

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

The debilitating delay in DU's expansion

The institution must be allowed to grow sustainably

WE are disappointed to learn that Dhaka University (DU) and 83 other organisations (social infrastructures, several schools, colleges and institutes) are yet to receive the land which the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) has committed to providing them, through temporary allotment papers, four years ago. Despite prior legal issues with the land and against High Court directives, Rajuk allotted 52 acres of land in Purbachal to DU so it could build a second campus there. In order to accommodate the university's growth—it currently has some 37,000 students, 1,992 teachers, 83 departments, 13 institutes, and 56 research centres and bureaus—it has been seeking to expand its infrastructure since the 1990s, with its plans being halted by changes in governments and aforementioned legal issues.

What is even more disheartening is that many chunks of DU's original campus (that is, about 57 acres) have reportedly been lost over the decades to different governments during the British period, Pakistan period and even in independent Bangladesh. No concrete actions have been taken by any government in the 85 years that the university has been trying to reclaim these lands, even though many promises have been made over the years. Speaking to our correspondent, the Rajuk chairman said the handover process was stalled as the case was still pending with the court.

We can't help but wonder if this is why the DU's masterplan to redo its campus with more high-rises came about last year. If so, it is understandable why the university authorities may have resorted to planning such a drastic transformation of the historic campus and its structures. However, as experts have cautioned in the past, if DU does go through with this masterplan, it risks disrupting the preservation of the history and natural environment of its campus.

Thus, Rajuk must be held accountable for going against the High Court directives and promising land to DU and 83 other organisations, given that it is now coming up blank when it's time to deliver on its commitments. More importantly, the government must recognise DU's need to expand, so that it's able to accommodate its students and faculties comfortably. We urge the authorities to expedite the university's mission of recovering its lands and parts that have been lost over the years. This can significantly solve DU's infrastructural issues in a way that would not harm the existing structures and environment of the campus.

First-of-its-kind health insurance for PWDs

Let it be accessible, hassle-free

THE government's decision to introduce health insurance for people with disabilities (PWDs) is, no doubt, a praiseworthy one. The insurance policy, named "Bangabandhu Suraksha Bima for Persons of Disabilities," will cater to people with autism, Down's syndrome, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy. Reportedly, the initiative has been piloted in Dhaka city, Dhaka district and Sylhet district as the number of people with autism and other neurological disabilities is higher in Dhaka and Sylhet than in other districts.

A detailed report in this daily tells us that PWDs will not have to pay any fee for the insurance scheme; rather, their parents will have to pay a nominal premium, which will vary depending on their income. Parents whose monthly income is Tk 25,000 or less will have to bear 25 percent of the annual premium or Tk 125, while those whose monthly income is more than Tk 25,000 will have to bear the entire annual premium, which amounts to Tk 600.

People with disabilities aged 3 to 25 years can now sign up for the policy. Decisions for expansion will be taken by the authorities on the basis of the initial response. In this respect, we believe piloting a new project is always a good idea before jumping headlong into unknown territory. It is also a sensible move to initially bring 100,000 people under this programme in the first year, and expand it to include the visually impaired, speech-impaired and other categories of disabilities at later stages.

Health insurance for citizens with disabilities is a completely new and innovative idea in Bangladesh that will need careful handling right from the beginning. It must be ensured that the target group can access the services without having to experience unpleasant hassles. Feedback from relevant stakeholders will need to be incorporated to bolster the scheme.

The implementers will need to be prepared to set the best examples of interaction with people with disabilities and their parents/guardians. It goes without saying that a successful implementation of the pilot project will pave the way for bigger and better social welfare projects in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Schools should remain open

The surge of Omicron has finally declined and children are back in schools. In most countries, when Covid cases are on the rise, schools are one of the last establishments to be closed. The same should hold for Bangladesh. The classroom environment is crucial for the development of children. This is why authorities should do their best to keep schools open.

Halima Begum, Kalbanyur, Dhaka

Will Dhaka Wasa and its MD ever be held to account?



Naznin Titih is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

NAZNIN TITIH

IN 2019, Taqsem A Khan, managing director of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), faced huge public outrage for saying that the water supplied by Wasa was 100 percent drinkable. He made the claim at a press conference arranged to refute a number of allegations raised against his organisation by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). Taqsem said that the water Dhaka Wasa supplied to the city residents was good at the source, but that they might get contaminated in the pipelines, adding that they had undertaken projects to replace those pipelines. He then declared that people would be able to drink water straight from their taps by 2021.

More than two years later, a large part of Dhaka is still getting smelly, dirty and contaminated water. The water is not only unsafe to drink, but it's often completely unusable. Since Taqsem took charge of Dhaka Wasa 13 years ago, many projects have been initiated to improve Wasa's service, spending crores of taka, but the quality of its water at the consumer end has hardly improved, according to our reports.

The TIB did a year-long study titled "Dhaka Wasa: Challenges of Good Governance and Way Forward," and revealed their findings in April 2019. They surveyed 2,728 connections and service recipients of Wasa and found that 91 percent of Dhaka's population had to boil water to drink it. In the process, they burnt gas worth Tk 332 crore a year.

According to the study, nearly 45 percent of Dhaka Wasa consumers didn't get adequate supply of water, while about 35 percent complained of getting poor-quality water throughout the year. However, they did have to pay the increased water tariff every year. Reportedly, Dhaka Wasa has increased its water tariff 15 times since 2009. It has proposed to raise the water tariff by 20 percent again this year. If the proposal is approved, consumers will have to pay the increased price from July.

Naturally, such a ruthless proposal made by a state-run organisation has been met with widespread criticism. People questioned the rationale behind such a proposal at a time when inflation has hit us hard. In fact, people have started to question the honesty and integrity of the Dhaka Wasa MD, who is drawing a hefty amount for a salary every

In 2020, the responsibility of Dhaka's drainage management was handed over to its two city corporations because of Wasa's prolonged failure to eliminate waterlogging. It has also been revealed that Wasa's sewerage lines contaminated the Buriganga River.

Now, the Wasa MD, with his questionable track record, is trying to burden the consumers with another tariff hike. The justification he has given for this hike just doesn't hold water: He said Wasa needed to raise the water tariff as it couldn't continue its operation "through begging." The fact, however, is that Dhaka Wasa is already a profitable organisation. In the 2020-21 fiscal year, it logged in a profit of Tk 49.6 crore, while its retained earnings (the portion of a company's cumulative profit that is held and saved for future use, particularly for investment purposes) stood at a staggering Tk 892 crore, according to its audited financial report.

Therefore, there is clearly no logic behind raising the water tariff at a time when ordinary people already have their backs against the wall due to uncontrolled inflation, unemployment and the pandemic impacts. In fact, instead of burdening the consumers, what the Dhaka Wasa authorities should have done is try to improve their service quality by addressing the allegations of corruption and irregularities raised against them.

The TIB study mentioned above found that 62 percent of those seeking water and sewer connections from Wasa reported facing harassment and irregularities. The TIB said that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) should look into Wasa's corruption. Later, the ACC's investigations found that Wasa's consumers were not getting good service because of widespread corruption and delays in project implementation. The ACC clearly mentioned that Wasa kept extending deadlines and increasing the project costs to facilitate corruption, highlighting in its report the many ways in which corruption gripped the organisation.

It is, therefore, most unfortunate that after all the studies and investigations—not to mention a number of news reports revealing Wasa's irregularities over the years—no substantive action has been taken against Dhaka Wasa and its MD. We can't help but ask: Is Dhaka Wasa and its MD beyond accountability?

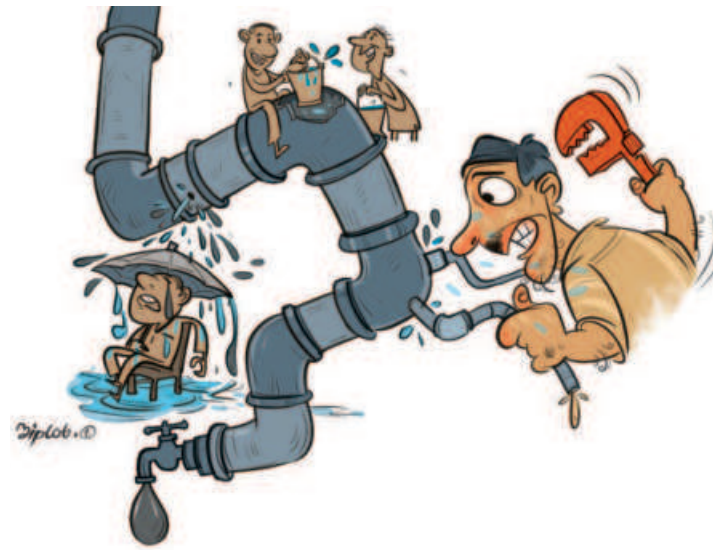


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

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month. According to news reports, as the water tariff increased year after year, so did the Wasa MD's salary. During the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the water tariff was raised twice, Taqsem's salary was also raised by Tk 1.75 lakh. Currently, he gets a monthly salary of Tk 6.15 lakh—a whopping 421 percent raise in 12 years! We also learnt that the Dhaka Wasa officials received stimulus benefits of Tk 40 crore last year. The Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) has rightly said that it's the Dhaka Wasa MD and officials who are actually getting the benefit of frequent water tariff hikes.

One of the many allegations that Taqsem has faced over the years is that he has been appointed and reappointed as the MD for six consecutive terms, reportedly in violation of Wasa's rules and regulations. TIB termed his appointment and repeated reappointments "questionable" and called for a neutral audit of his performance, which has not happened till date.

Under his leadership, Dhaka Wasa has failed not only to provide safe water to its consumers, but also solve the waterlogging problem in the city.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

From Shock Therapy to Putin's War



Katharina Pistor, professor of comparative law at Columbia Law School, is the author of "The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality."

KATHARINA PISTOR

AS Russian tanks battle through Ukraine on the orders of an authoritarian president, it is worth noting that Ukrainians are not the only ones who crave democracy. Russians, too, have taken to the streets—at great personal risk—to protest Vladimir Putin's act of aggression. But they are fighting an uphill battle in a country that has never been given a chance to become democratic. When such an opportunity was available, it was subverted not by Putin and his kleptocratic milieu, but by the West. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago, American economic advisers convinced Russia's leaders to focus on economic reforms and put democracy on the back burner—where Putin could easily extinguish it when the time came.

This is no trivial historical contingency. Had Russia become a democracy, there would have been no need to talk about Nato and its eastward expansion, no invasion of Ukraine, and no debates about whether the West owes Russia's civilisation greater respect.

Let's recount the sequence of events. In November 1991, the Russian Supreme Soviet (parliament) gave the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin extraordinary powers and a 13-month mandate to launch reforms. Then, in December 1991, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved by the Belovezh Accords. Surrounded by a small group of Russian reformers and Western advisers, Yeltsin used this unique historical moment to launch an unprecedented programme of economic "shock therapy." Prices were liberalised, borders were opened, and rapid privatisation began—all by presidential decree. Nobody in Yeltsin's circle paused to consider that the Russian citizens might first want a chance to develop a sound constitutional foundation for their country.

The reformers and their Western advisers simply decided—and then insisted—that market reforms should precede constitutional reforms. Only by moving fast would Russia be put on a path to economic prosperity, and the Communists be kept out of power for good. With radical market reforms, the Russian people would see tangible returns and become enamoured with democracy

the parliament refused to budge, and a deep political crisis ensued. In the end, the standoff was resolved by tanks, which Yeltsin called in to dissolve the Russian parliament in October 1993, leaving 147 people dead.

To be sure, many members of parliament were opponents of Yeltsin and his team, and perhaps wanted to turn the clock back. But it was Yeltsin who set a dangerous new precedent for how disputes over the country's future would be resolved. And Yeltsin and his team didn't stop there. They also rammed through a constitution that enshrined a powerful president with strong decree and veto powers, and with no serious checks and balances.

I still recall a revealing conversation that I, a student of Russia's reforms at the time, had with Dmitry Vasiliev, a top member of Yeltsin's privatisation team. When I pointed out the shortcomings of the draft constitution, he said they would simply fix it if the wrong person ascended to power. They never did, of course—nor could they have. Vasiliev's statement fully encapsulated how the economic reformers thought about constitutional democracy.

In December 1993, the new constitution was adopted through a referendum, which was held jointly with elections to the new parliament. Yeltsin's candidates suffered a stunning defeat, but with the president's new constitutional powers secured, the economic reforms continued. Yeltsin was then "re-elected" in 1996 through a manipulated process that had been planned in Davos and orchestrated by the newly minted Russian oligarchs. Three years later, Yeltsin made Putin the prime minister and anointed him as his successor.

Democratising Russia may always have been a long shot, given the country's history of centralised power. But it would have been worth a try. The ill-advised prioritisation of economic goals over democratic processes holds lessons well beyond Russia. By choosing capitalism over democracy as the foundation for the post-Cold War world, the West jeopardised stability, prosperity, and, as we now see again in Ukraine, peace and democracy—and not only in Eastern Europe.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin with US President George HW Bush and Mrs Bush in the South Grounds of the White House in Washington, DC, the US, in 1992.

PHOTO: DAVID VALDEZ/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

automatically. It was not to be. The Yeltsin presidency turned out to be an unmitigated disaster—economically, socially, legally, and politically. Overhauling a Soviet-style centrally planned economy in the space of just 13 months proved to be impossible. Price and trade liberalisation on their own did not create markets. That would have required legal institutions, but there was no time to establish them. Moreover, the shock therapy unleashed such severe and sudden social and economic disruptions that it turned the public against the reforms and the reformers. The Supreme Soviet refused to extend Yeltsin's extraordinary powers, and what happened next would set the stage for the rise of authoritarian presidentialism in Russia.

Yeltsin and his allies refused to give up. They declared the Russian Constitution of 1977 illegitimate, and Yeltsin proceeded to assume power unilaterally, while calling for a referendum to legitimise the move. But the constitutional court and