

## Number of new coronavirus cases rising

*Health guidelines must be strictly enforced without complacency*

THE fact that the number of new coronavirus cases has been rising for a week is extremely disconcerting, particularly given that schools and colleges are scheduled to reopen on March 30, and universities soon after. On Wednesday, the number of new cases rose to 1,018, which was down to 348 only a month earlier. The daily infection rate also rose to 5 percent this month, up from between 2.26 and 3.30 percent throughout February, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Health experts have warned that the rise in new cases and deaths could push the country back into another crisis situation, much like the ones experienced in the US and Europe. They said that people have started to believe that the pandemic is over and are, therefore, ignoring many of the health guidelines that had initially helped us bring down the number of cases. An alarming number of people are reportedly not maintaining social distancing or wearing masks like they are supposed to. Moreover, many people are attending social gatherings and travelling to popular tourist destinations. The combination of these factors, brought about by a false sense of security, is contributing to the rise in the number of new cases.

What is further concerning is the arrival of the deadly UK coronavirus variant, as confirmed on Tuesday by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). The IEDCR confirmed that they have found at least 5 cases of people being infected with the UK variant of the coronavirus. The arrival of this strain of the virus, along with others, could potentially raise the number of new cases even further. Thus, it is essential for the authorities to ensure that people travelling into the country strictly follow the quarantine rules.

Having struggled for about a year to reduce the number of new infections and deaths, now is not the time for us to get complacent. The authorities should immediately launch new awareness campaigns to make sure that people continue to strictly adhere to the health guidelines. Otherwise, we might have another resurgence of the outbreak on our hands which will set the country back even more. This understanding must be engrained into the consciousness of all citizens.

## A madrasa teacher's wrath on an eight-year-old

*Directive banning corporal punishment must be enforced*

THE recent video of the violent beating of an eight-year-old by a madrasa teacher shows the impunity that authority figures in our educational institutions still enjoy. The event took place when the parents of the victim came to visit him on his birthday. As they were leaving, the little boy tried to tag along with them, and thus caused the wrath of the teacher who then mercilessly beat him with a cane. We are relieved that the teacher has been sacked from his job and also sent to jail by a Chattogram court.

The above case is not an isolated incident, however. According to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), a total of 69 children became victims of physical abuse in educational institutions across the country in the first six months of 2018 alone. In 2013, more than 150 students were beaten by an assistant teacher of the Gulta Government Primary School in Tarash upazila, Sirajganj. After the incident, thirty students were unable to attend their classes due to injuries caused by the beating.

We should understand that corporal punishment is mostly an outlet for adults to vent out their frustration, not an attempt to educate children. It causes direct physical harm to the children and negatively impacts their psychological health. It may increase aggression in them and culminate into violence in intimate relationships once they grow up. There are correlations between being physically punished as a child and perpetrating domestic violence in adulthood. This is why taking prompt action to curb the practice of inflicting physical and mental torture on minors has become the need of the hour.

The Education Ministry had issued a guideline to prohibit corporal punishment in 2011, which was basically based on a judgment by the High Court terming physical and psychological punishment in educational institutions as a violation of children's rights, in particular their fundamental rights guaranteed under article 27, 31, 32 and 35(5) of the constitution. It's imperative that this guideline is enforced properly to protect our children from early-life violence. The ministry is reportedly in the final stage of preparing the draft of a new law that includes a provision for imposing a ban on corporal punishment and mental torture inflicted by teachers on schoolchildren. The process of turning this draft into an active law must gain pace so that legal provisions can get stronger in combating this heinous crime as soon as possible.

Most importantly, the parents should also stop displaying unquestioned reverence towards teachers no matter how they behave with their wards, as it ultimately gives them the license to inflict such cruel treatment on students with total impunity. We hope that the madrasa teacher whose brutality was caught on camera will face swift justice, and that it will serve as a deterrent to other perpetrators of corporal punishment.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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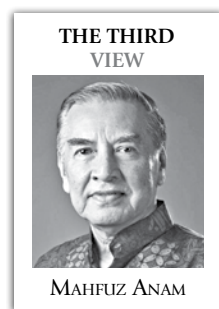
### Unfit vehicles on the roads

A large number of the public buses and other vehicles in Bangladesh are unfit for roads, yet they move without any problem and often without legal paperwork. Their continued operation is putting lives at risk and causing environmental pollution, with black smokes. Unfortunately, the numbers of such illegal vehicles as well as unlicensed drivers, both major contributors to road accidents, are on the rise. The authorities must do something about it.

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# A self-defeating obsession with 'image'

*The more you want it, the less you get it*



THE THIRD VIEW  
MAHFUIZ ANAM

AT 50, it's time we acted in a manner that reflects a confident country, not one that is nervous and insecure fearing that the slightest criticism will cause us harm. It's time we became a nation that is fully aware of its potential, certain of its abilities, conscious of its strengths, and hence allows openness, freedom of expression and an unfettered play of creativity that—as history proved over and over again—lie at the core of a people's real and sustainable advancement. It's time we came out of our occasional infantilism. It's also time we did away with the laws that enchain people, intimidate them, curb their freedom of speech, inhibit their urge to dream and prevent our youth from participating in building a future which, by definition, is theirs.

The 50th anniversary of our birth must be as much a moment to tell the world about our significant achievements as a time for inner reflection, admission of mistakes, and adoption of corrective measures that will guarantee an enduring future in freedom and prosperity.

Though we are turning 50 as a country, our obsession with "image", however, does not appear to be ebbing. People in vital positions seem to talk about it as if it is the be-all-and-end-of-all things about our country. We are perhaps the only country in the world—unless we want to side with the authoritarian ones whose protestations in favour of democracy are most vigorous—that has a law to protect its "image". We don't seem to understand that image is a reflection of reality. If we change the reality, the image changes by itself. However, if we try to improve the image without changing the fundamentals, it will not work. It is as if we are advocating for applying make-up to look good rather than improving one's health with a nutritious diet.

The irony of it is that Bangladesh is the best example of the above statement—and our leaders do not seem to realise it. For the first 25 years of our 50-year existence, we cried ourselves hoarse about how the world was unfairly depicting us, while we killed the Father of the Nation, had one coup after another, saw frequent uprising in the armed forces, poor governance and the general health of the economy being either poor or showing only very limited signs of improvement. Our reality was devastating, and yet we wanted the world to sing our praise.

However, in the last 25 years, starting with the restoration of democracy in December 1990, our growth momentum changed, GDP continued to rise in spite of global trends to the contrary, and social indicators began to tell a positive story. The child mortality rate declined, and the general nutrition level rose, as did our literacy rate and average life expectancy. We fulfilled the MDG goals and are now well ahead of many countries in meeting

the SDG goals. Our recent graduation from the LDC country status into a developing one forcefully tells the story of our determination to fulfil the pledges of our freedom struggle.

As all this happened, our image changed automatically. No law, no cajoling, no ingratiation, nothing was required. Only deeds. Suddenly, the world saw the potential that we presented and started to count on us as an exemplary member of the international community, serving as a role model for how a country with tremendous odds can struggle out of constraints. Our actions spoke louder than words, our performance belied the critics, and no laws were needed to protect our image. It stood on its own. The March 10 article in the NYT by Nicholas Kristof—titled "What Can Biden's Plan Do for Poverty? Look to Bangladesh"—is but the latest example of what we are saying. The article is particularly satisfying as it suggests that the US should learn from Bangladesh in fighting poverty, a befitting rebuttal to Henry Kissinger's

motion ever since the enactment of the Digital Security Act (DSA). This single act did more harm to the image of the country than the so-called "enemies" could have done.

Let's take the last few years as an example of how unwise legislation and their unthinking implementation have clouded what would otherwise have been a powerful positive narrative. As we continued to get accolades from the UN, WB, ADB, global ranking institutions and the international media, as our people and our PM continued to be honoured by different global and regional bodies, we did very little to stop the instances of forced disappearances, custodial deaths, cross-fire killings, arbitrary arrests, torture in custody, invasion of homes without warrant, plainclothes people claiming to be law enforcers and picking up people, extortion, opposition activists being beaten up by police, people being in jails for months, if not years, without trial and sometimes without even being charged, and not to mention the corruption,

mentioned as a factor for his activities?

Are we to understand that he refrained from carrying out his duties because doing so would "tarnish" the country's image? Has unearthing corruption ever "tarnished" the image of any country anywhere at any time in history? In fact, the very opposite is true. What a pathetic excuse for inaction.

Imagine if our heads of statutory bodies, secretaries of ministries, the police chief, chiefs of intelligence agencies, heads of departments in ministries all started to decide what to do and what NOT to do on the basis of their personal thoughts on what and what would not hurt our image. Imagine our auditor and comptroller general deciding not to reveal the anomalies he uncovers because of the "image" factor. The whole edifice of governance would collapse if such a thought process was to receive widespread currency.

As we stated at the beginning, the obsession with image is self-defeating. It is so because the more you want it, the less it comes your way, and conversely, the less you care about it, the more you get it. This is truer for countries than for individuals. The more a country seeks good publicity and good image, the more it sounds like propaganda and the more its value corrodes due to lack of credibility. The image of a country depends more on what values it actually represents. Of course, the infrastructure, the economy, the glittering cities, the skyscrapers and fast trains have their value, but ultimately, it is how inclusive, open, participatory and dissent-tolerant a country is that determines its true maturity.

Suddenly, New Zealand has become the world's favourite country simply because of the sensitivity, openness, tolerance and deep empathy with which it handled the terrorist crisis generated by a white supremacist. The policy leadership of Jacinda Arden, which was accepted and welcomed by the majority of New Zealanders, has transformed that little-known corner of the world into a democracy's showpiece. Merkel's Germany gained global admiration when it took in a million Syrian refugees. Bangladesh itself, and its leader Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, earned much global respect because of the way we welcomed and have been housing the 1.1 million Rohingya, despite us being so resource-constrained.

So the point is, we shouldn't be obsessed with "image" but rather with "performance". Change the facts on the ground—as we did in Bangladesh—and the image will automatically reflect it. Perform, uphold democratic values, institute rule of law, and ensure economic justice, and the image automatically becomes better and better. Suppress freedom and muzzle critical voices, jail critics, denigrate peaceful demonstrations, demonise dissent and enact laws like the DSA, then our "image" will be damaged and we cannot gain widespread acceptability regardless of our economic success.

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Bangladesh's transformation over the last 50 years speaks for itself.

PHOTO: ATA MOJLISH

"Basket Case" remark 47 years ago.

So, how did this transformation of our image at the global stage come about? Was it the work of some PR agency or some lobbyist making the rounds of important offices or persons? Most recently, our prime minister was honoured to be among the three most successful women leaders in the Commonwealth for demonstrating extraordinary leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic. Wasn't this recognition based on her work? Wasn't her success due to her guiding Bangladesh through this global crisis, and especially for her far-sighted and timely action in procuring sufficient supplies of vaccine when so many countries—including many EU members—are still in a desperate search for theirs?

So when all the evidence proves that images reflect reality and that negative images change into positive ones when we work hard to improve that reality, then why, in God's name, are we jailing people for pointing out flaws in our system? A reckless spree of arrests, detention, torture and defamation cases have been set in

money laundering and trafficking of women. What then is really "tarnishing" our image, and who are responsible for this?

Recently, we have been hearing from some very unexpected quarters about the importance of the "country's image", terming it as the first priority. We thought protecting the country's sovereignty and independence had that place of honour. Where do priorities like protecting the constitution, upholding the rule of law, ensuring freedom and rights of the people and equality before the law, etc. find their place if protecting the country's image takes precedence above everything else?

Recently, during his last press conference, the departing chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) reportedly said that he had refrained from taking any decision when he thought it "might tarnish the image of the country". Honestly, I couldn't believe my eyes when I read it. The ACC's mandate is to fight corruption. As its chair, he was supposed to lead that fight. Where in his mandate—or the rules and the law that established the ACC—is the country's image

## Women, unpaid work and the coronavirus

DEBRA EFROYMSON

ASK the average man whose wife has no paid job what she does and the response is likely to be, "Nothing". Ask a woman who does not have a paid job what she does, and she also is likely to say, "I don't do anything." Then try asking who cleans the house, washes the clothes and dishes, plans and prepares the meals, takes care of the kids, and manages the household accounts: "I do." For women who do have a paid job, household work is likely a second full-time job on top of the first, but without the benefits of weekends or holidays. And the coronavirus has only made it worse.

Children are home all day, requiring attention when previously there was a break while they attended school. Everyone is stressed. Violence at home has risen. And as usual, women are expected to silently cope with all of the problems, helping others while exhibiting no needs of their own.

Every year on March 8 (and around that time), people around the world pause to reflect on various issues facing women. We discuss progress and setbacks, positive changes and lingering problems. We make commitments to improve the situation, whether it be to have more women represented in government, to finally do something about violence against women, or to address women's pressing physical and mental health needs. And then we forget.

Two things would be helpful to remember. First, whatever services we feel should be extended to women, these are really only a tiny return on the amount that women contribute to society through



'Women's unpaid household work represents a contribution to the economy that allows others to earn money and make their more visible contributions.'

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

their unpaid household (and agricultural, handicrafts, and other) work. All of society is indebted to women. Women's unpaid household work represents a contribution to the economy that allows others to earn money and make their more visible contributions. We should make good on that debt by ensuring that women have access to the services they need.

Second, our society can never achieve its goals if we continue to allow half of the population to fall behind. Women's manifold skills and talents will continue to be wasted if they do not have access to the same opportunities as men, and if there are not better social policies to

reduce the burden of their household work.

If we acknowledge these two points, then we can see that programmes for women are not charity—they are an investment in our society and a just return for all that we take from women. Perhaps we can also see that it is not enough to devote to women an annual day of attention (and that too blemished by insulting pink-tinted ads targeting women as beautiful things to be consumed rather than as full sentient contributors to society). Whatever policy is being considered, we should always ask how it will affect women differently from men.

When we talk about essential workers, we should remember that almost all women, formally employed or not, are essential workers, doing work that has more true meaning and value than much of the work we openly acknowledge and applaud.

When we talk about pensions, we should remember that housewives are ignored despite their decades of service, often 16 hours a day, 365 days a year. When we discuss the mental health issues of children during the pandemic, we should remember that women are on the frontline, caring for those children, and thus also in need of services and support. The coronavirus may kill more men than women, but that doesn't mean that only men are affected: women care for those men and may lose their source of livelihood when a male family member dies.

On a more personal level, we can also remember to acknowledge the hard and valuable work performed by the women in our families, so that when people ask what your wife, mother, sister or daughter does, rather than say "Nothing" or "She's a teacher/doctor/businessperson", we can respond: "She cares for my entire home and family... and she's a teacher/doctor/businessperson." And for all those women out there, please remember—when people ask what you do—not to dismiss all the important work that you contribute daily to keeping your family healthy, safe, and more or less sane as the coronavirus pandemic continues to change so many aspects of our lives.

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