

# The Daily Star

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## Do we have a pandemic plan anymore?

*Lifting restrictions amid high positivity rates is alarming*

**I**N a move as baffling as most Covid-19 pandemic-related decisions taken by the government, a circular on Sunday announced the removal of most curbs starting Wednesday, August 11. This decision came on a day that saw 241 deaths and over 10,000 cases recorded in the previous 24 hours, while the positivity rate stood at 24.52 percent, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

According to the circular, 50 percent of all modes of public transport (such as buses, trains and launches) will be allowed to run and at full capacity. This means that there will be little to no social distancing on public vehicles, if past experience is any indication. Besides all offices, banks, factories, mills and financial institutions reopening, restaurants, malls, markets and shops will also be allowed to operate in a business-as-usual manner. While malls and markets will stay open from 10am to 8pm, restaurants will operate between 8am to 10pm, seating patrons at half capacity throughout.

The circular reflected decisions taken during an inter-ministerial meeting on August 3, to keep the economic wheels of the country turning. This relaxation of restrictions was also said to be applicable for the foreseeable future. But *does* the government have a solid Covid-19 pandemic plan for the foreseeable future? The constant flip-flops and confusion over its decisions, and the lack of foresight as evidenced by the lifting of almost all restrictions on Sunday, are not exactly reassuring.

As if to reiterate the contradictory nature of most of the authorities' pandemic-related decisions, Cabinet Secretary Khandaker Anwarul Islam yesterday said during a press briefing that "[operation of] recreation venues or public gatherings" will still not be permitted after August 10. But how can public gatherings be avoided if public spaces such as malls, markets and restaurants are allowed to stay open, and there are limited restrictions on vehicular movements? Will there be law enforcement personnel at every crowded corner trying to impose social distancing? How many of the thousands of people out and about will be fined or detained for not wearing masks properly? When—as one infectious disease specialist told a reporter from this daily—this lifting of curbs gives way to more Covid-19 cases and more deaths, how does the government plan to deal with a possible third wave of the pandemic?

While we commend the government for achieving its target of inoculating 32 lakh people (aged above 25 years) nationwide within only two days instead of the predetermined six days, we would also urge the authorities to not rest easy yet. The need to help citizens maintain their socioeconomic wellbeing is understandable, but this needs to be done in a more planned way and keeping the long-term future in mind—not just the next couple of weeks. It is high time for us to stop making decisions on the fly regarding the dire Covid-19 situation of the country.

## ASEAN should intervene to help the Rohingya

*It has the capacity to negotiate with Myanmar*

**W**HILE addressing the 54th ASEAN Day event organised virtually, Bangladesh's foreign minister urged ASEAN member states to intervene and help in the Rohingya repatriation process. The foreign minister reminded the member states of the economic, environmental and socio-political costs that Bangladesh has had to bear by sheltering about a million Myanmar nationals who fled a military crackdown in Rakhine state in 2017. Given that Myanmar is a member of the ASEAN and has continued to become isolated on the international stage ever since the military coup of February 2021, ASEAN is well-placed to intervene in the matter.

The foreign minister during his address brought up an excellent point. The continued limbo that the Rohingya are stuck in and its ramifications threaten not only Bangladesh's security, but that of the whole region as well. We have seen how the violence inside Myanmar has forced Rohingya refugees to flee to other ASEAN states such as Thailand and Malaysia. How long will the ASEAN states—as well as other regional countries—continue to overlook this? When Myanmar has consistently ignored the calls from ASEAN member states as well as its neighbours to stop persecuting its own citizens and has showed a complete lack of good faith in negotiating and repatriating the Rohingya from Bangladesh, how long can the member states afford to allow Myanmar such leeway to change its way of its own accord?

So far, the ASEAN member states have issued some statements from time to time, urging the authorities in Myanmar to facilitate the return of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to Rakhine. However, the ASEAN as a whole has not publicly recognised the underlying causes that have led to the Rohingya refugee crisis, neither has it condemned the Myanmar military's human rights violations against the Rohingya strongly enough. Without exerting any strong pressure, it would be unwise to expect the Myanmar authorities to act any differently from the past—that much is clear.

We hope the ASEAN member states recognise this reality. The need for a concrete plan for addressing the crisis that the Rohingya are facing inside Myanmar, as well as abroad, has never been more acute. And ASEAN has never been better-placed to play a key role in solving the issue. Not only will the Rohingya community and Bangladesh be greatly appreciative of such attempts, but it will also demonstrate ASEAN's commitment to protecting human rights and maintaining stability in the region.

# Averting a generational catastrophe

500 DAYS OF SCHOOL CLOSURE



MANZOOR AHMED

**U**NESCO has called the learning loss caused by the Covid-19 pandemic "a generational catastrophe." What does it mean, and how can we cope with it? A related

question is, when should schools reopen and how? This has been a question ever since school closure began to be extended repeatedly since March last year. After 500 days of shuttered schools, an unsavoury landmark that Bangladesh hit on July 29, 2021, the question remains unanswered.

### Learning loss and the generational catastrophe

The prolonged cessation of schooling already suffered by millions of children in low and middle income countries,

large majority of children because of connectivity and device problems, and the limitations of one-way communication, with little interaction between teachers and students. Even in normal schooling, it is known that a majority of children do not learn what they are supposed to learn each year, according to National Student Assessment reports.

When schools restart, where should the students be placed—in the same class as they were in the beginning of 2020, allowing a loss of almost two academic years? Or should they be promoted to the next class, cutting the loss by a year? But how ready would they be to follow the lessons for the same class or the next higher class? How much of what they had learned has been forgotten? It is very likely that the large majority would be ill-prepared for restarting their lessons.

The way to find out their level of preparedness would be to conduct a rapid assessment of student learning when schools reopen, focusing on core

learning readiness. Pre-existing social and economic inequalities and educational disparities have been further aggravated as a pandemic impact.

After appropriate placement of students when schools restart, a "learning recovery" plan for the next two years have to be worked on and carried out, again focusing on the core competencies such as language, math and science, so that eventually students begin to fall into a normal curricular routine. Many education experts recommend that in teaching and testing, the emphasis on the core competencies should become a permanent feature of our schooling.

### When should schools re-open and how?

The education community in Bangladesh, and the Education Watch 2020 report "Bringing on track schools and learning" prepared in March this year, advocated reopening of schools without delay in stages and with due health and safety precautions.

The authorities should begin planning for extending the current school year to June 2022 and take this opportunity to come to a decision on a permanent change of school year from September to June, starting from this year. The current school year, if necessary, can be extended to July or August next year, foregoing summer vacation as part of the recovery plan.

### What about public exams?

The public examination arrangements have to be reconsidered. The PECE at the end of class five and JSC at the end of class eight should be dropped in 2021 and 2022. A simpler and more useful alternative should be considered for the future. SSC, HSC and equivalent exams should be held when schools re-open, but they should only test core subject areas and in an abridged form, making it possible to complete each exam within a week, as many experts have recommended.

However, a decision has been announced by the Ministry of Education that SSC and HSC exams for 2021, whenever these are held, will be on the additional subjects related to the separate academic streams (Science, Commerce, Humanities) rather than on the core contents of Bangla, English and Math. The scores in these core skills will be decided on the basis of students' past marks obtained in their JSC and SSC exams. This is an injudicious decision. The merit of the students and their future academic performance are better judged by the competency they can demonstrate in the core skills of languages and math.

I recommend foregoing the exams in the additional subjects in the interest of keeping the public exams short, concentrating on the core subjects and completing them within a week. I hope the decision announced will be reconsidered. Planning for the exams in the changed format should begin in earnest and all concerned—teachers, parents and students—should be given necessary orientation and information much in advance.

The two measures on school calendars and public exams are the least that must be done as essential elements of the learning recovery plan in an unprecedented emergency fraught with uncertainty.

The recommendations made by Education Watch and other groups will still apply. These include a step-by-step approach; ensuring safety measures in all schools with financial support from the government; health and education sector collaboration at the local level to protect and keep children, teachers and families safe; and involving local stakeholders—NGOs, parents and local government—in implementing and monitoring the learning loss recovery plan.

Schools have to be reopened safely and with a plan to carry out learning recovery successfully. The danger of a generational catastrophe has to be averted. Proper planning should begin urgently, involving stakeholders beyond the closed circle of officials, even though the timetable remains uncertain. Bold thinking and unconventional responses are needed in these exceptional times.

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Surveys and studies show prolonged school closures have made girl children face higher risks of child marriage. PHOTO: STAR

difficulty of implementing a recovery plan, and the longer term impact on children's learning and their mental health, are unprecedented in their scope and scale. The loss of almost two school years means that a whole generation may grow up with irrecoverable education deficits, which can affect their adult life and performance and, in turn, have an adverse impact even on the next generation. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, speaking in October last year to a high-level education meeting at the UN, warned about a "generational catastrophe." Then, on March 29-30 this year, in a virtual meeting of education ministers in Paris, the danger of a generational catastrophe was reiterated by UNESCO's Director General Audrey Azoulay.

Evidence from surveys and expert opinion suggest that distance education initiatives such as TV programmes and online lessons have not benefited the

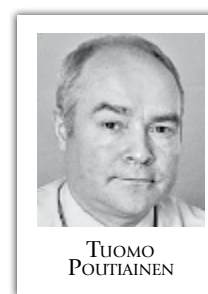
knowledge and skills, such as in language and math (rather than specific content in the textbook), expected for a particular grade, to determine where the students should be placed. The schools and teachers have to be ready to conduct this assessment and they need to be guided and oriented by an expert team from the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and the respective directorates.

How many will actually return to school when schools restart? Surveys and studies have indicated that child labour has increased during the pandemic, girls have been married off early, and some children have moved from mainstream schools to Qawmi madrasas because of lesser cost and the offer of room and board (and they remained open during Covid-19). Studies have also reported increased poverty, stress and tension in the family, and increased violence against children and women as a byproduct of the pandemic, which affect children's

Meanwhile, beginning in mid-June, the Covid-19 Delta variant, a more virulent and risky infection in comparison to the earlier variants, arrived and spread to many parts of the country. Infection and death rates have soared and the healthcare system is deluged by patients requiring hospitalisation. Vaccination is not available yet to the large majority of the population. The government is trying hard to secure a sufficient volume of vaccines from all possible sources, but a timetable for full mass coverage does not yet exist.

A quick reopening of schools, therefore, cannot be contemplated at this time. A definite timeline will depend on how quickly all school teachers, staff and their families can be covered by vaccination. For tertiary level education, students should also have vaccine protection before their respective institutions re-open.

## How the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework will connect education and training to the job market



TUOMO POUTIAINEN

**T**HE Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF) combines general education, technical-vocational education and higher education into one

harmonised, quality-assured system. For four years, the ILO Bangladesh has been supporting the Technical and Madrasah Education Division (TMED) of the Ministry of Education to develop this framework and define clear pathways, level descriptors and a concrete structure for the BNQF.

The government has demonstrated its commitment to the BNQF by setting up a National Steering Committee (NSC) chaired by the Minister of Education. It has also set up seven technical working groups, headed by senior education officials.

Extensive technical consultations were held with senior level officials from the general education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and madrasah system, as well as representatives from the agriculture, engineering and medical education sectors. The TMED and Secondary and Higher Education Division coordinated the whole process, which was finalised and endorsed at the NSC meeting on June 3, 2021. The BNQF will now gradually come into effect through the development of a quality assurance system, implementation guidelines, and the legislation.

Alongside different education and training agencies, professional organisations, industry bodies like the Bangladesh Employers Federation (BEF) and the National Coordination Committee on Workers Education (NCCWE) worked together for the vision of BNQF to become a reality. The structure of BNQF is based

on the framework for technical education (NTVQF), which was developed by the government of Bangladesh in 2011 in collaboration with the ILO and the European Union. The NTVQF is directly linked to the National Skills Development Policy 2011.

The BNQF includes ten levels of qualifications based on increasing complexity of learning outcomes expressed in three domains—knowledge, skills and

her career path, she can obtain national certification through short training or assessment from a TVET institution. With that certificate, she could upgrade her position at the workplace, and later, she will have further opportunities for higher-level skill certification or higher education, which will lead her towards further professional development or open windows for further education.

Another important facet of the



Millions of migrant workers leave Bangladesh without any formal recognition of their skills or experiences. PHOTO: STAR FILE

attitudes. The BNQF provides access to qualifications, which assist people to move easily and seamlessly between the different education sectors and the labour market. The BNQF upholds lifelong learning and increases the employability of graduates through open and flexible qualification pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer.

Now, the question is how the BNQF will work in the real world and what it means for workers and employers. Let us take the example of a young girl from Gaibandha, who started working in a factory after her SSC/HSC exams and stopped her education. After five years, if she decides to get a skills certificate for

BNQF is how it aims to deepen support for labour mobility through increased recognition of the value and comparability of different qualifications in Bangladesh. The BNQF promotes international recognition, equivalence and comparability of qualifications through bilateral or multilateral mutual recognition arrangements (MRA), and harmonisation of qualifications through regional frameworks. Providing skills and qualifications equivalent with the standards of other countries would allow Bangladeshi workers to stand in a similar position with their counterpart migrant workers from other countries.

In the context of the fourth Industrial

revolution and increasing automation, labour market trends are showing a shift to jobs that require higher skill levels. A recent analysis of 200,000 jobs in 29 countries by Price Water Coopers shows that 44 percent of workers' jobs will be displaced by mid-2030s by the automation. On the other hand, a McKinsey report shows 26 million new jobs will be created by the advent of online services. In this situation, Bangladesh's workers must not and cannot be left behind.

This is why the Prime Minister of Bangladesh called for a BNQF, one that offers flexible entry and exit to students in the different national education streams. In addition, BNQF has the power to put in place the mechanisms that will help workers and employers to re-skill, find work, change occupation and create jobs. A BNQF will help a worker's professional career development and lifelong learning opportunity.

Millions of migrant workers leave Bangladesh without any formal recognition of their skills or experiences. They then return home without any further recognition for the additional skills they acquired working overseas. The ILO and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment are now exploring ways to introduce a National Skills Passport (NSP) for millions of migrants workers, based on the BNQF.

All those involved are now working to bring the BNQF into force as soon as possible to reap the benefits of the country's demographic dividend. This will help employers—home and abroad—to find the right person for the right job with the right skills. It will also help the government in undertaking long-term skills planning for the economy and for future employment creation. The BNQF is thus a fundamental cornerstone for the future prosperity of the country and its citizens.

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