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Lockdown in the border districts

Bolting the door after the horse has bolted

THE spike in infection rates in the border districts, and the mortality rate as a consequence, are not entirely unexpected. In spite of the need to have a strict lockdown immediately from the end of May, as suggested by the Epidemiology and Public Health Committee of DGHS in the seven districts where the Delta variant (commonly known as the Indian variant) of coronavirus started spreading in the communities, the lockdown was delayed. We believe that the suggestion should have come sooner than that. But even after it was made, it was not, unfortunately, implemented on time.

In fact, since the beginning of this year, we have used these columns to warn of the dire consequences of a second wave of Covid-19, and later of the risks posed by the Delta variant and its likely impact on the country, particularly in the border districts. We had also suggested that the government should not stand on protocols and bureaucratic paperwork and procedures, but implement lockdowns in the border districts straightaway through executive order, and that the decision to effect lockdown should not be left entirely to the district administrations alone.

The cabinet decision to enforce a lockdown, taken on May 31, was deferred because the seven border districts also happen to be the major mango growing districts and it is harvesting season. Again, economic considerations have trumped health security, and this exposes the administration's ambivalence on the matter. We wonder why a cabinet decision was not implemented immediately, and whose decision it was to defer implementation of the lockdown decision. Regrettably, compared to the previous week, the number of new cases has risen by 55.16 percent and deaths by 46.30 percent in the seven days until Saturday. This could have been avoided.

Unfortunately, the lockdown has come at a time when the seven districts are saturated with the virus. However, this is no longer a matter that affects the seven districts only. The infection has also been transmitted inland from the borders, as statistics suggest. Saturday recorded 67 deaths—the highest since May 2—while the positivity rate rose to 18.02 percent, which was only 7.91 percent on May 29. The number of high-risk districts, i.e., where positivity rate is more than 10 percent, rose to 54 on Saturday from 36 on June 3.

What we are seeing is disjointed action, lack of specific policy, confusion, and a reactive rather than proactive response. What is needed is a strict lockdown (while making sure people have access to food and basic services, such as healthcare), since what we are witnessing now are cases of fast-spreading community transmission. So far, most of the lockdowns are so in name only—it is business as usual in most areas except in the education sector. We must recognise that the current Covid-19 is serious and we cannot treat it with levity.

Govt's road accident taskforce still ruminating

When will directives to make roads safer be implemented?

ACCORDING to a DS report published yesterday, in October 2019, a taskforce headed by the Home Minister himself was created to implement the 111-point directive that was, in turn, prepared by a 16-member team headed by a former shipping minister. Since then, the taskforce sat two times, most recently in December 2019, to decide how to implement these directives. However, both meetings have proved to be futile, which is most evident in the ever-increasing number of road crashes and deaths and injuries caused by them. Now, the taskforce is going to sit for the third time.

In 2020, a total of 4,996 people died and 5,085 others were injured due to road accidents. According to the Road Safety Foundation, in January 2021 alone, 484 people died and 673 people were injured in 427 road crashes, which is 25.58 percent higher than the same month in the previous year. All the initiatives taken by the government so far to curb road crashes, including observing several police weeks, laying out a 17-point directive and enacting the Road Transport Act in 2018 have resulted in nothing. According to data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), there are 31 lakh unfit vehicles on our roads, and 77 percent of the drivers of these vehicles don't have any driving licenses.

In the second meeting of the aforementioned taskforce, its members decided that drivers, conductors and helpers of public transport will be given appointment letters. However, both transport owners' and transport workers' groups have not implemented this directive yet. While the general secretary of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation said that they sent letters to the owners' association to implement this directive, the secretary general of the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association blamed Covid-19 as the roadblock in implementing these directives. It seems that shifting blame from one side to the other has become the norm of these transport sector bodies, while road accidents continue unabated.

As the taskforce sits to decide how to fix the problem of road accidents for the third time, we fervently hope that on this occasion, some clear directives will be adopted and implemented. The taskforce must work as an independent body that can apply the 111 recommendations (given by the 16 member team last year) and not be beholden to any other body. Also, this taskforce has to keep both the owners' association and the workers' federation in regular check and take immediate measures to bring these two private bodies to book for any irregularities. We sincerely hope that the taskforce will act as a powerful watchdog for our transport sector so that it can enforce all the directives that will make our roads safer and hold accountable those who are recklessly endangering lives.

Accountability in utilising resources is crucial for higher revenue mobilisation

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE unreal target for revenue mobilisation has made the target numbers provided in the national budget unreliable and less authentic. For several years, the revenue targets are set so high

that they remain beyond the capacity of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to achieve, given current institutional and structural circumstances. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the task has become much more challenging, as economic activities have dampened and incomes of individuals and businesses have eroded. Since revenue income is a major source of domestic resource mobilisation, which is used to finance budgetary expenditures, lower resources lead to the risk of reduced budget implementation. The other sources of income are borrowing from the banking system, sale of national savings certificates, and foreign loans and assistance, which are used for financing the budget deficit. In the recently announced budget for fiscal year (FY) 2021-22, the budget deficit is set at 6.2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In the latest budget, revenue income that includes both tax and non-tax revenues is set to be Tk 389,000 crore,

outgoing fiscal year. Therefore, to achieve the targeted revenue in the upcoming fiscal year, revenue mobilisation will have to increase by 30.5 percent. In view of the ongoing pandemic and subdued economic activities, this is an unachievable target. Also, in Bangladesh, resource mobilisation efforts have been lower than its targets for decades. One does not expect any radical changes in FY2021-22 either.

With revenue mobilisation targets in the current fiscal year remaining unfulfilled, the revenue-GDP ratio will be 9.9 percent, which is lower than the targeted 11.4 percent in the revised budget of FY2020-21. For a growing economy, low revenue collection obstructs the fulfilment of the objectives set in its short term activities, and medium and long term plans. Adequate domestic resources create fiscal space for the country to prioritise its spending in line with the policy priorities and political commitments of the government. At the current level of domestic resource mobilisation, implementation of those plans will be very tough.

On the other hand, as Bangladesh is going to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, higher domestic resource mobilisation will become all the more important. Traditionally, a part of the budget is financed by foreign resources. However, foreign aid and concessional loans will not be available during the post-graduation period. Unless domestic

through the use of information technology has resulted in significant improvements in other countries, as technology could effectively capture earnings and expenditures of people. Technology can also help establish an easy tax collection procedure and increased compliance. Along with the full automation of the NBR, the need for more human resources and higher skills is also crucial to improving

going to be implemented within a year is not comprehensible.

In addition to technology and skilled human resources, the motivation of taxpayers is also important. People would feel motivated to pay taxes, and contribute towards an effective resource mobilisation effort, only if the utilisation of resources is done efficiently and without corruption. If the taxpayers are not convinced about the quality of



Illustration by Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo

The Finance Minister expects that the estimated revenue target of FY2021-22 will be possible through effective tax policy, efficient tax management and participation of all stakeholders, including businesspersons. How these are going to be implemented within a year is not comprehensible.

which is 11.3 percent of GDP. This is 10.7 percent higher than the revised budget of the outgoing FY2020-21, which was Tk 351,532 crore. In the latest budget, the revenue target has been set at Tk 330,000 crore. However, given the achievement record in tax collection during the 11 months of the outgoing fiscal year, the target for FY2021-22 is far too high and not likely to be achieved once again. Tax collection during July to May of FY2020-21 was short of Tk 44,361 crore compared to its revised target. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) projected that revenue collection by the NBR will finally add up to Tk 298,000 crore in the

resource mobilisation efforts are enhanced substantially, the country will have to resort to expensive foreign loans at the market rate to meet the resource gap, which could increase the debt burden.

It is ironic that in a country of about 165 million people, the number of taxpayers is only 2.5 million people, according to the latest budget announcements. The tax net is skewed, with a large number of eligible people remaining outside of it. Tax evasion and avoidance are problems across various income groups and economic sectors. Implementation of e-governance

efficiency, especially given the size of the population and the prospective number of taxpayers in Bangladesh. Besides, the tax administration has to encourage people through a hassle-free tax system that will respect taxpayers and cooperate with them. There is a fear among the new and small taxpayers that once they are recorded, they will be targets of harassment.

In his budget speech, the Finance Minister referred to a number of reform measures on direct tax, value added tax and customs development. For example, the budget speech mentioned measures such as the upgrading of the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), consolidation and integration of iBAS++ (Integrated Budget and Accounting System), electronic return filing, electronic tax deducted at source (e-TDS), automated customs risk management and introduction of an authorised economic operator system. However, the reform measures have been on the table for years. These measures should have been completed and operationalised long ago. The Finance Minister expects that the estimated revenue target of FY2021-22 will be possible through effective tax policy, efficient tax management and participation of all stakeholders, including businesspersons. How these are

services they get from the government in return, and if they are not confident of the proper utilisation of their taxes, they will not feel motivated to pay taxes. Therefore, transparency and accountability of resource allocation for development are also pre-conditions for higher domestic resource mobilisation. How much of this resource is used for employment generation, poverty reduction and social safety are key factors for successful resource mobilisation efforts. Rationalisation of tax rates through a progressive tax system and incentives to all taxpayers should be in place to ensure tax justice.

Ideally, revenue mobilisation efforts are also a way to create a sense of participation among people in the development process of the country. However, many do not feel such a sense of participation in the current development mechanism, despite paying regular taxes. If the common taxpayers do not have the opportunity to create pressure on public representatives to be accountable and transparent on the use of their hard-earned money, the utilisation of these resources will not be beneficial to all.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Why do bureaucrats always get the blame?

DINA S

CRITICISING civil bureaucrats has become a trend for journalists. While it is true that bureaucracy is associated with procrastination, it is important to understand the role of civil servants under the Constitution of Bangladesh. Politicians, mostly ministers, formulate policies and civil servants implement these policies. This is their defined role by the Constitution. Accordingly, the job of members of parliament is to make laws. Nowhere in the job description of MPs is distributing relief mentioned, as suggested by the reporter who wrote "The republic of bureaucrats!" in *The Daily Star*. MPs got involved in this task because there is money in it—this is an open secret. Nowadays, they are even becoming chairpersons of school committees for the same reason. It is not an MP's job to worry about the appointment of teachers at a primary school. They are public servants paid with taxpayers' money to do their job.

The reason the Prime Minister asked secretaries to take over relief distribution from MPs was because of widespread corruption in it. This was reported by all newspapers. Once the secretaries took over, the relief distribution was efficient, and the poor received what was meant for them. But no newspaper reported this. So, something to think about—journalists, who are supposed to be the "conscience" of society, are taking the side of corrupt politicians who have no problem stealing food and cash from the poor during a pandemic. Instead, they are criticising public servants who performed their job well. This is not to say that public servants are more honest than politicians. Such comparisons can be murky in a country like ours. Who is honest? Who is efficient? You be the judge.

There is no reason the top jobs of the Public Service Commission (PSC) should go to academics. The reporter argues that these jobs should go to experts. He doesn't seem to understand that academics are not experts in public service, public servants are! For inexplicable reasons, there has been

a culture of appointing university professors in these roles. So, professors now feel entitled to these. They teach theories about public service, but they have actually never implemented these theories. That is why professors have failed so miserably as administrators (vice chancellors) of public universities. It may be news to you that in India, bureaucrats are often appointed vice chancellors of central universities such as Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi University, Aligarh Muslim University, Banaras Hindu University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and so on. It may be even more surprising that the

In previous election commissions also, brigadiers were appointed members. Army officers are appointed as director generals of medical colleges and other government bodies. Has the efficiency of these institutions increased? News reports show that they have not. Under the constitution, the role of the army is to defend the country from external enemies. In special circumstances like natural disasters or other emergencies, they will aid the civil government.

It may be popular to blame bureaucrats. The truth is that a country needs an efficient bureaucracy to run

ours.

Are public servants corrupt and inefficient? You bet. Then again, who is not in Bangladesh? A skilled and efficient bureaucracy is a fundamental pillar of democracy. There are many examples of bureaucrats, mostly former CSPs (Civil Service of Pakistan) who have done excellent jobs in different roles. For example, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who was President of Bangladesh from 1996 to 2001, was a CSP officer. He started his career as a CSP officer in 1954 and then was transferred to the Judicial Branch, where he ultimately became the Chief Justice of Bangladesh. Justice Shahabuddin was one of the finest and most effective presidents in the history of Bangladesh. Bureaucrats like Dr Akbar Ali Khan, Dr ATM Shamsul Huda and Khaled Shams (all former CSPs) have done way more for the nation than most academics.

I have heard some people say, what's the big deal? Bureaucrats are paid to do their job. That's true. But aren't teachers paid to teach? Aren't journalists paid to do whatever it is that they do? Is there anyone who does their job for free?

Military rulers undermine and weaken civil administrations to pursue their own interests. Sometimes, they give prized jobs to professors that should not go to them. But that does not mean that they are the ones who are more suitable in these roles. Like the army should mind its own business, professors should pay attention to teaching, the job they are paid to do. God knows the state of education in our universities is not good. The job of the media should be to look after public interests. When journalists and the media take the side of corrupt politicians and academics and stay silent about the increasing role of the army in the administration, something is seriously wrong.

In conclusion, however, I must say that the current state of the civil administration is dismal. Politicisation, nepotism, widespread corruption and inefficiency are ruining the bureaucracy that is supposed to be a vanguard of democracy. Then again, the state of higher education is even worse.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

central Indian government feels quite comfortable appointing joint secretaries in these roles. Public servants have historically performed efficiently in these roles. Indian journalists do not question why bureaucrats were appointed there instead of professors. Do you think professors are doing a good job as vice chancellors of public universities here?

The reporter also asks why bureaucrats are appointed as election commissioners or CECs. Let me ask another question. Why are army officers being appointed as election commissioners? In the current election commission, there is a brigadier.

the affairs of the government and serve the public. Politicians should formulate policies. Professors should teach. Civil servants should govern. That is how it should be in a democracy. In India, the military has never been able to take over civilian governments. Have you ever thought why this is so? It is said that the Indian Administrative Service is the steel frame of Indian democracy. India is not a perfect example, especially under PM Modi. But even its staunch critics like myself would admit that it is a functioning democracy, which remains a distant dream to many nations, including