

## No cheers for Palestine

*Undoing Netanyahu's legacy will take much more than his removal*

WE welcome with cautious optimism the news of the removal of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister after a new coalition government took power on June 13. Netanyahu, the chief architect of Palestinian misery over the last 12 years, has been replaced by his former chief of staff Naftali Bennett. This would have been an improbable scenario even a few weeks ago. It comes after a tumultuous coalition building exercise that saw wildly diverse and disparate parties uniting with little in common except for a desire to unseat Netanyahu. Under the new coalition deal, Bennett, a right-wing nationalist, will be replaced as prime minister by centrist Yair Lapid in 2023. For the Palestinians, and for those of us who want to see a peaceful resolution to the Palestine question, what's important is whether this can bring any meaningful change going forward.

Bennett's ascension to premiership may have been a political jaw-dropper but it was, as experts have pointed out, the best of three "highly imperfect alternatives"—the other two being the continued rule of Benjamin Netanyahu or an unprecedented fifth round of elections in two years. So, we finally got rid of the "crime minister" of Israel, but does it mean an end to his destructive legacy? A reality check, unfortunately, provides little assurance that things would be different now that he is gone.

First, the very makeup of this coalition of left-wing, centrist, right-wing and Arab parties—each with conflicting priorities—underscores its fragility. It may disintegrate at the slightest of provocations, if the history of such coalition governments in Israel is any indication. Coalition leaders have themselves said they would maintain a "status quo" on issues of religion and state and will, therefore, be unwilling to agree to any sweeping policy changes to resolve the Palestine crisis. Second, Netanyahu may have been unseated but he remains a force to reckon with. Even before Bennett was sworn in, he had warned that his Likud party, now in opposition, will try to "topple" the new government—and that may happen "sooner than people think". Third, there is no reason to think the new premier, who served as a defense minister under Netanyahu, will be much different from his former boss. His political career, like that of many in the new government, was moulded by Netanyahu. Bennett has also long advocated annexing parts of the occupied West Bank. The best-case scenario is that he will be handicapped by his lack of representation in the coalition (his party has only six of the parliament's 120 seats). But no concessions toward Palestine can be expected from him either.

What all this means is, the status quo on the question of Palestinian sovereignty will most likely remain in place. We may see a continuation of Israel's annexation and settler projects unfolding differently, with the US forever at its disposal, even if there are fewer bombings in the occupied territories. The departure of one man, however evil, will not bring any fruitful change unless Israel, as a state, changes its policy. The world must take decisive action to make this apartheid state comply with international laws and protect Palestine's right to self-rule with dignity.

## When protectors become killers

*Govt must ensure exemplary punishment of the killer ASI*

THE shocking murder of three people, including a child, by an Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) in Kushtia town highlights the need for our police department to cleanse itself of rogue elements who misuse their legal right to use and carry firearms, and wield their power for personal missions instead of carrying out their responsibilities of serving the public.

A report published in this daily yesterday mentions the Superintendent (SP) of Khulna district confirming that the culprit had gone to Kushtia carrying a firearm without any permission from a higher authority. It is a relief that this dangerous individual has been arrested and also, suspended from the police department. However, fear still looms large, since such incidents are not isolated. While the recent ruling by the High Court suspending six police personnel for the illegal and unconstitutional confinement of four minors is a step in the right direction, it points towards a wider culture of impunity for members of the police force, who are often able to abuse their power with little to no consequences.

The death of these three people at the hands of the ASI not only demonstrates the reckless behaviour of many members of the police, but the lack of structural accountability within these organisations as well. Over the years, we have learnt of many incidents of members of the law enforcement agencies resorting to lawlessness. Apart from the extreme cases such as murders, in many instances, the departmental action taken for many serious offences amounts to mere suspension and transfer. It is important that the police and other law enforcing departments undergo much needed reforms and have a system of accountability for the law enforcers who actually break the law instead of upholding it. There must be a sincere effort to root out corrupt elements within the police department. Relevant to the latest case of multiple murders committed by an ASI, the police department must be especially diligent about background checks, and psychological assessments of possible candidates have to be included before recruiting them, so that individuals prone to violence are not inducted into the force.

# Listen to the reform agenda, please!

FY21-22 HEALTH BUDGET



MUSHTAQUE CHOWDHURY

BA NGLA-DESH is under "strict lockdown" for the past many weeks but what is happening under its guise is anybody's guess. Barring educational institutions,

all else is open. It is a textbook case of implementation failure of a public policy. Public health experts have been calling for a "zoned" lockdown. Although this had fallen on deaf ears earlier, fortunately, some of the border towns are enforcing this now.

In Bangladesh, the Covid-19 vaccination campaign is all but stalled. This is an unfortunate situation which could have been avoided had the government listened to the experts. Voices suggesting hedging the bet by diversifying vaccine sources were loud enough. An important reason why the countries in the North are seeing light at the end of their long tunnel is the quick rollout of vaccines. India is also following the same route. About 15 percent of their target population is

and ensuring nobody is left behind. The government's commitment is high but in order to acquire the requisite vaccines for the nation, they have to be "diplomacy-smart".

The budget and subsequent discussions have brought to focus once again the issue of investments in health. The abysmal allocation (less than one percent of GDP) is a national embarrassment. The absorptive capacity of the Ministry

pragmatically included the following.

As a first step, the government should form, through an Act of Parliament, a high-level Permanent Health Commission to decide on the roadmap to achieving the vision for health. The government has committed, repeatedly in various global fora, to implement Universal Health Coverage (UHC). UHC, as we know, is achieved when everyone can access quality health services they need

faulty system where both the purchaser and provider roles are vested in the same place (MoHFW).

In all of this, management and governance are the keys. Much has been written about the poor management of our health systems, both public and private. We have examples galore on the poor delivery of health services by the public system. Absenteeism is the name of the game and at any given time, not even two-thirds of the relevant staff are found in facilities which require their presence 24/7. I don't think we have analysed it enough, let alone address the root cause of why such management and governance failures happen. The same goes with the private sector healthcare where the absence of regulatory enforcements has turned it into an uncontrollable monster.

Fourth, we must re-emphasise primary health care and community participation. Primary healthcare (PHC) has been a subject of systematic neglect. Only 25 percent of the budget is spent on PHC, which serves 70 percent of the population. The Community Clinics (and union and upazila level centres) have brought the infrastructure close to people, but not the care. There is a perennial shortage of healthcare workers, equipment and essential drugs, which make these less popular destinations for the ill. If the PHC system was strong, we wouldn't have seen so much Covid-related pressure on our city hospitals. Similarly, there is no alternative to community participation in healthcare and its management. Experts have repeatedly emphasised on the value of a "whole of society approach" in combating the Covid-19 crisis, but to no avail.

Finally, we need to revamp planning, research and data systems. Any reform requires appropriate, relevant and timely availability of data. A number of institutions in the public sector are vested with this role. Unfortunately, most of these are laden with problems due to lack of leadership, bureaucratic dilly-dallying, lack of capacity and inadequate financing. The government should review their role and activate them.

Initiating the above reforms will require commitment of the highest office. As has been shown in many countries, leaders who have initiated reforms such as UHC have become national heroes. Such reforms would be befitting as we celebrate Mujib Borsho and the nation's golden jubilee.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

*Primary healthcare (PHC) has been a subject of systematic neglect. Only 25 percent of the budget is spent on PHC, which serves 70 percent of the population.*

already vaccinated, compared to our three percent. The government's plan to vaccinate 25 lakh every month needs rethinking, as this would take five years to vaccinate the entire target population. We must aim to complete this job in a year's time. It is daunting, but doable. The country is endowed with an effective child vaccination programme which owes its success to the historic partnership between government and civil society organisations in the 1980s. This needs to happen again for timely implementation

of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) has always been a matter of concern. They cannot spend the money they have, so why bother asking for more? Bangladesh has done well in many of its health indicators in recent times. This is credited not only to the interventions by the government, but also by NGOs. Through collective effort, we have experienced notable improvements in social determinants of health including women's empowerment, education, poverty alleviation and food security. Reaching the next level, such as fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals, would require increased attention on many of the so-called "higher hanging fruits". Experiences from other countries going through such transitions call for a quantum change in the way health services are envisioned and delivered. In other words, this requires a total reform. Small changes here and there won't help.

Over the past year or so, the demand for a complete reform has been gaining momentum. There is a remarkable unison among the experts on the fragility of the Bangladesh health system and how it could be improved in a sustainable way. Concrete recommendations put forth on how to approach such reforms

without suffering financial hardship. The Commission should be headed by an individual of repute, who should have an excellent and holistic understanding of public health and the factors that affect and are affected by it. It is critical that s/he should have enough clout and status to implement reforms across various sectors (a cabinet minister status). Commissioners should be drawn from people with expertise in related areas including public health, medicine, economics, finance, business, gender, politics and civil society.

The second step is to make the health sector more accountable. An important measure towards this is to set up an independent National Health Security Office (NHSO). This body would be tasked to act as the financier of the health sector. This office would be the holder of the entire health budget and would disburse to different sub-sectors (such as hospitals, primary healthcare, related institutions) based on population needs and demands. The Office would monitor the expenditures through strict regimes of internal audits and monitoring. An autonomous Office, headed by an individual with the rank of a senior secretary, would do away with the current

# Tidal river management: Indigenous technology for saving coastal ecosystems

TASLIMA AKTER SHIKHA and MD. EKTEKHARUL ISLAM

THE Southwestern coastal region of Bangladesh has been marked as a critical disaster hotspot. This region includes four districts—Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Jessore—which have high concentrations of rivers and canals, forming a dynamic coastal ecosystem. The coastal ecological system is changing more rapidly than before due to different cross-cutting social, political and natural factors. Prolonged and recurring water-logging due to inappropriate and poorly-managed engineering interventions, semi-intensive aquaculture, and diversion

In the coastal areas of Bangladesh, 139 polders have been constructed since 1960 to control the unstable environment and support agricultural growth. Such large-scale intervention initially resulted in increased agricultural yield until the 1980s. However, the delta floodplain got disconnected from the dense river channel network, and the siltation rate accelerated in the river beds, culminating in the emergence of a water-logging problem. Water-logging causes extreme economic, social and cultural damage to these areas. Since all of the affected districts are majorly agriculture-dependent, water-logging will more adversely affect farmers' income and daily labour. Most of the

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PHOTO: ZAHID AMIN

of river flow in the upstream have all dramatically altered human livelihoods. On top of that, climate change effects have exacerbated the crisis in recent years.

This region is a concrete example of how multifaceted natural, political and social factors create a complex socio-ecological system. The southwest of Bangladesh is part of the greater Ganges floodplain, an extraordinarily complex and sensitive ecosystem. This ecosystem relies on a delicate balance between water flows from two directions: downward flow from the source river and drainage tributaries, and upward flows of sediment-laden estuarine rivers from the Bay of Bengal (that causes riverbed siltation). Riverbed siltation and brackish water effect due to sea-level rise and high tide have led to prolonged and recurring water-logging in southwest Bangladesh in the last two to three decades.

dwellers of this region depend on shrimp farming, weaving, poultry, cultivating lands to produce paddy, lentils, and seasonal crops for their living.

From the early 1980s, local people started cutting dykes based on a practice from the past built on local knowledge to address the worsening impacts. After years of modelling and systematic experiments, a large body of experts, researchers and institutions now support the community approach called "tidal river management" (TRM). TRM is an environment-friendly, cost-effective, technically feasible, participatory and highly socially acceptable method that provides a unique solution to the water-logging problem. TRM has been implemented in Salta, Betna, Kapothakkha and Hari-Mukteshwari rivers as an indigenous solution for river management. It has had an extended effect on enhancing river

navigation and creating better sediment management.

Tidal River Management is considered the most effective method to save rivers and the ecosystem. To put it simply, TRM controls the sediment of the rivers as high tide brings muddy water flow with a dense concentration of sediment. Local people cut the embankment to a certain point where the tidal water can get into the floodplain, deposit a part of the sediment into the floodplain, and go back to the ocean. Over time, the disposition of residue raises the land level and enriches the soil. Hence, the process does not let the sediment settle on the river bed and so the depth of the river increases and makes the river accessible.

According to research and community consultation, TRM can be scaled up and replicated on river basins throughout the southwest coastal region, making it the most effective method to increase cultivable lands, mitigate water-logging crises, and increase rivers' navigability. This sediment management technique has been practiced for years as an indigenous solution by the locals, as they have discovered it to be the best method of climate change adaptation to protect the region from sea level rise. According to a very recent study based on sophisticated modelling techniques, 106 beels in the coastal area are suitable for use in TRM. The same research suggests that TRM can reduce flood susceptible areas by 35 percent in suitable beels and enhance agricultural production in the long term. As sedimentation is a necessary coastal ecological process, TRM will also potentially contribute to land reclamation.

Arguably, Tidal River Management also comes with a few challenges. First, planners and engineers often neglect this system as it is an entirely indigenous

invention. Second, the implementation of TRM requires a large volume of land that local people do not want to give up for several reasons. Land owned by the government (Khas land) often remains under the control of influential local people as well, and they have no incentives for giving up that land. Third, many people are dependent on the land for agricultural production, and they have limited capacity to embrace a new livelihood method for survival at the advent of land acquisition. So arises the need for timely and appropriate compensation for locals, which is a critical issue in the TRM implementation process.

Fourth, TRM requires a great deal of synchronisation between stakeholders for successful implementation and desired outcomes, including local government, resource management agencies, the community and non-governmental organisations. For instance, in Khukhsia beel, an unplanned implementation of TRM, without sufficient cooperation between stakeholders and government agencies, resulted in several disruptions during operation, and the water-logging problem remained. Last but not least, to bring holistic change in coastal governance, relevant stakeholders must accept the value of local knowledge. In the Bangladeshi context, engineers, government representatives and bureaucrats are deemed the "social supreme class" and their inputs dictate the decision-making process at the grassroots level.

For a healthy coastal ecosystem in the southwest of Bangladesh, a scientific understanding of sediment and fluid dynamics needs to be adequately developed. There is a higher degree of consensus that proper sedimentation management by keeping the canals and creeks connected to the rivers will end the water-logging crisis in the coastal region. In this regard, indigenous practices by local people must be utilised for a more appropriate solution to the water-logging problem. We must also reiterate the need for political goodwill for adaptive ecosystem management by ensuring participatory governance. Uses of Tidal River Management (TRM) should be considered and given more emphasis for facing the aforementioned challenges.

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