

Stronger relations with Sri Lanka

It will foster deeper economic, diplomatic engagement

THE Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to Bangladesh—to join celebrations marking the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—comes against the backdrop of a devastating pandemic and thus an increased awareness on both sides of the need for deeper engagement to combat its economic fallout. It was, therefore, good to see the spirit of cooperation and bonhomie that came from both camps. This signals their willingness to take their relations to the next level. We hope the visit, the second by a head of state since March 17, as part of a string of state visits and virtual engagements planned for the 10-day celebrations, will usher in a new era of trade and connectivity which will be beneficial for all.

Bangladesh already enjoys warm relations with Sri Lanka, connected mainly through air and maritime routes as well as sharing platforms common to the region, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Sri Lanka is one of the first countries to have established formal diplomatic ties with Bangladesh after the latter's independence. Both countries have gone through remarkable changes since, but their ties have grown from strength to strength. That said, there is still potential to further deepen existing ties under the present circumstances. Both countries can actively pursue bilateral agreements by focusing on strengthening cooperation in key sectors, a priority underscored by both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Sri Lankan counterpart. According to media reports, the two premiers agreed on Saturday to deepen their cooperation in various sectors, especially exploring newer avenues in trade and commerce, as the bilateral trade of the two countries is much lower than its potential. A number of MoUs were also signed at the meeting held at the Prime Minister's Office.

With Covid-19 still ravaging the global economy and a resurgence of interest of late in reviving old platforms like Saarc, there is scope for further extending the areas of connectivity. Bangladesh can keep up the momentum by, for example, working towards signing a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka, among other countries, fostering deeper linkages with its garments industry, incentivising FDI from the country, as well as promoting itself as a friendly tourist destination to the Sri Lankan people. The possibilities are limitless if the momentum can be used properly. We hope the government will be able to maximise the opportunities of multilateral engagement as occasioned by the twin celebrations of Bangladesh to further advance its economic goal in the coming days.

Migrant workers caught up in Lebanon's economic crisis

Govt assistance necessary for repatriation

WE are disheartened to learn of the plight of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Lebanon, as they struggle to survive amidst the Middle Eastern country's own financial (liquidity) crisis. The Lebanese currency (lira) has been depreciating rapidly in recent times, reaching a point where its value was nearly 10,000 to one US dollar on the black market on March 2 (according to the AFP news agency), while the official fixed rate recently shifted from being 1,507 lira per US dollar to 3,900 lira per US dollar. The restrictions imposed by banks on withdrawals of money and on transfers of Lebanese pounds to US dollars have only worsened the situation for the Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Given that their earnings do not amount to nearly as much as they used to earn even two years ago, the workers are not only unable to send remittances home and help support their families, but also it has become hard for them to even survive in that country—let alone save anything for the future. So far, 5,990 of the roughly 1.30 lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers in Lebanon have applied to be repatriated via the Bangladesh mission there. Since February 15, more than 4,000 workers have successfully returned home on special flights. The situation is worse for the undocumented workers (of whom there are about 30,000), who have to pay a hefty USD 400 as airfare and a fine of 1.4 lakh Lebanese pounds. Repatriating to Bangladesh for these migrant workers, it transpires, is almost as difficult as staying in Lebanon amid the dire financial situation there.

The migrant workers' financial hardship is also evident in the USD 39.86 million drop in remittances received from Lebanon from fiscal years 2018-2019 to 2019-2020. Not only are Bangladeshi citizens struggling to survive there, but their families back home are also bearing the brunt of the crunch as they are receiving much less than the amount of money they used to. In such a situation, we believe it is the duty of the Bangladeshi government (and its embassy in Lebanon) to ensure that not only are no new workers sent to the country, but that those who are there receive their dues from their respective employers. We would also urge the authorities to ensure that all migrant workers, documented or not, who wish to repatriate to Bangladesh, are helped in doing so safely.

It is a matter of moral responsibility for the government to help our financially struggling and stranded citizens in Lebanon and other countries recover as much as possible, after they have helped the economy flourish for years with their hard work and sacrifice.

Four education imperatives for a developed Bangladesh

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

OVER the next two decades Bangladesh is to stay on course with its economic growth—and maintain the impressive 6-plus percent annual growth in GDP that it has had over the last decade—there has to be special policy level attention to education investments, much larger spending and better accountability of education officials for good management and results. Four priorities must be on the education agenda.

First, the government should consider expenses in universal education as an investment instead of treating schools as cost centres. Recent experience of election to the state legislature in Delhi, and the stunning victory of the Aam Admi Party (AAP) defying the political tide, demonstrates that higher spending in public education combined with good school management pays off. It has resulted in better learning outcomes, higher students' attendance, and improved school infrastructures and has earned political credits for AAP. This is a lesson worth noting in Bangladesh.

Second, all providers, public, non-state and private, in primary and secondary education should focus on student learning outcomes—not just enrolment, dropouts and completion. Great strides have been made in Bangladesh in bringing children including girls into schools. National Student Assessment (NSA) is undertaken every two years on a nationwide sample of grade 3 and 5 students and schools by the Directorate of Primary Education. NSA measures student learning in Bangla (the first language) and arithmetic against basic skills specified in the curriculum. NSA showed more than half of class 3 and class 5 students did not perform at grade level in Bangla and arithmetic. In other words, after five years of primary education, the majority of students do not acquire literacy and numeracy at a functional level, handicapping them for further education or vocational skills training.

Education researchers and academics suggest two measures to help children achieve the essential competencies specified in the curriculum: i) attract and retain enough capable teachers in the system and support and motivate them to perform in classrooms according to set performance standards; and ii)

discontinue the present high stake nationwide public examinations at the end of grade 5 and 8 which push students to memorise guidebooks and spend time and money for private tutors; and force teachers and parents to aid and abet this distortion of learning.

Testing is not a substitute for good teaching. School-based formative assessment of learners should be emphasised. The assessment of system, school and teacher

essential to function in modern societies across countries.

In today's global world, Bangladesh has to compete in the world market and be at par in skills and competencies with other countries. Up to 700,000 young workers, almost half of all new entrants to the workforce every year, go abroad as migrant workers. They and those staying home must earn the skills and capabilities to adapt to the changing needs of the

planning, budgets, governance, and management need to move progressively towards meaningful decentralisation with devolution of authority with accountability to district, upazila and individual institutions. No other education system of the same size and scale of Bangladesh with 40 million students, a million teachers and 200,000 institutions, is run in such a top-down way. The decisions that should be



performance can be better done through an adaptation of the NSA approach, without putting young children in a tough competition with their peers.

Third, Bangladesh should consider joining OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D). It is a pilot project that aims to make the cross-country assessment more accessible and relevant to a wider range of countries. PISA measures key knowledge and skills

world of work.

Cambodia, a country facing quality issues similar to Bangladesh, has joined PISA-D in its bid to improve student learning and assessment capacity. Its eye is on equipping the young learners with 21st century skills in demand globally. Cambodia is being assisted by UNICEF-sponsored Southeast Asia Programme on Learning Metric (SEA-PLM). Bangladesh can benefit greatly by joining PISA-D.

Fourth, school level education

taken by the schools or local education authorities are often decided in the capital, frequently by passing the buck to the highest levels of the government. Schools of the 21st century must be responsive and adaptive to the diverse needs and circumstances of the learners across the country.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is an education policy researcher at the University of Toronto, and former Senior Education Adviser of USAID in Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

India's Smart Vaccine Diplomacy



SHASHI THAROOR

AS countries scramble to secure Covid-19 vaccines, ugly expressions like "vaccine race" and "vaccine nationalism" have entered the global lexicon. But, at a time when global cooperation in

sharing vaccines is minimal, and the World Health Organization's vaccine-distribution plans are yet to get off the ground, India has taken a different tack, quietly pursuing "vaccine diplomacy." Its "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship) campaign has shipped hundreds of thousands of Indian-made Covishield vaccines, manufactured under license from Oxford-AstraZeneca, to some 60 countries.

India is a global pharmaceutical powerhouse, manufacturing some 20 percent of all generic medicines and accounting for as much as 62 percent of global vaccine production, so it was quick off the mark when the pandemic struck. Before Covid-19 vaccines were developed, India supplied some 100 countries with hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol, and sent pharmaceuticals, test kits, and other equipment to around 90 countries. Later, even before the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was approved, Adar Poonawalla, the 40-year-old head of the privately-owned Serum Institute of India, audaciously decided to manufacture it—a billion-dollar gamble. When approvals came, SII was able to churn out millions of doses, making them available to the government both for domestic use and export.

Indian vaccines have been flown to most of the country's neighbours, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Nepal, and also farther afield, to the Seychelles, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Pacific Island, Caribbean, and African countries. Vaccines have helped mend strained relations with Bangladesh and cement friendly ties with the Maldives.

To be sure, China and Russia are promoting their own vaccines, and western drug companies are raking in a publicity bonanza (along with a share-price windfall). But in developing vaccines for its own use, the Global North overlooked the prohibitive cost of the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines for poorer countries.

Indian-made vaccines, on the other hand, are reportedly safe, cost-effective, and—unlike some others—do not require storage and transport at very low temperatures.

India's vaccine diplomacy is, of course, not purely altruistic. When the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, laid the foundations of India's science and technology infrastructure, his intentions were expressed in noble, humanist, and universalist terms. But his successors have long recognised how India can leverage its scientific and medical skills to enhance its geopolitical standing. At a time when most richer countries are criticised for hoarding vaccine doses, India stands out for having sent 33 million to poorer countries, with millions more in the pipeline.

Brazil, with polls showing 50 percent of Brazilians surveyed unwilling to take the Sinovac vaccine, President Jair Bolsonaro turned to India, which came through promptly. Tweeting his thanks, Bolsonaro illustrated his gratitude with an image from India's Ramayana epic, depicting Lord Hanuman carrying an entire mountain to deliver the life-saving herb Sanjeevani booti to Lanka.

Indian vaccines are arriving even in richer countries. The United Kingdom has ordered ten million doses from SII. Canada, whose prime minister, Justin Trudeau, has riled his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, more than once, telephoned Modi to ask for two million vaccines; the first half-million were delivered within days. Trudeau effusively declared that the world's victory over

wealthier countries is no less striking. According to Duke University's Global Health Institute, developed countries with 16 percent of the world's population—including Canada, the United States, and the UK, each of whom have guaranteed enough supplies to vaccinate their populations several times over—have secured 60 percent of global vaccine supplies for themselves. Other countries commandeering supplies exceeding their domestic needs include Australia, Chile, and several European Union members.

The world is paying attention to India as it shares its available vaccine supplies, instead of choosing the nationalist course of blocking exports. India has also offered 1.1 billion vaccine doses to the WHO's COVAX programme to distribute Covid-19 vaccines to poorer countries. As Modi has tweeted, "We are all together in the fight against this pandemic. India is committed to sharing resources, experiences, and knowledge for global good."

If there is a concern, it is that India has exported three times as many doses as it has administered to its own people. The country is lagging behind its own target of immunising 300 million people by August, after vaccinating some three million health-care workers in a campaign that began on January 16. And mounting concern about rising case numbers, the emergence of Covid-19 variants that may not respond to existing vaccines, and an economy that has not yet fully recovered, will intensify the challenge India confronts in fulfilling its obligations to developing countries while also meeting domestic demand.

Meeting that challenge is a vital national interest. India's vaccine diplomacy has been a boon to the country's aspirations to be recognised as a global power. In combating the pandemic, it has gone well beyond the routine provision of health care or the supply of generics. To be sure, it is uncertain whether promoting soft power through health-care exports significantly boosts a country's position in the global order. But if and when the permanent seats at the United Nations Security Council are ever rearranged, grateful governments will know who has done the most to save a world reeling from the onslaught of a deadly pathogen.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)



Workers unload a pickup van that carries Oxford-Astrazeneca Covid-19 vaccines which arrived from India as a gift to Bangladesh, in Dhaka, Bangladesh January 21, 2021.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

There is also an unspoken subtext: rivalry with China, with which tensions have intensified following clashes along the Himalayan frontier. Not only has India overshadowed China as a provider of cheap and accessible vaccines to the Global South; it has been quicker and more effective. For example, China has announced 300,000 doses for Myanmar but is yet to deliver any, while India quickly supplied 1.7 million. Similarly, Indian vaccines beat China's into Cambodia and Afghanistan.

When a credibility crisis consumed China's vaccines in pandemic-ravaged

Covid-19 would be "because of India's tremendous pharmaceutical capacity, and Prime Minister Modi's leadership in sharing this capacity with the world."

India is using the country's capacity in this sector subtly to advertise an alternative to China's economic and geopolitical dominance. While China has been secretive in releasing data about its vaccines, leading to controversies over the efficacy of them, India organised trips for foreign ambassadors to visit pharmaceutical factories in Pune and Hyderabad.

The contrast with the behaviour of