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LATE S. M. ALI

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Rohingya crisis is as much the international community's problem, as Bangladesh's

Countries that can influence Myanmar must resolve this

THE World Bank, as part of its proposal for preparing a global Refugee Policy Review Framework has suggested to the Bangladesh government through a letter to grant freedom of movement of refugees, that they be given birth certificates, education, jobs and infrastructure. The Bangladesh government has made it clear that it does not want any measures that will lead to Rohingyas being integrated into society. The reason for this seemingly harsh stand is purely practical. We just don't have the capacity to absorb more than a million people given the huge number of poor we have already, a number that has increased as a result of the economic fallout of Covid.

But it is also true that the Rohingya crisis is a very complex issue and it is hard to find any clear-cut solution given the volatile situation in a post-coup Myanmar and an army government that was instrumental in displacing the Rohingyas in the first place through persecution. Bangladesh generously accepted the Rohingyas (who were fleeing genocide in their homeland) because it was the right thing to do but over the last four years it has become increasingly difficult to bear the economic and social burden of being host to more than a million refugees. But what about the Rohingya people who are stranded in Bangladesh with excruciating uncertainty regarding their future? The international community has been providing humanitarian assistance to help Bangladesh cope with the crisis but donor fatigue is setting in resulting in fewer funds than committed, coming in.

The international community should realise that this is not a problem created by Bangladesh—it is a problem created by Myanmar, dumped unfairly on Bangladesh. Despite resolutions from the UN, Myanmar has not budged and continues to ignore the crisis it has created. It has not given any clear indication that it will repatriate the stranded Rohingyas and will provide them with a safe and dignified return.

It is not the ideal solution that Rohingyas will be deprived of proper education, employment and birth registration while they are in Bangladesh and cannot move out of the camps. However, some concessions need to be made regarding education and income generating activities within the camps including the one at Bhashan Char where conditions are much better (at least till now) than the cramped camps in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf. But it is understandable that Bangladesh does not want to give the impression that the Rohingyas will be integrated into the mainstream society as that would only absolve Myanmar from all responsibility and would only add to Bangladesh's economic burden. The international community with greater involvement of Myanmar's trading partners such as China, India, Japan, Indonesia and Germany, ASEAN and OIC countries has a responsibility to formulate a strategy that will repatriate the Rohingya and ensure their safe return to their motherland. If this is not possible the international community must commit to absorbing this displaced population as they have done in other instances.

Factories reopening amid strict lockdown

Are workers' lives of no priority to us at all?

ON Friday, a few hours after the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) disclosed its recommendation to extend the current strict lockdown, the government's cabinet division issued a circular stating that export-oriented factories will be able to operate as per usual starting today, August 1. Regarding this, the Directorate General (DG) of the DGHS acknowledged that the government is facing pressure to open the factories, but that, if the infections rise higher, they "will not be able to accommodate patients at the hospitals."

According to a report in this daily, no sooner had this news broken than the ferry terminals became overpacked with Dhaka-bound commuters yesterday. Reportedly, around 20,000 people were waiting to board the ferries at 10 am yesterday. No vehicles could board the three ferries which left the Kazirhaat ferry ghat around the same time, due to the rush of passengers. Needless to say, there was no space for social distancing, and people were also not paying heed to wearing masks since there was no one there to enforce such health guidelines.

Besides being a potential contributor to a higher rate of infections, this hasty reopening of factories also makes evident a total disregard for the safety of millions of workers. Most of them were given barely a day's notice to reach their workplaces in Dhaka division, while the positivity rates for Covid-19 in all divisions are at their worst yet.

This past week, Dhaka experienced a positivity rate of 35 percent, while other industry- and transport-heavy districts such as Narayanganj, Manikganj, Munshiganj and Gazipur had rates of 39 percent, 45 percent, and 44 percent respectively. We cannot criticise the workers for rushing to their workplaces as this is the only way they can survive.

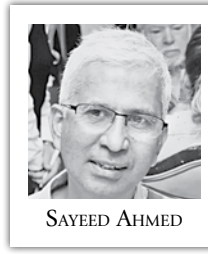
Wouldn't it have been better if the workers had been vaccinated first before reopening factories? Unfortunately, there has been a consistent lack of planning and foresight when making sweeping decisions such as this during each of the country's worst Covid-19 phases this year, and it seems this trend will continue.

We sincerely hope—even that the worst surge following the eight-day easing of the lockdown for Eid-ul-Azha was not enough of a lesson—authorities have a plan to manage the higher rate of infections experts are predicting as a result of reopening of factories.

We also hope healthcare personnel will be provided with as many resources as possible so they can continue to not only treat others but also protect themselves on duty. We hope the government soon finds a solution which will allow citizens to save their lives without having to risk their livelihoods.

Online education and artificial intelligence

What can Bangladesh learn from China and USA?



SAYEED AHMED

followed. But what many don't know is Chinese education never went into lockdown.

Within less than three months, Beijing Normal University (BNU) started a new semester offering more than 3,000 online courses. BNU could do so only because of China's comprehensive education technology (EdTech) drive in the preceding years, as a blog post at the Oxford Internet Institute elaborates. With EdTech, China combined computer hardware, software, and educational theory and practice to continue education. In 2017, it adopted a vision to become a world leader in EdTech and artificial intelligence (AI), giving top priority to implementing AI solutions in the education sector. In 2018, Zhejiang University on China's east coast had already built smart classrooms equipped with audio recognition and simultaneous interpretation. When the pandemic struck, all the tools were ready for recording video lectures or live streaming. It was not only the universities; most Chinese primary and secondary schools also commenced online schools on February 9, 2020 with nearly 200 million students.

How did Beijing achieve such a phenomenal feat? According to a UNESCO post, "How is China ensuring learning when classes are disrupted by coronavirus?" the Chinese government mobilised every related ministry, private entity, and telecom company, and above all, teachers and students. It also launched 22 validated free AI-based online course repositories. Schools and teachers chose suitable modes of delivery based on local e-readiness. But China's EdTech drive also highlighted its deep digital divide. As of 2018, many schools in remote areas didn't have reliable internet connections. The Ministry of Education (MOE) started providing every public school with at least a 10-Mbit broadband connection to overcome this problem, achieving 95 percent coverage in April this year.

The drive for Internet-based learning also attracted many big corporates—such as Alibaba and Tencent (both tech giants) and SoftBank Group (Japanese multinational conglomerate)—into China's lucrative private e-tutoring market. They each launched one or more EdTech platforms and deployed every means to secure a market share. With Chinese parents' willingness to spend extra money for children's education, such practices triggered intense market

competition. E-tutoring and homework consumed the students' weekends and holidays, creating an unsustainable situation. The trend prompted the MOE to set up a division to oversee all private EdTech platforms. Beijing also launched a crackdown on the big ones, several of which had become unicorn companies (private companies valued at more than USD 1 billion) as listed by Holoniq.com.

USA is the other country where EdTech saw a surge giving rise to unicorn companies such as Articulate and Udemy. It already enjoys a long-running public education infrastructure comprising schools, state administration, funding, parent-teacher committees, and the like. After the onset of the

education delivery through EdTech. On the other hand, USA further strengthened its existing education system with EdTech. A Forbes article states that the American system is ground-up, while the Chinese approach is delivered centrally with a top-down approach. Whatever their policies, Bangladesh needs to learn from these experiences and address its problems with solutions focusing on local situations. Its education is stuck in the pandemic, and scientists are predicting more such pandemics in the future. Most Bangladeshi schools and universities have started online lectures and exams. Yet, none have found any reasonable solution that can replace the in-person experience. Students attend

sector. What actions can Bangladesh take to embrace education for all in a digital era? Here are a few ideas.

First, adopt a vision to implement education through digital means regardless of the pandemic situation. Second, prepare a policy to implement it. Third, mobilise all professionals such as students, teachers, subject matter specialists, educationists, and pedagogical experts. Include social influencers such as NGOs, political leaders, and the mass media in the process. Third, bring in the infrastructure providers such as telecom companies, internet service providers, cloud platforms, and hardware manufacturers. Fourth, set up an AI and Augmented Reality research centre



No one should miss out on education for lack of digital connectivity.

pandemic, EdTech added value to the existing system by providing technology products and services to facilitate learning and administration. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators use technology for meetings, enrolments, attendance, student support, counseling, and feedback. But the digital divide is a problem in the USA also, as Boston Consulting Group reports. Almost 30 percent of K to 12 students cannot follow online school because they couldn't afford proper internet connection or suitable devices.

How do the Chinese and the American EdTech drives compare, and what's their relevance to Bangladesh? China embraced a paradigm shift and introduced AI, making remarkable strides in public

lessons and take exams over poor internet connections with insufficient devices, often unable to follow or communicate with the teachers. Mobile data quickly runs out, and students have to step out to buy additional packs. It's an untenable situation, and Bangladesh's education is in jeopardy.

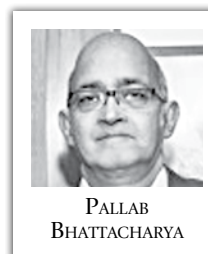
Thankfully, Bangladesh has a few advantages too. Several NGOs, such as Brac, specialise in delivering education through a network of schools, teachers, and volunteers. There is also the government education infrastructure down to the upazila level. Two full-scale ministries are responsible for delivering education from K to 12 and at the tertiary level. There are already a few Bangladeshi EdTech initiatives ready to help this

for applications in education. These are, however, not entirely new ideas. Bangladesh government has already adopted a policy to implement the "Digital Bangladesh" vision. All that is needed is a vision for delivering quality education through online platforms.

No one should miss out on education for lack of digital connectivity. The returns from the factories and businesses are easy to see, and there is a strong lobby to keep them running. But the benefits of education are long-term and profound. Suspending education for any period may cause irreparable damage, erasing decades of progress.

Dr Sayeed Ahmed is a consulting engineer and freelance writer.

India's opposition unity a work in progress



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

with an array of their leaders meeting each other, strategizing how to put up a united front against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party in the next general elections due less than three years down the line.

At the heart of the opposition show was undoubtedly West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who has positioned herself as the pivot for possible opposition unity. She met Congress interim President Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal among others in Delhi. In many ways, the events were a throw-back to the months in the run up to the last parliamentary polls in 2019 when the BJP returned to power for a second successive tenure despite hectic efforts by the opposition to come together. But three years is a long time in Indian politics.

Certain things have definitely changed now from what it was the last time around. The most striking change is that unlike in 2018 and 2019, the BJP today finds itself having to battle against an increasingly combative opposition on the issues of the Pegasus spyware controversy and handling of the Covid-19 situation. By contrast, the search for a concrete framework and basis of opposition unity still remains a work in progress.

Unlike 2018-19, Mamata has a higher national profile this time especially after her party Trinamool Congress' landslide victory in Bengal assembly elections in 2021. In a bid to amplify that profile this time, Mamata presaged her visit to Delhi with two key decisions: (1) she was chosen as the chairman of the party's parliamentary group, even though she is neither a member of parliament or the state assembly; (2) she was the first off the bloc to appoint a commission of inquiry into the Pegasus row even as the Indian government has maintained

silence on the need for a probe. The Mamata government's setting up the inquiry commission is apparently aimed at forcing the hands of the Indian government in ordering a probe. So, there is an element of politics in her action. The BJP has been dismissive of Mamata becoming the TMC parliamentary party chairman and some have even accused her of resorting to political gimmick. Mamata had during the Left Front rule in Bengal complained of her phone being tapped. In fact, it has been pointed out that on assuming power in 2011, her government had set up a committee to probe phone-tapping but the report of that committee is still to be made public.

Coming back to the proposed opposition unity, Mamata, during her

was "I am not a political astrologer."

Mamata also made it clear that the 2024 general elections would be a Modi-versus-the-rest affair. The opposition lacked a united face to take on Modi in 2019 and the result was there for all to see. Dislike for Modi or the BJP may not be a sufficient glue for anti-BJP forces to unite. A common minimum programme for the opposition is another major challenge as the anti-BJP regional parties do not have a common agenda and have different political compulsions in their respective states.

Many political commentators and opposition parties have hailed Mamata's victory in Bengal assembly poll as a big momentum builder towards opposition unity. But the rest of India is not Bengal.



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

PHOTO: AFP

Delhi sojourn, made some important remarks that could be considered pointers to a roadmap: (1) such unity would happen "automatically"; (2) she invited some powerful regional parties like Biju Janata Dal and YSR Congress Party, which rule Odisha and Andhra Pradesh states, to join the proposed opposition front even as the two parties are known to be friendly to the BJP at the national level; and (3) six months are enough to firm up opposition unity. But she skirted the most ticklish issue: who would be the opposition's face against Modi? Her reply to the question by journalists in Delhi

The TMC has no presence outside Bengal. Besides, people vote differently in Lok Sabha and state assembly elections, a message driven home to the opposition in 2019 general elections and to the BJP in this year's assembly poll in Bengal. The BJP may have won two consecutive Lok Sabha polls, but it has not yet threatened the turf of any regional party in state-level elections.

The TMC is not the first party to defeat the BJP in a state poll. The Congress had done it in 2018 in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in results that were then seen as a big boost to the party

ahead of the 2019 parliamentary poll. But it did not work out that way. It was Modi who had helmed the BJP charge in those three states in 2018. The difference in Bengal in 2021 and the three states was that the BJP had put in all its might and Modi had campaigned more vigorously for the simple reason that it was aspiring for power in a state it never won before unlike in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh which the saffron party has ruled many times in the past and where it has an entrenched organisational apparatus. Secondly, the Bengal assembly poll results burst the unprecedented and false hype the BJP had created about its prospects, something which was evident to dispassionate political analysts.

However, the TMC's strategy in Bengal assembly elections this year has two important lessons which other regional parties can have a look at: one is to flag a state-specific sub-nationalism based on language like Bengali sub-nationalism and the second is to shun grandiose announcements of industrialisation and instead fill the election manifesto with promises of low-hanging fruits in sectors like health and education, state-level job and cash dole-outs that touch the day-to-day life of the masses.

One much talked-about fall-out of Mamata's presence in Delhi recently is that it appeared to have prodded Rahul Gandhi into an outreach exercise with other opposition parties, a job he has left to other leaders of the Congress till then. On the first two days when Mamata's meeting with other opposition parties in Delhi hogged the media focus, Rahul attended two separate gatherings of opposition outfits for coordination in parliament to corner the Modi government on the issues of Pegasus and contentious farm laws. Not wanting to be seen as lagging behind Mamata in uniting the opposition, the Congress made it a point to publicise to the media Rahul's two meetings with the opposition parties. A perception of one-upmanship between the TMC and the Congress was inescapable. Interestingly, the TMC did not attend the two meetings Rahul had with the opposition parties.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.