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Reopening of schools postponed for the umpteenth time

Govt must listen to the experts and have a concrete, effective plan

It is quite frustrating to see most industries operating in a business-as-usual manner even amidst a still-dangerous Covid-19 situation while students of all levels have been suffering from varying degrees of learning loss since March of last year, when all educational institutions were shut down due to the virus. At a virtual briefing on Wednesday, the education minister announced that educational institutions will reopen once the infection rate drops below 5 percent, or on June 13 if the situation improves—whichever comes first.

The government's concern about further spread of the virus, especially amongst elderly relatives of students, is justified and understandable. However, we cannot ignore some of the more severe consequences of keeping educational institutions closed or only running online, such as the increase in the number of dropouts and child marriages. Moreover, if shops, bazaars and many workplaces can be opened, why not the schools? In rural areas especially, many students' education is completely halted as they cannot attend online classes like their urban counterparts. Educational programmes broadcast on state-run TV channels can only make up for so much of over one year's worth of learning loss. It has become a matter of urgency now to reopen schools, for rural children especially, in order to keep them from becoming engaged in hazardous jobs or being married off by parents.

It has been quite clear for some time now that we cannot wait until the virus is fully eradicated to reopen educational institutions, as we seem to run into new issues such as vaccine shortages and surges in cases every other day.

We believe it is long overdue for the authorities to come up with a solid plan to either send students back to school (preferably in phases and maintaining necessary health guidelines), or to ensure their learning loss is curbed as much as possible while at home. Since the latter is quite a challenge for most areas, opening schools while maintaining basic health guidelines seems to be the most logical move—something that is being done in other countries. We agree with the suggestion of the former DGHS director of disease control that the government could reopen schools in areas where the infection rate is well below 5 percent. Getting all teachers vaccinated would also be an effective way to ensure safety. That seems to be the case in many rural areas where education has come to a complete standstill since the pandemic started. Unless children start going to school where they learn, play and make friends, there will be more learning loss, school dropouts, child marriages, child labour, and not to mention mental health complications, thus taking away all our achievements in these areas.

DSA strikes again!

When will this atrocious law be shelved?

Once again, the dreaded Digital Security Act is being used against journalists and media officials, this time to sue two journalists and one official of Somyo TV over airing a report on corruption allegations against a Noakhali court official. In addition to these three members of the press, three other individuals have also been made accused in the case.

In his court statement, the complainant claimed that the report was "untrue, false, fake, baseless, vindictive and defamatory". He also filed a Tk 10 crore defamation case with the First Joint District Judge's Court in Noakhali on May 5 against the same six accused over running the report. And he further claimed that the broadcasting had damaged his family's reputation and prestige. What is striking, however, is that according to one of the journalists made accused in the case, they had prepared the report based on the charge sheets in two corruption cases against the said court official.

So, all they had done was make public the contents of an official document. They did not just cook up some baseless allegations against the official out of thin air. If charge sheets have been prepared against the court official for two cases of corruption, then it is no laughing matter. One would assume, if the official was innocent, that he would want his name to get cleared through proper investigation of the charges against him. Instead of trying to prove his innocence to the anti-corruption authorities, why the official has chosen to go after journalists who had simply reported on the matter using official documents is difficult to understand.

Then again, it might not be that surprising or difficult to understand given the way the DSA has been used till now. Last year, as many as 457 people of various professions were prosecuted and arrested in 198 cases filed under the Digital Security Act. Of them, 75 were journalists, while others included teachers, students, folk musicians and cultural artists. Nearly half of the journalists who were prosecuted were arrested at some stage. In many of these cases, the accusations were so flimsy and the methods used were so unprofessional that it became evident how the DSA is being abused to stifle free speech, free expression and press freedoms.

What is happening now is the result of arbitrary restrictions on free speech and the ongoing choking of free media. The government has repeatedly hinted that it is unwilling to listen to members of the media or experts from other fields when it comes to such concerns, and enacted draconian laws such as the DSA. Despite the people's protest against its misuse, the government has done nothing to fix this. And this is its result, clear for all to see.



Migrant workers intending to travel to Saudi Arabia gather in front of the Saudia office at the capital's Hotel Sonargaon around noon on May 24, 2024 to book hotel stays after reaching the Gulf country.

PHOTO:
PRABIR DAS

At every step, they are exploited, mistreated and humiliated

We demand a full audit of the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund

THE THIRD
VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

Expatriate workers are our goose of Aesop's Fables that lays the golden eggs. And they do so year after year, without any help from us, and in spite of the constant humiliation we subject them to. From 2016 to 2019, the average annual remittance (Jan-Dec) flow was USD 15.25 billion. In 2020, it rose to USD 21.7 billion. For the first four months of the current year (January to April 2021), we have so far received USD 7.7 billion. This, in spite of the global pandemic and the consequent job and financial loss. Their devotion to their families and the country is unparalleled.

For these billions in foreign exchange that our government gets, it spends not a single taka. It is the workers who pay for every expense—all sorts of fees (not to mention bribes) and exorbitant airfare (see postscript)—while we reap the benefits of a hefty foreign exchange reserve, so much so that we can assist Sri Lanka with USD 500 million. (As a Bangladeshi, it does make me feel proud that we now have the capacity to help a neighbour, but can't we spend a fraction of that reserve, which they help to make anyway, for our expatriate workers who are now desperately borrowing from loan sharks or selling whatever little they possess to comply with a sudden Saudi travel requirement?)

The root of the present crisis lies in the gross neglect of timely vaccination for our workers scheduled to go to Saudi Arabia to join their work. We knew exactly the number of workers that would be going, as all of them had confirmed bookings from months ahead. Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA)—the apex body of all recruiting agencies—literally begged the ministry and all relevant authorities to arrange for special vaccination of the workers scheduled to leave in May. It fell on deaf ears because we just couldn't care less what becomes of these poor workers as long as the money kept flowing.

When Saudi authorities saw that our workers were not vaccinated, they imposed the restriction of obligatory quarantine triggering the present crisis. If only we vaccinated them in due time with two doses and gave them the vaccination certificate, our workers would have been able to take their regular flights, and they would have been spared the present sufferings. Biman wouldn't have to cancel its flights either, incurring heavy losses. It was the responsibility of the Expatriates' Welfare ministry and they did nothing. All they had to do was coordinate with the health ministry and give our workers priority vaccination, and there would not have been the present crisis. Will they be held accountable?

On May 10, the Saudi government informed us that starting from May 20, workers will have to comply with a new set of health guidelines including a seven-day obligatory hotel quarantine, for which they will have to pay in advance Tk 60,000 to Tk 70,000 per person.

Both the airlines got ten days' advance notice to comply. Though its passengers had to undergo a lot of last-minute hassle,

Saudi Airlines organised hotel quarantine for the passengers up to May 24—of course on payment—and did not miss a single flight. But as of Tuesday, Saudi Airlines is refusing to do their job and has put the onus on the passengers to make their own booking in hotels prescribed by the Saudi civil aviation authority.

Biman, on the other hand, instead of helping the situation, has cancelled its flights to Saudi Arabia since May 20 with all the attendant uncertainties for its passengers, including expiry of visa, work permit, etc. Our national carrier, whose flights are supposed to resume from tomorrow, has also shifted the burden to the passengers after doing nothing since the order was issued on May 10.

According to our estimate, about 5,000 workers are now stuck here, not knowing what to do, where to go and who is there to help them. There are another 33,000 Saudi-bound workers waiting to travel in June with visa and confirmed tickets in their hands. If they had gotten the jobs in time, their departure would have been without any hassle. Now they will have to spend money for hotel quarantine—in foreign exchange in Saudi Arabia—for their travel.

So why is there such secrecy about the overall financial position of the fund? Is it because the workers, who are the real owners of the fund, will come to know how much money they own and how their hard-earned money is being squandered?

So why are these remittance-sending, reserve-replenishing, never-demanding anything workers being so badly treated? Why aren't the government, the concerned ministry, the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), etc. lending a helping hand at this time of our workers' crisis, particularly since they are sitting on thousands of crores of the workers' own money—which has been collected to handle the type of situation that the workers are facing now?

The Expatriates' Welfare ministry, whose reason for its very existence is the workers, has so far remained shamefully silent. Not arranging for vaccination and then not coming to the aid of the workers constitute gross neglect of duties, both legal and moral, on its part.

Immediately after the Saudi government issued its travel advisory, the ministry could have stood by the workers assuring them of its assistance. It could have worked with our embassy in Jeddah and Riyadh, with Biman, with the Saudi embassy in Dhaka, with the representatives of recruiting and travel agencies, and with other concerned

bodies in order to help our workers.

The role of the ministry and the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB) is inexplicable and unforgivable. They are probably sitting on more than three thousands of crores of takas of workers' money and not extending the crucial financial assistance that the workers need at the moment and not coming forward in any way at this hour of crisis is clearly condemnable.

We searched the website of the WEWB, which manages the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF), and nowhere could we find the total picture of the financial position of this organisation. There is no figure of its total assets and liabilities, a rudimentary requirement for any institution that believes in accountability and transparency. What we get are annual reports and that too only the expenditure figures under various heads, not the earnings.

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The Board, according to its annual report for 2018-2019 (website sourced), spent a total of Tk 183.37 crores, of which Tk 162.46 crores were used in providing services to the workers and the remaining Tk 20.91 crores for its own administrative and other expenses. Of the second amount, Tk 6.66 crores were for administrative cost (Proshashonik, item 2), and Tk 12.29 crores for procurement and service (Shorboraho o Sheba, item 3).

If we delve into item 2 (the administrative cost), we see Tk 1.86 crore spent on salary, Tk 1.40 crore on staff wages, Tk 1.8 crore on house rent, Tk 60 lakhs on festival bonus, Tk 21 lakhs on medical allowance, and Tk 24 lakhs for special allowance (car).

Looking into item 3 (procurement and service), we see Tk 2 crores spent on data entry, Tk 4 crores on contract/temporary workers, Tk 90 lakhs on travel, Tk 80 lakhs on petrol/gas, Tk 60 lakhs on security guards, and Tk 20 lakhs on overtime.

There are innumerable other expenses under various heads amounting to lakhs of takas whose justifications are at best tenuous, if not outright questionable: Tk 4 crores for contractual and temporary workers, Tk 2 crores for data entry, Tk 20 lakhs for internet bill, money for buying cars, furniture and decorating offices, etc.

There appears to be a well-designed vagueness about the budgetary links of the ministry and that of the WEWB. This allows the officials to spend under various heads and intermingle the sources of funds. We are told the funds are audited but have no public evidence of it. Are the funds audited by professional and reputed CA firms or by made-to-order auditors? We need to know the full story of the funds from 1990 till date, which are estimated to be more than three thousand crores.

The lack of transparency starts with the composition of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board which was set up in 1990 as Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF), in which each expatriate worker was obliged to contribute an amount—smaller at the start, but now Tk 3,500—to be used for their welfare. From its inception up

to 2013, this fund was managed by the BMET with very limited overhead cost. Now with the formation of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), it has more than 200 staff members with an annual overhead cost of more than Tk 20 crores. Why shouldn't the government bear this cost, instead of charging the workers? Also, why should the BCS cadre staff on deputation to this body be paid from the funds of these poor workers, rather than from the government's own budget?

Interestingly, of the 16-member board, there are only three representatives from the workers (practically only one, as two posts are vacant), 12 representatives from various ministries and 1 representative from recruiting agencies. One can easily guess how much of the interest of the workers gets priority in the board's deliberations. Since the money that the board handles is owned by the workers, why is there so little representation of the OWNERS? Would any equity paying group ever permit such usurpation of power? It is only because these workers have no voice and very little rights that they can be subjected to such arrogance and injustice.

The government's initiative of providing 2 percent incentive to workers for the money remitted is a very good step. It should be raised to 5 percent, given how much we incentivise our export industries with bank loans, cashback incentives, tax breaks, etc. Such a move will further increase money transfer through formal banking channels, shifting from informal channels like hundi. With greater liquidity in the hands of the recipients of the remitted money, rural economy will grow even faster.

The neglect, indifference and disrespect with which our migrant workers are treated, as further evidenced by the present crisis, call for an immediate review of the work of the ministry and the WEWB. The first priority is to undertake a serious overview of the total situation of how our expatriate workers are recruited, trained, sent abroad, looked after in the host country, and served in times of crisis. The overview should also look into ensuring their basic human rights, health conditions and some sort of livelihood support once they return, etc. To start with, we must ensure greater representation of the expatriate workers at all levels of the ministry's functions that deal with them. There must be a larger participation of the workers in the WEWB as well as obligatory transparency in their use of the workers' fund.

It is high time we showed due respect and extended deserved dignity to the unsung nation-builders that the expatriate workers really are.

Postscript

According to *The Daily Star* report dated April 24, the price of a ticket to Oman, the UAE and Qatar now costs around Tk 80,000 to Tk 1 lakh. The price of a ticket to Saudi Arabia rose from Tk 20,000 to Tk 95,000. Comparatively, a ticket from Kolkata to Riyadh costs Tk 13,000, and from Mumbai to Dubai Tk 17,000. From Nepal to Riyadh, it costs Tk 35,000, to Dubai Tk 20,000 (Source: Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh).

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