

Ensure health and safety when reopening universities

Wellbeing of students must play a central role in decision-making

AFTER over 500 days of closure of all education institutions in Bangladesh—one of the longest pandemic-induced shutdowns of education in the world—we are pleased to hear that the authorities have decided to resume certain education-related activities from mid-October. At a meeting on Thursday, it was announced that students of all public and private universities will be inoculated against Covid-19 by end of September, and the universities will start in-person classes from October 15.

Although there have been attempts to shift to online learning during the prolonged shutdown, the huge digital divide and inadequate planning and haphazard directives from the education ministries did not lead to desired results. Given that Unesco has termed the learning loss caused by the pandemic an unfolding “generational catastrophe”, we fully accept the urgency of holding exams and resuming classes as soon as possible. However, we must also equally stress the importance of protecting our students while helping them to recover from learning losses.

While we appreciate the initiative to vaccinate students, it must be noted that only 35 percent of 1.45 lakh registered students have been inoculated so far, out of a list of about 3.5 lakh university students sent to the health ministry by the UGC. This means that there are still around three lakh university students who need to be given both doses of the vaccine, of whom over two lakh haven't even registered for it yet. What steps are being taken to ensure these students are registered? Does the government have enough vaccines in stock to inoculate all of them by October? Is there going to be another special vaccination drive for students, and will this be as crowded and chaotic as the one we saw earlier this month? Given the precedent that has been set regarding stock shortfalls and last-minute cancellations of special vaccination drives, one can be forgiven for being cautious in their expectations.

The reopening of halls is another issue where education authorities have been accused of being unsympathetic to students' needs. So far, it has been decided that universities will make their own decisions regarding this. But if halls do not open by the time students have to sit for exams or join classes, have the authorities considered how they will afford the substantial expenses of arranging their own accommodation? The UGC chairman has also said that strict Covid-19 health protocols will be maintained in classrooms. We hope that these protocols, and all other relevant information, will be properly communicated well in advance to the students—since so far, the frequent disruptions in learning as well as the uncertainty and lack of clarity surrounding decisions related to the resumption of in-person classes have put a great deal of stress on them.

While no concrete decisions have been taken regarding the reopening of schools and colleges, it is expected that an announcement will be made within the week. We urge the authorities to allow no further delays in holding SSC and HSC examinations, and to listen to the experts in formulating strategies for reopening all schools and colleges in phases. At the end of the day, it is imperative that the wellbeing of our students is at the centre of every decision taken regarding them, and that they are able to have their concerns heard during this decision-making process.

Every child deserves to be registered at birth

Govt must fully resume birth registration in Cox's Bazar

IT is disheartening to know, as a recent study cited by *The Daily Star* found out, that citizens in Cox's Bazar district are being put through unnecessary hassles in relation to acquiring birth certificates for their babies. Apparently, since 2017, soon after the influx of Rohingya refugees, the district administration suspended birth registration in a bid “to prevent Rohingya babies and children from obtaining the primary certification required for citizenship.” As a result, Bangladeshi nationals in the district have been denied the basic right of registering the births of their children for nearly four years.

While the High Court in 2019 did order the district administration to resume issuing birth certificates, only 12 of the 71 union parishads (UP) in the district so far did so. Around the same time, “the government and the UNHCR had begun the biometric registration of all Rohingya refugees, including babies born in the camps.” Still, and even to this day, most citizens in the district are unable to register new births. It seems that the law also differs between unions, as the chairman of Palongkhali union of Ukhiya upazila says that locals in his union cannot get a birth certificate from another union, despite what the relevant law states.

Now that the facts are out of the way, we cannot help but wonder at the sense—or lack thereof—of the authorities in suspending birth registration in the district in the first place. We understand that the arrival of Rohingya refugees was chaotic and disorganised and that some form of control was necessary initially. We also fully agree that repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar should be the ultimate goal of Bangladesh. However, couldn't the refugees have been prevented from possible attempts at registering their children as Bangladeshis without stopping a vital service for the lawful citizens? Residents in the 12 UPs where birth registration has resumed are also facing various hurdles in the process. First, there is the Tk 500 fine for “late registration” even though the delay is not to be blamed on the applicants. There is also an unusually high number of documents (around 28) to be provided for registration including, curiously enough, birth certificates of the grandparents of a baby.

We would urge the government and relevant authorities to fully resume birth registration for Bangladeshi citizens in all 71 UPs of the district, and also to make the registration process as simple and hassle-free as possible. In Bangladesh, birth registration is mandatory within 45 days of a birth. It is also required to access a host of vital services. Citizens must not pay for the inability of the administration to devise an effective way to deal with the concerns surrounding illegal registration.

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I don't remember the last time I went to Chattogram. My knowledge of the port city can be summed up by the memorable quote from the epic fantasy series, *Game of Thrones*, where the main protagonist is told:

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

A piece of news made me venture into the abyss of the unknown. On Wednesday, a certain Saleh Ahmed (55) was wading through a waterlogged road in Chattogram when he slipped and plunged into a nearby canal. There has been no sign of the body that disappeared in the Chashma Canal. Firemen are keeping an eye for the body to surface as their initial search has yielded no results. In the last five years, at least six people have died in this canal that flows into Karnaphuli river, including a CNG auto-rickshaw carrying a passenger. Mind it, we are talking about the disappearance of a citizen from the heart of a city, not of a trekker lost in the wilderness. It tells a lot about our urban planning and management.

Instead of unfolding my ignorance over the waterlogging issue caused by that illegal settlements and unplanned urbanisation; dried-up canals through illegal refilling; garbage accumulation and encroachment of drains; landslides during torrential rains; lack of coordination among different service agencies; and lack of political will and civic behaviour—I shall instead focus on an image that struck me after I heard the canal's name: *chashma*. Chashma or eyeglasses, according to Collins dictionary, “are two lenses in a frame that some people wear in front of their eyes in order to help them see better”.

Saleh Ahmed failed to see that the road

In Chattogram, these institutions are either over-mandated or under-mandated for its drainage system management. The end result is a mess.

underwater had merged with the canal. He disappeared while trying to cross the road on his way to the shrine at Muradnagar. Google Maps helped me locate the canal near a hill of the same name. The canal, if I have understood correctly, flows from the nearby Chashma Hill and ferries water to the river and then to the sea. The

The Hills Have Eyes

man, a vegetable trader, died under the watchful eyes of the hill and the canal. I am sorry if the reference reminds you of the horror film *The Hills Have Eyes*. But this incident has no horror plot or link to any urban legend suggesting that the man had offended one of the holy men in the shrines or that the canal demanded human sacrifices to keep its flow. It is an accident as the victim failed to see. The question is: Whose fault is it that he couldn't see? Can we afford not to

waterlogging. The incident at the Chashma Canal makes us see such rain as the cry of the sky. Nature exists in an organic whole; if one body is hurt, the other part feels it too.

Surely, there are agencies to see this and dismiss my poetic rendering as illusory as the birthplace of Rama. A simple Google search produced the names of three key actors. The Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) is responsible for the drainage system besides houses, roads, and

Saleh Ahmed will keep occurring.

From my safe distance in the capital, it is difficult for me to fathom the gravity of the situation. Just like it is difficult for us to imagine why desperate Afghans were clinging on to the body of a plane to escape from Kabul that had fallen. The spectacle made us aware of the horror that returned to a space that was beginning to feel the air of freedom and democracy. The image of the bodies falling off the plane created a spectacle. The sight and sound



Firefighters search for a man in a canal at Muradpur, Chattogram after he slipped and plunged into it as the nearby road was submerged by rainwater on August 25, 2021.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

see when an accident like this happens? Where is the body now? Stuck somewhere in the cornice of a hill? Stuck in the silt and filth of the blocked canals, flow into the river, or carried to the sea to become shark meat?

The uniqueness of Chattogram lies in its topography. Here we have a city that houses hills, plains, canals, rivers, and the Bay area. A 1969 survey under the “Storm Drainage and Flood Control Master Plan and Feasibility Report for Chattogram”, conducted by the US-based engineering firm JR Snell, identified 34 canals in Chattogram. Twelve of those canals do not exist anymore, and eight are in the process of dying. Of them, Chatkhai Canal has the ill fame of being the “Sorrow of Chittagong.” If this downward trend continues, what future do we have for the water bodies? The lost body of Saleh Ahmed creates a spectacle to reflect on the condition of manmade disasters. His death, in a way, is a performative act. We may not hear it, but we can feel its silence. It is easy to blame the downpour for the

rainwater management. The Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) deals with primary and larger canals. Chattogram WASA (CWASA) takes care of sanitation and storm-water management. My colleague from Chattogram tells me that these three agencies become hyper-active only during the monsoon (and I believe him, because the Dhaka officials are no different). The lack of coordination among them is evident from the city flyovers where you can see that one agency digs and fills up the road, and then another agency repeats the performance soon after. One agency vacates the illegal settlements, while the others allow new ones to grow. It seems like a recitation competition where everyone is given the same poem to recite. Ideally, everyone should play a certain part of the play to complement one another so as to complete the act. According to experts, these institutions are either over-mandated or under-mandated for drainage system management. The end result is a mess. It must be dealt with urgently, otherwise tragedies like that of

it had reached many shores including ours. Unfortunately, sometimes we get excited over things that happen afar while we miss things that occur in our own backyard.

Wasn't it Tagore who famously wrote in *Sphulingo* (Sparks):

“I've gone to see the mountains, the oceans I've been to view.

But I haven't seen with these eyes What two steps from my home lies

On a sheaf of paddy grain, a glistening drop of dew.”

Tears of Saleh add “a glistening drop of dew” to the waters of the Chashma canal, by extension to the Karnaphuli river, and to the sea. One can only hope that the pair of spectacles will be fixed soon. The frame needs to be fixed. Only then will we “see better” (as the fool advised King Lear in Shakespeare's tragedy) and see the misery of the common man.

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Why amplifying Rohingya voices is essential

AHMED SHAFQUAT HASSAN

THROUGHOUT history, humanity has often failed to take adequate notice of some of the worst atrocities that were committed. The story of the Rohingya falls squarely into this category. As a group, they are among the most persecuted, and yet their cries for justice and help have long gone unheard.

On August 25, 2017, the Myanmar military launched a brutal crackdown that would lead to the exodus of about 700,000 Rohingya who fled persecution and mass ethnic cleansing on their own land. They crossed miles of treacherous terrain to find themselves at the borders of Bangladesh, where most of them are currently housed in camps strewn across Cox's Bazar. While some countries surrounding Myanmar turned away many of the Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh took in all who turned up and gave them shelter and support. August 25 has since come to be known as the “Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day”, to be observed every year.

This was but the latest in Myanmar's long history of systematic oppression of this community, however. Since 1942, the Rohingya have suffered almost apartheid-like conditions in their country. They have been disenfranchised, and denied support, education and economic opportunities. Beyond that, they have been subjected to myriad human rights abuses, including forced labour, not unlike slavery. Myanmar's distaste for the Rohingya is a result of an ethno-religious clash with the objectives of the Myanmar junta, which has been trying not only to curb the establishment of democratic rule in the country, but also to unite the nation under a more Buddhist identity.

This infectious problem was first noticed during World War II, as the Rohingya sided with the Allied forces while the Myanmar military chose to side with the Empire of Japan. Since then, the abuse and ostracisation of the Rohingya people have been prevalent. They were denied any opportunity to self-identify or find any form of economic emancipation. And, while this infection festered, the

world failed to take notice. Although the rise of the democratic movement in Myanmar seemed to have brought some semblance of hope for a cure, especially for marginalised communities like the Rohingya, the recent coup staged by the military stunted any possibility of justice, accountability or reconciliation in the foreseeable future. While the world was distracted by the 2020 American presidential election and its aftermath, whispers of a coup to seize power in

like the Palestinians, the Syrians and many more, is their (lack of) ability or opportunity to tell their story. It is one thing for a nation to host those who have been displaced, but that is neither a sustainable nor a justifiable way of managing the problem. What is required is the demand for justice and the accommodation of that process.

In the years leading up to the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, there was a sufficient degree of mandate and political

along with their allies and advocates from across the globe.

The Rohingya require the same form of support and access to such modes of narrative building. This could happen primarily by giving them access to modes of media allowing them to speak freely in demand for justice and accountability against those who oppressed them in Myanmar. However, to make their advocacy effective, access to education and a guide for advocacy are necessary. The world can collectively help further the cause by simply joining their demand for justice. The momentum towards justice delivery must be kept up.

The effectiveness of international law largely depends on cooperation. The global community, if correctly informed, can be persuaded to push for the restoration of democracy and the rights of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Bangladesh has long demanded such restorations. As a host country, Bangladesh's support of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other such supranational legal bodies and trial initiatives is instrumental in ensuring that justice is served to the Rohingya quicker than instances in the past. Such courts have presented their interest in the matter in recent years; the logistical support necessary should not be difficult to obtain.

As we recall the unspeakable horrors of August 25, 2017 today, it is imperative that we remind ourselves why remembering these stories of atrocities inflicted on the Rohingya and other refugees around the world is important. While Bangladesh may not have the resources to offer them a permanent home, it is possible for us to amplify their voices, demanding justice for their people by being their permanent allies—much like our own allies did in the past. Their message and stories must be heard and amplified so that they can no longer be ignored or, worse, forgotten. So that even if it is in the distant future, those who have suffered, and the generations after them, are able to use these narratives to demand the justice they long for.

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Rohingya children fly improvised kites at the Kutupalong refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on December 10, 2017.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Myanmar, democratically won by the NLD party, were already in the air. But the global community failed to take notice again. Today, some 600,000 Rohingya still remain in Myanmar, living in constant fear for their lives.

The Rohingya are currently screaming into a void, unable to find ways to voice their concerns and thoughts or attract meaningful support. What binds us to their plight is Bangladesh's experience of similar tragedies before and during the 1971 war. What binds the Rohingya's plight to that of the millions of other persecuted or forcibly displaced peoples,

will galvanised against the atrocities committed during World War II. The stories of the families who suffered at the hands of their oppressors, and later were allowed to come forward, were a means to ensuring that their stories lived to see the days of trial and stand as testimony when required. This was equally true of the years of advocacy in favour of trials against the war criminals of 1971 in Bangladesh. Many of these stories were frequently published in media across multiple platforms. However, it was imperative that the people who suffered were empowered to speak for themselves,