

Deaths in DMCH ICU fire

Expose abject lack of preparedness and training

FOUR precious lives were lost in the fire that devastated the newly built ICU of Dhaka Medical College Hospital recently. Incidence of fire is not unexpected. However, fire can be prevented if the preventive measures are in place and everyone is in the fire drill. And if it breaks out at all, the effects can be mitigated by proper and quick response by the concerned personnel. Therefore, the four lives lost is not acceptable and merits strong action against everyone in the line. Our weaknesses are exposed only after an incident occurs. And as facts reveal, had everything been okay, and had everyone played his or her part properly instead of abandoning the respective duty station leaving the patients behind, these four precious lives might not have been lost.

It is frustrating that the leading medical college and hospital in the country has no emergency evacuation plan, reportedly. And even if it has, as the Director of DMCH has claimed, the plan failed to work. We want to know why? Why was there no sign of the emergency response team to take care of the critical patients in the ICU when the fire broke out? It is sickening to learn that the nurses ran for their lives leaving the hapless patients to their fate. Even the fire extinguishers were not working, and given the picture we get from media reports, one wonders whether there was anybody to use the fire extinguishers even if those were working. The answer should be made public so that the mistakes are not repeated.

We are afraid that the responsibility for the deaths falls squarely on the shoulders of the DMCH administration. They should answer why there was no evacuation plan, and if there was, why it did not work. We would like to know when was the last time an evacuation and fire drill was carried out in the hospital. We would like to know when did the Fire Service inspect the DMCH last and what was their action if their recommendations were flouted. Rules and regulations there is no dearth of. What we lack are people in positions of responsibility whose dereliction of duty causes unnecessary loss of life. They must answer for their failure.

The pandemic's new poor

Govt recovery plans must make them a priority

IT is concerning to know that more and more people have fallen below the poverty line due to the Covid-19 fallout. A study conducted by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM), in 2020, found that people living below the poverty line increased to 42 percent during the lockdown period compared to 2018 when it was 21.6 percent. Among them, a whopping 51.2 percent were from the service sector. More shocking is the fact that among those from the service sector who had to face enormous financial crunch during the pandemic, small-business owners comprised the largest portion—28.76 percent. This resonates with another report published by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on February 15 of this year, which states that though almost a year has passed since the Covid-19 outbreak, no sign of recovery of micro and small-scale enterprises can be seen yet.

The government had rolled out a stimulus package of Tk 20,000 crore, mostly targeting the cottage industries and the SMEs, soon after the coronavirus had broken out. But a large portion of it remained unutilised as most of the small businesses could not access it due to them being excluded from the formal banking processes. It is a relief for us to find that the government has again decided to roll out two new stimulus packages amounting to Tk 2,700 crore, this time through government and semi-government organisations.

But it has been seen in the past that our social protection programmes are often hampered by corruption and mismanagement during their implementation periods. The government has to ensure that the truly needy and vulnerable people are identified correctly and the support actually reaches them if it wants its latest financial aid initiative to be successful. While in the short run cash and food relief may alleviate some of their hardship, the government must prioritise and devise programmes that will create jobs and other income generating activities for these people who have suddenly found themselves jobless.

We strongly feel that our own government has a lot to learn from the aforementioned economic model so that it can address the plight of those people who have become the "new poor" during the coronavirus pandemic.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

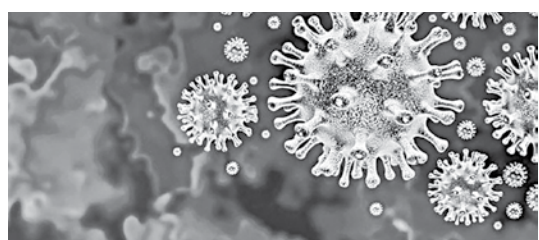
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The vicious virus is still at work

For more than a year now, life has stayed drastically changed for everyone all around the world. The coronavirus is still here, and there is no way of telling when the pandemic will finally be over. We have lost many illustrious people in our country to this deadly disease. Many more have died in other countries.

We must remain careful until the outbreak is over. Let us pray that the virus does not take many more lives. Let us remain hopeful that these testing times will come to pass.

Nur Jahan, *Chattogram*



Continuing Bangladesh's transformative journey in the next 50 years



FAHMIDA KHATUN

MACRO MIRROR

BA NGLADESH has made a transformative journey during the last five decades since its independence in 1971. Steady economic growth, and achievements in the social arena, including primary school enrolment rate, immunisation against early childhood diseases, reduction in infant mortality rate, and significant progress on water and sanitation are some of the accomplishments of the country which has set examples for many countries. Another transformation of the economy has been in the area of trade openness. The economy of Bangladesh has integrated into the global economy through exports, imports, remittances and foreign direct investment. More than 60 percent of the economy is globally integrated. This indicates the strength of the economy which is capable of taking part in global economic activities.

As we celebrate the achievements of the last 50 years, we also have to work towards consolidating what has been achieved during this period, improve upon where there have been limitations and prepare for the new realities in an ever-changing global setting. The country has done so much, but so much is also left to be done. Among those, five issues will need special attention in its journey during the next decades.

First and foremost is the issue of inequality. Economic and social progress are faced with the challenge of unsustainability due to high inequality. The experience so far has been that as economic prosperity of the nation has increased, inequality has also risen. There are certain pockets of poverty that are lagging far behind and where the benefits of various government and non-government programmes hardly reach. Among these are urban slums, coastal belts and other ecologically vulnerable areas. There is also a divide between rural and urban income distribution. One of the reasons for this is that income earning opportunities for people, particularly the youth, are limited. Not everyone who enters the labour market get an employment. So, growth has not been able to create adequate jobs. Private investment, which is a major source of employment, has remained low and stagnant. The other reason for inequality is the concentration of income and wealth among a very few people in society. This wealth is not necessarily earned by them. Much of this is ill-gotten. A significant part of this wealth goes out of the country. It does not come under taxation or any other public scrutiny.

This brings us to the second issue which is to establish good governance. Improvement in governance is essential for economic progress. Of course, one might point out that so far the Bangladesh economy has progressed despite governance deficiency. Enabling

national and international policies and hard work and resilience of Bangladeshis people have transformed the economy into one of the fast-paced economies in the world. The economy could withstand domestic and global challenges such as political unrest, natural calamity and global financial meltdown. So, the lack of good governance did not stand in the way for its economic growth. Such complacency may be a bit too farfetched.

There are a number of strong cases which indicate that lack of good governance is hindering progress in those specific sectors. Private investment, banking sector and domestic resource mobilisation are examples where lack of good governance has negative implications. Despite investment friendly policies in place, the share of private investment is hovering around 24 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP),

2020). While a large number of eligible taxpayers are outside the tax net, there is also huge tax evasion by wealthy people who get away without paying the due amount. Therefore, improvement in governance and institutional reforms can reduce corruption, and establish accountability and transparency in economic management. This will improve the quality of development.

Third, the future growth will be determined by the level of technological adoption. In the past, the adoption of technology in the agriculture sector had contributed to increased food production and achieving food self-sufficiency in Bangladesh. Poverty alleviation in Bangladesh has been facilitated significantly by technological innovation. The use of computers and mobile telecommunication has improved efficiency and opportunities not only for

Fourth is the investment on human capital. In fact, how Bangladesh will benefit from the 4IR will depend on its preparedness in terms of educating and training its human resources and providing access to technologies. With the current level of public investment in education, young graduates do not gain the required skills for the job market. In the new context of technology-based work, more government investment in ICT education is required. A digital divide is already being observed during the ongoing pandemic. This may accentuate further if the poor do not have access to technology and opportunity for learning technical skills. The youth are the most important human resource for Bangladesh. It can benefit from its demographic dividend by engaging the trained and skilled youth in the economy. Experts suggest that Bangladesh's



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PHOTO: STAR

and foreign direct investment is not encouraging either. Cost of doing business is high and global competitiveness is low. Poor quality of services, lengthy process, corruption, bribery and rent seeking discourage investors. In case of "Ease of Doing Business Index" of the World Bank, Bangladesh has been consistently lagging behind some of the competing countries in the world market such as China, India, and Vietnam. The banking sector is burdened with high non-performing loans (NPL). Much of this NPL is due to wilful defaulters who are powerful. Running away with public money from the banks by bank officials themselves has added a new dimension to the problems in the banking sector. Another important area where poor governance has been influencing its performance is the tax collection effort. Despite high economic growth, Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio is only 7.9 percent (in fiscal year

the urban people but also for farmers and women in the rural areas. However, technology is evolving fast. Artificial intelligence, robotics internet-of-things, and blockchain are moving into our workplaces. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). Employment will be reduced due to the introduction of technology. Work opportunities in many sectors will totally be lost. Developing countries will be more vulnerable to automation than developed countries. It is apprehended that this will stagnate wages and give rise to further inequality. However, there will also be opportunities for new jobs due to technological change. There could be higher demand for new products and services due to which new skills and new jobs may be required. So, Bangladesh has to prepare itself as the 4IR is already knocking on the door.

demographic dividend will continue till 2040. Therefore, involvement of the youth in the economy is crucial at this moment.

Fifth, tackling the impact of climate change will be the most important task of Bangladesh. With high population density, Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods and cyclones. The impact of global warming manifested through sea level rise will be massive and will inundate the coastal regions of the country. Large investments in technologies will be needed to tackle such climate-related vulnerabilities. Bangladesh has already shown leadership in international forums on climate issues. It will have to continue to claim its share in climate finance as a victim of climate change.

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Creating a bright future together



LI JIMING

ON March 17, Bangladesh kicked off its 10-day series of celebrations of the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and

the golden jubilee of the country's independence. As a good friend of Bangladesh, China would definitely not be absent from such an event. Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory video message, and extended, on behalf of the government and people of China, cordial greetings and best wishes to President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and the government and people of Bangladesh. This congratulatory video message bears special significance as it was the first time that President Xi ever recorded such a video for another country's domestic programme. It shows the great importance attached by President Xi himself to Bangladesh and China-Bangladesh relations.

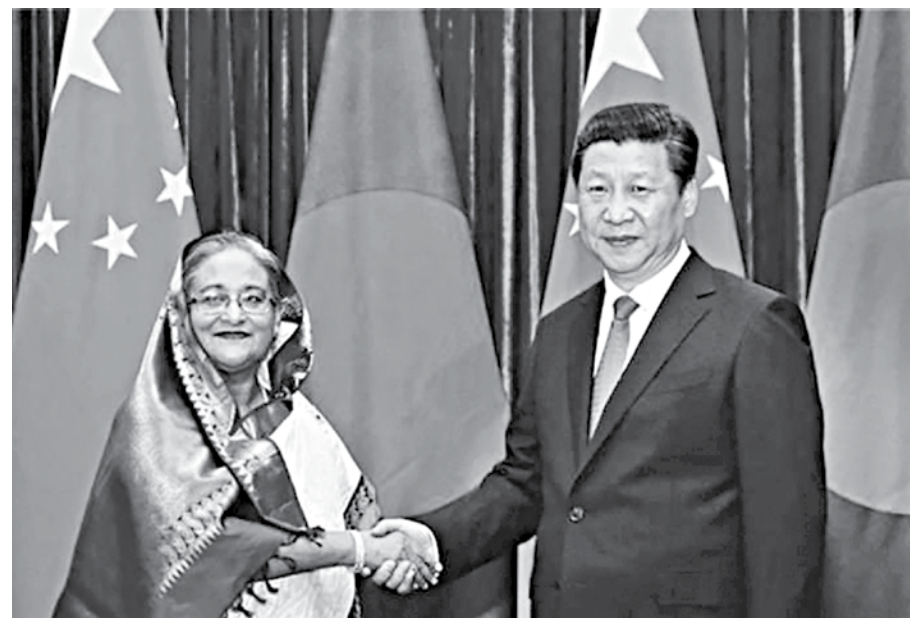
As President Xi has pointed out, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was an old and good friend of the Chinese people. He visited China twice in 1952 and 1957 and forged great friendships with Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai, and other Chinese leaders of the elder generation. The seed of China-Bangladesh friendship had been planted by the veteran leaders of the two countries long before diplomatic ties were established.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is also no stranger to me. Since I assumed my duty as the Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka, I heard many touching stories about Bangabandhu, a great hero in Bangladeshi history and the founder and architect of Bangladesh. He dedicated his whole life to the welfare

of the Bangladeshi people even since his early childhood, and often gave away his personal effects to the people in need. He sacrificed his own life in the service of his beloved people and country. It is said that even after more than a half-century, a senior Bangladeshi lady can still remember every detail when she performed for Bangabandhu as a little girl. Indeed, Bangabandhu is fondly remembered by the people in Bangladesh to this day. The "Sonar

based on Bangabandhu's diary about his visit to China. After reading this book, I had a deep understanding of what the Honourable Prime Minister had mentioned to me several times on that day: Bangabandhu's many visions about China now have come true.

I was honoured to attend the grand event on March 17. President Xi said in his congratulatory video message that, "Do not forget who dug the well when drinking water from it." It described



PM Sheikh Hasina with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

PHOTO: STAR

Bangla" he envisioned is still galvanising the Bangladeshi people in their pursuit of national rejuvenation.

A few days ago, I handed over a bronze bust of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Her Excellency Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a special gift from the Chinese Embassy for the auspicious occasion of the celebration of his birth centenary. During the meeting, the Honourable Prime Minister gifted me a book written by Bangabandhu, "The new China I Saw". It is compiled

Bangabandhu's contributions to the China-Bangladesh friendship, and did impress me a lot. President Xi stressed, "now it is our sacred duty to pass on the baton to future generations." The Honourable Prime Minister also echoed positively to his speech.

Only friendships built on sincerity can last long. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties 46 years ago, China has always regarded Bangladesh as its true friend and partner for development. China highly values its relations with

Bangladesh. We firmly support each other on issues concerning our core interests. Recently, the two countries have been focusing on fighting against Covid-19, and China is ready to offer Bangladesh 500 thousand doses of Covid-19 vaccines as a gift, implementing the idea of building a community with a shared future for humanity.

As Prime Minister Hasina said at the event, Bangladesh should move forward further which is to make Bangladesh a developed and prosperous country by 2041. "Mujib Borsho" and the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh is a new beginning of its "2041 Vision". 2021 is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China and the first year of the "14th Five-Year Plan". Just a few days ago, the Fourth Session of the 13th National People's Congress of China had just voted through the 14th Five-Year Plan and the Outline of Long-term Goals for 2035. At present, both China and Bangladesh are standing at a new historical starting point, and we can go for a bright future together on the basis of traditional friendship.

China and Bangladesh are good partners in fighting the epidemic, in resuming work and production, and in national rejuvenation. China is willing to work with Bangladesh to implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, promote the construction of a China-Bangladesh community of shared future and China-Bangladesh health community. China is also willing to work with Bangladesh to strengthen high-level exchanges and jointly build the "Belt and Road" cooperation, implement more projects that benefit people's livelihoods, and build the foundation of China-Bangladesh friendship. Let our two countries work hand in hand, based on the solid friendship built by our predecessors, to realise our goals.

HE Mr Li Jiming is Ambassador of China to Bangladesh.