

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

# Are we ready for the looming Omicron crisis?

## Proper execution of planned curbs is vital

WITH Covid-19 case counts rising for over a week, likely fuelled by the highly contagious Omicron variant, the question that we need to ask is: How ready are we for another wave? Given our past experience of handling similar spikes in Covid cases, there is room for both optimism and cynicism. Health officials are confident they can take the looming threat head-on, with a new set of restrictions to be implemented within a week. Harsher restrictions, including lockdown, are on the cards, too, if the situation "goes out of control." Experts, however, believe that the challenge is not so much rolling out new restrictive measures, as making sure that they are executed properly and collaboratively.

Bangladesh may have been able to keep its overall Covid positivity and fatality rates relatively under check, but it's a success that is owed less to the pursuit of a scientific solution than to factors that have yet to be fully determined. In any case, there is no doubting the great deal of suffering—personal and collective—caused by the government's poor handling of the Covid crisis in the last two years.

The good news about Omicron is that it may be less severe than other Covid variants. The bad news, as evidenced by case records in other parts of the world, is that it's surging faster, meaning that people remain as vulnerable as ever, and that the pandemic may last longer than expected. Already, several states in India are struggling with soaring cases. In Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, a curfew has been announced. On January 4, Covid-19 cases in India increased by 10.75 percent compared to the previous day. Omicron is feared to be fuelling these infections. This, as one expert told *The Daily Star*, suggests that we will see a major spike here in the next couple of weeks.

If it does come to pass, we need to prepare in advance not just to curb infections, but to handle the extra load of patients. Urgent measures must be put in place to ensure smooth and uninterrupted supply of oxygen, a key requirement for Covid patients, in hospitals across the country, as well as increasing their seat capacities. A fresh review of the hospitals by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) should help determine their readiness. Also, according to the DGHS, only 31 percent of the population have been fully vaccinated so far. The vaccination drive must be ramped up. More importantly, all the restrictions and health directives being imposed by the authorities must be implemented properly, or they may prove to be ineffective against the virus.

# River grabbers walk away with impunity

## Perpetrators must be given exemplary punishment

IT is disconcerting to note that river and land grabbing is going on around Bangladesh right before the eyes of the administration, and the grabbers seem to care little for the existing court directives against such illegal practices. The unlawful occupiers often get emboldened when the local administration deliberately looks the other way. Such encroachment of riverbanks is narrowing down the width of important rivers, disrupting the water flow, and obstructing smooth plying of river vessels.

A story published in this daily on January 5 gives details of how some powerful quarters are filling up parts of two important rivers, the Meghna and the Fuldi in Munshiganj, to set up their factories and other structures. On May 6, 2019, Three Angle Marine Ltd, a local shipping company, was found responsible for grabbing parts of the two rivers. And the district administration, through a circular published in 2019, declared that the company had occupied 4.31 acres of low-lying lands and canals and almost one acre along the Fuldi and Meghna. It's all in paper, and yet, after two years, the same administration now says that the company has not grabbed any parts of those two rivers. Surprisingly, the administration discovered that the company is only responsible for grabbing some farmland.

Reportedly, the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) has directed the administration to investigate the matter; accordingly, the Gazaria UNO submitted his report to the district's deputy commissioner (DC). But the report has more surprises to offer the aggrieved parties. It said the information given in the 2019 circular regarding river-grabbing by Three Angle Marine Ltd was "untrue." Though earlier investigations found evidence of grabbing around 34 acres of land, the latest report cleared the company of the accusation. It has been mentioned that the probe body talked to several villagers during the investigation.

Meanwhile, locals told this newspaper that they categorically mentioned that the company had occupied around 60 acres of land belonging to around 120 farmers, also grabbing a portion of the Meghna and Fuldi rivers. The company has also filled up two canals, Kumira and Borocharal, in the area. Interestingly, the Gazaria union parishad chair commented that the UNO probe report was faulty. They want an impartial investigation claiming that they heard of "underhanded dealings."

The entire episode smacks of corruption and backtracking by the district's highest authority in favour of some law violators. Instead of taking appropriate legal steps against the accused, they are allegedly working in the company's interest. Here one gets the message that those with power in the country can exert influence at the right places to have things done in their favour.

# Should Covid caution supersede learning loss action?



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ON September 12, 2021, schools in Bangladesh reopened after 18 months of Covid-19 closure—partially, with restrictions. The majority of students, except for Classes 5 and 10 public examinees, came to school one or two days a week for limited hours. At least a quarter of students, many of them girls, did not return. Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni recently warned that if the Omicron wave hit Bangladesh, schools might be closed again. Does Covid caution supersede actions on students' learning loss?

Schools are starting the new year with the usual scramble for admission, and parents' heartache to find a place for their children in their "preferred" schools. Attempts have been made to ease this process by introducing admission by lottery in Dhaka. New textbooks are being distributed all over the country, but without "celebration," as that became a casualty of the pandemic. These are efforts to go back to the normal routine, but do they help address the learning loss challenge?

Bangladesh was one of the few countries that kept schools closed non-stop for over 500 days. Health and education experts argued against the "one size for all" solution irrespective of the infection rates, variation between Dhaka and the rest of the country, and diverse local conditions. Most countries have allowed local decisions by school districts about restrictions and their durations, with overall health and education guidelines provided from the higher administrative levels. Schools received financial and technical support from higher levels, too. It has been argued that, given the problems of bringing the population—including students—within the vaccination net, and the difficulties in preventive measures, testing, isolation and treatment of those who may fall ill, a strict approach was necessary in Bangladesh.

The hard-line approach adopted to keep students safe, however, has been a contrast to actions on helping students catch up and cope with the learning loss. Surveys and studies have documented that most students could not or did not benefit from the distant-mode TV and online lessons, student "assignments," and teacher contacts. It can be reasonably concluded that with a minimal engagement in learning for almost two years, students who were auto-promoted from their previous grade in 2020 were not ready for lessons for the new grade when schools reopened in September. Then, with little regular classroom instruction, they are to be auto-promoted again to the next grade in January 2022. It means that a student who was in Class 3 in March 2020 is in



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FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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Class 5 in January 2022 without acquiring the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy.

It might be noted that even when schools functioned in pre-Covid days, the majority of Class 5 children did not acquire the grade-level basic competencies in Bangla and maths, as judged by the National Student Assessment. Perhaps

(and change school year to September–June permanently); help teachers with guidance, online support and incentives to carry out the remedial work for students; and forego the emphasis on public and school exams and put all effort on teaching-learning to recover the loss.

These practical suggestions are based on the premise that there has been a shock

to the education system, even bigger than the one in 1971, when education came to a halt during the Liberation War for a year. This is a bigger shock because schools have remained mostly shuttered for almost two years, and the end of limitations and restrictions is not in sight because the course of the pandemic remains unpredictable. Moreover, the education system is five times larger compared to 1971, making its management that much more complex and difficult.

The authorities have not paid heed to the educationists' advice. The main concern of the decision-makers appears to be to go back to the old routine, regardless of what it means for students' learning outcome. The Directorate of Primary Education has prepared its 2022 calendar retaining the much-disputed Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), which is planned for November 2022. The secondary education authorities are planning for their public exams in the summer; how students cope with the learning loss is their own business!

The cumulative effect of the prolonged closure and loss—students moving up from grade to grade without acquiring the basic skills and without a rescue and recovery strategy—will harm the students permanently. This generation of students will grow up with a debilitating handicap—unless a remedial plan is put in place. A generational danger in education is looming, which is not receiving the attention of policymakers.

A judicious approach is essential to ensure both student learning and student safety. The education system must survive the present crisis and overcome the adverse generational impact. The educationists' advice to deal with the crisis should be heeded. A rethinking about an education rescue plan and a school calendar to facilitate it is in order, before it is too late.

Education specialists and concerned civil society bodies have said that, as a response to the unprecedented crisis fraught with uncertainty about its course, an education rescue plan of two- to three years' duration has to be adopted and acted upon. They advised: carry out a rapid assessment in each school of student readiness for their grade level in basic skills of Bangla and maths (plus science and English at secondary level); extend current school year to next June and help students to be prepared for their grade in core skills

use application. Integrating all these functions in one has become vital for the business-to-business (B2B) sales organisations. Before the pandemic, there existed a change in customer preferences from in-person to digital sales interactions. The ongoing crisis further solidified this shift.

Undoubtedly, the main reason behind this transformation is that information is readily available to customers online, just at the tip of their fingers. Research shows that 54 percent of millennial B2B customers prefer to have no interaction with sellers. Sellers must meet their customers virtually, analyse the spend patterns, and be seen as trusted advisors. They must produce personalised experiences that both add value and help them stand out.

Most importantly, sellers must have a 360-degree view of their customers, from CRM systems, across the organisation and external sources such as social media and demographic data. Moreover, sellers need to enhance their ability to collaborate in a personalised manner. For example, sellers can share contextual information with their colleagues and from an inbound and outbound perspective.

When a business operates inefficiently, it can end up absorbing an incredible amount of revenue each year. By understanding business efficiency and the strategies for improving it, we can help our businesses waste less effort and time, allowing it to run much more smoothly. The key is to work smarter and implement the right business modules to ensure utmost efficiency.

# How technology can help improve business efficiency



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THERE'S a saying that goes, "A penny saved is a penny earned." In other words, the key to success is making businesses more efficient. Every business dreams of becoming a well-oiled machine, with zero wastage of time and money. While that may seem far-fetched, we are closer to the dream now more than ever. According to a new McKinsey Global Survey of executives, responses to Covid-19 have accelerated digitalisation of employee, customer, and supply chain interactions by three to four years. As a result, businesses—especially small and mid-size businesses—without proper digital access had to deploy practical and effective solutions at a faster rate. With remote work mandates, supply chain shortages, and consumers turning to online channels amid mobility restrictions, the past two years have been extremely difficult for businesses around the world.

The continuous improvements in technologies are offering businesses new opportunities for efficiency and guaranteed success. Numerous tools are already being made available to streamline the process, reduce waste, and make businesses more dynamic. Today, as

companies prepare to recover and innovate towards the new normal, an appropriate cloud-based business management solution can help them enjoy benefits that go beyond cost-effective and remote work. Subsequently, companies can easily accelerate digital transformation and create better employee, customer, and seller experiences.

Likewise, SMBs rely heavily on business management software to automate and optimise processes across their entire organisation—from financials to sales and service to procurement and operations management. The new way of cloud-based ERP software, in particular, promises faster time to value, reduced costs, and more business management skills.

The current times of uncertainty have caused evolving trends that are continually fluctuating consumers' expectations. If a business fails to innovate and adapt, it will be left behind. Hence, it is crucial for businesses to ensure that they are providing the best customer experiences to succeed.

To create a smoother transition of the increasing digital transformation in Bangladesh, Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central is a convenient cloud business management solution designed for growing SMBs. This provides a platform that allows businesses of all sizes to interconnect their teams through one cloud ecosystem for seamless and efficient business operations and accelerated growth. It is also a comprehensive business management solution that helps SMBs connect their finance, sales, service, and operations teams within a single easy-to-

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