

Mobilise aid to help the new poor

Immediate action needed to tackle the alarming rise of poverty

ACCORDING to the findings of a survey done by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), the number of new poor reached 32.4 million in August, after the second wave of the pandemic. In March, before the second wave of Covid led to another round of lockdown, the percentage of people counted as new poor was 14.75, according to an earlier edition of the study. In the latest study, that number has gone up to 19.54 percent.

This study once again confirms what a number of others have previously suggested—that the shock from the second wave of the pandemic has led to a further rise of poverty. Since the Covid pandemic started, a number of studies conducted by different organisations have indicated that poverty in Bangladesh has risen due to the pandemic-induced lockdowns, as well as other factors. In the meantime, we have seen high-level government officials refuting these numbers, while failing to provide any of their own or without giving reasons as to why these numbers weren't acceptable.

In any case, what is clear as day is that poverty in the country has gotten worse, and people are struggling as a result. On top of that, due to international supply chain disruptions and the workings of various local trade syndicates, prices of essential commodities have gone through the roof in recent times. All these combined is causing huge sufferings to people—particularly those who have been pushed into the poverty trap during the time of the pandemic.

Amid such circumstances, we fail to understand why the government is raising fuel prices, which will surely have a knock-on effect on all other goods and services. What is required is for the government to provide all forms of support to the people who are economically struggling, not measures that will increase their financial burden.

In line with that, the government should immediately consult with experts to formulate strategies that can quickly help those who have become newly poor, to get back on their feet. A big factor that has led to the rise in poverty is the loss of jobs. The government should, on the one hand, provide some sort of unemployment benefit to them, while on the other, take measures that can help them get reemployed. Moreover, the government should also provide financial aid in terms of direct cash transfer to these people, and for that, it needs to identify who are in need of such assistance, through consultations with different NGOs and think tanks.

Do more to de-escalate unrest in Rohingya camps

Authorities must step in to investigate and resolve internal conflicts

IT seems that tensions in Rohingya refugee camps are only increasing as this daily recently reported the death of an alleged Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) leader in Whykong camp in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila. Though it is unclear as to what really transpired, police suspect that Mohammad Hashim, a refugee himself, may have been the victim of a mob beating. It has also been alleged that the self-proclaimed ARSA leader was one of the masterminds in the assassination of Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah in September, and may also have been involved in the October 22 killings of six people in a camp madrasa.

One thing that Hashim's alleged murder makes clear is that it is high time for the government to step in and put a stop to such violence and unrest in the refugee camps. The unopposed expansion of an insurgent group such as ARSA is certainly a concern for our national security, as they are often involved in criminal activities such as drug peddling and weapons trafficking along our borders, besides also causing mayhem in the lives of Rohingya refugees through attacks, human trafficking, and even murder. Earlier reports by this daily have stated how refugees spend their nights fearing criminal attacks in the overcrowded camps.

We reiterate our concern, from our earlier columns, about whether only three battalions of the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) are enough to effectively maintain law and order in the camps that are housing over a million refugees. Though patrolling by security forces increased after the killing of Mohib Ullah, it is clearly not enough to make the camps safe for their inhabitants.

We also urge the government to be proactive in de-escalating the tensions in Rohingya refugee camps, instead of reacting to gruesome incidents after they occur. If such incidents are allowed to continue without thorough investigation and strict resistance from authorities, the conflicts between groups within the camps will only increase and may even reach a tipping point that will be difficult to turn back from. Security in the camps must be consolidated significantly if we are to avoid more violence and loss of lives. Authorities must prioritise the safety of the Rohingyas seeking refuge in the camps, until their peaceful and dignified repatriation is achieved.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Don't raise fuel price

In the last six years, the average crude oil price was about USD 50, when BPC didn't reduce local fuel price, hence it made significant profits. I suggest that, with the higher crude oil price now, the BPC not increase local fuel price in a Covid-distressed economy. Rather, if needed, it should redeem some of its earlier made profits to maintain the current price level at least for the next two years. This would be useful for the economy, business and even for the government.

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BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

WHEN life gives you lemons, make lemonade. If lemonade can help you go invisible, do something insane: rob a bank, perhaps. In 1995, a middle-aged man named McArthur Wheeler walked into two banks in Pittsburgh doing just that. He even smiled at the security cameras during the heist. Later when police arrested him, he muttered: "But I wore the juice." Wheeler thought that by rubbing lemon juice all over his face—as lemon juice can be used as invisible ink—he would be unseen to surveillance cameras. Police later confirmed that the man was not deranged, but "incredibly mistaken." Psychologist Prof David Dunning and his student Justin Kruger at Cornell University studied this curious

played in strategically customised, spin-friendly, slow wickets. They scored low, but defended such low scores against worthy opponents. The slowness of the pitch allowed our batters to toy with their shots: scoops, reverse sweeps, or cross-bats (some of these shots were agricultural enough to be reminiscent of our indigenous games, such as *danguti*). These matches were designed to boost team confidence ahead of the tournament. Our formidable win against Sri Lanka, Australia, and New Zealand gave us false self-assurance.

Our Tigers flew from the soggy fields of Mirpur to the dry deserts of Dubai in a hot air balloon. It did not take much for Great Britain (Scotland, Ireland, and England) and Australia to remind us of the reality of the colonial game. Agricultural shots against the colonial powers worked well in films such as *Lagaan*. Illusion reigns supreme in movies. In reality, such shots reduced our Mirpur Tigers to kittens who were simply found playing with a ball of

incompetence calculus. I blame my middle-class sentiment for my whimsical support for the Tigers of Mirpur. My love-hate pendulum with which I approach our national team is probably common to most of the people that I know. We love to be associated with victory, but dissociate the moment there is defeat. Then again, as a nation, we don't get too many opportunities to be proud of our own. Team Tigers have given us a few such occasions. We pin our hopes on their success. It pains us to see our balloons of hope being burst by their irresponsibility and incompetence. Probably, by now, the incorrigible Tigers have made most of us indifferent to sports.

However, while watching the gallery, another reality dawned on me. The expatriate Bangladeshi audience went to every match to enthusiastically support their team. The match for them was a lemon that promised lemonade. Most of them are probably humiliated by their affluent hosts on a daily basis. The matches were a respite from the daily



If the Tigers see international tournaments as platforms to learn at best, they must be the most educated team in the world.

FILE PHOTO:
FIROZ AHMED

case and came up with a theory, which is now known as the Dunning-Kruger effect. It talks about the "illusion of confidence."

In their research paper, Dunning and Kruger wrote: "When people are incompetent in the strategies they adopt to achieve success and satisfaction, they suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realise it. Instead, like Mr Wheeler, they are left with the mistaken impression that they are doing just fine."

Our national men's cricket team went to the ICC T20 World Cup with similar over-confidence buoyed by the success attained in the preparatory matches

hope during the entire competition. The Dunning-Kruger effect could be seen in action as the reverse bell curve exposed the over-confidence and incompetence of our team. The hyperbole with which we cite stats to describe our non-performing stars sounded horrible (pun unintended), especially in the shrieks of an over-enthusiast commentator. The blame game of the board bosses sounded equally empty as they had failed miserably over the years to spread cricket outside of Mirpur or to create a high-performing talent pool. Instead, they prematurely bring in players from the Under-19 team to play for the senior team, only to break their confidence once and for all. Political considerations add further to the

drudgery. They probably spent a fortune to be in the fields to support their team, hoping for a moment of glory which would allow them to hold their heads high among the people who have little or no respect for them in their professional sphere. The game was more than runs and wickets. It was a *lagan* (appropriate time) for them to be proud of their nation in an international setting. But provided with the lemon, our team managed to turn it sour for its fellow compatriots. I guess we are making over-confidence a national habit.

You can take my lemonade saga with a grain of salt. Let me garnish it with a mint-condition example.

Around 90 percent of the applicants,

who took the admission test under the "Ka" unit at Dhaka University, have failed. The pass percentage in the "Kha" unit is slightly better: 16.89 percent. Ironically, 75 percent of these admission-seekers scored a perfect GPA of 5 in their HSC or equivalent exams. The admission tests have exploded the bubble of confidence these applicants have been living in. As someone who used to set questions for these tests, I know that the question-setters are under strict instructions to

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judge the knowledge of the students at an intermediate level. Then why would so many students fail? True, the selection process demands a high number of eliminations, but that does not justify the failure of so many students in the tests.

According to one report, many of the students failed due to their lack of proficiency in compulsory English language. English is important as students are expected to read texts and supplementary resources in English at the tertiary level. Without linguistic competence, they will be forced either to express in a faulty language or to memorise their answers. Maybe it is rote learning that has improved their academic portfolios at the secondary level. The GPA is a result of a rehearsed performance or a faulty assessment system that gives false hope to our young ones. As our cricket stars have shown, grades are not always true reflectors of one's abilities.

The coaching centres and publishing houses spoon-feed our students with false confidence that falls short at the first sight of a real-life test. The high GPAs are nothing but a manipulation of the market. Similarly, why are we not surprised when our top-ranked player is given chance to play in IPL not for his performance, but for his ability to lure the Bangladeshi market?

Isn't it uncanny that the Dunning-Kruger effect can be traced in both our education and our cricket? Well, our cricket gods have once again consoled us saying that these games on the global platforms are but occasions to learn. One meme has it right: the learning curve of the Bangladesh team makes Tigers the most educated team in the world.

Meanwhile, someone in Cricinfo wryly wrote: "You are the weakest link, goodbye."

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Celebrating cooperatives, reimagining economies



DEBRA EROYMONS

ON the first Saturday in November, Bangladesh observes the National Cooperatives Day. In these times of domination by giant corporations, it may be hard to imagine

the role of cooperatives. Yet, the Bangladeshi government is supporting the development and growth of cooperatives, resulting in a growing number of cooperatives and their members, and their increased importance to the economy.

The dominance of giant corporations on the global economy is not something to celebrate. The fact that corporations are richer than many national governments gives the former far too much power. Back when I worked on tobacco control, I was shocked that governments around the world were reluctant to pass laws that might harm the business of tobacco companies. Wait—isn't it the government's duty to make laws to protect health and the environment? Isn't controlling corporations a major part of their duties? But even in countries which score low on the corruption index, corporate lobbying still influences policy.

Giant corporations have a well-deserved notoriety for lobbying against any number of regulations that would protect the environment and people's health but harm corporate profit. Examples of corporate malfeasance include lobbying that contributes to major oil spills, Facebook spreading misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines and contributing to the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol, and Amazon crushing unions. Giant corporations are also known for their effect on small businesses: when a

Walmart comes to town, a tsunami of shop closures follows in its wake, as small businesses have no way to match Walmart's prices. With Amazon delivering ever more goods—and there are various smaller versions of Amazon fulfilling the same role here in Bangladesh—fewer people go to shops, which also helps put those shops out of business. But with those closures of local shops comes a devastating effect on the local economy, from which many small towns never

allow me a brief lapse into fantasy. You know how there are all those cheap Chinese goods for sale—toys and sandals and other junk that lasts perhaps a few weeks or months at most? But people buy them because they are "affordable." Well, obviously, mass-producing plastic products for consumption by the poor is not great for the environment, nor does it particularly contribute to human happiness. Imagine, instead, a world in which more of our goods were hand-



Successful cooperatives have changed the fate of many communities all around Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO:
STAR

recover. Fewer people have traditional jobs. More people work for the gig economy, where they have no worker protection, no health insurance, and no pension.

It might seem that the only direction in which we can move is towards ever greater consolidation of the economy into the hands of a few corporations, and thus ever more billionaires controlling most of the world's wealth—as well as its governments. But there is a brighter alternative.

produced by craftspeople, who have some interest and pride in their work. Rather than shop regularly, we would own a lot fewer things, but they would be of better quality. Rather than work for giant corporations where, too often, we are merely interchangeable parts easily discarded if, heaven forbid, we raise our voices for better working conditions, we would belong to a local cooperative of people interested in using their skills to earn their livelihood—but also in contributing to the community.

Cooperation is an essential quality that enables people to live together and local economies to thrive.

Another fantasy, based on a Bangla novel I read, is of local communal kitchens that buy food in bulk, hire local people to cook it, then sell it at low cost to those in the community. If you can't afford even that price, you can contribute labour to eat for free. Communal kitchens would save people money and time. Working together to cook and serve the food would also strengthen communities.

There are many organisations, like the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and Local Futures, that study and promote a more localised approach that emphasises cooperation over competition, the local over the global, and concern for all life over selfishness. There is no reason to allow giant corporations to continue to dominate our economies and our lives. We can support the local—both in terms of individual and small businesses and cooperatives. Truth be told, competition is overrated in economics; cooperation is an essential quality that enables people to live together and local economies to thrive.

If you agree, try to ensure that your shopping matches your convictions by supporting cooperatives and small local businesses, rather than giant corporations. We all can contribute to creating the society that we wish to live in.

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