

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Wishing everyone a Happy New Year!

May this year be full of hope and happiness

TWO years ago, when we stepped into an exciting new decade, few would have guessed that it would begin with a global pandemic. As we exit the year 2021, however, all around we can see the hope of a better future increasing among people. Even though it is good to see the number of new infections and deaths in Bangladesh come down the way it has in recent months, we should remain extremely vigilant about the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which has been tearing through many countries.

In order to ensure that we can fully overcome the pandemic, we must continue to work hard in the new year. The government has to focus on improving our healthcare sector, learning from the tragic lessons from the past two years. It should also ramp up its vaccination campaign and make sure that those who are in need of the booster shot the most get them on time and without hassle. The citizens of the country must continue to maintain the proper health safety guidelines and help each other out in times of need. As has been revealed by numerous studies, the pandemic has caused complete chaos in the lives of millions of people. Many have lost their loved ones and their livelihoods. Poverty has increased rapidly over the last two years, and the government has to work extra hard and effectively if we are to overcome such a huge setback. While the economy seems to be finally recovering from the pandemic, we must try our utmost best to make this recovery inclusive. That is the best way to build a better future for all.

Road safety has again been a thorny issue this year, as numerous students and others have needlessly lost their lives due to the apathy of the authorities to ensure safety on our roads. We have seen students once again taking to the streets, protesting the utter disorder that has taken over them. In the new year, we hope to see that change for the better. The cases of violence against women and children that have occurred in the last year are also worrying, and as a society we have to try and eradicate such violence. Moreover, the intolerance on part of the state and its actors that has led to the shrinking of the public sphere, of the space for dissent, etc also has to be addressed with urgency, if we are to prevent our democracy from spiralling into complete despotism. As citizens, we must remember to actively participate in the functioning of the state if we are to reverse the trend towards authoritarianism.

As a newspaper devoted to the truth, The Daily Star commits to continue to work for public interest, social justice, the young people of this country, development, the environment, better democratic practices, and freedom of expression. We thank all of you who have stood by us all these years. A very Happy New Year to our readers and patrons!

Now is not the time for complacency

We must continue to improve our healthcare facilities

WE are pleased to know that the healthcare sector of Bangladesh is now much better equipped to deal with surges in Covid-19 cases than it was last year. In 2021, the major challenges that the healthcare sector encountered was ensuring supply of Covid-19 vaccines to inoculate a huge chunk of the population, and that the infected got beds, ICU support, and adequate oxygen. Following these challenges, the government rightly faced widespread criticisms after failing to ensure some of these basic healthcare facilities months after the pandemic began. Fortunately, now our hospitals are much better prepared.

Having said that, even though we don't fully understand how dangerous the Omicron variant is, we have seen how it has caused havoc in some parts of the world—including some of the most developed countries with healthcare facilities that are miles ahead of ours. Moreover, even though on paper our healthcare facilities seem to have improved, it has not yet been fully tested. We hope that proves to be the case, and that the new variant of the coronavirus does not spread at the same rate here, as it has done elsewhere. However, we must prepare for the worst—and in line with that, continue to improve the conditions of our hospitals to be able to tackle any potential new surges of Covid cases.

We must remember the lessons we learnt last year, when some might have prematurely thought the pandemic was over once infection rates began to go down in the beginning of the year, only to explode later on—and the stress that put on our healthcare system. In order to avoid such a mistake, we urge the authorities to ensure that our hospital facilities do not deteriorate, and that all healthcare staff maintain the same standards they had done towards the later parts of the previous year. Moreover, one aspect that is yet to be addressed properly is the corruption that has been plaguing our healthcare sector—which we saw even during the worst times of the pandemic. This, too, is something that the authorities must address with utmost focus and urgency.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop with the noise pollution!

Winter is here, which means the season of weddings is here. Weddings are certainly joyous occasions, but must we celebrate them with music so loud that our neighbours cannot sleep at night? I have sick parents, for whom loud noise is not only disturbing, but detrimental for their health too. People need to stop with this menace. One person's celebration must not inconvenience others.

Suraiya Khaled, Old Dhaka

Our children will be our saviours



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is senior deputy editor and the head of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

IS it really 2022? How did 2021 go so fast? Was it because we had such high expectations and ended up facing one daunting catastrophe after another, that we didn't realise that the days had turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into a whole year?

It was supposed to have been the year of salvation—the year when we would finally be able to at least take our masks off and breathe. Instead, it became another battle: another, more vicious strain of coronavirus called Delta ravaged our nations, killing and debilitating humans even more ruthlessly than its cousins, destroying families. Then, just as we were starting to believe the pandemic was on its way out, Omicron made its way in to give us a rude reminder that it was far from over.

It has been the year of "realisation": that we must live with Covid—for how long, no one knows. Scientists fear that newer variants of the virus may crop up from time to time, and the one way to combat them is to update the vaccine formulae and keep inoculation rates high.

But since we are starting the New Year, let's try to see the silver linings among the constant barrage of tragedy and chaos. Unsurprisingly, it has been the young people who have provided the balm to our wounded psyche. Nothing could be more exhilarating than the Bangladesh U-19 women's football team clinching the 2021 SAFF U-19 Women's Championship after defeating India 1-0. The euphoria of the girls was so contagious that it was hard not to get teared up with pride and wonder. How heart-warming was it to see the feisty Mogini twins—Ana Mogini and Anuching Mogini—play, with Ana scoring the winning goal? It proved again how girls from the remotest, most impoverished and neglected communities could be trained to become the most formidable athletes. This, and the happy event of the Bangladesh national women's cricket team qualifying for the Women's ODI World Cup for the first time, are signs of where we should be turning our attention to: sports facilities and support for our girls and women—something that has been grossly neglected for decades.

While we are talking about getting awards for excellent performances, let's not forget the 16-member team of girls and boys who won four gold, two silver and five bronze medals in the 23rd International Robot Olympiad. It proves the point about giving young people the right opportunities at the right time to



▲ Young students showed the courage and the leadership that adults failed to display when they took to the streets to demand something as basic as road safety in 2021.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

bringing in outstanding results.

Last year has also shown us just how passionate our young people are about protesting against injustice. The death of Nayeem Hasan, a Notre Dame College student who was hit by a Dhaka South City Corporation garbage truck, reignited protests by hundreds of school students demanding road safety, compensation

by a sadistic husband. The young are tired of the impotency of greying leaders who talk incessantly and continue to fail in leading, protecting or nurturing them and their planet. Their outrage is contagious and has connected millions of their comrades across the globe, and now collectively they are a force to be reckoned with.

for victims, and proper monitoring of vehicle fitness. It showed that, despite the heavy-handedness and intimidation they had faced in the first road safety movement in 2018 (also sparked by the deaths of two students hit by a killer bus), these young people refused to cower down from stopping vehicles to check for valid papers, and demanding something as basic as roads that are safe from reckless drivers, who think nothing of bulldozing a human life and speeding away.

All over the world, young people are joining the movement for change—whether it is Greta Thunberg from Sweden continuing to chastise governments for their ineptitude and insincerity in combatting climate change, or Malala from Pakistan who took a shot to the head for championing girls education banned by the Taliban, or those thousands of young men and women pouring into the streets to protest police brutality and gross racial discrimination against Blacks or People of Colour, or the students of Dhaka University protesting the torture and killing of a fellow student

In the Orwellian systems that seem to be spreading all over the world—where the innocent continues to be denied justice, silenced for even asking for it; where the slightest dissent may be ferociously muzzled and where the tentacles of corruption reach far and wide—it is the young people who have the temerity to throw their fists into the air in protest or victory. It is their courage, resilience, solidarity, the clear perception of what is right and wrong, the ability to be creative in the direst circumstances, and the innovative spirit that emerges during each crisis as well as each technological revolution—it is all this that we must embrace, encourage and support with sincerity and love. The year 2021 has given us ample evidence that pandemics, climate change and greed for power will continue to threaten our very existence. As we stumble into 2022, let's have faith that our young will find ways to reverse this doomsday trajectory, and come up with the antidote for a toxic, dystopian future.

Mobile Playground, Happy Children



Debra Froymsen is the executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh, and author of "Beyond Apologies: Defining and Achieving an Economics of Wellbeing."

DEBRA FROYMSON

HAVE you ever watched kittens, puppies, or other baby animals play? Running, chasing, jumping, nipping. Young goats scramble up a hill and push each other off. Colts bound joyously across open fields. They have fun, sure, but they also gain physical strength, agility, and various other skills necessary for survival.

What is essential for other animals is not optional for people. We need parks for recreation, socialising, exercise and play. We also need more porous surfaces and trees as Bangladesh bears the brunt of the climate crisis ever more in ensuing years. Ideally, then, the importance of green space would translate into prioritising parks and playgrounds throughout the city, and ensuring that they are accessible for all.

And yet, caught up in our busy lives, we seem to forget that play is not just for fun. Many parents seem not to realise that play is necessary. Many do not recognise that it is not healthy—physically, mentally or socially—for children to be shuttled about between school and tutoring, with no opportunity to run about and, well, be children.

As for those parents who do understand the importance, who live in a city, and who realise that active outdoor play has many advantages that playing with a smartphone does not, the question arises: "Where can my children play?" In the rush of development, modernisation, and with an influx of climate refugees,

what open spaces are left in cities? How many schools or neighbourhoods have playgrounds? How many areas have usable parks?

We need to create many more such spaces in our cities. But we cannot afford to wait quietly. Children's development is being harmed by the absence of such spaces. The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problem.



▲ This little strip of an alleyway has been perfectly transformed into a safe place for children to play in and the adults to socialise in. The photo was taken in Vietnam.

PHOTO: COURTESY

We need to understand that the term "public space" includes streets, roads, and footpaths. That the purpose of such spaces is not only for travel. That public space in cities is too valuable to surrender it all to the use of the automobile. All this shuttling about, here and there, back and forth, may serve some important purpose—though one can't help but wonder how much—but at least equally important is the need for children to play. And given that many streets are little used for many hours of the day, why not turn them temporarily into playgrounds?

Dhaka has, prior to Covid-19, experimented successfully with the concept of car-free streets. One side of

Manik Mia Avenue was transformed, on the morning of first Friday every month, into a joyous celebration of life. Other such events were organised regularly in Mohammadpur and Uttara. Alas, they all stopped due to Covid-19 and have not resumed.

To fill in the gap, Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB) Trust has begun a weekly event in West Dhanmondi. The mobile playground involves converting a quiet residential street into a temporary playground, particularly inviting to the youngest children—girls as well as boys—who have little other opportunity for outdoor play.

Two children show up hours in advance of the opening to help the WBB staff decorate the space. A teenage boy with Down Syndrome recites a prayer. Children pour out of the buildings and explore the play options: drawing, crafts, board games, skipping rope. Most of them don't know each other; they never have an opportunity to occupy and explore the streets. Parents are relieved and grateful. The entire scene is a combination of astonishing and ordinary: this is what our cities should provide, but so rarely do.

Sometimes, our big problems have surprisingly simple solutions. No place for children to play outdoors, for youth to play sports, to cycle, to skate? No place for adults to enjoy some time outside for exercise and socialising? Well, find a fairly quiet street and convert it, for a few hours a week, into a recreational space. And in the meantime, continue to remind our urban authorities that in addition to all our other needs in cities, we need access to existing playing fields. We need a lot more green space for climate resilience. We need green and open public space to help keep the population healthy—mentally and physically—and to ensure that children have the opportunity to develop their full potential as future contributors to our beloved Bangladesh.