

MPs blast health ministry's dereliction

It is high time for officials to be held accountable

IT was encouraging to see our dysfunctional parliament be enlivened for once with the type of challenging questions that ought to be asked in the great parliamentary hall. As this newspaper reported on Tuesday, during a parliamentary discussion on the supplementary budget for fiscal year 2020-21, opposition lawmakers heavily criticised the health ministry for its failure to curb corruption and ensure healthcare for people amid the Covid-19 pandemic. They also demanded increased budgetary allocation for the health sector and its proper utilisation.

Since the pandemic began, we have seen the health ministry perform disastrously. The sector has been plagued by one incident of corruption after another, including in the procurement of basic safety items such as masks and PPEs, the issuance of fake Covid certificates, private hospitals operating without proper licence, etc. Furthermore, it has been revealed how syndicates, in collusion with ministry officials, had been carrying out systemic corruption even at the height of the pandemic. In response, we have seen the authorities basically do nothing—a handful of officials were transferred, while others were similarly let off the hook with a slap on the wrist. And this is what has allowed corruption to flourish.

Instead of addressing the corruption, we have constantly been hearing top health officials make lofty promises and, time and again, failing to deliver on them. The MPs also criticised the government in this regard, particularly in reference to the procurement of vaccines and the mystery surrounding when they will arrive in Bangladesh and when a large proportion of the population can finally be vaccinated.

The poor budgetary allocation to the health sector was another item of discussion in the parliament. Amid the pandemic, India increased its allocation for the health sector by 137 percent in this year's budget, while in Bangladesh, it has been raised by only 12 percent. We understand that part of the reason for this is the woeful track record of the health ministry in properly utilising funds allocated to the health sector. But why isn't that being addressed? If officials in the health ministry are inept, then why aren't they replaced? Why isn't anyone being held accountable for all this incompetence?

For months we have been asking the same questions that were raised in parliament by the MPs, in these columns. But unfortunately, we are yet to get any satisfactory answers. We can only hope this prompts the authorities to react and take the matter seriously.

Our healthcare sector is in shambles and the responsibility for that comes solely down onto the shoulders of the corrupt health officials, and the authorities that have allowed them to continue with their corruption without taking any action. This can no longer be allowed. Transparency and accountability must be brought back to the health sector. Corruption must be rooted out, and the health sector must be made efficient enough for it to effectively absorb the entire budgetary allocation.

Recurring slum fires a cause of concern

Take substantive measures to prevent fire, plan proper rehabilitation of slum dwellers

INCIDENCES of fire in the slums of Dhaka have taken frighteningly endemic proportions. In the last six months, fires have engulfed several large slums in the city, creating greater suffering for already marginalised and distressed populations. In the latest incident, on June 7, more than 500 shanties in a large slum in Mohakhali were gutted. The authorities are still looking for the causes of fire. But need one spend so much time to look at the causes of fire, given the very hazardous environment the slum dwellers live in?

The growth of slums in Dhaka city, as in many other big cities, particularly of Asia, is a natural phenomenon, economically driven by the pull of the metropolis. One doesn't have to read volumes to discover the causes and consequences of shanty fires. It is, thus, surprising that our planners have spared little time to this very destabilising phenomenon. It is worth mentioning that, out of an estimated 20 million people living in Dhaka, more than a million live in the hundreds of slums dotted across the city. The official estimate, according to the LGRD minister's comment in 2019, is half that number. But that figure is already outdated by half a decade, since it is from 2014.

However, the difference in numbers notwithstanding, there is no substantive plan (nor is one on the anvil) that would address the problems of the slum dwellers in totality, and more importantly, help reduce the chances of disasters by eliminating their hazardous living conditions. Given the existing conditions of the slums, what is surprising is not that there are periodic incidences of fire, but that these do not occur more often.

We believe that the government should expand its interventions in slum areas. As a first step, these slums must be freed of rent-seekers and gang lords who hold the residents in bondage. A comprehensive plan to make the slums of Dhaka more resilient should be formulated. There are already several NGOs working in the slums to address and mitigate different problems. Their experiences must also be garnered into a cohesive action plan. Unless concrete steps are taken to prevent all kinds of hazards, including fire, and mitigate their consequences, the people of the slums will be consigned to suffer from them in perpetuity. There is also an urgent need to develop low cost housing for slum-dwellers. Does the government have any plans for these people, who are significant contributors to the economy and yet are forced to give up a huge portion of their income as rent for accommodation that is substandard and risky?

Tremors in Sylhet might hint at bigger earthquakes

Are we ready to deal with the fallout?



MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU

IN two days (May 29-30), six successive mild earthquakes shook Sylhet city and its adjacent areas, leaving people panicking and running out into the streets. The Bangladesh Meteorological Department confirmed that one of the tremors was of the magnitude of 4.1 on the Richter scale. On Monday, Sylhet was jolted by another mild earthquake. In the meantime, Sylhet City Corporation sealed off 24 vulnerable buildings for 10 days after the series of tremors caused a building to tilt. One must question why it took so long for this action—specialists from the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology had flagged 35 buildings as vulnerable to earthquakes almost six years ago.

Bangladesh has not experienced a major earthquake in over a century, since the 8.1 magnitude Great Indian Earthquake in 1897. At the time, 545 buildings collapsed in Sylhet district and a large number of people died, even though the population density and number of concrete structures were far less back then. However, an escalation in seismic activity has been observed recently. A magnitude 6 earthquake was felt on April 28 this year. Three earthquakes were felt in 2020—a magnitude 4.4 on November 3, 5.8 on June 22 and a magnitude 5.1 earthquake on June 21.

Experts say that in earthquake prone areas, earthquakes occur more after every 100 years, and Bangladesh is situated in a high risk zone for earthquakes. The observatory at BUET recorded 86 tremors over four magnitudes during January 2006 to May 2009. These minor tremors indicate the possibility of heavier quakes.

Dhaka is more vulnerable to earthquakes due to its geological location and human and economic exposure. According to the earthquake disaster risk index, Dhaka tops the list of the 20 most vulnerable cities in the world. According to a seismic zoning map from BUET, 43 percent of Bangladesh can be rated as high risk, 41 percent as moderate and 16 percent as low risk. The high risk group includes major population belts such as Chattogram, Dhaka, Rangpur, Bogura, Mymensingh, Cumilla, Rajshahi and Sylhet.

A study from the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme

(CDMP) suggested that some 72,316 buildings in the capital will be fully damaged and 53,166 others will be partially damaged in the case of a 7.5 magnitude earthquake, leading to an economic loss of about USD 1.1 billion from structural damage only. At least 10 major hospitals and 90 schools in the capital may be destroyed completely and another 241 hospitals and clinics may be partially damaged. Economic loss due to

Plan has been prepared for emergency response agencies, including the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD), Armed Forces Division, Department of Disaster Management and Cyclone Preparedness Programme. Finally, the Ministry of Housing and Public Works has been able to get approval for the National Building Code after five years of delays. Back in 2012, CDMP built a team of 62,000 urban volunteers to carry out immediate

There is also not enough engagement of NGOs and the private sector in response mechanisms. For example, debris management will be a big issue if an earthquake hits. The Rana Plaza collapse generated around 7,000 tons of debris. If we see an earthquake like that of 1897, about 300 million tons debris will be generated and the first task would be to clear the roads leading in and out of cities before any rescue drive could commence. However, despite the scale of these tasks, contingency plans are yet to be tested and standard operating procedures for agencies are yet to be developed. A specific authority and implementation plans are yet to be placed for acting building codes. The narrow and crowded road in the capital, such as in old Dhaka, would be a serious bar to future rescue operations.

So what can we do to ensure that we are ready to manage the worst case scenario, in the event of a disaster? First, a coordination platform should be in place, involving different government and non-government agencies. Additionally, extensive mass awareness programmes must take place on a regular basis and span all strata of society, including city dwellers, government officials, municipality officials, politicians, engineers, architects, designers, builders and medical people.

Secondly, the government must enforce proper implementation of the National Building Code. Experts have continuously pointed out the need for a proper implementation plan, as well as an authority nominated to oversee implementation of the building code. Initiatives should be taken to demolish old and high-risk buildings as a first step towards minimising casualties, followed by retrofitting to make vulnerable buildings more resilient.

Finally, capacity enhancement of emergency response agencies is a must in the areas of both skill and equipment. Coordination amongst the agencies should be the top priority. Disaster risk reduction measures should also be institutionalised at community and household levels. In this, both public and private sectors should be more involved. In the area of mass awareness, the systemic engagement of the media could play a vital role.

It should be said that we are not expecting a big tremor in our country any day now, but if it does strike, only the development of a culture of resilience can contribute to reducing the loss of lives and property.

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A major earthquake may cause massive destruction in the highly populated capital crammed with unplanned buildings, like that seen in this picture from Mohammadpur.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

damage of structures is likely to be USD 1.07 billion in the case of a magnitude 6 earthquake. It took 21 days to complete the search and rescue operation of the tragic Rana Plaza collapse. If a single building can take that long, what will happen if a moderate earthquake hits the city and the estimated damage occurs?

The government of Bangladesh has already taken a number of initiatives to minimise the potential damage of a sizeable earthquake. By analysing the seismic data, earthquake risk maps of Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh and Sylhet City Corporations were prepared, and similar mapping projects are underway for some of sub-regions. The Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) were updated in 2019, where responsibilities were defined according to relevant ministries, departments and agencies to reduce risks and damages. Ward level disaster management committees have also been introduced.

Additionally, the National Contingency

rescue operations if disaster occurs. This programme was then handed over to the FSCD. The government has also spent Tk 62 crore to procure search and rescue equipment, and has handed it over to concerned agencies.

However, although the government has taken several initiatives, this level of preparedness is not enough with respect to the country's vulnerabilities, which was demonstrated in the Rana Plaza rescue, as well as during recent fire incidents in Banani, Chawkbazar or Nimtoli. Our citizens have immense gaps in knowledge when it comes to how they should act during earthquakes. Out of 62,000 urban volunteers created by CDMP, only around 37,000 been trained by FSCD and the programme has all but disappeared. The volunteers who are trained are not on track, although there was a plan to develop an inventory and organise refreshers on a regular basis.

A lack of coordination among responding agencies is the biggest obstacle.

In-country international higher education: The right step forward

SHAMSUL HAQUE

IT'S no secret that the Bangladesh education system seems to be, slowly but surely, achieving quite notable standards. Let's take a look at the numbers, starting with primary and secondary education. In the past two decades, Bangladesh has witnessed significant gains for children in access to these levels of schooling. As per the latest government statistics, net primary school enrolment rate stands at 97.74 percent, with the Grade 5 completion pass rate at 97.59 percent. These figures are better than those of many developed countries.

One of the prime reasons for the government's drive to improve education standards to international benchmarks is the growing economy. In fact, Bangladesh is one of the world's fastest growing economies—NASDAQ placed Bangladesh at the third position globally in 2020. A surging economy with increasing foreign investments in modern new-age industries requires a continuous supply of manpower that has international standard higher education and work experience.

There are three principal routes to fulfil this requirement. First, open our borders to expatriates with the required international education and experience—this is a suboptimal strategy that comes at significant cost, with outflow of valuable foreign exchange in terms of salaries, and of course a reduction in job opportunities for the domestic population.

Two, empower our youth to join leading universities on foreign shores to gain the required skills. This is an unviable strategy. On one hand, foreign-educated youth might not come back, procuring gainful employment in foreign shores instead after completing their education. On the other hand, there is a debilitating economic impact on the country due to these local students paying the fees of their respective foreign universities and trying to cover living expenses abroad. In these cases, not only do families end up mortgaging and liquidating all their fixed assets for their children's foreign education, there is also an unceasing outflow of precious foreign exchange.

The numbers are striking. UNESCO reported in 2019 that close to 60,000 Bangladeshis annually went abroad for

higher education. The minimum duration of graduation abroad is three years—in other words, at any given moment, one can assume that there are 180,000 Bangladeshi students in foreign universities. The average annual cost of graduate education in any good institution in the West is around USD 20,000, with postgraduate studies costing more. Even quite conservatively, this means that for 180,000 Bangladeshi students, with each spending USD 20,000 on an average, our country remits USD 3.6 billion or Tk 305 billion every year. This is clearly unsustainable.

That leaves us with our third route—that is, to provide affordable international

they undertaken the same programme abroad.

As mentioned earlier, the advantages are immense. Not only are we talking about saving a large part of the annual USD 3.6 billion outflow (the local fees will be paid in Taka and the royalty payments to foreign universities are relatively minimal); it immediately achieves the dual objectives of empowering domestic institutions to match international curriculum, teaching and research standards as well as positioning the country as being at the forefront of progressively internalising global education.

There is a caveat however. Setting up

the Strategic Plan for Higher Education (SPHE) 2018-2030, which enshrines the tenets of the government's outlook. While launching the plan, PM Sheikh Hasina reiterated, "SPHE 2018-2030 is a step forward in embodying our determination to help evolve a human capital on par with the global standards [...] The Strategy will help make the higher education of Bangladesh globally competitive."

The strategy itself is defined very clearly: "Private universities play an important role in saving foreign currency as many students who would have taken admission in overseas universities enrol in these universities [...] As a policy option, the government may allow foreign universities to open their branches in Bangladesh. This will help meet the increasing demand for higher education in the country. In the age of globalisation, shutting out outstanding regional and global providers from our higher education scene would be counterproductive."

In light of the above, let's look at the government's recent decision to approve a Monash College study centre in the country. Monash College is owned by Monash University Australia, a university ranked in the top 60 globally. The Monash College curriculum being offered in Bangladesh is the same as the international Monash College curriculum. The exams and teaching in Bangladesh are under the oversight of the Australian campus and all teachers are apparently being trained and developed in partnership with Monash Australia's direct involvement. Setting up Monash College's study centre here seems to have the potential of not only allowing local students a chance to access global education in the country, but also opens up possibilities of improving local teachers' skills. The entry of Monash could lead to other international universities replicating their own models here in Bangladesh.

While there is still much distance to be covered for Bangladesh to become the international higher education destination of choice for students across the subcontinent, the government's decision to be a global player in international higher education is a step in the right direction.

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higher education opportunities in-country, which will ensure that our new-age industries get a steady stream of highly skilled domestic manpower possessing global standard education, resulting in appreciable increase in domestic employment rates as well as in per capita income. This can be done by encouraging government and private higher education institutions to initiate academic centres of leading international universities via memorandums of understanding, joint ventures, twinning and similar arrangements. This would offer the same foreign degree inside the country at relatively lower fees as compared to what the student would have had to pay had

of such international academic centres in the country will involve crores of Taka of investment, and in many cases, foreign investment. However, private companies and foreign investors can be encouraged through limited companies and not through non-profit trusts, as investors bring in equity investments against issued shareholding.

With foresight, the government seems to have already put in process a plan covering all the above aspects. The three pillars of the government's plan for internationalising higher education are the Private University Act (amended in 2010), the Foreign University (Branches and Study Center) Rules 2014 and most importantly,