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HSIA's condition needs dramatic improvement

The state of our biggest airport is an embarrassment

THE current condition of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka is truly shocking. Although the airport's facilities were never anything to boast about, with the closure of the airport's lone runway for around eight hours a day, things have taken a major turn for the worse.

Flights that were supposed to be operated over a 24-hour period are now being jammed into 16 hours due to renovation of the taxiways. As a result, the airport is constantly being overwhelmed with more passengers than it can handle. According to a report in this newspaper, it is near impossible for passengers to get their hands on luggage carts—which have always been too few and are usually in desperate need of repair. The queue in front of the departure lounge now extends way too far, causing all sorts of sufferings for passengers, including constant flight delays. The main reason for this is that the number of health officers that have been assigned to verify the Covid-19 tests are majorly inadequate. And while the queues everywhere are too long, there are hardly any seating facilities available for passengers at the airport.

The first thing that any foreign visitor notices when they visit a new country is its airport. The impression that our airport gives off is one that we should be ashamed of. We often hear our politicians and high officials talk about how important it is to present a good image of our country to the outside world. Well, what image are people to make of our country when they visit our overcrowded and underequipped airport, whose officials tend to be unhelpful and unfriendly?

Migrant workers, whose hard-earned money keeps our balance of payment stable, are among the worst sufferers due to the airport's woeful condition. Many of them, having travelled from the Middle East, have nowhere to rest once they return to the country. Is this how we should be treating our own citizens, who carry on their backs the fate of our economy?

It is outrageous to see how apathetic the authorities have been over the years to the sufferings of passengers at our airports. The current conditions are simply a result of that. For the authorities to allow our biggest airport to be in such a bad state—which presents a terrible first impression of our country to visitors—is testament of how much they actually care about the image of the nation.

We call on the government to take immediate measures to improve the conditions of HSIA. The number of usable luggage carts should be increased. The number of waiting room seats should also be increased, as well as the number of airport staff for all purposes. Moreover, these improvements shouldn't be short-term measures, but a permanent feature at the airport.

Booster shot campaign is timely

Regular vaccination drive must not slow down

WE believe that the government's Covid-19 booster shot campaign, which started on Sunday, could not have come at a better time. With the presence of the newest variant of the coronavirus, Omicron, detected in the country last week, now is the ideal time for us to ramp up our existing vaccination drive as well as further strengthen the immunity of vaccinated citizens with booster shots. According to reports by this daily, the government currently plans to use Pfizer shots on people aged above 60 years and frontliners, and the programme is supposed to expand nationwide soon.

Though this promptness of action makes us feel more optimistic about our fight against the Omicron variant—which is said to be twice as invasive as its predecessor, Delta—we do hope that the mistakes from previous vaccination campaigns will not be repeated. Often in the past, people waited in crowded queues for hours, only to find out that the centre had run out of vaccine doses. Although the health minister recently reassured us that there were enough vaccine shots in stock and that more were arriving next month, we hope the supply of doses will be consistent for at least a few months at a time, so that we don't find ourselves in a bind again.

It is also important that the regular Covid vaccination programme is not disrupted by the booster shot campaign. Only 25.89 percent of the country's population has received both doses of the vaccine so far, and given the speed at which the new variants of the virus emerge, the authorities certainly need to do better in terms of making sure that more people receive their jobs.

As such, we urge the authorities concerned to expand the booster shot campaign to the rest of the population as quickly and efficiently as possible, while also ensuring that the regular vaccination drive does not lose its momentum. In addition to this, the general public needs to be re-motivated to practise simple safety measures such as frequent handwashing, wearing masks in public, and socially distancing. It is also crucial to ensure that the health sector is ready to handle any extreme surges of Covid cases, as we don't want to see a repeat of the first two waves of the pandemic in our country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Will we get our normal life back?

Over the last two years, life has changed drastically for everyone all over the world. The coronavirus is still taking lives of so many people. Death is lurking everywhere: people are dying in road crashes, fires and natural calamities. Murders are also taking place quite often. It seems there is no end to lives being lost for no reason. Will it ever get better? We must do better to get our normal lives back.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

The unbreakable link between development and democracy



FAHMIDA KHATUN

ON the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence this year, we have highlighted our achievements as a country. Indeed, our country's success story in the economic and social arenas are spectacular. From an extremely poor country with high population, undiversified economy and poor infrastructure, Bangladesh has become a lower middle-income country and will graduate from the Least Development Country (LDC) group to the Developing Country group in 2026. A shining example among the other LDCs, Bangladesh's economic and social performances also outshine other South Asian countries in many respects. Economists have analysed the reasons behind this performance quite extensively.

growth and democracy is inconclusive. There exist innumerable studies that discuss whether democracy is necessary for growth. Some empirical studies indicate that democracy does not have much relevance for economic growth. On the other hand, more recent studies concluded that democracy has a significant impact on economic growth.

In my opinion, when we try to link or delink development with democracy, two aspects must be kept in mind. We must comprehend the meaning of both these terms. To start with, by democracy we do not merely mean expressing individual choices by taking part in the electoral process. It is not only about voting in a government in a country—it is about the participatory process in all development efforts of the government of the day. It is about social and institutional transformations where personal growth and welfare are considered integral. It should be a right to have an improved quality of life which is valued and respected.

This brings us to the other concept:



Development and democracy go hand in hand.

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On the eve of the 50th Victory Day of Bangladesh, a number of international media also asked me if democracy was necessary for development. In fact, there are sporadic discussions among certain quarters in the country on the necessity of democracy in the development process. There are also attempts to redefine democracy conveniently. While the political scientists are in the most suitable position to provide a wholesome explanation of the concept, an educated mind also understands the basic concept of democracy.

Theoretically, in a democratic environment, there are better opportunities for economic, social and cultural growth. Democracy is also crucial for sustainable development in the long run. Many scholars, including Milton Friedman, argued that a higher degree of rights led to economic development. Empirically, the relationship between

development. Though we often use "growth" and "development" interchangeably, the depth of these two concepts varies. Growth is a narrow concept that only captures the rise in income, while development entails a deeper meaning of progress. It is about all-encompassing advancement in human life. Therefore, even with a high growth rate, a country may not be necessarily developed. From that perspective, the United Nations categorises countries based not only on per capita income, but also on human asset index and economic vulnerability index. The World Bank, on the other hand, divides countries based only on income. A high-income country may not necessarily be a developed country. The danger of income-based progress is widely known. It only looks at income per capita and ignores the quality of life and other non-economic requirements of human beings. Growth-

based progress also ignores inequality, distributive justice, and inclusivity. It denies the basic rights of a human being. It is no wonder that, while countries are economically progressing, inequality is also increasing around the world.

Therefore, when examples of undemocratic countries are brought up as stories of economic success, these aspects remain absent in the perspective. Recently, China is cited by many as a case study, where the economy is growing fast even

Dysfunctional democracy with little or no accountability and transparency benefited mostly those who were in or close to power.

Bangladesh is at a crossroads now. It has made impressive economic and social progress over the last five decades. But a lot more should be done in the coming years if it has to fulfil the commitment of establishing a just society—as enshrined in the constitution. Unfortunately, the circle of beneficiary groups created

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in an undemocratic environment. This is an utterly short-sighted proposition that contradicts the whole concept of development itself.

Singapore, under the leadership of former President Lee Kuan Yew, is also cited by many. He transformed a third world country into a first world nation within only three decades. However, the other side of the growth story is not encouraging. While Singapore prospered phenomenally at that time, dissenting views were not tolerated. The rule of Lee Kuan Yew is compared with that of an autocrat, who would intimidate any opposition in his way. Therefore, one must not lose sight of the suppression faced by its people. On the positive side, efficiency, honesty, corruption-free administration, absence of red tape, and tax benefits facilitated foreign investment and trade. There was no compromise on discipline in the country. This is unthinkable in countries like Bangladesh, where corruption and politics go hand in hand.

It is surprising to see such discussions of the so-called benevolent dictatorship surface in a country whose people fought for its own democracy and economic emancipation in 1971. Have we not seen that, despite the economic progress of the then Pakistan, the eastern part of the country (Bangladesh) was deprived of all the benefits? The centre of power was located in West Pakistan, and people in East Pakistan had no rights. So, the rights had to be acquired at the cost of blood and lives. And then again, after independence, people's voices were suppressed by the military and autocratic regimes for a long time. Economic growth was not stalled, but that was not necessarily distributed among all.

around political power is becoming larger and stronger day by day. That circle is hijacking the benefits of growth, leaving the larger communities behind. High and wilful bank loan defaults, cheating innocent customers through malpractices in the e-commerce sector, corruption in the health sector, poor quality of education, illegal land and forest-grabbing, pollution of waterbodies, violence against women, and reckless killing through road accidents are some of the examples that reflect how these unacceptable practices continue to remain unabated despite high growth. People's voices are either suppressed or unheard in most cases.

So, democracy should also be about getting the opportunity to take part in determining an individual's own interest, rather than having others' interests imposed on them. Transparency in resource allocation and its utilisation, accountability of resource management, protection of human rights including freedom of expression—all of these are components of the democratic package and essential for inclusive development. Hence, the true meaning of democracy should lie in empowering people through enabling their participation in the electoral and development process. Freedom through free and fair democracy is a defining component of a long-lasting development process. The journey of the highly developed and strong democratic countries vindicate this experience. Bangladesh's next important goal should be to achieve a strong democracy in all spheres: economic, social, cultural, and political.

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Lessons to be learnt from 2021



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE year 2020 was the toughest that I can remember as a business owner. Like many RMG manufacturers in Bangladesh, there were periods where I did not know how I was going to survive.

But what about 2021? While the past 12 months have also been very challenging, there at least seems to be light at the end of the tunnel this time. The dust seems to be settling amid the pandemic and one can begin to see what the future of our industry might look like as we learn to "live with" the coronavirus—rather than constantly battle it.

Around the world, millions of people are still suffering, and many businesses remain in uncertainty. Despite these challenges, it is also possible to look at 2022 with an air of cautious optimism as far as the garment makers of Bangladesh are concerned.

Lessons have certainly been learnt in the nearly two years of the pandemic, and I think from those lessons we can get an idea of how our industry might resume its journey towards the path of prosperity next year and beyond.

What have we learnt, and how can this insight guide us moving forward?

Lesson one is about resilience. If somebody had said in 2019 that all our orders could be stalled for months at a time—just like that!—and that we could somehow struggle on and survive, few would have believed them. And yet, here we are.

At the beginning of this pandemic, predictions were made that 50 percent of Bangladesh's RMG sector might disappear. While the capacity has dropped, it has only dropped slightly, and we have even begun to regain the pre-pandemic production levels as 2021 draws to a close. Ours is a resilient industry with ingenuity at its heart. The past two years have shown how strong we are, and we should take pride in that.

The second lesson is about the

shifts in global production and supply chains. Prior to 2020, our industry at a global level was already re-thinking its sourcing strategies. Fashion retailers were reconsidering their "China plus one" sourcing strategy for a variety of economic and political reasons. The pandemic appears to have sped up that process, as the tension between China and the West has increased. Bangladesh, thankfully, remains politically neutral on the global stage and has not been drawn into the trade spats we have been witnessing between the US and China in recent months.

As an industry, we can capitalise on uncertainty elsewhere and continue to offer a safe, reliable, sourcing hub for fashion brands and retailers.

Lesson three is that size now matters more than ever. It is well documented that our buyers have been consolidating their global supply chains and are rationalising their number of suppliers. The idea is to create closer ties and partnerships with a smaller number of mid-sized and large operators. Only garment makers of a certain critical mass will be able to offer the economies of scale to compete successfully on the global stage moving forward. With this in mind, Bangladesh's RMG base might be forced to go through a period of mergers and acquisitions to improve cost bases and create increased efficiencies. In the short term, this might be challenging for some, but overall, such a process would likely make our industry more globally competitive.

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Lesson four is related to transparency. One thing I have noticed over the past two years is a willingness of governments in the West to consider new regulations around due diligence in supply chains. What does that mean for us? Well, according to these laws, our multinational companies must have greater accountability around their suppliers, and will be held liable if there are social and/or environmental transgressions in their supply chains.



The year 2022 is going to be all about being innovative and adopting sustainable methods to keep the wheels of our RMG sector running.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

These new laws, which we will see more of in the future, puts the spotlight firmly on us as suppliers. We will come under the microscope like never before in the coming years, and be forced to jump through many compliance hoops in order to win and retain business. Already, many vendors request us to sign up for numerous compliance checklists in order to be considered as a supplier. Pressure to meet their standards will only increase as they seek to remove all risks from supply chains. It is up to us all to be on board with these demands, and this issue ties in with the point alluded to above about the growing importance of size and economies of scale.

The final lesson is about the need

to move beyond competing solely on price. This pandemic has proven, yet again, that as garment makers, we remain price-takers. Even these past few months, when the order books have been solid, unit prices have remained on the low end amid fierce competition for orders. Moving forward, I believe we must do all we can as an industry to move beyond being price-takers—otherwise, we will always be chasing our tails.

How can we do this? In the usual

ways—which I have talked about in my columns regularly. By moving beyond staple products and towards value-added areas which use man-made fibres as well as cotton. By innovating. By investing in sustainable production methods. By smart marketing and clever use of PR. And by working together as an industry, united under the umbrella of the BGMEA, which is leading the change in our sector, looking into new possibilities, exploring new markets, and plotting a path for our sector as we emerge from the pandemic.

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