EDITORIAL

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We must reform our approach to public projects

If stopping wastage of money is the goal, a lot of holes need to be plugged

MIDST concerns about a debt distress precipitated by ongoing strains on Bangladesh's There is a foreign exchange regime, there seems to have been a realisation in the policy circles about the importance of tightening our purse strings through austerity measures. We've already seen several policy directives to that effect, such as cancelling foreign trips of public officials and postponing less important projects that require imports. While this drive may not be born out of a genuine desire to cut all unnecessary expenses of the government, one would hope that it will extend to how the government implements its projects where time and cost overruns are quite common, for which it is the people who have to pay.

The proposed revision of the Dhaka-Ashulia Elevated Expressway project, which is yet to formally take off even though its deadline expires in just over a month, provides a good case study of these interlinked crises, and how we approach it will determine the viability of the present drive. According to a report by this daily, officials are now seeking four more years and an additional Tk 651.72 crore. If approved, it will take the total cost to Tk 17,553.04 crore. The project—with a significant portion of its budget coming from a Chinese loan of USD 1.1 billion—is one of the 27 for which Chinese financing was assured in 2016. How soon or efficiently can Bangladesh implement these and other such projects? Can it repay its foreign debts on time? Will RMG exports and remittances—our prime sources of foreign currency—be enough to offset a possible debt

One less-recognised concern is how poor implementation of public projects has been hurting our economy. This is a hole not of foreign making, and any austerity measure without plugging this hole risks being rendered ineffective in the long run. Unfortunately, when it comes to implementation, there seems to be no shortage of reasons for public projects to drag on year after year. In the case of Dhaka-Ashulia Elevated Expressway, it is delayed activation of the Chinese loan. Unless the authorities are careful, soon it may suffer from the same problems that routinely dog almost all other projects: lack of coordination, inefficiency, mismanagement and corruption. The huge amount of money thus wasted is a sad commentary on how our approach to economic problems has been basically a case of one step forward and two steps back.

This is why we need reforms that are inclusive and reflective of the wider issues involved. While the government goes about stopping wastage of public money, especially foreign currency, it must fix internal, systemic challenges long draining our coffers. Public projects are a good starting point

Shooting tragedy reveals cracks in **US gun policy**

Stricter law is the only solution to such violence

UR hearts go out to the families of the victims of a shooting tragedy in the United States in which 19 students of a Texas school were mercilessly killed. In this latest version of gun violence in the country, an 18-year-old gunman entered the school premises armed with automatic rifles and sprayed bullets on the students in classrooms. Among the dead are also two teachers and the gunman himself.

Reportedly, the killer came to the school with the evil intent of killing students after shooting his own grandmother to death. The police, however, shot him dead before he could kill more children. And while the mayhem left the parents and teachers of the school as well as community members devastated, the enraged nation wanted to know how a boy of his age could own an automatic rifle. Sympathising with the families of the victims, President Joe Biden expressed his grief with a call on lawmakers to defy the powerful gun lobby and enact tougher laws to curb gun violence. His words—"When in God's name will we do what we all know in our gut needs to be done?"-reflect the profound emotion of peace-loving citizens regarding such meaningless deaths across the US.

Although the US has witnessed a good number of blood-chilling gun violence incidents in the past decades, powerful lobby groups have thwarted all attempts to pass stricter gun laws pointing to the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which they say ensures the right to "keep and bear arms". As a result, anyone can walk into a store to buy a handgun and even an assault rifle without any questions being asked. The lone killer in the Texas shooting incident is said to have been a troubled teen having speech impediments, who once cut up his own face "just for fun". That sounds like someone who needed medical and psychological attention. That he was still able to obtain an assault rifle shows that the American gun control policy needs drastic reforms.

We hope saner heads will prevail and all that is necessary will be done to prevent the recurrence of such tragic violence.

PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

A grand initiative going sour



■ HERE is a peculiar trend in

Bangladesh. When someone

hundreds of copycats spoil it. Following

or two quality independent newspapers

were launched. Now there are more than

alone. Someone started private hospitals.

Now there are more than 5,000 private

private diagnostic centres, according to

the DGHS. There are many more that are

visionary former bureaucrat and diplomat

hospitals and clinics and over 10,000

unregulated and unmonitored.

Same is the case with private

universities. After the pioneer and

Muslehuddin Ahmad started the first

private university in Bangladesh-North

South University (NSU)—in 1992, there

Grants Commission (UGC), 108 private

addresses in Dhanmondi, Lalmatia, and

their vicinity), with 33 currently operating

without vice-chancellors and 76 without

survive with such blatant violation of the

law? Because of political support. There

are 114 new applications for universities

of public resources to provide higher

education, private investment in this

crucial sector is an acute need. Not

the "money-maker" investment, but

education-promoters' investment. And

that is where we have miserably failed.

A cursory study of the Board of

revealed an overwhelming presence of

with an aggressive profit motive into

the very ethos of private universities

their standards to get more students-

scholars or competent human resources.

universities. They have done a creditable

job in providing high quality education

and producing a qualified workforce that

Bangladesh needs. Science, engineering

in these institutions with more and

trained through scholarships and

more qualified faculty members being

training workshops. Faculty members

and IT education have gradually improved

The above, however, is not the whole

generating "certificate holders," not

story. There are several good private

and forcing many of them to lower

the higher education sector, changing

businessmen as sponsors, who have come

Trustees (BoT) members of some 15

prominent private universities has

Given our population and the dearth

pro-VCs or a treasurer. How do they

and many have political backers.

universities. Of them, 52 are in Dhaka

(unconfirmed reports say 22 have

are now, according to the University

500 daily newspapers in Dhaka city

the restoration of democracy in 1991, one

starts something innovative, then

THE THIRD **VIEW**

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher

MAHFUZ ANAM

expertise and knowledge with some of our private universities, some of whom are also reaching out to international bodies for quality enhancement.

So the case is of some very bad apples spoiling the good ones, or should we say, many bad apples spoiling the few who have managed to emerge with some reputation—NSU being a case in point. Time has come for some serious

ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

The challenge of the moment is not to underestimate the contribution that the private universities have made, but to devise ways to improve their internal governance appropriate checks and balances on the power of the BoT and the administration, led by

introspection and reforms. The challenge is how to reinforce all the positive gains of the private university experience and weed out the negatives and move on.

We need to start with the Private University Act that defines who can be their sponsors. No qualifications or criteria are set here. A special fund of Tk 5 crore for Dhaka and Chattogram and Tk 3 crore for other metropolitan areas, 25,000 sq-ft of owned or rented space, and a Board of Trustees (BoT) consisting of 9-21 members are all one needs to apply for a private university. Nothing is required about the educational qualifications, professional records, reputation of a BoT member or at least some signs of his/her interest in education. Anyone with some money to spare could sponsor a university, and that's what mostly happened. Some joined to promote education, but many others to promote themselvesassociation with a university set the right

Things dramatically changed when the private universities became very successful and turned into huge money making machines. The best of our private universities charge Tk 6,500 per credit, and a student generally needs 120 credits for his or her degree, making for a total of Tk 7.8 lakh for an undergraduate degree. The middle-order ones charge Tk 4,000, amounting to Tk 4.8 lakh. With an average student body of 5,000 (some have 25,000 or more), and adding to it all sorts of fees—including every semester registration fee—it is a huge annual intake, whose bank interest itself makes for a significant earning.

universities, not all, having signed up for a non-profit university, and seeing the money that was flowing in, felt that they deserved a share of it. Since they couldn't take dividends, they started extracting perks like expensive cars, annual foreign trips with family, high fees for attending BoT board meetings—as much as Tk 1 lakh—and fees for attending meetings of committees that numbered from 12 to 25 in some instances. In a case of one university, that we could verify, a BoT member could walk into any committee meeting, regardless of being its member or not, and then charge attendance fees for any number of meetings held that day. Some BoT members annually collected around Tk 1.5 crore with taxes on those fees that the university was forced to pay. Many trustees got personal offices in the university premises and started interfering in hiring faculty members, student admissions and admin staff, and got personally involved in micromanaging the university, largely disempowering the

The future of 328,000 students in private universities is at stake here, with 97,500 women with 42 percent in engineering and technology, 24 percent in business administration, 11 percent in humanities, 6.71 percent in science, six percent in law, three percent in social sciences, and the rest being less than one percent, according to the UGC.

The challenge of the moment is not to underestimate the contribution that the private universities have made, and erode in any way their autonomy, but to devise ways to improve their internal governance with appropriate checks and balances on the power of the BoT and the administration led by the VC. It was the absence of this balance—with the BoT thinking, claiming and acting as the "supreme authority"—that has led to the present governance and financial problems.

As for NSU, without prejudice to the accused BoT members, the rest of the board should reconstitute itself, elect a new chair (temporarily, if necessary) and institute a thorough investigation headed by an independent body comprising eminent scholars and administrators, assisted by a reputed auditing firm. The BoT should do it before the government

For the longer term, an experiment, an initiative by NSU founder Muslehuddin Ahmad titled Education Quality Assurance Foundation (EQAF), could be looked into. The EQAF suggested a process of self-regulation and peer monitoring with the help of internationally recognised bodies that ensure globally recognised quality standards of universities all over the world.

We need such a measure as an integral part of the graduating process to the status of a developing country. We also need it to supply that crucial qualified human resources that the future growth of Bangladesh requires.

from prestigious universities abroad the VC. A section of BoT members in some are showing interest in sharing their FINANCING FOR LOSS AND DAMAGE FROM CLIMATE CHANGE What developing countries should propose



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh.

SALEEMUL HUQ

It is essential

vulnerable

developing

countries to

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with an

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strategy.

participate in

for the

T the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow last November, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, speaking on behalf of 55 vulnerable developing countries under the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), put forward a demand to set up a facility to finance loss and damage from human-induced climate change. This demand was included in the draft of the Glasgow Climate Pact until the last official day of COP26, but after the COP president extended the time by one day, the language in the final version was changed from the "Glasgow Facility on Finance for Loss and Damage" to the "Glasgow Dialogue on Finance for Loss and Damage." This was done at the insistence of the US, who refused to allow the finance facility to be announced.

Needless to say, this was a great disappointment for all the leaders of the CVF member-states.

The dates for the Glasgow Dialogue have now been announced to be held in June in Bonn during the Subsidiary Bodies meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is essential for the vulnerable developing countries to participate in the dialogue with an effective strategy.

I offer some suggestions for their consideration to present their views in the dialogue and beyond.

First, this is not the first time that there has been a dialogue on finance for loss and damage; there was a similar one called the "Suva Expert Dialogue," held some years ago, that only considered insurance as the only tool to address loss and damage and resulted in a major initiative called "Insuresilience" led by Germany, but outside the UNFCCC, which was supposed to insure 400 million people. This initiative has piloted a number of different insurance schemes around the world with mixed results. However, it has become quite clear even to the Germans, who are still the greatest promoters, that insurance cannot be a solution for the poorest people in the poorest countries, who cannot afford to pay the premium for

Alternatively, Germany is now proposing to develop something they call the "Global Shield," which it will place at the upcoming G7 meeting in June. While the details of this Global Shield are still not clear, it does go beyond simply providing insurance, which is a positive step.

However, it is still an initiative promoted by Germany outside of the UNFCCC's scope, and does not formally address loss and damage from human-induced climate change explicitly.

Second, the vulnerable developing countries must have their own proposal for the dialogue, to ensure that it leads to the setting up of the facility for financing loss and damage at COP27. The details of how the facility would work can be finalised at COP28 in 2023. This procedure of announcing a new entity at one COP and then fleshing out the details at the subsequent COP was how the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage (SNLD) was

It is also important to recognise that the UNFCCC negotiations are no longer the only game in town as far as the actual finance for losses and damages is concerned—Scotland has already contributed two million pounds with a number of others adding more funds. A significant new player is the Facility for Loss and Damage created by the Multi-Donor Fund of the CVF and V20 (the finance ministers of the CVF), which is managed by the UN and will fund communities in vulnerable developing countries suffering impacts of climate change and dealing with actual losses and damages. The CVF and V20 have invited others to contribute to their facility if they wish to actually help the victims of climate

An important element of the current dialogue on loss and damage in the UNFCCC is that the developing countries are not invoking the notion of liability and compensation, rather simply appealing to a sense of solidarity from all countries to help the poorest victims of climate change.

This doesn't mean that the arguments of making the polluters pay has been forgotten, but it has moved out of the UNFCCC discussion and into legal cases under national legal jurisdictions in countries like Germany, the US, Australia and others. It is also likely to be taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by some countries in the Pacific, led by Vanuatu. They will start by seeking a resolution in the upcoming session of the UN General Assembly to allow them to seek an advisory judgement from the ICJ.

The issue of finance for helping the victims of human-induced climate change has now become the most urgent climate issue, and needs to be addressed both inside and outside the UNFCCC. Bangladesh has played a leading role in this important issue, and should remain at the forefront going forward as well.