beneficiaries, apart from the NID mishap, they found some other gross anomalies in the list and cut down around five lakh names from the list—among them were government officials, pensioners, and beneficiaries of other social safety net schemes. Surprisingly, there were also names of 557 people in the list who each owned Tk 5 lakh in savings certificates while around three lakh names were included there more than once. There were also several types of inconsistencies in the list.

All these flaws in the list need to be fixed immediately if the government wants to provide its cash assistance to the right people—rickshaw and van-pullers, day labourers, construction workers, agriculture farmers, employees of shops, people employed at small businesses, poultry labourers and transport workers, etc.—who have been the worst affected by the pandemic. And the first step to disburse the fund to the targeted people would be to rectify the list from the field level. It is good to know that the PMO has already directed the upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) to do so. The finance ministry's recommendation to identify the mobile phone numbers that are being used by the potential beneficiaries and opening Tk 10-account under the supervision of the upazila administration should also be implemented. Besides, the NID problems of the beneficiaries need to be solved.

Corruption, weak targeting of people and inefficiency have always marred the government's safety net schemes. We hope the government will soon solve these issues and provide financial assistance to those who need it the most.

## Fake certificates giving a false sense of safety

*Fraudsters must be arrested and sent to jail*

HE discovery of a hospital's staff engaged in issuing fake Covid-19 test reports to unsuspecting patients is deeply worrying at a time when accurate reports are vital to containing the pandemic. We commend the members of the mobile court that sealed off the Regent Hospital on charges of issuing such fake reports while taking money from patients. Rab has in fact, identified syndicates that are in operation, swindling people and issuing these fraudulent reports. The implications of such malpractice are devastating. Individuals who may be infected with the virus may be under the false impression that they are free from it because the fake certificate has given a Covid-19 negative result. This means the person may become extremely sick without treatment and also unknowingly infect others. For expatriate Bangladeshis working abroad it has far reaching consequences as they are being refused by the destination countries after testing positive even though they had reports that stated they had tested negative.

The fraud has also badly affected Bangladesh's image abroad. Japan, Italy and South Korea have already restricted the entry of Bangladeshis after some of them, with documents certifying that they didn't have the coronavirus, tested positive after they arrived in those countries. Recently 151 Bangladeshis were sent back from Italy because earlier several Bangladeshi expatriates arriving in that country with certificates saying they were Covid-19 negative tested positive.

While we commend the government in catching criminals and sealing off the hospital involved in the scam, it cannot be emphasised enough how crucial it is for other syndicates involved in this malpractice to be caught and brought to book immediately. It is disturbing to note that despite knowing that Regent Hospital's licence had expired years ago the health service division of the health ministry still signed a deal in early March with it to treat Covid-19 patients. The government must carry out extensive monitoring of all Covid-19 hospitals and pathological laboratories doing these tests.

There will always be fraudsters waiting to take advantage of any crisis to make a quick buck. But the enormity of the crime of issuing fake Covid-19 certificates warrants continuous vigilance on the part of the government and its law enforcing agencies. It also highlights the need to be more diligent about scrutinising hospitals and making sure they have valid licenses to function. If hospitals do not have valid licenses they should not be allowed to operate at all, let alone conduct tests. We sincerely hope that these syndicates are brought to book and our image abroad is restored so that Bangladeshis are not barred from countries they travel to for work or other purposes. The government should also create widespread awareness about the dangerous consequences of wilfully buying such certificates.

### NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA  
MEHREEN AMIN

**M**ONDAY July 6 proved to arrive with ominous news for international students studying in the US, some of them still in the US, others back home for the summer as well as those who

were scheduled to start university this fall. A formidable statement issued by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) stated that all foreign students in the US taking online classes would have to leave the US while those scheduled to get in would be denied visa. The directive can affect the over one million international students in the US; around 7,500 are Bangladeshis enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programmes.

The announcement, came at a time when these young men and women were trying to cope with the anxiety of staying cooped up in their apartments in the US and suddenly transitioning from regular Spring classes to online classes because of the pandemic. They had to take classes online (at the same cost as regular classes) because US university authorities were following the protocol to protect their students, faculty and staff from becoming infected by Covid-19. Because there is a pandemic out there—everywhere, with the US being one of the worst hit bearing the loss of already at least 130,000 lives. Because containing infections is very difficult when there are thousands of people walking around in close proximity as is the case with university campuses. Online classes were therefore, not chosen by international students. For many universities online classes are the only classes offered next fall. So according to ICE—if a student is enrolled for only online classes they cannot stay in the US and may face deportation if they do.

So what would the cost be to the US? Many international students pay exorbitant tuition fees that significantly contribute to the universities' development. They also pay rent for their dorms or apartments and spend money on food, health insurance, transportation, clothes, entertainment and so on. But it's not just the around USD 45 billion they contribute to the US economy (US Department of Commerce 2018). Foreign students give American students the opportunity to learn about other cultures and different world perspectives.

Foreign students come on merit so they bring in talent and innovation; many are involved in groundbreaking scientific research. Which is why there are so many international students in MIT, Harvard, UC Berkeley and all the other prestigious US universities. It is a mutually enriching experience that promotes camaraderie, harmony and peace among people of diverse cultures. These are compelling reasons why universities should have international students yet they seem to have little relevance in the context of this regulation.

If followed through, the regulation will impose unbelievable hardship on foreign students. Many have signed year-long leases on their apartments or dorms, many share apartments with local students—how will their contracts

would mean an extra expense many students can ill afford. These institutions may not even be able to provide the students the courses they need to complete their degree or maintain their status as required by US immigration law.

So what is going on?

As analysts have commented the reasons behind this harsh move seems more political than pragmatic and a way to arm-twist universities into resuming regular classes. As President Trump has tweeted: "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!". So just like wearing a mask has been perceived as an act of defiance against the president instigated by Liberals and Democrats and other undesirable opponents rather than a life-saving safety measure advocated by scientists the world over, keeping schools



PHOTO: CHRIS GRAYTHEN/AFP

be sorted out? Will they be refunded rent or security deposits already paid for apartments they have rented? Others would have to move out of their apartments or dorm rooms with all their belongings. Where will they store them in the middle of a pandemic, more importantly, for how long? What happens to students who are from countries that have travel bans? What happens to newly enrolled students eagerly waiting to start university in the fall?

Let's not even get to the mental anguish of leaving their university life, their friends and going into an uncertain future. Many students come from countries where Internet connections are not guaranteed to run smoothly which will make online classes a frustrating affair. The difference in time zones itself will make attendance and concentration challenging. Getting enrolled into another institution that offers in person classes

and universities closed is perceived to be another display of rebellion. But what the Trump administration fails to acknowledge is that having online classes in lieu of physical classes is the least desirable alternative for universities but it happens to be the only one if the health of the students and university staff are to be protected. American universities pride themselves for having the most learned scholars and academics teaching participatory, engaging, face-to-face classes and providing vibrant, intellectually stimulating campuses for their students. In American classrooms, students are forced to think for themselves, be creative, inquisitive and challenge conventional viewpoints. The sprawling campuses, with their grand architecture give students a unique university experience which includes building friendships with a diverse student community and creating

memories that will stay with them forever. It is precisely why it is a dream for students all over the world to go for higher education in the US. Online classes deprive students of all these joys of regular academic life and make imparting education challenging, to say the least, for the universities. So nobody is excited about these online classes, it is a compromise that is considered a necessary measure purely because of a health crisis that threatens lives. *Covid-19 is still here* and infections in many US states continue to rise. The conditions are still extraordinary and so imposing the standard regulations during normal times (that were initially stalled because of the pandemic) is hardly logical.

The only sliver of hope for international students devastated and confused by all this is if their institutions offer what is known as the hybrid model—a mixture of online and in person classes. This allows them to take more than one class (three credit hours) online and stay in the US. If their institutions do not offer hybrid classes then they can transfer to another institution that does offer such classes to maintain status and stay. This is applicable only for F1 non-immigrant students and not for F-1 students in English language training programmes or students pursuing vocational degrees on M-1 visas.

As expected there has been widespread backlash against a move that contradicts the US's image as a country that has traditionally attracted students from all over the world. Harvard and MIT have sued the Department of Homeland Security and ICE, seeking a temporary restraining order against the rule. According to Forbes the suit says that the policy is 'arbitrary and capricious and an abuse of discretion'.

Meanwhile universities all over the US are in a quandary of whether to have hybrid classes or stay exclusively online.

Everything therefore depends on whether there will be a spike in Covid-19 infections in the fall—as feared by health experts. If that is the case it will make it very difficult to hold even hybrid classes. So if the regulation is imposed all foreign students will be denied entry into the US. It may also result in the loss of many new international students for US universities and direct them to more welcoming countries. And that would hurt the US's educational institutions as well as its economy.

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## MUHAMMAD SHAHIDULLAH'S 135TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

# Shahidullah, a linguist and language activist

NAZMUL AHASAN

**B**Y the time Muhammad Shahidullah was old enough to begin his secondary education, he already knew five languages. Besides his mother tongue of Bangla, he not only learnt Urdu, Persian and Arabic—perceived to be the languages of Muslims—but he also became proficient in Sanskrit, the primary liturgical language of Hinduism.

While studying in Howrah Zilla School, Shahidullah met Harinath De, his teacher and mentor. Harinath De was a legendary polyglot who learnt 34 languages—20 European and 14 Indian ones—in a very short lifespan of 34 years. He successfully infused his passion for learning new languages into Shahidullah. By the end of his life, Shahidullah knew 24.

However, Shahidullah developed a special interest in learning a particular language: Sanskrit. In a society that was divided strictly along religious lines, it was very unusual for a Muslim student to have fondness for Sanskrit. When Shahidullah graduated with honours in Sanskrit, he became the university's first Muslim student to have achieved this remarkable feat.

In fact, he was so adamant about mastering this language that he went so far as to sue a Brahmin teacher at Calcutta University who had refused to teach him Vedas, a major Hindu religious text, as part of his master's course because he was a Muslim. His case stirred an uproar when Maulan Mohammad Ali, a prominent Muslim writer, penned a scathing editorial titled *The Shahidullah Affair* in *The Comrade* newspaper highlighting the discriminatory behaviour of the university. Liberal Hindu intellectuals found the conduct disturbing. Suren Banerjee, editor of *The Bengal*, wrote of the conservative Brahmin pundit: "Today, these orthodox pundits should be thrown into the Ganges." Calcutta University Syndicate tried to convince the teachers in vain and regretted its inability afterwards.

Later, the case ended up in Delhi High Court which eventually ruled that the university accept Shahidullah as a student in its Sanskrit programme, or create a new department to accommodate him. The university did the latter and created the comparative philology department. It was while studying in this department that Shahidullah met his old mentor Harinath De as a professor, though briefly.

He was the first student, and the only in his batch, to have received a master's degree from the department. He might

not have studied Sanskrit exclusively as he had insisted, but his academic works in comparative philology allowed him to learn and study a wide range of languages and proved instrumental in his career.

Seven years later, Shahidullah joined the department as "Sarat Kumar Lahiri Research Assistant in Bengali Philology" at the request of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the vice chancellor of the university who was sympathetic to him. The next year, in 1920, as part of his assignment, Shahidullah published one of his most important papers titled "Outlines of an Historical Grammar of the Bengali

He later contended that it was Gaudi Prakrit, not Magadhi Prakrit as believed by many contemporary linguists including Suniti Kumar Chatterji, from which the Bangla language had descended.

However, he did not disavow his old love for Sanskrit. In 1926, he enrolled himself at University of Sorbonne, Paris where he studied Vedic (Sanskrit), Avesta (ancient Persian), Tibetan languages and comparative philology. At Sorbonne, Shahidullah had the rare privilege of undertaking research under Jules Bloch, the most prominent scholar of Indo-Aryan linguistics of that time.



Dr Muhammad Shahidullah and Dr Kazi Motahar Hossain at the inaugural ceremony of a literature conference at Dhaka Curzon Hall in 1954.

Language" in the *Journal of the Department of Letters of the University of Calcutta*. This lengthy essay was instrumental in composing subsequent historical Bangla grammar. Subhadra Kumar Sen, a professor of phonetics and linguistics at Calcutta University who wrote a book named after Shahidullah covering his life and work, observed of the paper: "This is a compact introductory essay on the principles and application of Historical-Comparative Grammar."

In 1921, when Dhaka University was founded, he joined its Bengali and Sanskrit department as a lecturer. Four years later, he shattered a popular myth that Bangla had originated from Sanskrit.

By this time, Haraprasad Shastri, a fellow Sanskrit scholar and Shahidullah's teacher, rediscovered a palm-leaf manuscript of *Charayapada*, the earliest specimens of the Bangla language. Shastri let Shahidullah, among a few others, study the ancient text, written in Abhattha language, an ancient form of the Bangla language we use today. Two years later, he submitted his thesis titled "Les Chants Mystiques de Kanha et de Saraha (Songs of the mystics Kanha and Saraha)" deciphering the works of two of the Buddhist poets who composed *Charayapada*. According to Professor Subhadra Kumar Sen, the biographer, the doctoral dissertation was Shahidullah's

most significant work. Shahidullah, in his lifetime, contributed to nearly all branches of linguistics, but his activist persona occupied a big part of his legacy. He was one of the first to demand Bangla to be the state language of Pakistan.

Soon after the creation of Pakistan, East Pakistan was dominated by questions of language. As Congress had chosen Hindi as the state language of India, Pakistani ideologues thought they should make Urdu their state language. Ziauddin Ahmed, the then vice chancellor of Aligarh University, was one of the first to demand that Urdu be made Pakistan's state language. Ziauddin's opinion was important because he was also the chairman of East Pakistan Educational Reconstruction Committee in which Shahidullah was invited to join as a member but he declined.

In response to Ziauddin's advocacy of Urdu, Shahidullah wrote an op-ed titled "Pakistan's Language Problem" in *Weekly Comrade* and *Azadi* newspapers. In this opinion piece, he detailed his arguments as to why Bangla should be made the first state language of Pakistan. He was liberal enough to propose Urdu to be made the second state language although it was not a native language in any part of Pakistan.

"It is a mistake to think that in a state there can be only one state language... In Canada, English and French; in Belgium, French and Flemish; and in Switzerland, French, Italian and German are recognised as state languages. It would be a retrograde step to make Urdu the sole state language of Pakistan, in imitation of or out of revenge for the recent Congress decision in favour of Hindi..."

However, West Pakistani rulers did not pay heed and went ahead with making Urdu the state language of Pakistan. In fact, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, clarified in Dhaka University Convocation the next year that, "There can be only one state language if the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison and that language, in my opinion, can only be Urdu."

His speech instantly triggered a populist outburst which culminated in the events on February 21, 1952, when, according to Shahidullah's biographer Professor Sen, "his students as he rightly observed to Sukumari Sen in a private conversation had literally and freely shed their blood for the sake of their mother tongue."

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