

The Daily Star

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DHAKA MONDAY DECEMBER 13, 2021, AGRAHAYAN 28, 1428 BS

OMICRON detected in Bangladesh

As the new coronavirus variant has been detected in Bangladesh, our best bet is to stop it from spreading

As we had all feared, the Omicron variant of the coronavirus has now been detected in Bangladesh. Two players of the Bangladesh women's national cricket team, who tested positive for Covid-19 last week, have been infected with the Omicron variant. They are currently under observation in quarantine, and we hope they will make quick and full recovery.

This, however, should serve as a wake-up call for us all. On the first day of this month, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that Omicron had been found in 24 countries. A week later, various international media outlets began to report that Omicron had spread to nearly 40 countries, which WHO confirmed as well. Meanwhile, the most recent reports suggest that the new variant has spread to close to 60 countries. That just goes to show how quickly this new variant has been spreading.

According to scientists, the Omicron variant is 4.2 times more transmissible in its early stage than Delta. That means that it is already far easier to spread—and could be even more so when it mutates further.

The economic damage done by the previous waves of Covid—particularly as the country was forced to go into lockdown—was massive. Our economy is yet to recover in any shape or form from that, which means the Omicron variant poses a clear and present danger to our economy, along with the health of our citizens. Therefore, if we continue to handle the situation lackadaisically, like we did during the previous waves, there is no doubt that Bangladesh is in for a bumpy ride ahead.

We hope that the authorities have learned from the mistakes that were made during the previous Covid waves. Instead of being reactive in its measures, the government has to be proactive in stopping the new variant from spreading in the country. That means it has to ensure strict monitoring and screening at the airports and at every other location through which people might be entering Bangladesh. And those entering the country should be placed into a minimum of 14 days of quarantine.

As recommended by experts, the genomic sequencing of every new case of Covid-19 should be done to limit the transmission of Omicron. Moreover, the government should make sure that all hospitals are ready and equipped to deal with any sudden spike in the number of infections, and also continue to enforce the health guidelines strictly—without exceptions.

HSIA authorities must ensure smooth flight operations

Mismanagement following eight-hour closure of runway must be addressed ASAP

PASSENGERS at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka have been going through immense sufferings after the airport authorities introduced an eight-hour closure of its lone runway—starting from midnight on Thursday—in order to facilitate the construction and expansion of taxiways for the airport's under-construction third terminal. Reportedly, the departure of several flights were delayed following the closure, since the airport authorities could not complete the immigration process of several hundred passengers in time, as per the new schedule.

While the airport authorities had previously assured that the closure would not cause any disruption of flights and in-passenger handling services, what happened in reality was just the opposite. Reportedly, at least 12 international flights had to be rescheduled due to the runway closure, and passengers had to stand in long queues at the check-in counters, immigration and other places. The mismanagement at the airport was evident everywhere—including inside and outside the terminals, passenger check-in counters of airlines, immigration, and boarding bridges.

While flight delays and passengers' sufferings are regular phenomena at Dhaka airport, the closure of its only runway for as long as eight hours every day has just turned the situation from bad to worse. Evidently, the authorities have not planned properly or taken any prior preparations to operate all the flights—some 85-90 flights depart and touch down at the airport every day—within the 16 hours of operation. As the airport authorities often grapple with maintaining the flight schedules at regular times, it is no surprise that they would struggle to maintain the new schedule, unless of course they take the necessary measures to do so. Sadly, that's where they have failed—they did not ensure the necessary number of check-in counters, boarding bridges, security check-in counters, baggage loading and unloading bays and other related facilities to maintain the new schedule.

Since the daily runway closure is supposed to continue till June next year, the authorities must address all these issues as soon as possible in order to avoid the flight delays and reduce passengers' sufferings. They must ensure that all the immigration counters are in operation so that passengers can complete their immigration on time. Setting up additional check-in counters and other necessary facilities to deal with the pressure of passengers, as different airlines have demanded, should also be considered. In addition, the manpower shortage at the airport also must be addressed. Last but not the least, the airport authorities may consider reducing the closure time of the runway in order to overcome the present crisis.

Achieving a just society in the next 50 years

MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

THROUGHOUT 2021, we have been celebrating 50 years of Bangladesh's independence, with a lot of glory and pride. We are fortunate to have a country of our own as many people around the world are still struggling for a country of their own even today. We are immensely grateful for the sacrifice made by the freedom fighters who fought to liberate the country during the nine months of war in 1971. We have deep gratitude towards Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Bangladesh's war for independence.

This war was to liberate Bangladesh from the economic, social, political and cultural dominance of Pakistan. The Liberation War was influenced by the ethos to establish a country where the underlying philosophy of development policies were equity and justice. Independence was about achieving democratic, economic, social and cultural rights. Following our independence, the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh were articulated eloquently in our constitution.

After Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, we inherited a poor and undiversified economy. It was predominantly an agricultural economy with low productivity. It had underdeveloped

Any economy which stands on weak footings and is characterised by high inequality, low job creation, poor governance, corruption, and low efficiency cannot sustain its progress for long.

industrial and services sectors, a rapidly growing population, low education and skill, and poor infrastructure. Due to decades of British and Pakistani colonial exploitation, the economy was stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty. Low levels of income, savings and investment were resulting in a low growth. On top of these, the war had caused serious damage to the economy.

Despite such unfavourable

circumstances and resource constraints, Bangladesh has made spectacular economic and social progress over the last five decades. The growth rate of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been impressive. On average, Bangladesh's GDP has risen from about three percent in the 1970s, to seven percent in the 2010s, and crossed eight percent just before Covid-19 hit the country. Though the pandemic has slowed the GDP growth, it is projected to catch up faster



In the next 50 years, Bangladesh has to work towards consolidating what has been achieved so far and improve upon where it is lagging behind. PHOTO: COLLECTED

than other countries. High growth has pushed per capita income upwards by 23 times in 2020 from the level in 1973.

The characteristics of a modern economy—that is, the transition from agricultural dependence to industry and service sector-based growth—is also being observed gradually. Currently, the share of agriculture in Bangladesh's GDP is about 13 percent, while that of the industry and services sectors are about 35 and 52 percent, respectively. The economy has also been integrated with the global economy. Shares of exports, imports and remittances in GDP have increased over time. High imports are possible through impressive remittance flow. On the other hand, dependence on foreign aid to undertake development work has declined by almost half in terms of its share in GDP in 2020 from that in 1973, indicating a more self-reliant growth effort.

Economic progress has impacted the citizens' social lives positively, on many counts. Population below the poverty line has declined from more than 80 percent in the early 1970s to 24.2 percent in 2016. Life expectancy has increased by more than one and half times since 1973. Maternal mortality has declined by almost four times and child mortality by about five times now since the 80s. And there are many more visible progresses, of

which we are proud.

The recognition of such progress has come from several organisations. In February 2021, Bangladesh, for the second time, fulfilled all three criteria to graduate from the group of least developed countries to that of developing countries. The United Nations has recommended Bangladesh's graduation by 2026. In 2018, Bangladesh met these criteria for the first time. Besides, in 2015, Bangladesh became a lower middle-income country from a low-income country, according to the World Bank.

Enabling national and international policies, and the hard work and resilience of Bangladeshi people have transformed the economy into one of the fast-paced economies in the world. It could withstand domestic and global challenges such as political unrest, natural calamity, and global financial meltdown. More recently, the economic fallout due to Covid-19 has been much less in Bangladesh than many countries. But such complacency should not get into our heads, because any economy which stands on weak footings and is characterised by high inequality, low job creation, poor governance, corruption, and low efficiency cannot sustain its progress for long.

While we rejoice at the achievements since our independence, we have also observed many missed opportunities. The fruits of the progress are yet to be distributed equally to each and every citizen. Despite steady progress in several areas, the promise of an equitable and just society has remained unfulfilled. Income inequality persists as resources and wealth are concentrated among a few people in society, many of whom are politically connected. The nexus between politics and business is stronger than ever before. It is now a two-way

relationship in Bangladesh. Politicians are now turning into businesspersons by using power to enjoy wealth and luxury, while businesspersons are turning into politicians to enjoy the power that is attached to it. In the process, the whole objective of serving the people as their representatives has become blurred as this is often a secondary objective of many politicians. Bangladesh is now a country where the number of ultra-rich people is increasing fast. The experience so far is that, as economic prosperity of the country has increased, inequality has risen as well. This is reflected both through Gini coefficient and Palma ratio, which economists use to measure inequality.

Therefore, the macroeconomic numbers are only a part of the full story. The GDP may continue to grow, and per capita income may also rise, but they mean nothing in the end, particularly for those who live on the edge of vulnerability. This is not only because the process of estimating GDP and per capita income is faulty and provides an incomplete picture, but also because, in the absence of major enablers of economic progress, such as participatory development process, growth will continue to suffer from disillusionment. Studies indicate that if political and economic institutions are inclusive and pluralistic, everyone will have incentives to invest and success follows. However, nations find it difficult to succeed if institutions protect the political and economic interests of a small group of powerful people.

On the occasion of Bangladesh's golden jubilee, as we celebrate the achievements made by our country, we also have to bear in mind that the sacrifice of our freedom fighters can only be meaningful if tangible change in the lives of the poorest and common citizens takes place. This requires an inclusive democratic and development process. Participation of the broader section of people in the economic and political process can make the 50 years of economic progress meaningful. During elections, a lot of promises are made by the aspirant public representatives. However, following the elections, one does not see much of those promises fulfilled. The accountability of the political representatives is weak with little monitoring on the fulfilment of their commitments.

Therefore, in the next 50 years, we have to work towards consolidating what has been achieved so far and improve upon where we are lagging behind. Our golden jubilee celebration may come to a close formally by the end of 2021, but we want to celebrate Bangladesh's achievement each and every day. This is possible if we engage ourselves to accomplish the unfulfilled dreams of making Bangladesh a just and equal society.

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Does the US have any moral rights to convene a democracy summit?

FURQANUL ALAM

DEMOCRACY today is going through a bad time all around the world. The ghost of the Arab Spring still haunts us. Authoritarianism and dictatorship have emerged within various structures in different countries around the world. By taking away the freedom of expression and the right to



US President Joe Biden speaks to representatives of more than 100 countries during a virtual democracy summit at the White House in Washington, DC on December 9, 2021. PHOTO: AFP

elect people's representatives, dictators have muzzled their respective citizenries. The cries of the oppressed people can be heard in the streets.

At such a time, the summit for democracy was held on December 9-10 at the initiative of US President Joe Biden. The Biden administration invited 110 countries from around the world to take part in the virtual event. Naturally, China and Russia did not get the call, as

of the invited countries have partial or no democracy. These include Angola, Congo, and Iraq. Democracy in these three countries is blocked, says Freedom House. Only 16 African countries have been invited to the conference, which is one-third of the continent. Although Sierra Leone, Lesotho, Madagascar, Benin and Burkina Faso are better ranked on the Freedom House Democracy Index than those 16 countries, there is no clear

answer as to why they were not invited. Meanwhile, the Philippines and Pakistan in Asia do not have real civil liberties and free and fair elections. Both countries are adept at suppressing opposition. Democracy in India is also moving in the wrong direction. But these countries were invited. Similarly, war-torn Iraq in the Middle East was invited to the conference.

Steven Feldstein, a senior member of the Cornish Endowment, a non-aligned international think tank, said 30 percent of the invited countries had either partial or incomplete civil and political rights. He made the remarks citing Freedom House's 2021 report on civil and political rights.

Does the United States have any moral right to convene or lead a summit on democracy? They have worked directly and indirectly to overthrow many democratic governments in the name of regime change. Former US President Donald Trump's warm relationship with dictatorial leaders around the world was well-known. During his term in office, the whole world witnessed horrific events. After terrorising citizens with arms in front of polling booths on election day last year, Trump supporters attacked the Capitol Hill, the seat of US government, in January this year. Racial discrimination is on the rise in the country. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey conducted on citizens in 18 countries, 56 percent think that the United States is not a good example for democracy. It ranks below Chile, Slovakia and Costa Rica in the Freedom House list of democracies. Thirty-three laws have been enacted in 19 states of the United States to make it difficult for people to vote. In some states, neutral election officials have been replaced by party ideologues. In addition, North Carolina and Texas have changed their electoral maps to get results in the polls.

The United States is on the list of backsliding democracies, as revealed

last month by the Stockholm-based international think tank International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance—for the first time in history. At present, a significant part of the US citizens is in doubt about the credibility of their latest election. According to a poll by the non-profit US media National Public Radio, only 33 percent of Republicans believe the 2024 presidential election will be transparent.

Of the 195 independent nations recognised by the United Nations, 85 countries, including Bangladesh, were not invited to the democracy summit. Due to such a questionable list, the foreign minister of Bangladesh recently commented that only countries with weak democracies were invited in the first phase of the conference. Other countries that have not been called by Biden can perhaps also find solace in the disputed list.

In the current context, the success of the democracy summit is in question. History also speaks against the United States. Democracy meetings of 106 countries were held in June 2000 in Warsaw, Poland. The initiators were then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek. Russia and some Arab countries were invited as potential democracies. The Warsaw Declaration vows to protect human rights. However, the implementation of that declaration has not seen much progress. On the contrary, the condition of democracy in the world has deteriorated day by day over the last 15 years.

It is still too early to say if President Biden was too optimistic about the success of the Summit for Democracy. The influence of dictatorship is growing all over the world. Expecting to find a solution through such a special conference is a bit of a stretch.

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