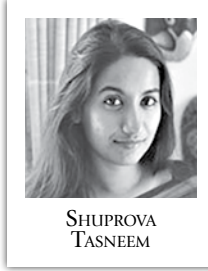


Our students deserve better policies

What exactly is our long-term plan for recovering learning losses?



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

THE prolonged school closures in Bangladesh has put us at the top of yet another unpalatable list—according to UNICEF, we have had one of the world's longest full closure of educational institutions due to the pandemic.

Its data also suggests that, after Brazil, Bangladesh has the most number of students who have missed almost all classroom instruction time since March 2020. We are one of the few countries in the world that have not even partially opened schools during the course of the pandemic, for over an entire year. Research suggests that 5.92 million primary and secondary students in the country are facing learning losses as a result. An Education Watch report also detailed how almost 70 percent of students are not participating in distance learning.

Against this backdrop, one had hoped that the joint press conference by the two education ministers, held on Wednesday, would give the country's students some much-needed relief by providing a concrete roadmap to the resumption of education in Bangladesh. Their announcements, however, were at best confusing, and at worst—incoherent, out of touch and devoid of any empathy for the students of Bangladesh. After 14 long months of school closures, our students deserved better than the confused plans that have been put forward.

Let us start with the conflicting statements. It was suggested at the press conference that educational institutions might open on June 13 and in fact, current school closures have been extended to June 12 only. So will schools be opening then? Unlikely, since the education minister also said the ministry will be relying on the suggestions of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, which has recommended reopening educational institutions once the infection rate drops below five percent, which has again been on the rise for the last several days.

This also begs the question—if the ministry has been relying on the committee's recommendations, why did they not start planning to open schools when the positivity

rate started nearing five percent in January this year? Government data suggests that on January 12, the positivity rate was at exactly five percent. By January 19, the seven-day rolling average positivity rate was also five percent—meaning that by then, the average positivity rate had been at five percent for a week. It wasn't until late March that the positivity rate started climbing again. So why then, were students not given the opportunity to go back to school, at least for a month or two? For children who are at high risk of being pushed into child labour and/or child marriages, especially due to the economic crisis that the poorest families are facing

of Secondary and Higher Education recently published guidelines on the health and safety measures that will be followed in this scenario, which includes measures to physically distance, the division of classes into smaller groups and the use of masks by all. As commendable as these suggestions are, how feasible are they, especially since, according to the Obhimbabok Oikya Forum (a platform of guardians), there can be more than 80 children in one classroom? Will temporary classrooms be set up elsewhere? Will teachers' capacity be improved, will teaching assistants be hired? No information has been shared on how these plans are actually going to be

resume, but when they do, SSC students will attend around 360 hours of schooling over 10 weeks, and HSC students will attend around 500 hours of the same over 14 weeks, and then they will get exactly 336 hours to absorb this information (assuming they don't take time to eat, sleep or relax over the two weeks of preparation time), after which they will sit for the most important exams of their adolescence, on which hinges their chances of getting into universities, following their ambitions and keeping their families happy/solvent.

I wonder if the officials who came up with this plan went through such intensive and continuous work hours while formulating it. Perhaps they might have come up with a better plan if they did. However, given the very real impacts the pandemic is having on the mental health of young people—coupled with the report from a youth organisation in March this year suggesting that suicide rates have gone up by a staggering 44 percent in Bangladesh in 2020 when compared to 2019—one feels a little more time should have been spent on making provisions that actually take the well-being of students into account.

What is truly disappointing is that nothing was said in the press conference that we haven't already heard before. The authorities have had a year to think about how to safely reopen educational institutions, and this is the best that they could come up with, despite experts putting forward multiple short- and long-term recommendations regarding the situation. The most obvious of these has been the idea of opening schools in different districts in phases, depending on the local coronavirus situation.

According to regional data from the IEDCR, 41 percent of all Covid-19 cases are in Dhaka (given the population density of this area, this isn't a surprise). The worst district after Dhaka is Chattogram, with around six percent of cases, followed by Cumilla and Narayanganj (both at 1.9 percent). This means that every other district in the country holds less than two percent of total cases, and if you compare it to data from December 2020, you'll find that the situation really didn't change much in terms of district-wise distribution of Covid-19. Given this scenario, it is absolutely baffling why children across the country—especially those in remote/rural areas who are most

affected by the digital divide—are being held hostage simply because we are unable to get the coronavirus under control in the urban centres.

It is clear that there is a pressing need for decentralisation of education policy. The two ministries must end this one-size-fits-all approach and involve relevant stakeholders—schools, educators, local administration, NGOs, policy experts and most importantly, students and their families—to come up with a coherent learning recovery programme that goes beyond the bare minimum and actually comes up with approaches tailored to different localities and their contexts. At present, the government has no idea what the learning levels of SSC/HSC examinees even are. It is folly to come up with examination schedules without actually getting them back into classrooms first.

And beyond exams and learning recoveries, we must devise methods to get children who have already been lost to child marriage and employment during the pandemic, back into school. It is extremely concerning that, despite economic inequalities being further entrenched during the pandemic (CPD estimates over 16 million people have been further pushed into poverty), we are not seeing any real effort from the authorities to ensure this is not reflected in soaring rates of school dropouts.

When the health and safety restrictions were eased around August last year, most of our usual activities resumed. It was not just offices and markets that opened up—weddings were attended, holidays were planned, and life went back to relative normalcy for most adults. So why then, did we shut our children out of their classrooms? What does this say about the value we place on education in this country? Through our desire to protect our children during the pandemic, have we inflicted greater long-lasting damage on their intellectual development and psychological well-being? As the main government bodies in charge of the education of our younger generations, we hope the two education ministries are pondering these questions as seriously as they ought to.

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @shuprovatasneem.



Nayeem, a student of class-III, smiles as he carries his basket of cigarettes and betel leaves on the streets of the capital's Mugda. With his school closed since the start of the outbreak, the eight-year-old has been selling his wares on the streets to contribute to his family's income.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

during the pandemic, any opportunity to make up for learning losses (and access the school meals initiative) would have been a welcome change.

This brings us to the next suggestion put forward in the press briefing regarding the plan for reopening schools. According to a report in this daily, if/when schools do re-open, students of class five will attend classes six days a week whereas students of class one to four will go to school once a week. The Directorate

implemented.

If you are worried that not enough concern is being shown for our primary/secondary students, the ministry's plans for SSC and HSC students almost beggars belief. After over a year of being kept out of classrooms, the plan is that SSC and HSC students will attend 60 and 84 days of class respectively, six days a week, and then be given two weeks to study for their exams (with shortened syllabuses). So we still don't know when these classes will actually

criticism even from its most ardent supporters. In the first five months of 2020, 400 cases were filed and 353 arrests made under the purview of this legal instrument.

Rozina Islam's employer Prothom Alo performed an in-depth analysis of 197 such cases and reported that a high majority of these were filed based on certain vague accusations—specifically for making adverse remarks, defamation, sharing distorted images, spreading rumours and conspiring against the state. In a recent column for *The Daily Star*, academic CR Abrar cited the Prothom Alo report and stated that "in 80 percent of instances, the plaintiff was either leaders or activists of the ruling party or police". Abrar further pointed out that of "the 197 cases, 88 were filed by Awami League MPs, union council chairs and activists of youth, student and volunteer wings of the ruling party, and 70 more were filed by the police"—so either there is an egregious misuse of political power taking place, or if we are to believe the government, there are widespread anti-state activities being carried out against what is perhaps the strongest political regime this country has ever seen. I leave it up to the readers to decide which is true.

The current circumstances with Rozina Islam in my opinion, is symbolic of the systematic degradation of press freedom and journalism in Bangladesh—and as a result, while we condemn her detention, harassment and persecution by state authorities, we are reminded of the sobering fact that her situation is but part of a wider state mobilised censorship of the press. From the highest level of the government, to ministers, ruling party MPs to civil servants running the bureaucracy, there is a tacit message given towards non-state actors—if you cannot be with us, do not condemn us. If you cannot support us, do not criticise us. In a nutshell, the state has promoted self-censorship on part of the media by perpetuating an environment of judicial harassment and allowing for security forces as

well as grassroots Awami League activists, to tap into oppressive legal tools to nullify civic opposition. This perhaps has been expressed most aptly, by the harassment carried forth by health ministry officials against Rozina Islam.

Perhaps it is a good idea to take a step back, and define what the role of free media is in developing the foundations of a thriving democracy. The press and news media is often referred to as the Fourth Estate—through indirect social influences, the Fourth Estate has the unequivocal capacity of advocacy and the inherent ability to frame political issues. Checks and balances are crucial in a political system to ensure equal distribution of power, opportunity, information and wealth—and the media acts as a guardian to ensure accountability from those wielding authority on behalf of the people. If you have an absence or deficiency in sustainable democratic exercises between political parties and in the wider public system in a society for whatever reason, the media steps in to do the role of a de facto challenger which ensures that the government of the day does not become tyrannical or dictatorial—guaranteeing that the mandate and consent of voters are considered in policymaking. Therefore in no way, should the media be an ally of either this government or of any other regimes in principle—that simply is not their role. Yes they support, yes they remind, yes they stand with you during periods of national crisis—but they are not your unwavering and unquestioning friend. And they should not be punished for not being so.

In the recent past, there has been an inclination by sycophants of the ruling party to invalidate accusations made against the government, by suggesting that the media should not put their energy in solely criticising the government—but should simultaneously market the successes of this regime. I disagree—the party in power has its army of marketing strategists who have

successfully and to the fullest of their abilities, been able to promote the developmental agendas and achievements of the government. They have done so in a relatively protected digital and political space, free from political harassment and state persecution—on the other end however, with each passing day one sees a smaller space for formal dissent to take place. It is here where today's media should ideally step in—and remind the government of their failures. And failures

In the recent past, there has been an inclination by sycophants of the ruling party to invalidate accusations made against the government, by suggesting that the media should not put their energy in solely criticising the government—but should simultaneously market the successes of this regime.

will continue to be present—we are not a utopian wonderland and Rozina Islam's investigative pieces on Prothom Alo and the kind of journalism she represents, provides the country and its government to mend what is wrong and progress. And therefore the space and opportunity for free thinking and dissent, cannot and must not be side-lined by any political regime.

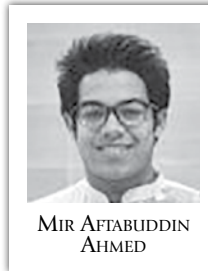
No political expert in Bangladesh will suggest that the media in its totality, is acting as a vessel on behalf of Awami League's

political rivals—neither is it accurate to suggest that media personalities are fully immune from having their own skeletons. However, a cautious media which is being harassed using this country's judicial system, is practicing self-censorship in its publications—this, no editor, senior reporter or average citizen will deny. That should be our primary concern as readers and supporters of a free press. It is not a matter of national pride to see Bangladesh being ranked 152nd out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index—neither is it acceptable to see a senior female journalist who has championed transparency, accountability and the concept of open government, be harassed for doing her professional job.

Rumours have circulated regarding the so-called sensitive information that Rozina Islam supposedly acquired on her phone prior to being arrested. I end this piece by asking a series of questions in this regard—if this document was so confidential, why was it left unprotected in the room of a mid-level health ministry official? On the basis of what law was Rozina kept in a confined space by health ministry officials for close to six hours and harassed by civil servants? Who gave who the right to seize Rozina's cell-phone? What message is the state giving to Bangladeshis during their Golden Jubilee celebrations by tapping into the Official Secrets Act for the first time in the country's independent history, to make a reactionary case against a journalist? And of course—should Rozina Islam be provided monetary compensation for being harassed by the very officials that she is trying to hold accountable, at a time when corruption in the health ministry is rampant? If the contexts centring around Sagor-Runi, Mushtaq Ahmed, Kajo and most recently Rozina, does not concern us as citizens, what will?

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a Toronto-based Banking Professional and a regular contributor for *The Daily Star*. Email: aftab.ahmed@alum.utoronto.ca

Self-censorship and the media: Where are we heading?



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

FUELLED by draconian legal measures and administrative harassment against seasoned Prothom Alo correspondent Rozina Islam, the journalistic community is fuming at the humiliating and hasty actions of the health ministry—and by definition, frustrated at the supposed inaction of the government and the judiciary to address what in reality, is nothing less than an embarrassing move to stop a journalist from doing her professional duty. Senior newspaper editors have penned columns terming the arrest of Rozina Islam as a direct attack on the media—we unitedly share their concerns. Citizens have taken to social media to remind each other of the corruption unearthed by investigative reporters like Rozina during the pandemic. With the health ministry being at the centre of these graft scandals, questions naturally arise regarding the intention behind prosecuting Rozina—we share these apprehensions unanimously as well. The question which arises as a result is this: is Bangladesh drafting its eulogy of a free media?

Rozina Islam is out on bail—yet she is in no way a free citizen. Across television talk shows, media forums and international organisations, one central concern is increasingly being expressed—the increasing usage of legal architectures that stem from the colonial era and a parallel environment of suppressing press freedom, which is widespread in Bangladesh. Whenever issues of concern are raised through the media, the state has developed a tendency to crush vocal opposition—usually citing national security concerns. The Digital Security Act for example, has been this government's primary Achilles Heel over the past couple of years—receiving

QUOTABLE Quote

STELLA MCCARTNEY
fashion designer (1971—)

Everyone can do simple things to make a difference, and every little bit really does count.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Break-away group
- 5 Mailbox part
- 9 Bars on cars
- 11 Easy two-pointer
- 13 Shrek's love
- 14 Singer Cara
- 15 High trains
- 16 Lease signers
- 18 Staggering
- 20 To date
- 21 Fabric workers
- 22 Peas' places
- 23 Count start
- 24 "Fifth Beatle" Sutcliffe
- 25 Close
- 27 Flag features
- 29 Musical ability

DOWN

- 1 Less dangerous
- 2 Driven out
- 3 1967 Peaches & Herb hit
- 4 Top rating
- 5 Police trap
- 6 Old Italian coin
- 7 1986 Madonna hit
- 8 Like some windshields
- 10 Mocking work
- 12 High homes
- 17 USN rank
- 19 Easter lead-in
- 22 Sch. Orgs.
- 24 Accent
- 25 Elite Navy group
- 26 Cuban capital
- 27 Slump
- 28 Digestive aid
- 30 Targets
- 31 Like some jackets
- 33 Take in
- 37 Pod unit
- 40 Pharaoh symbols

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

CLIP RACER UNITE MAN BIGGUN BALL NED TINA BAG BRIAR LEONE ESSES

SPORT TONER ARENA BUGEYED AWED REDD TERN BEGOFF MAE THETA SAGES MAST

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

I THOUGHT YOU SAID HE WAS IN A MEETING

I DIDN'T SAY WHERE IT WAS

THEY SAID THEY WERE MEETING AT THE GOLF COURSE

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YOU NEED TO COME STRAIGHT TO THE PICKUP AREA AFTER SCHOOL.

OH, THERE'S JUST A LITTLE BUSINESS WE HAVE TO DO.

I BET THEY FINALLY FOUND A FAMILY TO ADOPT YOU.

I HOPE THEY'RE WOLVES!