

Cancellations of JSC-JDC exams

Finally, some respite for students

AFTER almost five months of postponement of classes and uncertainty regarding the schedule of school examinations, this year's Junior School Certificate (JSC), Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) and their equivalent exams have finally been cancelled. Moreover, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has suggested that students might be promoted without having to sit for class final tests. We welcome this move, which would certainly bring some respite to anxious students worried about finishing their syllabuses and performing well in the highly competitive exams, with schools closed for the better part of the year due to the pandemic.

Exams are nerve-wracking even during non-Covid times. The pandemic has exposed our students to further mental and emotional vulnerabilities, as they are stuck at home for long periods of time with no interaction with their peers, worrying about an uncertain future. Compelling them to sit for exams for which they were unprepared for would have been cruel, to say the least, and we appreciate that officials have now been asked to devise alternative evaluation methods for promotions for all grades. We believe this is an opportune moment for the education sector to come up with methods of assessments that don't rely on rote memorisation but rather promote critical thinking among students, and enable them to engage analytically with knowledge gained from their textbooks, and indeed, the outside world. The latter ought to be a prerequisite of education, whether or not there is a pandemic.

The education ministry and primary and mass education ministry have extended the closure of educational institutions until October 3, following recommendations by the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19. This, too, is a necessary move to ensure the safety of students and their families and to keep the transmission of Covid-19 in check. However, this prolonged closure will further negatively impact students who lack access to digital devices, TVs and radios and hence cannot reap the benefits of alternative programmes introduced by the government since the onset of Covid-19. The ministries must address this digital divide urgently or risk mass dropouts, particularly as poor families, struggling to tide over the pandemic, put their children to work or marry their daughters off. As a result of the cancellation of the PECE, it was also announced that the government will not provide any scholarship to over one lakh students of primary schools and madrasas across the country that are offered on the basis of these results. We feel this decision could also push students from disadvantaged backgrounds out of education, and we urge the government to come up with alternative methods to assess the needs of students and grant scholarships to the most deprived candidates.

Moreover, the fate of HSC students still hang in the balance, and they risk losing a year if the Covid situation does not improve in the near future. If the situation prolongs for much longer, the ministry can consider opting for predictive grades based on previous class exams. At any rate, it should explore all possibilities while engaging with experts as well as students on how to best mitigate the problem.

Making masks with garment scraps to ensure livelihoods

Rural women lead the way

THE global economic slowdown that resulted from the pandemic has affected multiple industries and led to mass unemployment at home and abroad. It is encouraging to learn that during such difficult times, rural women are making biodegradable, reusable Ella masks from garment scraps—a product of ELLA (Eco-friendly low-cost liquid absorbent) Pad, an award-winning social enterprise known for reusing high-quality textile scraps from export-oriented garment factories to produce sanitary napkins for RMG workers at affordable prices. Ella masks are standardised according to World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines.

In order to provide financial independence, the enterprise connects rural women with different institutional buyers and UN agencies who purchase their masks. With the opportunity to earn Tk 400 per day without any additional hassle, hundreds of women from seven districts—Dhaka, Gazipur, Jamalpur, Kustia, Magura, Narayanganj and Rajbari—got involved with the project. Many are even earning more than they did previously, and are able to make significant contributions to their household incomes.

At a time when unemployment poses a grave threat, it is promising to see how the organisation is trying to ensure the health and well-being of marginalised women to alleviate their sufferings. Overtime, when the demand for masks ease, ELLA Pad aspires to diversify into home textile items so that the women can continue making a living. We hope such initiatives get all the support they need in carrying out their activities so that they can be replicated across the nation and empower women in impoverished communities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Biodegradable PPE

A recent report in this daily highlighted the invention of biodegradable PPE by Dr Mubarak Ahmad Khan, who also invented the famous Sonali Bag using jute polymer. We are well-aware of the perils associated with plastic waste being discarded improperly, which tends to help spread the virus further. However, Dr Khan's PPE, which is made with cellulose extracted from jute and chitosan, a natural fibrous material made from the exoskeleton of crabs, lobsters and shrimps, dissolves in soapy water within three minutes and disintegrates in plain water within seven days. In this moment of crisis, his innovative invention has the potential to make a positive impact at home and abroad. The government should support Dr Khan in every possible manner.

Sanjida Alam, Narayanganj

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

BANGLADESH has inherited many legacies by virtue of its long history as a constituent of a larger geographical entity, of which it was a part till not very long ago. Some of them make us proud, some we

would rather shun. But one common trait of most people of South Asia is the propensity to hide behind abhorrent legacies of the past to hide our failings as well as our incapacity or unwillingness to change the status quo, and instead blame the past regimes for one's shortcomings. We have the most recent example of "legacy" being cited as the reason why we are witnessing instances of crossfire.

The issue of crossfire killings has come into national focus more acutely after the preplanned murder of Major Sinha. But extrajudicial deaths are not recent phenomena. We have been witnessing this practice for a long time. But when some of our leaders resort to blame games and citing the past as an excuse, what they expose is a selective memory (or selective amnesia if you like), basking in the self-serving feeling of satisfaction that it is the predecessor and not them, who is the villain of the piece.

We prefer to blame this legacy because that perhaps suits our purpose no matter how blatantly obvious those practices may be in the present. We still blame the "bloody Brits" for many ills but do nothing to change the rules, practices or traditions we have inherited. Every regime, irrespective of the party in power,

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EDITORIAL

The 'legacy' of crossfire

has blamed its predecessor for all the wrong policies and for all the evils that were happening in the country. However, not only were those policies not done away with—they were generally made even more stringent by adding more draconian features. In recent times, the floor of the parliament was used to root for crossfire as a way to resolve law and order issues. The number of deaths since the start of the anti-narcotics drive suggests that as an expedient, crossfire may have come to be accepted as a tactical norm.

policies have been steadfastly continued with. Operation Clean Heart may have been a well-intentioned undertaking—to arrest the rising incidence of crime and lawlessness and recover illegal weapons, but at the end of the day, at least 58 people were dead, allegedly killed by the security forces, and about 10,000 arrested. The Act of 2003 to indemnify the killings was declared illegal by the High Court. In similar vein, the Rakkhi Bahini was given indemnity in 1974. As we have stated before, one hears critical and discordant notes only when a ruling

follow the tactics of the gun and narcotics runners; doing that degrades them to the level of injustice of these elements. But even more than that, resorting to such extrajudicial means, where the police become the judge, jury and executioner, denigrates the legal system and the court, and as Albert Camus has said, it mutilates justice. Such police actions also betray a lack of confidence in the judicial system. And if it becomes a common trick of police trade, it often becomes a weapon of extortion and fear wielded by some errant police officials.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

The latest example of the blame-the-past inclination is a minister's frank admission that crossfire deaths are illegal—being a lawyer, he couldn't say otherwise—but he quickly added that it is a legacy the Awami League has inherited. He also, somewhat ruefully, acknowledged that bad legacies take a long time to purge. Indeed, legacies, particularly bad ones, are like the second layer of human skin, the dermis, which is impossible to peel off. But one would have thought that a decade was long enough a time to get rid of a practice for which the country has had to face severe internal and international criticisms.

The most unfortunate aspect of governance in Bangladesh is that although there have been changes in government from time to time, the bad

party cadre has the misfortune of falling victim, as was the case of Arzu Mian, a Bangladesh Chhatra League leader, who was allegedly killed in a "gunfight" with Rab in August 2015. And it was an AL MP who reportedly claimed that "Arzu was murdered" and said, "the government could not function depending on Rab, which was formed during the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition government."

The country today is caught between crossfire and self-defence. Although one does not have any issue with the security forces resorting to genuine self-defence, the narrative of self-defence has been so overused that it no longer accords legality to the killings; the official statements following such deaths are too repetitive to satisfy one's credulity. The law enforcing agencies can ill afford to

No society can endure a situation where law keepers break the law. While the government is justified in undertaking drives to arrest a deteriorating law and order problem, it cannot justify the extrajudicial actions resorted to by the police. One wonders if trade in yaba and other narcotics have reduced in the two years of the drive, despite the nearly 400 dead.

Extrajudicial methods have both national and international repercussions, apart from the deleterious effect on the rule of law. And the lawmakers, instead of blaming the baggage of the past, should do away with those instead. Is there the political will to do so?

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Epidemics, economics, and externalities



KOICHI HAMADA

COVID-19 and its collateral damage continue to leave a trail of devastation around the world. Millions of businesses have closed, with many having no realistic prospect of reopening. Millions of people have lost their jobs.

Millions are without health care. Some families are suffering from food insecurity for the first time. While the well-to-do can manage by using their savings, those who live from paycheck to paycheck, or hand to mouth, are suffering unfathomable hardships.

The pandemic also poses an almost impossible problem for traditional economic thinking. Most economists believe that the price mechanism will

resources from being allocated efficiently.

Consider the decision whether or not to wear a face mask. In the absence of a pandemic, the demand for and supply of masks reflect the benefit and cost of producing them. Mask wearers will be protected from harmful substances in the air, but will incur costs: inconvenience, some discomfort, a possible loss of physical attractiveness, and of course the price of the mask. The market will equate the benefit and the cost, and scarce resources will be used in adequate amounts.

But this is not the case when externalities exist, as with Covid-19. Today, wearing a mask will deliver many benefits beyond those to the individual mask wearer. If the wearer is infected, the mask will prevent transmission of the coronavirus to friends, and further to friends of friends.

Here, the market fails, because the benefit of wearing a mask is far higher than what a single individual would

has so far been one of the most successful in the United States in terms of infection and mortality rates. By contrast, governors of other, mostly southern, states refused to listen to scientists and health experts, and thus did not mandate mask wearing or enforce shelter-in-place orders and social distancing guidelines.

Similar externalities, or technological diseconomies, exist with respect to the environment. If a firm freely disposes of a large amount of sewage or air pollutants, then it is not paying the cost of the harm that its discharges or emissions will cause. The company is thus producing the substances in far greater quantities than a comparison of social cost and social benefit would deem adequate.

Yet, US President Donald Trump's neglect and dismantling of environmental regulations encourages such behaviour, because it enables many firms to avoid the cost of external diseconomies and impose additional hazards on society. Environmental deregulation assumes

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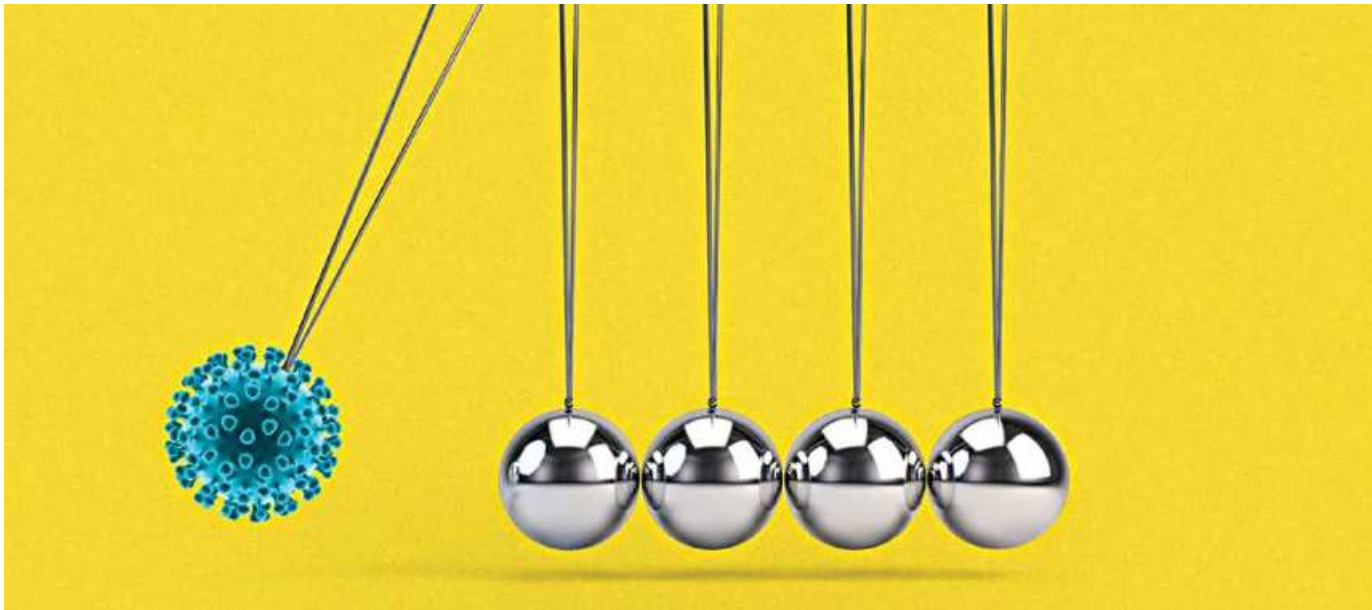


PHOTO: COLLECTED

allocate resources efficiently, if not equitably, and that competition will maximise national income. But this assumes, crucially, that the activities of individuals or firms do not directly affect those of other agents, except through price signals in the market that indicate the scarcity of a product.

Economists refer to these effects as "externalities," and divide them into external economies and diseconomies, depending on whether they are positive or negative. Such externalities prevent

estimate for themselves. National or municipal governments must therefore intervene and make it mandatory for all residents to wear one.

By requiring everyone to wear a mask, rather than leaving the decision to personal choice, a community can better protect itself from the substantial ravages and suffering caused by Covid-19. I live in Connecticut, where the state's governor and his pandemic task force have responded appropriately and done a good job of containing the virus. The state

away the externalities the regulations were intended to address.

This reflects a broader mindset shared by Trump and leading Republicans such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. It is reflected in a lack of compassion or empathy for others, particularly non-white people and other marginalised groups—many of them US citizens—who are suffering from poverty or illness. One can only assume that Trump and those like him are unable to regard others as entitled to comparable

concern and respect as those in their wealthy, rarefied circles.

But we can turn for inspiration to Guido Calabresi, the US Circuit Court Judge and Professor Emeritus at Yale Law School who, along with the late Nobel laureate economist Ronald Coase, laid the foundations of the interdisciplinary "law and economics" approach. Calabresi highlighted the importance of social justice and the serious impact of sudden income fluctuations on people involved in accidents—very similar to what many are experiencing during the current pandemic.

In his book *The Future of Law and Economics*, Calabresi explores a new approach that incorporates externalities into consumption. In particular, he argues that a legal system which reflects people's compassion toward one another may help to create a more equitable society.

Calabresi's idea is especially welcome and enlightening at a time when too many leaders are neglecting the struggles and pain of their fellow citizens. Perhaps close study of Calabresi's argument and propagation of his ideas among policymakers would contribute to fostering a much-needed sense of social solidarity in a world where the self-absorption of some is a threat to all.

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