

Oxygen supply disruptions kill patients in Satkhira

Authorities must investigate the failures that caused this to prevent any recurrence

WE are shocked and saddened to hear of the deaths of at least five Covid-19 patients in Satkhira Medical College Hospital after disruptions to their oxygen supply on Wednesday night. According to hospital employees, there was a dip in gas pressure in the evening since the vendor had failed to deliver the oxygen on time. An official of the vendor has affirmed that the delay was caused at the Benapole Port, through which the company imports oxygen to Bangladesh from India. We are yet to receive any information on what caused this delay.

A report in this daily suggests that on average, the hospital needs around 6,000 litres a day. Hospital officials said they have a 20,000-litre oxygen reservoir, but they informed the supplier on Wednesday morning when the reserve came down to 2,400 litres. Why did they not make attempts to refill the reservoir before it became so critically low? Given the current situation in Satkhira, where the positivity rate was still as high as 42 percent on June 30, why were prior arrangements not made to ensure that the hospital has a continuous and adequate store of oxygen supply?

The civil surgeon of Satkhira has suggested that the dip in oxygen cannot be the reason behind the deaths of patients since necessary oxygen cylinders were added to ensure uninterrupted supply and the pressure went down for only 15-20 minutes. However, a patient's son told *The Daily Star* that his father died from breathing difficulties soon after the supply was interrupted. These families have suffered a devastating loss, and their concerns should not be dismissed. The death of even one person from a lack of oxygen supply should be treated with the utmost gravity.

Unfortunately, in the face of burgeoning Covid-19 infections, such incidents are becoming increasingly common. The news of the Satkhira incident was quickly followed by another report, on Friday, saying that seven patients had died of coronavirus within 13 hours at Bogura's specialised Government Mohammad Ali Hospital. Relatives have complained that patients died due to a lack of adequate oxygen support.

We urge the authorities to conduct immediate investigations into the causes of deaths of these patients and ensure that such failures do not occur again. It is clear that we are now smack in the middle of the second wave of Covid-19 in Bangladesh. Within the past week or so, we have seen the highest number of daily Covid-19 cases in the country, as well as the highest daily death toll. Given the severity of the situation, smooth operations at hospitals across the country, especially in the districts most affected, should be the government's number one priority. Now is the time for the authorities to put all their weight behind our overburdened health sector and ensure that the hospitals are able to operate at capacity and beyond.

Woman wrongfully jailed for 24 years!

Accused uncle, policeman must be punished and the legal system must be freed of such manipulations

WE are relieved to know that Piara Akhter, a woman who languished in jail for 24 years despite having committed no crimes, has been finally released from jail. She was in fifth grade when she was arrested and convicted for a crime she didn't commit. Trying a child before a regular court instead of a juvenile court is illegal, as is coercing a child into making a false confession. Falsifying her birth date in the case documents was the last nail in the coffin. All of these crimes have been committed by officials involved in Piara's case.

According to our report, she was only 12 years old when a policeman came to her school one day, took her to the police station, and made her give a false statement saying that she had killed her cousin. At the time of the incident, Piara had no guardians to speak on her behalf as her father was dead and her brother was working in Dhaka. Next thing she knew, she was behind the bars with convicted criminals.

This incident highlights how easily both the legal system and the law enforcement process can be manipulated in our country, leading to such a harrowing tale of wrongful conviction. The main culprit in Piara's case was her uncle, who allegedly had a land dispute with her family. Blaming Piara for murdering his child and taking away over two decades of her life, with the assistance of a corrupt policeman, was the consequence of a personal vendetta.

We urge the authorities to ensure that the accused uncle and policeman are tried soon and given proper punishment for their crimes. Besides, the legal system and the police department have to find out how laws are so easily defied in our country and remove the legal loopholes so that no one else has to go through the trauma that Piara has. We laud the local administration's decision to provide Piara with a house to live in and a job to earn her livelihood. But these things won't bring significant change in her plight if society at large doesn't help her overcome the trauma and hopelessness she suffered all these years. We hope Piara will get all the support she needs to restart her life with dignity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Unity can save us

The crisis we have been facing for nearly one year and a half due to the coronavirus has been really unprecedented—a situation greatly affecting our financial and mental health conditions. However, to prevent a further cataclysmic impact of the virus, what we all—both the authorities and civilians—badly need is to act wisely and in unison instead of blaming each other. Otherwise, we may have to experience the same harsh conditions that India has been facing for some time now.

Md. Rasel Sheikh, Uttara

100 YEARS OF DHAKA UNIVERSITY

Mother of All Bangladeshi Universities



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BLOWN' IN THE WIND

THE institution that one attends for education is often attributed with the honorific title *alma mater*, literally meaning "generous or nourishing mother". The phrase "*alma mater studiorum*" (nourishing mother of studies) was first used in 1088 as a motto by the oldest university in the Western world, the University of Bologna. *Alma* (nourishing/nurturing), a traditional adjective used for several goddesses in classical mythology, was appropriated to symbolise the Virgin Mary in Christianity by the Catholic monks responsible for the creation of the university. Universities ever since have been considered mother figures, and the "one who is nourished"—i.e. a graduate—is, therefore, referred to as an *alumnus*.

The University of Dhaka (DU), now celebrating its centenary, is not my *alma mater*. I joined there as a faculty member in 2011, after serving 17 years at another public university, Jahangirnagar University (JU). At the time of my recruitment, the then vice-chancellor told me that I was the first non-DU student to be recruited by the English department in its 90 years' history. While there are reasons to be proud of such an appointment, it is indicative of a very exclusive and insular nature of the university, which is far from ideal. At a personal level, I had every reason to be proud though, especially because almost all my teachers at JU were from the university I joined. The *alma mater* of those who instilled in me the passion for higher education is DU. In that sense, DU is my grand *alma mater*. To a great extent, DU remains a mother institution for all other institutions in Bangladesh. Behind the exponential growth in the number of universities, the signature of the oldest university is paramount. That's the historical prerogative of being the first university in the country.

The mother metaphor is further apt for Dhaka University as it has been the site that nourished the birth of a nation-state. The glorious role of student protest, intellectual support in creating national consciousness, and the ultimate

sacrifice made by the teachers and students alike made Dhaka University the epicentre of the tremor that ushered in the independence of the country in 1971. A similar upsurge in the 90s ended the autocratic regime that was choking our national freedom. There has been a recent tendency, however, to divide the history of the university in pre- and post-independence categories. The rumination over the first 50 years of the university inevitably leads to the slighting

exile. The lack of ownership is a worrying sign—and that, for me, is the greatest weakness of the university.

All the great universities of the world thrive because of their strong alumni support network. They bring in their industry support to enhance research collaboration, funding and internship opportunities for students, and scholarly inputs for the growth of a university. I am sure this is being done in many informal channels through departmental initiatives

surrounding the past of a university through citing the names of some celebrity professors who were part of its early days, the demand now is to make sure that the university redefines its purpose. I remember the prime minister in her inaugural speech marking the hundred-year celebrations of Dhaka University urged the authorities to come up with a strategic vision. I know that a dedicated team is working on that strategy paper. There is a national accreditation council that has drafted a national quality framework under the umbrella of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

These strategies are set to be adopted to benchmark the universities against global standards. The challenge, however, is to ensure a local and indigenous flavour of education. The models agreed upon are very West-leaning, keeping the international parameters prescribed by overseas consultants. The uniqueness of Dhaka University must be highlighted by the stakeholders concerned. These include present and former students, faculty members, administration, and employers. All of them must come together to decide what is good for the institution. Dhaka University must become a model institution for others the way it was envisioned by its founders.

It needs to promote and celebrate excellence not only for itself, but also for the benefit of society. Dhaka University's benefits so far have been measured in socio-cultural and political units. The real impact of the university will be felt once the university realigns its curricula to integrate teaching and learning with the needs of employers; its impact will be felt when it dedicates its research units to knowledge production and promotion for posterity and sustainability; its real impact will be felt when the taxpayers are assured that the money that they are contributing to develop human capital is well-spent—that the graduates are equipped with the knowledge and skill-sets necessary to advance the university, the community, and the country forward. With such a vision in mind, the alumni of the university need to critically engage with the university to prepare it for its journey ahead and secure its reputation as their *alma mater*.

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ILLUSTRATION: THE DAILY STAR

of the university in its second phase. The relegation in world ranking, the lack of vision in leadership, callous remarks by individuals in significant leadership positions, the news of teachers engaged in unethical activities, including plagiarism and corruption, may be cited as examples to suggest the downward slide. As a member of the fraternity, I cannot shy away from my responsibility of not doing enough to prove these accusations wrong.

What ails me, however, is the overarching, overgeneralised claims to dismiss the site of national pride! This is often done by people who have been nourished by this very university before embarking upon distinguished careers elsewhere. I find it distasteful when critics resort to lampooning in place of constructive criticism. If you have an ageing mother who needs support, our culture demands that we take care of her—not send her to an old home or

of Dhaka University. There has not been any formal process to involve the views of the stakeholders, however. One may mention the quota of registered graduates in the University Senate; however, the politicisation of the senate has reduced the body to a mere stamping agency during the budget meeting in a fiscal year and a VC-nominating agency in every year.

To think that the evils lie only in the second half of the university's existence is a fallacy. A 1929 report by the Hartog Committee, chaired by the university's first vice-chancellor Philip Joseph Hartog (1920-25), mentions the "waste and ineffectiveness" of the educational system that was initially trying to separate its needs along religious lines. Professor A.G. Stock's memoir talks about the abysmal standard of English and points out various oddities in the admission and examination processes.

While there is a charm in myth-making

Why China and India are wooing Bangladesh



SYED MUNIR KHASRU

BEHIND the dark, post-liberation period, its economy is weathering the pandemic well. The International Monetary Fund has projected a 4 percent rise in gross domestic product for 2022, whereas India's could decline by 10.3 percent.

Bangladesh's annual growth is 8 percent and per capita income stands at USD 2,227 in the 2020-21 financial year—12 percent higher than India. Add to this a giant market of 164.69 million people, growing manufacturing prowess, and availability of cheap labour, it is no wonder that the country is attracting renewed attention.

But geopolitics also plays a part here. Friction between emerging global superpower China and regional superpower India is elevating Bangladesh's regional importance. Located at the head of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is in a key strategic position, with both Asian powers eyeing to build ports in the country to boost their presence in the Indian Ocean region.

Chinese aid, Indian historical ties India-Bangladesh relations have had their fair share of ups and downs. Since the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2009, ties with India have greatly improved, with Bangladesh now India's largest trading partner in the sub-continent, with bilateral trade pegged at USD 9.5 billion in 2019-20.

Both governments have undertaken initiatives for boosting connectivity, while cooperation in the power sector has resulted in private Indian companies investing USD 9 billion in Bangladesh. Ms Hasina has also rooted out cross-border anti-India insurgency activities from Bangladesh and strengthened defence cooperation.

However, unresolved water-sharing issues, India's border killings of Bangladeshi nationals, controversial laws on Muslims in India and expulsion

of alleged illegal Bangladeshi migrants remain sources of friction.

Meanwhile, China is considered an "all-weather friend" by many in Bangladesh. A Chinese move to exempt tariffs for 97 percent of Bangladesh products is a welcome boost in Covid-stricken times for bilateral trade, which stood at USD 18 billion in 2019. Bangladesh now accounts for 20 percent of China's arms sales. Bangladesh is also the recipient of billions in loans and other assistance under

is being replicated in other parts of South Asia—a source of concern for India.

Earlier last month, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar spoke to his Sri Lankan counterpart Dinesh Gunawardena amid Delhi's growing concerns over the proposed Chinese-funded Colombo Port City project. Despite India's support for Bhutan against China over a still-unresolved border dispute, it has not stilled rumblings about reducing Bhutan's dependence on India in

whose economy is heavily dependent on energy exports shipped from the Middle East, is driven by its need to ensure it has friendly relations with littoral states around the Indian ocean.

From India's perspective, the building of Chinese relationships—and the ports and other facilities that come with it—with key countries along the maritime route is a threat, with the likes of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives being part of a strategic "string of pearls" to encircle India and choke its power projection.

Seen in this light, China's BRI is a tool to augment its foothold in South Asia by creating economic dependence, as it did in Sri Lanka. Chinese support for Bangladesh under the BRI framework, it is argued, is part of the same game to undermine India's security and strategic interests.

India too has been wooing Bangladesh in line with its "Act East" policy. Among other things, Delhi is trying to get Dhaka to join the Indo-Pacific "Quad", an informal strategic alliance involving the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. This has elicited a strong reaction from Beijing, with the Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe on a recent visit to Dhaka calling for joint efforts to resist "powers from outside the region setting up a military alliance in South Asia".

Dealing with two giants Bangladesh has been deftly balancing its relations with the two Asian giants, making it clear that it would not be choosing between the two. While trying to address India's geopolitical concerns, Bangladesh has steadfastly maintained its right to maintain economic cooperation as well as close defence ties with China.

While China has strengthened its economic ties with Bangladesh by bankrolling development projects, India has the benefit of a shared history, values, culture and connectivity with Bangladesh.

The onus is now on the two giants to prove whose strategic objectives are more aligned with the long-term interests of Bangladesh. For now, the country can enjoy the attention it gets from the two rivals. By playing its cards wisely, South Asia's stellar performer can safeguard its economic and strategic interests.

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Friction between China and India is elevating Bangladesh's regional importance.

PHOTO: AFP

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

It is building its third largest Payra deep-sea port with Chinese assistance while opening up Mongla and Chattogram ports to the Chinese, after access was granted to India. A USD 250 million contract to build an airport terminal in Sylhet city was awarded to China over Indian competitors.

And as India drags its feet on water-sharing negotiations for the Teesta River, the lifeline to north-western Bangladesh, the "Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project" was inked last year with support from China for a USD 1 billion engineering scheme. That said, moves by Bangladesh to assert cost control on some Chinese-backed rail projects have led to friction.

Sino-India tug of war in South Asia China's growing influence in Bangladesh

the Himalayan kingdom. In the Maldives, although there has been a renewal of an "India First" policy, China's expanding footprint there, such as the USD 200 million China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, has ensured its position in the country.

With the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the stakes for both India and China's regional security concerns have increased. Though India enjoys cordial relations with the current Afghan regime, China has the advantage of deeper pockets and good ties with Pakistan, a key player in Afghan geopolitics. While Beijing has diplomatic ties with Kabul, it has also been hedging its bets by building up contacts with the Afghan Taliban.

Politics of self-interest

The wooing of Bangladesh by China and India is part of a bigger tussle over regional and maritime security. China,