

# To open or not to open schools

## How costs and risks should be weighed



MANZOOR AHMED

SINCE schools were closed due to the pandemic on March 17 last year, the closure has been extended 17 times. The latest announcement was on May 26 further extending the shut-down until June 12. But there is no guarantee that schools will restart on June 13, unless the premises and criteria for weighing risks and costs are reconsidered.

Surveys have revealed a tiny proportion of students did or could participate and that too not effectively in some form of distance learning initiated by the education authorities. The survey undertaken by Education Watch and those by others towards the end of last year also showed that students and parents overwhelmingly supported school re-opening with appropriate health and safety protocols in schools. The authorities at that point seemed inclined towards resuming regular schooling.

Then in late March this year the infection began to spike which was seen as the beginning of a second wave. It took a serious turn in India in April reaching one of world's highest infection and mortality rates that overwhelmed the healthcare system of the country. Bangladesh government decided that lockdown was necessary to be imposed. The restrictions were applied with various degrees of flexibility and were mostly not observed or enforced rigorously. However, schools remained closed. Schools and

students seem to have been made to bear the heaviest brunt of all Covid-induced restrictions. Recent press reports show that students have become restive and have begun to take to the streets in different parts of the country demanding reopening of institutions.

In the news briefing on March 26, Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni made two significant points. School re-opening should be considered when infection rate comes down to below five percent (of those tested); and opening schools in stages starting with only in some parts of the country would be discriminatory, in her view ("Schools not opening soon," *Daily Star*, May 27).

If these standards are applied simultaneously for the whole country, the schools are not likely to open any time soon. These are not appropriate criteria for three reasons. Health specialists agree that when the pandemic will abate and whether there will be a third wave cannot be predicted. A major determinant is the time-table of mass vaccination. Meanwhile large parts of the country, especially rural areas, are, and will be, with low or close to nil incidence of infection. Should the large numbers of children in these areas be punished and deprived of learning opportunities?

Secondly, the discrimination and disparity argument is faulty—disparity has already existed in schools before the pandemic for many well-known reasons, one of which is the urban-rural disparity in services and provisions. It would be a step in the direction of mitigating disparities to offer a head-start for children in the remote and rural areas to recover their learning loss.

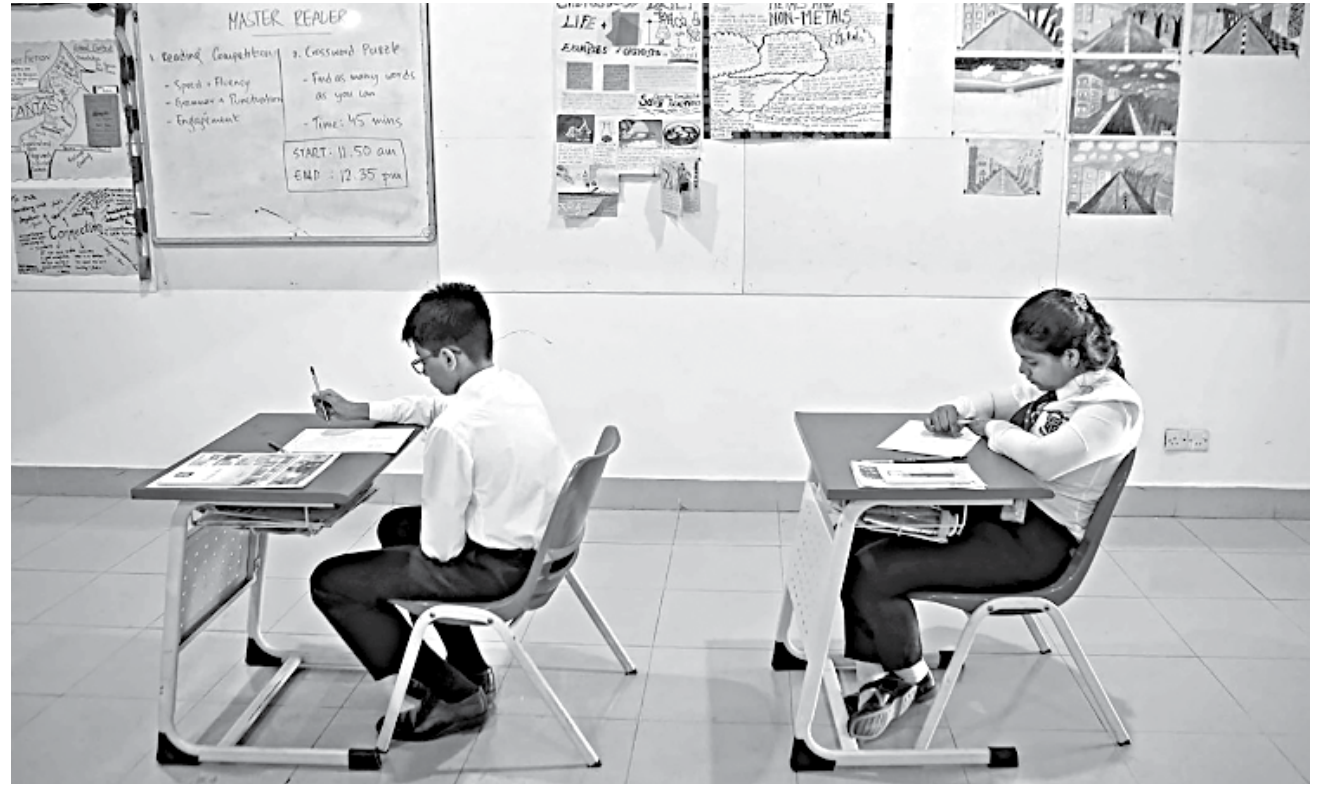
Thirdly, the idea that just restarting school all at once makes it an even

playing field for all is a superficial and administratively convenient view of equal opportunity. Pre-existing disparities in the education system has been further aggravated by the pandemic. This should not be an argument for not supporting children to recover their learning loss wherever and whenever they can be assisted.

The Asian Development Bank experts looking after South Asia noted

in spite of the second wave and even the possibility of a third wave. Its key messages were four-fold as explained in my earlier columns for this newspaper ("Four steps to reopening schools and recovering learning losses," *Daily Star*, May 5, 2021; "Can we prevent a potential collapse of the current education system," *Daily Star*, April 20, 2021; "Make school calendar child and learning friendly," *Daily Star*, December

changing school calendar permanently to September-June. There are also pedagogy, curricular arrangements, teacher support and learning assessment elements which need attention. Curriculum shortening and public exams have to be based on epistemological reasoning focusing on "core competencies", rather than sticking to the whole gamut of subjects in the syllabus.



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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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that the world's longest continuous closure of school due to the pandemic has been in Bangladesh. They have argued, citing international evidence, that keeping schools closed can be only the last resort and an extreme measure to be applied only for a short time, and that the costs and risks of keeping schools closed nationwide far outweigh those of keeping schools open ("School closure should be a last resort," *Daily Star*, March 27).

The Education Watch study recommendations "Bringing on Track Schools and Learning," in the interim report presented on January 17 this year still remain valid and relevant

20, 2020). The key messages, briefly reiterated here, need to be given due consideration by decision-makers at the political level, backed up by necessary technical analysis of the choices. First, it is necessary to go for reopening in stages observing health and safety protocol and with coordinated planning by health and education authorities, especially at the local level. Secondly, a learning loss recovery plan has to be formulated and implemented with at least a two year time-line including extension of the current academic year by six months to June, 2022 and, opportunistically,

Thirdly, effective management and implementation of the recovery plan is critical with upazila-based and institution-based planning. Finally, the short-term actions have to be placed within a medium term and longer term framework.

The unprecedented devastation of the education system, which surpasses the year-long disruption during the Liberation War in 1971, calls for bold decisions and exceptional steps. The policy-makers and decision-makers need to pay heed to the ideas presented above.

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# Let's all pull together on apparel industry safety



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

ANGLA-DESH apparel industry stands at a critical juncture. The industry has achieved significant improvements in safety and is making steady strides in sustainability. However, the industry, at present, faces a debacle as debates regarding its safety

monitoring authority have risen. The current safety arrangement under which our garment factories are being inspected is the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC). The RSC took over the work of the Bangladesh Accord, the previous agreement which had been operating in Bangladesh since 2013.

When the transition Accord was signed in 2018, it was agreed by the signatory brands and unions that after the agreement ends in May 31, 2021, work will be handed over to a national regulatory body who would take over the work thereafter. As part of this transition, in May 2020, the Accord operations in Bangladesh were transferred to the then newly founded RMG Sustainability Council (RSC).

Many have hailed the huge success of the Accord in helping to make Bangladesh one of the safest garment industries in the world. There are also calls to replicate the Bangladesh Accord in other garment sourcing hubs.

However, at the time of writing this article, there has been talk of a "New Accord". Only a couple of fashion brands have expressed public support for this "New Accord" and most are in the "wait and see what happens" camp; it's the unions and NGOs who are flagging their favour for the "New Accord". And things are moving fast.

First of all, we saw NGOs warning that much of the Accord's work would be undone if the RSC becomes the sole authority of factory safety in Bangladesh. The NGOs' argument is that the Accord is the only "credible" workplace safety initiative in the global garment industry. They also claim that a local body like the RSC will not have the "teeth" of the Bangladesh Accord and may be subject to too much political interference from factory owners and the government.

Just in the middle of this month, global unions gave notice to withdraw their involvement with the RSC from June 1. This is probably the last throw of the dice by unions in their attempt to get the work of the Bangladesh Accord extended beyond the end of May.

The unions claim that, by withdrawing their support, they will remove the credibility of the RSC as an effective workplace safety body.

In effect, they are trying to force the hands of brands and retailers—saying to them, "come to the table and help us get a new Accord off the ground."

On the other hand, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA) has argued that the RSC, along with a government body called Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), are perfectly capable of ensuring the highest standard of monitoring, inspections and certifications of health, safety and securities of the workers of Bangladesh RMG factories.

So, is there a way forward? The original Accord was established with

Any agreement for factory safety needs consensus. If an agreement cannot be reached for a new Accord—if all parties simply do not want one and it is only unions and NGOs pushing for it—then we have to respect that position. Broad support for a new Accord is tepid at best.

What is paramount is that we all should work for ensuring safety in the industry. I will support any safety structure we choose to go with and it looks like the RSC is the way we will go. I believe safety is not a matter of imposition, it's more of having a culture and acceptance.

The way external forces—the Accord and Alliance—supported us to transform the



The current safety arrangement under which our garment factories are being inspected is the RMG Sustainability Council.

PHOTO: STAR

the backing of a few "anchor" brands and once they had joined, others followed. It's looking like there is simply not enough will on the part of brands now to extend the Accord anymore. The reasons for this are many and varied although the global pandemic has surely played its part.

The factory owners are also happy to place their faith in the new body, the RSC. The main reason behind that is that they want a level-playing field with their competitors in India, Pakistan and elsewhere.

I have sympathy for both sides of the debate and there are no easy solutions here. For my own part I would say a safety body that is independent to monitor and support factory safety and improvements should be mandatory in Bangladesh.

industry, the same way they should support us to build national capacity. In fact, nothing has happened in between so that the initiative like RSC can be thrown away. In fact, there is equal representation of brands, trade unions and manufacturers on the board of directors of the RSC. This RSC also adopted all Accord standards, compliance, protocols and articles. So, everyone should give the RSC a minimum of three years to prove its mettle. The RSC, on the other hand, should maintain maximum transparency and accountability. Periodic information about the progress of RSC's work made available for the public can help build the required trust in it.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE) and Bangladesh Denim Expo.

**গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার**  
 বাংলাদেশ পুলিশ  
 অধিনায়কের কার্যালয়  
 র‍্যাপিড এ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-১১  
 আদমজীনগর, নারায়ণগঞ্জ

**উন্মুক্ত দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি (ওটিএম)/২০২১-২০২২/০১**

স্মারক নং-র‍্যাব-১১/৯৮-২৯/ওটিএম/হিসাব/ তারিখ: ১৩ জ্যৈষ্ঠ ১৪২৮  
 ২৭ মে ২০২১

১। এতদ্বারা ২০২১-২০২২ অর্থ বৎসরে নারায়ণগঞ্জ, আদমজীনগর র‍্যাব-১১ এর সরবরাহ কাজের জন্য পৃথক পৃথক টিকাদার নিয়োগের উদ্দেশ্যে গণপূর্ত, এলজিইডি, অন্যান্য সরকারি ও স্বায়ত্তশাসিত সংস্থায় তালিকাভুক্ত প্রকৃত বাংলাদেশী টিকাদারদের নিকট হতে "The Public Procurement Regulations 2008" বিধি অনুযায়ী সীলমোহরযুক্ত দরপত্র আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে:

ক্রমিক নং	কাজের নাম	সিউলির মূল্য (অফেরতযোগ্য)	দরপত্রের সাথে আবেদনমূল্য (ফেরতযোগ্য)	কাজের সময়সীমা
ক।	স্বাস্থ্য বিধান সামগ্রী	৫০০.০০	১৫,০০০.০০	(০১ জুলাই ২০২১ হতে ৩০ জুন ২০২২ পর্যন্ত)
খ।	অন্যান্য মনিহারি	৭৫০.০০	৫০,০০০.০০	
গ।	ব্যবহার্য দ্রব্যাদি	৭৫০.০০	৫০,০০০.০০	
ঘ।	চিকিৎসা ও শল্য চিকিৎসা সরঞ্জামাদি	৫০০.০০	১৫,০০০.০০	
ঙ।	যানবাহনের কাঁচামাল এবং যুট্টা যন্ত্রাংশ	৭৫০.০০	৫০,০০০.০০	
চ।	যানবাহন মেরামত ও সংরক্ষণ	৫০০.০০	১০,০০০.০০	
ছ।	যন্ত্রপাতি ও অন্যান্য সরঞ্জামাদি	৫০০.০০	৭,৫০০.০০	
জ।	ইউনিফর্ম (পোশাক সেলাই)	৫০০.০০	৫,০০০.০০	
ঝ।	আপায়ন ব্যয় (স্কেনা খাবার)	৫০০.০০	৫,০০০.০০	

১।	মন্ত্রণালয়/বিভাগ	স্বরাষ্ট্র মন্ত্রণালয়।
২।	দরপত্র দলিল বিক্রির কার্যালয়ের নাম ও ঠিকানা	স্বরাষ্ট্র মন্ত্রণালয়, র‍্যাপিড এ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-১১, আদমজীনগর, নারায়ণগঞ্জ। পত্রিকায় বিজ্ঞপ্তি প্রকাশের তারিখ হতে আর্থিক কার্যদিবসে আত্রাই দরপত্রাতাগণ উন্মুক্তভাবে কার্যালয় হতে দরপত্র দলিল ক্রয় করতে পারবেন।
৩।	দরপত্র গ্রহণের কার্যালয়ের নাম ও ঠিকানা	র‍্যাপিড এ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-১১, আদমজীনগর, নারায়ণগঞ্জ।
৪।	দরপত্র খোলার কার্যালয়ের নাম ও ঠিকানা	র‍্যাপিড এ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-১১, আদমজীনগর, নারায়ণগঞ্জ।
৫।	দরপত্র দলিল বিক্রির শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	২৩/০৬/২০২১ (১২০০ ঘটিকা) পর্যন্ত।
৬।	দরপত্র দাবিলের শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	২৪/০৬/২০২১ (১২০০ ঘটিকা) পর্যন্ত।
৭।	দরপত্র খোলার শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	২৪/০৬/২০২১ (১২৩০ ঘটিকা) দরপত্রদাতা/দরপত্রদাতার প্রতিনিধি উক্ত সময় উপস্থিত থাকতে পারবেন।
২।	দরপত্র মূল্যায়ন কমিটি কোন প্রকার কারণ দর্শানো ব্যতিরেকে যে কোন দরপত্র গ্রহণ বা সকল দরপত্র বাতিল করার অধিকার সংরক্ষণ করেন। দরপত্র তফসিল ক্রয় করার সময় পেপার কাটিং এবং নিম্নলিখিত সনদপত্র/সনদপত্রের সত্যায়িত কপি প্রদর্শন করতে হবেঃ	

ক। যে কোন তফসিলভুক্ত বাণিজ্যিক ব্যাংক হতে হালসনের আর্থিক স্বচ্ছলতা সনদপত্র।  
 খ। ব্যবসায়িক বৈধ ট্রেড লাইসেন্স (২০২০-২০২১) অর্থ বৎসরের।  
 গ। টিআইএন (TIN) নম্বর উল্লেখসহ হালসনের আয়কর পরিশোধের সনদপত্র।  
 ঘ। ভ্যাট নিবন্ধন সনদপত্র।  
 ঙ। বাংলাদেশী নাগরিকত্বের সনদপত্র।  
 চ। প্রতিনিধির ক্ষেত্রে মালিকের ক্ষমতা অর্পণপত্র সঙ্গে আনতে হবে।  
 ছ। ফার্মের অনুকূলে মালিকানা এক্সচেঞ্জ ডিফটেন্ডেন্স সনদপত্র।  
 জ। র‍্যাব, বিজিবি, পুলিশ ও অন্যান্য বাহিনীতে ৩ বৎসরের মধ্যে বিভিন্ন মালামাল সরবরাহের অভিজ্ঞতাসম্পন্ন সনদপত্র (যদি থাকে)।

তানজীর মাহমুদ পাশা, পিএসসি  
 লেঃ কর্বেল  
 পরিচালক  
 র‍্যাব-১১, আদমজীনগর, নারায়ণগঞ্জ  
 ফোনঃ ৭৬৯৪৯৩৩

জিডি-১০৮৮