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The Padma river speedboat tragedy could have been avoided

When will the responsible authorities be held accountable?

TWENTY-SIX people tragically died in the Padma river in Madaripur on May 3 when a speedboat capsized after crashing into a sand-laden bulk carrier. According to one of the survivors of the crash, the driver was not skilled at manoeuvring the speedboat and was driving haphazardly from the beginning.

Multiple government officials are now saying that speedboat services on this river route are illegal during normal times. Then why was this speedboat running when there is a lockdown in place? Even more alarmingly, the speedboat was not registered and its driver did not even have a licence. According to different government officials, this apparently is the norm, as around 400 speedboats are operating daily on this route, but none of them have any registration or fitness certificates from the government. And the drivers have no institutional training or license. If that is the case and it is so well known, then why are these speedboats being allowed to run on a regular basis? Which government authorities are responsible for overseeing the safety of these vehicles? And why aren't they doing their job?

The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) under the Ministry of Shipping is supposed to be responsible for development, maintenance and control of water transport and waterways in the country. Yet, according to its Assistant Director, who is assigned to ensure marine safety and traffic management at Shimulia terminal, his department does not monitor speedboat operations on the Shimulia-Banglabazar route due to a lack of manpower. We would like to know for how long BIWTA has had this acute manpower shortage, and what steps it has taken to solve this problem. Surely, its high officials cannot be sitting around while BIWTA is unable to carry out its responsibilities due to a lack of manpower?

And what about the Coast Guard? Why are speedboats like this able to get away with carrying more people than the boats' capacity, and why are people allowed to get on them without wearing lifejackets? The entire situation reeks of gross mismanagement on the part of the authorities and a complete lack of safety oversight and monitoring by different government agencies.

The authorities have formed a six-member committee to investigate the accident. By now, we all know how that usually turns out: the committee does its job and gives certain recommendations, which are unabashedly ignored by the relevant authorities and we end up back at square one. How long will this continue? How many more lives have to be lost before the authorities responsible for ensuring people's safety are finally held accountable for not doing their designated duty?

Will the inter-district transport ban prevent movement of people?

The authorities must come up with innovative solutions to stop the Eid rush

AS part of its strategy to contain the spread of Covid-19, the government has extended the ongoing lockdown till May 16. During this time, all inter-district bus, launch and train services will remain suspended. However, the administration will allow public transport to operate within the cities and districts from May 6.

We believe that lockdown is the only way to address the transmission of Covid-19 and rein in the pandemic, but the way we have gone about the business so far has been at best halfhearted, if not warped. While public transport has been off the streets, private vehicles have not. In the first stages of the lockdown, before April 14, public offices were closed, but not private ones. Later on, all offices were closed except essential services, and restaurants and factories were allowed to operate as well, but no directives were given on how the workers in these industries are meant to reach their workplaces without public transportation. It would have been judicious if government transport could run with health caveats imposed and enforced strictly.

Understandably, this transport-suspension measure is intended to prevent the coronavirus affecting the outlying areas of the country, which so far have remained relatively free from the pandemic. However, the two Eid festivals are when there is a large exodus of people from Dhaka to other parts of the country and vice versa, although the inflow into Dhaka is not as high as the outflow. We, therefore, wonder if the administration would be able to prevent people from moving out of the workplace towards home, albeit for three days. Given the fact that intra-district buses will be allowed to operate, people will district-hop to reach home. While ordinary people will have to pay through their noses, the transport owners will make hay by charging them at their will, which they do during these festivals. With rail and launch services also suspended, it is possible that all hell will break loose on the streets.

While we appreciate the intention of the government in suspending long range public transport, the suspension is likely to be circumvented by innovative travellers. The government will therefore have to take into account such possibilities and be equally innovative in their approach to stopping people from spreading the virus to the villages.

Four steps to reopening schools and recovering learning losses



MANZOOR AHMED

THE second wave of the pandemic has hit life and livelihood hard and has thrown us all into deep anxiety. For 40 million students, life-and-livelihood is to be in school. Normal life has been taken away from children and youth for over 14 months. How can their lives be returned to them? Four policy and action steps can help. The budget for the new year, starting in July, needs to make necessary provisions to support these steps.

In a webinar organised by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) on April 29, budget priorities for the pandemic-devastated education system were discussed in the presence of Planning Minister M Abdul Mannan and Education Secretary Md Mahbub Hossain. Speakers pointed to four kinds of measures that the budget should support and which would make it possible to restart school and begin the recovery of deep and unforeseen learning losses.

First, the authorities need to move away from the thought of reopening all schools all over the country on a fixed date. In Kutubdia and Khagrachhari upazilas, for example, total Covid-19 infection has been less than one person

Instead of trying to teach something in all the subjects in the syllabus, it is time now to concentrate on the core skills and knowledge subjects.

per 10,000. Is there any logic in keeping all schools shuttered and students confined to their homes in these areas? Schools can be opened in phases, taking into account the local infection rate. Health precautions and safety rules, however, have to be observed strictly. Upazila education and health authorities need to have a coordinated plan involving upazila health complexes and union health clinics for rapid antigen testing (to keep infection rate under surveillance), contact tracing, and treatment for symptoms as needed (It is difficult to understand why rapid antigen tests are not used widely). Health protection for students and teachers may be seen as ambitious, but a beginning in this direction has to be made. For all we know, we have to learn to live permanently with Covid-19 or similar epidemic threats.

Second, restarting school is not enough. A teaching-learning plan to compensate for the long cessation of learning has to be implemented. This

plan has to be one that is based on the science of learning rather than what is administratively easy and convenient. The thinking so far is to count the number of lessons that can be delivered during the year after schools open, cut parts of the syllabus in all of the subjects (six in primary and 13 in secondary) to fit the number of lesson days, and test students at year-end on these lessons for promotion to the next class. The

concentrated efforts in core subjects and enable students to acquire the core skills appropriate for their grade.

Teachers and teacher's assistants, who may be recruited to help in the extra learning needed for students, will need subject- and grade-wise guidelines. They will need help in assessing students' levels, as well as tips on the best ways of helping students, linking digital materials to classroom lessons, communicating



Nayeem, a student of class-III, has been selling cigarettes and betel leaves on the streets to support his family after schools shut down due to the pandemic. This photo was taken in December 2020.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

expectation is that school and students can go back to their normal routine next year.

Unfortunately, this administratively neat solution will not work for most students. The loss of over a year cannot be covered in the remaining days of the year (how many such days remain will depend on when schools can open). The science of education curricula and children's learning indicate that there are core competencies (such as in first language and math at the primary level) and in Bangla, math, science and English at the secondary stage that students must learn. There cannot be much scope for short cuts in these areas. Instead of trying to teach something in all the subjects in the syllabus, it is time now to concentrate on the core skills and knowledge subjects. Mastery in these skills will make students self-reliant and enable them to cope with other subjects eventually.

However, even devoting all efforts on Bangla and math at primary and the four areas at the secondary stage will not be sufficient to recover the loss of over a year (plus what students may have forgotten of their past learning) in the dwindling number of days in the school year. A prudent move would be to extend the current school year by at least six months up to June 2022. In other words, no year-end exam until June next year and promotion to the next class, after a summer vacation, in September next year. This "class-promotion holiday" will allow necessary time to plan for

with parents, and offering social-emotional support to students. Online teachers' portals should be built and teachers encouraged to participate. Teachers also need to be provided with financial incentives linked to results for the extra work and effort demanded of them. Methods should be devised to include non-government and non-MPO schools in these initiatives, since a large proportion of students are enrolled in these institutions.

By making a virtue of necessity, the school calendar can be changed in 2022, shunning the colonial era legacy of January-December to a climatically more appropriate—and in line with practice in many countries—schedule of mid-September to end-June, followed by a predictable and long break in the sultry and rainy times of the year. This would mean there would be no cyclical Ramadan holidays for school. Like all other businesses and offices, schools can remain open, but the daily school hours may be modified. Educationists have spoken about the time taken away from regular learning from November to February for annual year-end exams and starting the new year. This is the temperate and relatively rain-and-storm free time of the year that should be used for regular learning activities in school.

The education authorities are in a dilemma about when SSC and HSC exams may be taken this year, after abandoning the HSC examinations last year. Should they hold the exams with all

'I have no one else': How an eight-year-old girl lost her entire family at once



TAQBIR HUDA

IN the early hours of Monday morning, when most of us were tucked comfortably in our beds, eight-year-old Meem lost her entire family after the speedboat she was on crashed and overturned in the middle of the Padma river, drowning and killing 26 passengers.

Meem was travelling with her father, mother and two sisters to her village after receiving news that her Dadu had suddenly died. Speaking to a journalist from *Desh Rupantor*, Meem disclosed that her hometown is in Terkhada village of Khulna and their family had been renting a house in Mirpur for the past five months. They had boarded the speedboat from Shimulia Ghat. Little did Meem's family know that attempting to visit a dead family member would cause their own deaths.

Meem was asleep when the speedboat crashed. She was holding a bag full of clothes on her lap. It is this bag that would save her life. As the boat overturned and passengers began drowning, Meem found herself floating on the water by holding on to the bag. That is when the rescuers noticed a floating child clutching onto a bag and rescued her from the water.

As soon as Meem was able to overcome her shock, she asked for her family. She was told that her parents and sisters were now stored in body-bags in a nearby primary school, along with other dead bodies. She was then taken in front of the line of corpses, and asked to identify her family members one by one.

Meem was then rushed to the nearby Panchar Royal Hospital as she had

sustained minor injuries to her hands and eyes. Unlike most other passengers, no relatives had come for her or her family. Reporters found Meem in a state of disarray and constant tears. She murmured: "I have no one else."

The crash occurred when the speedboat hit a sand-laden bulkhead anchored in Padma, near the Banglabazar Ferry Ghat area in Madaripur's Shibchar upazila. Abdur Razzak, in-charge of

Rahima Khatun told press that the accident occurred as "there was not sufficient light in the morning and also the driver was not skilled enough" (*The Daily Star*). She further noted that the speedboat was carrying passengers, violating the restrictions imposed by the government amid the ongoing pandemic. Ghat authorities told press that the owner of the speedboat, Chandu Mia, does not have registration, while the



Eight-year-old Meem lost her entire family when the speedboat crashed.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

the local naval police outpost, told press that the speedboat was coming to Banglabazar Ferry Ghat, taking passengers from Shimuliaghat of Munshiganj. Meem was one of five people rescued alive. Survivors blamed the speedboat driver for causing the crash, saying he was speeding "recklessly" right from the start of their trip.

Madaripur Deputy Commissioner

driver employed by him to operate the boat, Md Shah Alam, has no license. When local authorities were asked how an unlicensed driver was still allowed to run an unregistered speedboat in the middle of a "lockdown", there were no clear answers.

Rahima Khatun told *The Daily Star* that the District Administration has formed a six-member committee to

the subjects in the syllabus, which lasts for six weeks or longer? The principle of the core competencies can be applied in this regard also. The SSC exams can be held on four papers for Bangla, English, math and science and can be completed in four days. At the HSC level, more papers on the separate streams have to be added, but the exams can still be completed within a week or so. A decision can be announced along this line for the school years '21 and '22 to relieve examinees of uncertainty and anxiety, and necessary preparations can begin for this purpose. The exact dates of the exams will depend on the pandemic situation, so that a certain number of in-person classes can be held before the exams. PECE and JSC exams may also be reconsidered along this line. Many educationists argue that abandoning them would do no harm and would actually be helpful.

Thirdly, proper implementation of school reopening and learning recovery will require a collaborative effort involving education NGOs, community organisations, local government and forums such as CAMPE, Health Watch and the Bangladesh ECD Network. The national directives have to be adapted and adjusted to each upazila and each institution, and appropriate work plans have to be prepared assessing local circumstances. Parents and teachers have to understand and support what has to be done. Resource requirements and sources of support have to be worked out. The implementation process has to be monitored and adjustments made as needed. Work teams that include officials and NGOs have to guide and carry out these tasks. An important activity would be to recruit, orient and supervise—in cooperation with education NGOs—teaching assistants to provide extra instructional support to students lagging behind. This cannot be left only to currently employed teachers in schools whose numbers are not sufficient and who are already overburdened.

Fourth, the school meal initiative, planned to be gradually expanded, should be accelerated to cover all pre-primary and primary level students, and at least selectively at the secondary level in ecologically and economically disadvantaged areas. All students at the elementary stage (up to grade eight) are offered a hot meal every school day all over India. During school closure due to the pandemic, rice, lentil and oil rations have been supplied monthly to every students' family in West Bengal. It is claimed that we have reached the per capita income level of India. If they can do it, we can as well.

The plan, implementation strategy and budget proposal for the steps suggested must come from the two ministries of education before the Ministry of Finance can consider these, with the Prime Minister's overall guidance, for inclusion in the national budget proposal. The ball is in the court of the two ministries of education.

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"investigate the accident". The committee, which includes magistrates, naval police and fire service personnel, has been asked to submit a probe report within three working days. But when was the last time any such probe committee formed after large-scale preventable "accidents" actually did anything to prevent the next one from happening?

Just last month in April, more than 30 people were killed when a large cargo vessel crashed into a ferry carrying 50 passengers rushing home from Narayanganj before the national lockdown. Last June, at least 32 people were killed when a ferry crashed into another ferry from the back in Dhaka, killing at least 32 people. In February 2015, at least 78 people died when an overcrowded ship collided with a cargo ship. How many committees were formed then and what action was taken based on their findings?

I am sorry Meem. I wish I had the words to console you, but the truth is, I have no idea what it feels like to lose my entire family in the blink of an eye. I am sorry you are now motherless, fatherless and sister-less, all because you had the misfortune of being born in a place where we have the luxury to hurt as many people as possible by being as negligent as possible; a place where basic safety standards do not matter because human lives do not matter.

What does the future hold for Meem and who will take care of her? Will she be an "economic burden" on a relative who will wait for the moment she reaches puberty to marry her off? Worse yet, will she end up as a victim of trafficking, as many young girls without a guardian are in this country?

I cannot stop wondering: what will happen to Meem?

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