

Schools need to reopen

But health guidelines must be strictly maintained

WE all know how difficult it has been for school-going children to cope with their studies during almost eleven months of staying at home and not going to school. Despite efforts to introduce various ways of remote learning, through online and especially televised classes, the experiment has pretty much failed because of lack of access to the devices needed. Children from underprivileged families especially and those living in the villages have been most-affected as they did not have adequate access to laptops, computers, TV sets or smartphones. An extensive Education Watch Report 2020-2021 released by the Campaign for Popular Education has revealed the extent of the education gap caused and given recommendations on how to address it.

According to the report, about 69.5 percent of the students did not participate in distance learning and 57.9 percent of them said they could not join the classes due to lack of devices. Over 16 percent who were able to access the classes said they found them to be boring and so they skipped them. Unsurprisingly, most of the students (75 percent) and parents (76 percent) surveyed have said that they want schools to reopen quickly as children are becoming restless and losing out on education.

This seems to be a logical and necessary step at this point when we are confronted with almost a year gap in education for most school-going children. But certain precautions have to be taken before any reopening of schools, researchers have warned. Teachers interviewed have also said that they want classes to resume but safety measures have to be implemented, such as cleaning the classrooms, cleaning bathrooms, providing handwashing facilities and enforcing physical distancing in the classrooms. Other recommendations of the study should also be adopted, including mandatory mask wearing, reopening schools in areas where infection and death rates are low, reopening them in phases, less time for examinations and more time for learning, cutting down holidays to increase class time, reopening certain grades first, and doing away with Primary Education Completion Examination and Junior School Certificate tests, while shortening the SSC and HSC syllabus with fewer subjects.

The survey report has given an invaluable assessment of how education has fared during the last eleven months, what measures failed and why, and also what will help to regain the academic loss. The government should take these recommendations seriously, and provide the funds required to implement the safety measures in the schools that will reopen. As another precautionary measure, vaccines may also be given to the teachers of these schools as soon as they are available.

While there are risks associated with reopening schools, the survey has shown that it is crucial to do so as children are being deprived of education every day they miss school. The key is to ensure that all health guidelines are properly facilitated and enforced.

One-third of 62 rivers in Barishal no longer navigable

The authorities must take urgent measures to protect these precious national resources

THE state of rivers in Bangladesh has been a cause for concern for a while now, so much so that in 2019, the High Court declared rivers to be "legal persons", with the National River Conservation Commission being appointed as the legal guardian of all rivers across the country. However, the gargantuan task of protecting our rivers from destruction has proved difficult even in some of the most river-rich regions of Bangladesh, as was made clear in a recent survey from the Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services. According to the survey, around one-third of 62 rivers in Barishal division has lost navigability, causing the suspension of vessel operations in around 460km (out of 1,475km) of 27 waterways.

In a country where not just the ecosystem, but travel, livelihoods and a myriad of economic activities are dependent on rivers, the filling up of rivers due to siltation and river erosion is something that should worry us immensely. According to experts, this will not only affect navigability but will lead to greater water logging, impact wetland ecosystems, and negatively affect irrigation and landing facilities. However, there is a simple solution—experts have recommended 4.2 million cubic metres of capital dredging and 170 million cubic metres of maintenance and conservation dredging in Barishal to deal with the issue.

We hope the authorities will listen to the experts and deal with the issue urgently in order to improve the navigability of Barishal's waterways, especially since so many of the area's residents are dependent on these waterways for travel and transportation. While launch owners have appealed for dredging once a year in order to continue their operations, the authorities must also address the concerns of environmentalists and civil society members and evict the illegal occupants around these waterways. However, in the long run, we must remember that our waterways and rivers are interconnected, and without dealing with the all-encompassing issues of river pollution and river-grabbing across the country, whatever localised steps we take to save our rivers may not be anywhere near enough. We hope the government will take concrete steps to implement the 2019 HC directive and will also arm the National River Conservation Commission with more executive authority to ensure the protection of these precious national resources.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Progress in local vaccine research

Covid-19 vaccine candidate Bangavax, developed by Globe Biotech Ltd. of Bangladesh, has initiated a new era for the country after the company submitted an application to Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC) recently seeking permission for first and second phase clinical trials. As a Bangladeshi, I feel really optimistic about this and pray for its success in the human trial. Undoubtedly, such research will inspire other scientists and researchers in our country.

Rakib Uddin Ahmed, Chattogram

A case for improving labour conditions in Southeast Asia

Bangladeshi migrant workers deserve better policy attention



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

IT has been well-known for a long time that Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East and South Asian countries are at the receiving end of all sorts of uncertainties one can think of. Some of them incur a debt burden from the recruitment process, face many hazards and health risks—and more so during the pandemic—and then are the subject of moderate to serious deprivations. International human rights advocates including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have tried from time to time to draw the attention of the host governments and Bangladesh to these violations, but it is not clear whether these have fallen on deaf ears.

A few weeks ago, this newspaper, citing a recent ESCAP study, reported that migrant workers in Southeast Asia "are more likely to be exposed to the virus, lack access to health care and other essential services, be stranded in countries without work or social protection and face rising xenophobia." As if to validate the study, a news item in South China Morning Post earlier this month reported that a Bangladeshi migrant worker, Hasibur Rahman, is suing his ex-employer and dormitory operator in Singapore accusing them of "false imprisonment" after he was locked in his room during the coronavirus outbreak. This news resonated with me since I have been following from time to time accounts of the poor working and living conditions migrant workers are subjected to in the construction industry in Singapore and Malaysia.

In Singapore, as of December 2019, low-skilled migrant workers account for 555,100 of its population of 5.6 million. News of the treatment generally meted out by employers in Singapore is nothing new. In 2014, The Guardian ran a feature under the title "Singapore needs to address its treatment of migrant workers" and warned that "unrest is spreading among Singapore's migrants over working conditions. How can a country of millionaires justify failing to act?"

I don't mean to single out Singapore as the only country that is treating its migrant workforce as second-class citizens. Migrants form the backbone of the labour force in other countries of Southeast Asia including Malaysia and Brunei, drawing workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. They all have witnessed the harsh living conditions and lack of basic amenities in their dorms and "labour camps". As one of the biggest economies in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is an attractive destination for workers from neighbouring countries seeking better

wages and employment. The country is thought to have at least five million migrant workers—including two million who are here illegally—which is more than a third of its workforce. Bangladeshis make up between 300,000 and 500,000 of them. The migrant labourers are mostly in concentrated industries that locals shun as 3-D, i.e. "dirty, dangerous and difficult".

Last year, from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed "the unique vulnerabilities of the world's estimated 164 million low-paid migrant workers, who toil at the jobs locals do not want, to save money and get a leg up back home." A new WHO study, published on December 18, 2020 on the International Migrants Day, reveals that the pandemic has had a highly negative impact on the living and working conditions of refugees and migrants. In Singapore, Bangladeshis constituted

gradually eased movement restrictions. CNBC warned last November that "neglect of migrant workers could hurt Malaysia's economic recovery."

Coming back to the story of Hasibur Rahman, a construction worker, who has filed a claim for USD 163,000 in damages, according to documents submitted in court and seen by AFP. Staff at his dormitory had locked Hasibur and up to 20 other workers in their room on April 19, after one of their roommates was thought to have contracted the virus and was transferred to a medical facility. During this time, they were only able to use the toilet by calling a guard to come and escort them. Some of the men were running fevers and the room was hot and poorly ventilated, the documents said.

In Malaysia, authorities arrested Mohamed Rayhan Kabir, a Bangladeshi, in retaliation for his criticism of government policies towards migrants

for the virus to spread."

It was recently reported that Malaysia would allow, until June 2021, undocumented migrants to sign up to work in construction, plantations, agriculture and manufacturing, or they may choose to return to their home countries. This may be a mixed blessing for the migrant workers, according to Irene Xavier, co-founder of Sahabat Wanita Selangor, a local group assisting migrant workers. "It appears they are answering the call from some industries that want migrant workers—it's not crafted with the interest of the workers in mind, that's clear."

Even as migration for construction work provides an income opportunity to improve the standards of living back home for Bangladeshi migrants and their families, the rising costs of migration, high risks of accidents, and flexible hiring practices in the industry have made this venture particularly precarious. Apart from having to pay exorbitant agent fees to access skills training, testing, and job placement services, Bangladeshi migrants face additional challenges at their workplace, such as job insecurity, low wages, weak bargaining power, as well as various occupational hazards in the construction industry.

Social advocates have rightly urged Bangladesh government to engage in diplomacy with host countries to ensure Bangladeshi workers are not being deprived of their rights. With nearly 8 million of its 160 million residents living abroad, Bangladesh has one of the world's largest emigrant populations, ranking only behind India, Mexico, China, Russia, and Syria, according to estimates from the United Nations' Population Division.

On December 18, 2020, the International Migrants' Day, *The Daily Star* showcased a new report from ESCAP circulated in preparation for the first Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) scheduled to take place in March 2021. The report alerts all stakeholders that Covid-19 will continue to have an impact on people and communities on the move in the near future. As vaccines are approved, the report underlines that the inclusion of migrants in vaccination programmes, including migrants in irregular situations, will be critical.

Another way of looking at it: the host governments need to realise that migrant workers are akin to the proverbial "golden goose" and continued mistreatment of these workers will be like killing the goose that lays golden eggs. Improving labour conditions is in the interest of both migrant workers and their host countries.

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This September 2, 2013 photo published in Malaysian newspaper *The Star* shows some undocumented migrant workers being rounded up as part of an operation to flush out unwanted foreigners in Malaysia.

FILE PHOTO

almost half of the migrants infected with Covid-19, and their situation has been compounded by poor living conditions, insufficient legal protection and limited access to healthcare. Overall, migrant workers' infections were three times higher during Covid-19. According to a report in Prothom Alo, more than seventy thousand Bangladeshis were infected in 186 countries by July 2020. By December 27, some 2,330 Bangladeshi migrants had succumbed to Covid-19 in 21 countries.

The Covid-19 crisis led Malaysians to take advantage of the Bangladeshis. Thousands of migrant workers reportedly lost their jobs. ILO said in a report that there were cases of migrant workers being unfairly terminated or not getting paid when Malaysia's nationwide coronavirus lockdown was first imposed in March. It was reported on May 26, 2020 that police rounded up 200 undocumented workers in one week alone in Petaling Jaya, outside Kuala Lumpur, even as officials

in an Al Jazeera documentary. His work permit was cancelled and he was eventually deported. Malaysia does not recognise refugees and there are high levels of distrust of those who come from abroad, often working as low-paid labourers. Some accused migrant workers of spreading the coronavirus and being a burden on government resources. The government's public attacks on Kabir, at a time of rising xenophobia in Malaysia, serve to fan the flames of intolerance, Human Rights Watch said.

Last September, BBC ran a story titled "Covid-19 Singapore: A 'pandemic of inequality' exposed", which focussed on the harsh conditions migrant workers face. "Their right to live in Singapore is tied to their job and their employer must provide accommodation, at a cost. They commute from their dorms in packed vans to building sites where they work and take breaks alongside men from other crowded dorms—perfect conditions

Factory closure and its indirect impacts on local economy



NAWSHAD AHMED

WHEN a reasonably large factory is closed down, either by the government or by a private entrepreneur, the immediate consequence of it that comes to mind is the loss of jobs. The closure of the factory will render a large number of workers unemployed and their families will suffer as a result. Oftentimes, the families of displaced workers go through terrible times and endure long-lasting effects. The direct consequence on the families of workers made redundant by factory closure is more easily understood by us, but the indirect impact of this on the locality in which the factory is located is not so easily perceived by all.

For example, if a sugarcane factory is closed down, it will have a negative consequence on the sugarcane growers in neighbouring areas who will suffer income loss as the demand for their produce falls. The damage to the local community and economy would be compounded as the affected families pull back on spending. Most of the schools, hospitals, businesses, restaurants, public transport and service facilities that were established centring round the factory will also suffer as a consequence.

The government is reportedly contemplating shutting down some loss-making sugar factories in the country. Depending on the size of the factory, it will have a proportionate effect which may be more localised but could also have regional consequences. The total loss of income and the consequent contraction of expenditure of the jobless factory workers and surrounding population might be huge, and are believed to have a depressing effect on the local economy by

indirectly affecting other producers and service providers who depend on each other's income. The closure of one large factory may result in partial or full closure of other businesses and industries in the area, setting off a downward spiral of economic activities resulting in additional unemployment, out-migration and large-scale displacement of population.

A household affected by job loss will continue to spend less than before until

recover from.

Before establishing an industry, a number of standard procedures are generally followed, including conducting a financial viability study and an economic feasibility study, the latter to assess the social costs and benefits of the industry. Therefore, while taking a decision on shutting down an industry, the wider consequences of the closure needs to be considered. The financial

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loss incurred by the enterprise should not be the sole basis for its closure—its impact on the local economy should also be estimated. In addition, the import substitution benefits of an existing industry should also be taken into account before closing down the industry. The drain on foreign exchange by importing the same item, for example, sugar, in case the sugar industries are closed down, and the effect of increased price of sugar on the public are important factors which should be taken into consideration before shutting down the industries.

It has to be remembered that losses are made not only by public-sector industries but by the private-sector enterprises as well. But both these sectors can recover from losses in various ways including modernisation, public-private partnership, foreign investment, re-pricing of products, use of innovative methods to produce by-products, and aggressive marketing of those. By using

all or some of these, an industry can turn around and start making profit again. Therefore, all efforts should be made like modernisation, use of new technology, rationalisation of human resource needs and capacity building, and stronger management and monitoring to give the public-sector sugar factories a new lease of life.

If these industries are closed down, it will go against the government's policy of enlarging formal employment opportunities in the country. At present, 85 percent of the employed people work in the informal sector who face various problems including irregular salary payments, absence of health and other benefits and no job security. An eco-friendly and environmentally sustainable industry like sugar factories should not be closed down without an all-aspect assessment of their performances.

From the above, it is clear that worklessness associated with closure of factories and the consequent spending cuts by households will resonate through the local economy, negatively impacting on society and business and ultimately affecting the entire geographical area. Due to the precarious labour market situation in Bangladesh, it is often difficult for the displaced workers to get reemployed, although lack of evidence in this area makes it difficult to assess how post-retirement pathways are shaped by the availability of alternative local economic opportunities. To avoid the burden on the government to compensate the workers and for the sake of sustaining the local economy, I think the government should take closure decisions with caution and following assessment of the overall impact of such closures on the local economy, rather than on the basis of only financial loss the public-sector industries are making.

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