

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY DECEMBER 26, 2020, POUSH 11, 1427 BS

Changing status of forestland will be disastrous

Lawmakers must honour PM's directives

At a time when it is imperative to protect whatever is left of our forests, something that has been emphasised by the Prime Minister herself, it is puzzling to see certain lawmakers acting in a way that is contrary to this.

According to a report in this daily, a local lawmaker has formally proposed to change the status of nearly 600 acres of reserve forest and wildlife sanctuary in Cox's Bazar into khas land for leasing it out to the people living there. What is most surprising is that the lawmaker is also a member of the parliamentary standing committee on the environment, forest and climate change ministry. Why would he make a proposal that would have a negative impact on the reserved forest?

According to the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950, forestland cannot be leased out and in 2018, a land ministry circular asked the district deputy commissioners not to lease out any protected forest. According to the villagers, they have been living in the area peacefully with no problems with the forest department. So why is there a need to formally change its status? As a Forest Department official has hinted—there is no guarantee that after changing the status of the forestland the original villagers will be evicted and the land used for other purposes. Let us not forget the numerous instances of disputed forestland being classified as khas land either by mistake or intentionally which has facilitated land grabbing or lead to the land being leased out to local influential quarters for commercial purposes.

It seems that while the Forest Department is against the changing of the status, the land office is in favour of it.

Since the government has made it clear that reserved forestland must be protected and the fact that those people living in the area have not faced any problems, there is little logic in de-reserving the forest which will obviously degrade it further.

We are alarmed at these actions that are clearly against our environmental laws and the objectives of the government to preserve our precious forests. This paper has also reported how another lawmaker from Cumilla-6 constituency has allegedly threatened an official of the Department of Environment (DoE) with dire consequences after she inspected a hill-cutting project by Roads and Highways (RHD) and prepared a damage-assessment report. An 11,400 cubic feet of hill was being flattened to expand the existing road under the RHD project. Wasn't it the DoE official's job to inspect such activity and make her assessment of the environmental damage? The government must make it clear to all public officials, especially lawmakers who have immense power in their constituencies, that they must all work in unison to prevent the destruction of the forestlands, especially the reserved ones. Those who take actions contrary to this mandate must be held accountable.

Meeting nutritional needs of the ultra-poor

'Pushti Bari' concept can be implemented across the country

It is heartening that women in char areas of Kurigram's Chilmari upazila are learning to ensure balanced nutrition for their families by growing fruits and vegetables around their houses for their own consumption. Reportedly, women from around 11 thousand families with limited resources are involved in this kind of farming. Their houses, built mostly on four to six decimals of land, are being turned into miniature agricultural farms called "Pushti Bari". The project is funded by the European Union and two non-government organisations are training the char residents on how to make the best use of their available land.

Residents of char areas generally live in extreme poverty because of adverse environmental conditions and a lack of work opportunities. Flood and river erosion often wash away their houses and belongings. These poverty-stricken people need special assistance from the government and non-government organisations to be able to live with some form of dignity. They need to be trained with some basic life skills so they can earn a living, have three meals a day and send their children to school. Projects like "Pushti Bari" could be the first step in helping these people move in the right direction.

While previously people of Chilmari chars could not ensure proper nutrition for their families because of high prices of foods and vegetables at the markets, the situation has now changed. After taking the necessary training, people, mostly women, are now utilising every inch of their unused land around the house and growing vegetables and fruits there. After meeting the nutritional needs of the family, many are also selling the excess produce. The example set in the remote chars of Kurigram's Chilmari upazila is very encouraging and should be emulated in other poverty-stricken areas of the country.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

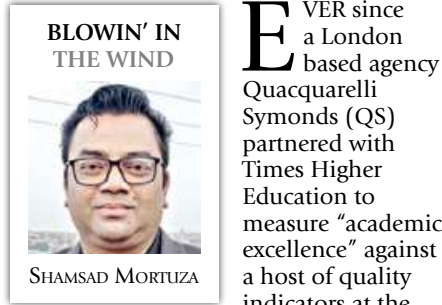
Understanding the new strain

WHO announced the new variant of the coronavirus as a normal part of a pandemic's evolution. WHO officials even put a positive light on the discovery of the new strain that prompted a slew of alarmed countries to impose travel restrictions on Britain and South Africa as the world was able to track the virus in real time.

Bangladesh is yet to take a decision. Bangladesh will decide on suspending flights to the UK after understanding the situation over the new spread. We need to look after our personal safety and remain vigilant to tackle the changing colours of the pandemic.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka

World Rankings and Indexes: Like Ducks to Water



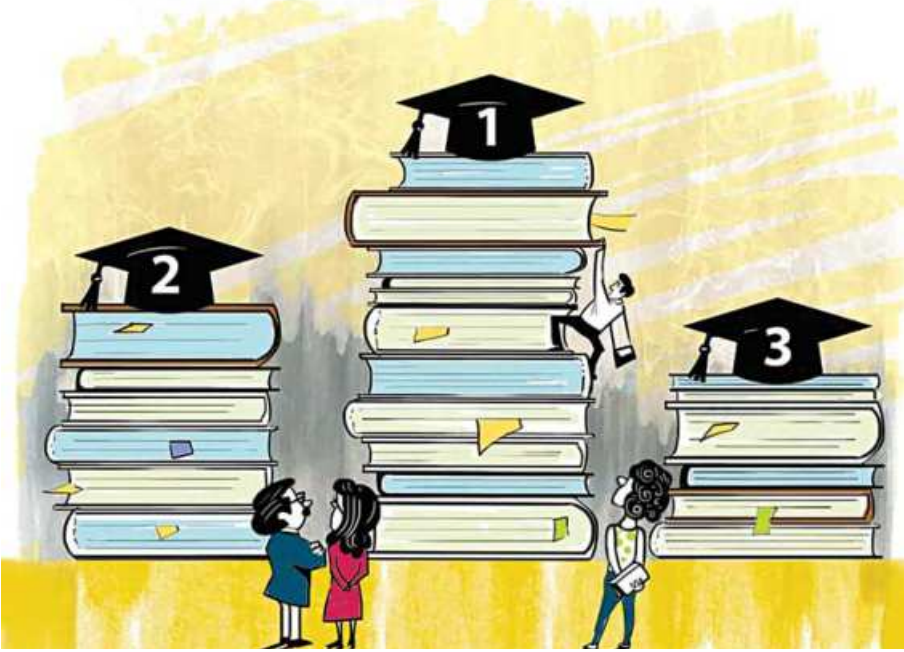
EVER since a London based agency Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) partnered with Times Higher Education to measure "academic excellence" against a host of quality indicators at the beginning of the millennium, universities all over the world have been attracted to the idea like ducks to water. Each year these agencies publish the world rankings; seeing the business potential, these two bodies have gone separate ways and kept introducing new categories of university rankings. It has not stopped universities from benchmarking one against the other though.

Universities that feature prominently in the ranking order brandish, and quite deservedly so, their badges of glory, while those in the lower order narrow the focus to highlight the region, area or subject in which they have fared better. For instance, a Bangladeshi university with NGO links tells us how it has performed in the "no poverty" category of sustainable development ranking among the South Asian countries, while keeping relatively mum on other aspects. The main parameters in which a university is judged include teaching and research, academic and employability reputation, student mobility and internationalisation, and faculty student portfolio. Most local universities struggle to excel in these given categories. Therefore, the universities who do not appear on the ranking radar follow

Just when we were gloating over the fact that we had surpassed the GDP of our big neighbour, UNDP released the Global Knowledge Index (GKI). According to which, Bangladesh is in 112th position out of 138 countries of the world.

Abraham Lincoln's maxim: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt."

However, living in an era of tweets and Trumpism, it's hard to keep silent and hide our inadequacies. Even when someone is silent, others will make sure that the scanty performance is exposed and discussed. There has been a huge uproar following the constant slide of country's oldest university down the ranking order prepared by the QS. The University of Dhaka has slid down from the 600 bracket in 2012 to the 800-1000 bracket this year in the QS World University Ranking. Among the Asian Universities, Dhaka University ranks 134.



The heat map prepared by the UNDP locates Bangladesh in the red zone in higher education and research.

In terms of employability, the university is ranked in the 500 bracket. Its Economics department is among the world's top 350-400 subject wise category. The last piece of information is an encouraging sign as it goes on to show that there is something right about an individual programme, which can be emulated by others.

Then again, when we look at the incentives received by the university, compared to some self-funded self-motivated private universities, who have outperformed the University of Dhaka, there are reasons to be upset. This year Dhaka University received Tk 830.06 crore from the government's exchequer. It

has grabbed the largest share of Tk 8,485 crore allocated for 46 public universities. A total of Tk 66 crore of its budget has been earmarked for research. With such allocations given to the university, as taxpayers, we have every right to question how this university is performing compared to other world universities and how they are contributing to the knowledge economy. The university, by definition, is the centre of all knowledge-intensive activities that must prepare the human capital to contribute to national growth with the production of knowledge and technical innovation. It is a university that should set the qualitative standard for the other universities.

particularly when it involves academic and industry-oriented research. Our poor performance in this sector drags us through the mud.

Just when we were gloating over the fact that we had surpassed the GDP of our big neighbour, UNDP released the Global Knowledge Index (GKI). According to which, Bangladesh is in 112th position out of 138 countries of the world. This is less flattering than all the development indexes in which we are presumably doing better. In total, Bangladesh scored 35.9 in the GKI, a summary list that measures the knowledge performance of countries at the level of seven areas (the scores received by Bangladesh are given in parenthesis): pre-university education (43.9), technical and vocational education and training (49), higher education (24.1), research, development and innovation (16.4), information and communications technology (43.1), economy (31.5) and the general enabling environment (46.4). Only some failed countries of Africa and central Asia are in the same league as us.

The heat map prepared by the UNDP locates Bangladesh in the red zone in higher education and research. This is alarming for a country whose economy relies on cheap labour that it employs in its garment sector or it exports overseas for its remittance. Vietnam, which is a competitor in the textile sector, has moved up in the GKI. And the African country Ethiopia is being targeted by the fashion industry as the new source of cheap labour for garments. Unless we shape up, we are in the danger of further degradation.

There is no way we can see the university ranking and GKI in isolation. The purpose of a university is directly linked to the development of a country. Development today is not measured by the bricks and mortars used in the elevated expressways or bridges. We are entering a knowledge economy where the role of the university is that of a knowledge-producing and disseminating entity. A twenty-first-century university has a new mandate of a developmental function. Countries such as Israel, Singapore, Costa Rica, Finland, or Switzerland have shown that knowledge production can provide greater economic security and standards for all in a self-serving way to ensure a healthier and more prosperous nation. Will we take it like ducks to water? Or will we reject it like goats?

Shamsad Mortuza is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.

The 'Wonder Drug' takes a quantum leap!

CM HASAN and PAULINE FRANCISCA GOMES

"THE next four to six months could be the worst of the epidemic", Bill Gates said during an interview recently. With Gates' prediction and second waves hitting several countries more severely than before, we have, indeed, come to a challenging forefront. Amidst all the uncertainties, the relentless efforts of researchers and doctors have yet again shone a ray of hope.

Ivermectin, a drug that has been highly acclaimed in the past few months for treatment of Covid-19 has once again come under the lime-light, but this time as a tool of prevention of the novel virus. A research on the preventive effect of Ivermectin on the SARS-COV-2 was published in the *European Journal of Medical and Health Sciences* on December 15, 2020, conducted by a research team in Bangladesh Medical College and Shomman Foundation under the guidance of chief investigator Dr Tarek Alam, professor and Head of Medicine Department in Bangladesh Medical College, and co-investigator Dr Rubaiul Murshed, Chairperson of Shomman.

A total of 118 healthcare workers actively engaged in taking care of Covid-19 patients were purposively selected and among them 58 subjects were given 12mg once monthly dose of Ivermectin for 4 months and the rest 60 subjects did not receive the drug. At the end of the study period, 44 out of 60 (73.3 percent) who did not receive a monthly dose of Ivermectin contracted Covid-19, whereas only 4 out of 58 (6.9 percent) who received the drug tested positive for the disease.

Earlier in July 2020, the research team led by Dr Alam and Dr Murshed had published a case series, combining Ivermectin and Doxycycline to treat Covid-19 patients with a higher rate of success, a major feat in combating the virus. This time, by resorting to the preventive function of the drug, the team has yet again reached another milestone. Although conducted in a small scale, this study has ignited hope in winning the battle against the SARS-COV-2 while waiting for vaccines to make their way into every household. The team has named the drug "People's Medicine" for its cost effectiveness and wide availability within the reach of all. However, the necessity of using masks and maintaining

social distance still overpower all preventive protocols that have been recommended till date.

Study on Ivermectin as pre-exposure prophylaxis of Covid-19 has also been acknowledged across the globe by many doctors and researchers. Recently, Dr Pierre Kory, a well-known pulmonologist in USA and the President of Frontline Covid-19 Critical Care (FLCCC) Alliance emphasised on the preventive effect of the drug on his recent review article where he compiled all data of Ivermectin prophylaxis studies, being conducted across the world. In Dr

Internationally acclaimed trials have shown positive cure rates of Covid-19 with Ivermectin in the past few months and now with its preventive capabilities, the drug has taken over the podium yet again. Based on the mountains of data on Ivermectin, many hospitals have already included the "wonder drug" in their treatment protocol to fight this disease.

In USA research published in *Chest* (Chest is peer-reviewed medical Journal published by American College of chest physicians) on October 12, 2020 by Juliana Cepelowicz Rajter, MD et al



Ivermectin, a drug that has been highly acclaimed in the past few months for treatment of Covid-19 has once again come under the lime-light

Kory's manuscript, along with many studies from Argentina, India, France and Egypt, Dr Alam's research on the preventive effect of Ivermectin gained acknowledgement as a commendable achievement from Bangladesh. Also, Dr Thomas Borody, renowned Australian Gastroenterologist and discoverer of the triple therapy for peptic ulcer, addressed the anti-viral effect of Ivermectin on Covid-19 in his study.

Recently, news from India stated that over 20,000 kalpawasis who are likely to camp on the Magh Mela will receive prophylactic dose of Ivermectin along with the frontline workers assigned duties on the Mela campus.

shows label use of Ivermectin in 173 patients at 4 hospitals in Florida (when compared with 107 patients who were not treated with Ivermectin having similar level of disease severity) was associated with lower mortality rate (39 percent among Ivermectin treated patients versus 81 percent who were not treated with Ivermectin) during treatment of Covid-19, especially in patients with severe pulmonary involvement.

Being a Bangladeshi and having been trained in the medical field in this country, it is an honour to be part of such a historic achievement. A medical finding of such vehement importance by a third world country is a victory on

least other type of masks). As significant portion of coronavirus transmission occurs through eye exposure, eye shields can be a very important part of protection from coronavirus infection. To conclude, we must all be vigilant towards the virus and avail all forms of protection to fight through this pandemic together because as Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one most adaptable to change."

Dr CM Hasan is Interventional Cardiologist and Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine and Cardiology, Mount Sinai Hospital, New York. Dr Pauline Francisca Gomes is Research Fellow, Shomman Foundation, Dhaka.