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Delay in setting up oxygen generators unfortunate

Another example of the health ministry's inefficiency

ALMOST a year has passed since the government decided to set up oxygen generators at different health facilities across the country to meet the oxygen needs of Covid-19 patients. Unfortunately, not a single one has been installed yet. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on February 12, the health minister in April last year revealed his ministry's plan to set up small oxygen plants at hospitals and import the required machinery for this. The government at that time planned to procure 99 oxygen generators in phases: 40 with its own funds, 30 with the Asian Development Bank's Covid-19 response assistance funds and 29 from the UN.

While there has not been much progress about the purchase of the ADB- and UN-funded generators, the status of the 40 generators purchased with the government's own funds is also unclear. While some officials of the DGHS claimed to have installed a number of them at various hospitals, others said this was not accurate. According to a DGHS official, only a few hospitals received the necessary equipment for installing the oxygen generators. It is also very unfortunate that our health minister still has not signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the UNOPS to get the 29 generators procured by them because the ministry has still not made a list of the facilities which would receive the generators.

The inefficiency of the health ministry in this regard is unacceptable, particularly at a time when the third wave of coronavirus has been claiming so many lives on a daily basis. With new infections of the Omicron variant rising, more and more patients needing oxygen and other support are getting admitted to hospitals. We wonder what will happen if the infection rates continue to rise like this. Will our hospitals be able to provide all patients the necessary oxygen support?

Setting up oxygen generators in our public medical colleges, district town hospitals and upazila hospitals is crucial. Once installed, they can provide uninterrupted oxygen supply to the critical Covid-19 patients for long hours. Also, compared to liquid oxygen supplied in tanks, the generators are much more efficient.

This delay in purchasing and installing the oxygen generators has once again exposed the inefficiency and lack of coordination among the different arms of the health sector. We hope the health ministry will learn from its past mistakes, take proper measures to treat Covid-19 patients and do the needful to set up the promised number of oxygen generators as soon as possible.

Migration too expensive for workers

Find mechanism to bring down costs

IT is good news that the expatriates' welfare ministry is considering revising the migration cost for the Bangladeshi job seekers in the international markets. However, it is imperative that it reduces—not increases—the costs associated with migration. The cost of getting a job in a foreign company and travel expenses at the moment is already too high, given the economic status of the jobless youths of the country. Pertinent issues like rising plane fare and costs involved in institutional quarantine upon arrival are adding to the financial burden of the aspiring migrants.

Though the relevant ministry often instructs the job-seekers not to pay anything beyond the official amount, in reality migrants have to pay three to four times more than the amount fixed by the government. In a recent report published in this daily, it is said that the migration costs for going to 16 countries, such as, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Malaysia, Libya, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Russia, Maldives, Brunei, and Lebanon, are fixed at maximum of Tk 1.66 lakh and minimum of Tk 97,780, but it is an open secret that job-seekers have to pay hefty amounts to various actors in the process. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data, the estimated average recruitment cost for Bangladeshi migrants was Tk 4.17 lakh between 2015 and 2018. This included agencies' service charge, airfare, passport, medical, and visa fees. But airfare has increased over Tk 1 lakh in recent days.

Returnees from various countries talked about different groups that operate on the route starting from Dhaka and extort money from workers. In fact, there is no way to learn how much a worker ultimately spends before landing at the doorstep of his employer.

The expatriates' welfare ministry said it would revise and re-fix the migration costs based on suggestions from the stakeholders so that these may become more "realistic". But what exactly does the ministry denote by that? If it means the government's revised fees will go beyond the existing costs, it would only make an already untenable situation worse for the workers. The concept of "employer pay model," as practiced in many countries, ought to be adopted by Bangladesh while sending workers abroad. Some experts also suggest the introduction of more affordable tickets for workers in the face of rising ticket fare.

It is crucial that the cost of migration for our workforce is significantly brought down. There is no denying that the lack of clarity in the entire process of migration is adding to the woes of our expatriate workforce who still remain the highest foreign currency earners for the country.

What ails our local governments?



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP of Bangladesh Police.

THE unfortunate fact of our times is that all reports on Bangladesh's socio-economic progression almost invariably point to the lack of good governance as a significant deficit in our developmental strides. I am not talking about macroeconomic stabilisation or the lack thereof. The point in question is: Do we see signs of deterioration in many sectors of public life, ranging from provision of civic services to the maintenance of law and order, where we can compare the present scenario to the state of affairs of the pre-Liberation years?

Let's begin with the condition of urban Bangladesh, where our cities doubtlessly present a dismal look. They are bursting at the seams, with manifest decay and deterioration all around. We do not see durable efforts for renewal and upgradation either. The construction of skyscrapers and a large number of residential buildings has actually turned our cities into concrete jungles. The most disconcerting aspect is that many of these urban centres are without basic hygiene facilities, with clogged drains and streets overflowing with sewage. A majority of city areas do not have proper disposal systems.

In cities and towns, potholed, uneven roads and streets without sufficient lighting are a major bane of the residents' lives. Open spaces that, in the not-too-distant past, provided leisure have almost disappeared. Basic municipal functions like collection, disposal and recycling of waste no longer seem to be a priority for those who run the cities. To further compound matters, air and sound pollution has reached horrendous levels. The irony is that, while we may have a national conservation strategy, we cannot manage our cities using scientific and sustainable methods. Do these unpleasant experiences not indicate a lack of good governance?

As for the provision of civic services in the Dhaka metropolitan city, one cannot help but cite the never-ending mosquito menace which assumes an unbearably aggravated dimension during the winter months. This winter has been no exception, as even in the so-called "posh" areas people had to take cover behind the mosquito net from early evening. Senior citizens fondly recollect the total banishment of mosquitoes in Dhaka city in the 1950s—a feat that was possible primarily due to the energetic efforts of a public-spirited politician. If that was possible then, why is it not now, with all the modern tools and strategies we have at our disposal? Who is to blame for such governance deficits?

It would appear that, while we are

making earnest efforts to reach the status of a middle-income country, we cannot effectively manage our cities. If one had to identify the main factor behind this paradox, it would most likely be the continuous absence of effective local governance. In fact, the sad spectacle of our cities is the direct consequence of there being no responsible local self-government. And there is no denying that

they politicised irretrievably.

One has to remember that institutions of local self-government introduced by the British were working very efficiently till 1947. Senior citizens recall the district boards/councils and the services rendered by them, especially in the field of education. Interestingly, most of our local politicians came to prominence through local institutions. Luminaries like Sher-



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ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

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the presence of a strong local government would ensure timely and smooth provision of basic amenities for ordinary citizens.

It is quite intriguing to see that, while during the British colonial period the local government institutions worked reasonably well, during our independent existence we have neglected and ignored this vital link in the hierarchy of the government and stifled its potential, never allowing it to grow. Our preoccupation has always been with making the national government more powerful—perhaps because, historically, we have always believed in a strong centre and valued charismatic personalities. Consequently, the size of the national government has increased manifold and expanded in many directions, assuming functions which are local by nature in the process.

We have, at the bottom of the administrative structure, a local government which is supposed to tackle problems that people face in their daily lives. Unfortunately, this tier was never allowed to take root or develop organically. It is also intriguing that democratically elected governments have always been averse to the concept of a strong local government. There have been eloquent deliberations on the "devolution of power" and the so-called "new social contract", but no practical empowerment of the institution of local government. Curiously, long-ruling military dictators did take in grassroots institutions, which

e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy started their careers from district boards. If our present-day guardians cannot manage small cities, how will they manage mega cities? We have not been able to produce alternative models of governance at the local level that can devise cost-effective, scientific, and sustainable methods of sanitation, drainage and waste disposal. Master plans have been made but are nowhere near being implemented. No responsible quarter is seen talking about the concept of a "city government", and no interest group lobbies for it earnestly.

The problems of emerging cities cannot be solved by engaging old archaic tools meant only for rural areas and small towns. Inadequately trained public servants cannot tackle problems relating to hyper-urbanisation, mass transit or environmental degradation because they have neither the tools nor the knowledge and training to understand even the basics of these problems.

Let us realise the wisdom of the saying: "All politics is local." Social change and development of grassroots institutions require a longer gestation period, so there will be mistakes. But effort has to be made so that our local institutions may know better, because there is no shortcut to development. The orientation of our public servants and the mindset of our politicians have to drastically change to ensure the good governance of our cities.

End the pandemic of violence against women

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VIOLENCE against women and girls increases during periods of crisis. So it should come as no surprise that Covid-19 has added to the risk of increased gender-based violence. Even before the pandemic, one in three women worldwide reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. But by confining women at home with their abusers, pandemic-related lockdowns have increased their exposure to violence. Lockdowns have also contributed to economic stress, and diminished women's access to the resources and support systems that help them escape abusive relationships.

In April 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for action to address gender-based violence during the pandemic. This call was supported by 146 countries. That same month, the United Nations Population Fund estimated that every three months of lockdown would result in an extra 15 million cases of violence against women and girls.

Eighteen months later, there is evidence that governments responded to Guterres' appeal. In the United States, for example, millions of dollars in pandemic-relief spending are being directed to strengthen urgently needed resources—such as shelters, psychological services,

and housing assistance—that address the immediate needs of women experiencing violence.

But to end violence against women and girls requires effective prevention strategies that target its root causes. Such programmes address pervasive inequalities and power differentials—especially gender norms that justify and normalise violence against women and girls.

There are plenty of examples of effective and proven approaches to preventing violence against women that can be implemented even during a global pandemic. A large body of evidence—including best practices and robust assessments generated over several decades—demonstrates which approaches work best. In particular, randomised impact evaluations can guide decisions on how to build healthy, violence-free populations.

One type of effective, evidence-based approach is facilitated gender dialogues. These conversations help men and women examine and challenge inequitable gender norms and roles, and practice relationship skills in safe spaces. One such programme in Ethiopia, called Unite for a Better Life (UBL), was conducted within the context of the Ethiopian coffee ceremony, a traditional forum for community-based discussion.

A randomised evaluation showed that UBL can reduce intimate partner violence by up to 50 percent when delivered to groups of men. UBL led to more equitable relationships, including greater joint decision-making, men's involvement in domestic tasks like cooking and childcare, and increased communication between partners on sensitive topics like sexuality. The

benefits of the programme spread beyond participating households. Positive effects, including reduced violence, were observed even among community members who had not joined UBL sessions. This research shows just how crucial it is to include men in prevention efforts.

Other promising approaches include school-based curricula, microfinance or savings and loans programmes to empower women, and social-marketing or media interventions. The latter include radio and television programming in the form of "edutainment," which integrates social change messages into storylines. Randomised evaluations have shown that edutainment can reduce acceptance of violence against women and its incidence, while also encouraging reporting.

Media-based campaigns offer a low-cost way to reach many people remotely. For example, UBL's podcast-based adaptation was designed for humanitarian crises where people may be on the move and unable to join in-person sessions. Additional work is needed to understand how other programmes can be adapted effectively to help people in times of crisis, like the pandemic; but the existing evidence offers a place to start.

There is no time to waste. Policymakers need to use the available evidence to expand effective prevention programmes and support their adaptation to new contexts. To end violence against women, governments must do more than provide support for survivors. They must invest in and implement effective violence-prevention programmes that challenge harmful gender norms and promote healthy, equitable relationships.

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