

The Daily Star

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## Knee-jerk reaction is not the answer

DGHS needs realistic plan to bring unauthorised institutions under regulation

**I**N a rather dramatic move, the health directorate has ordered closure of all unregistered private hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres within 72 hours, including those that have applied for licences but are operating without it.

There can be no doubt that unregistered hospitals must be brought under government monitoring and regulation, given the critical services they offer to the public, and the grave repercussions of allowing ill-equipped institutions with untrained staff to continue operations. Earlier this month, 25-year-old Sheuli Begum and her unborn child died at a local unauthorised hospital in Narail's Kalia upazila, when an unregistered health official failed to complete a caesarean operation. Reportedly, the DGHS decision to shut down unauthorised private hospitals follows a recommendation by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to bring those responsible for the untimely deaths.

Despite the urgency with which such institutions must be handled, we cannot but be wary of the knee-jerk reaction of the government in allowing only 72 hours to close down all such institutions. Is it even realistic when the government doesn't even have a list of all such unregistered institutions in Bangladesh? Does it have the capacity to follow up on its directive? And if it does, why has it allowed more than 5,000 unregistered hospitals and clinics to operate since 2018, when the DGHS introduced its online registration system? The DGHS issued a similar directive in August 2020 to private healthcare organisations to register online within August 23 the same year, warning of legal action against those unregistered. What major steps, if any, were taken following the directive? Who will answer for this inaction?

Unfortunately, what such hasty and unplanned reactions from the DGHS do is create the perfect conditions for underhanded transactions to take place. Leaders of the private hospital owners' association have long alleged that it is difficult, if not impossible, to meet all the criteria set by the DGHS for registration, and that only through payment of bribes can organisations get the required paperwork. There have been allegations, too, of many private hospitals getting registered via unethical means, despite not fulfilling all the requirements. Corruption, mismanagement and irregularities are built into the system, and the DGHS, we regret to note, is part of the problem.

The DGHS cannot absolve itself of its responsibilities as it attempts to provide prescriptions to bring the health sector under control. How can we trust it to do the needful when it has consistently failed to bring corrupt elements within its own department to book? If it really wants to bring some semblance of regulation and safety back to the sector, it must come up with a realistic timeline and plan to bring all hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres under registration and regular monitoring. It must strengthen its regulatory framework, ensure compliance, and check corruption at all levels of operation.

## NHD can help target real safety net beneficiaries

But only if the data is accurate and updated

**W**HILE it's good to know that the government will be using the National Household Database (NHD)—which is expected to be complete by June this year—from the next fiscal year to better target the social safety net programmes, this can only be useful if the loopholes in the database are addressed and the data is regularly updated. Reportedly, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the Department of Disaster Management (DDM) have developed the database, expected to serve as a poverty registry, by collecting data from 35 million families from all 64 districts in three phases in 2017 and 2018. This means that even if it's ready for use in the next fiscal year, it will be challenging to identify the real beneficiaries as the data has become dated already, particularly because the Covid-19 pandemic has created many new poor who have not been included in the database.

We appreciate the government for gradually bringing more people under its social safety net programmes—362 of the 495 upazilas of the country will get full coverage of such schemes from the next fiscal year—but we think the focus needs to be on bringing the most vulnerable under these schemes. Thus, while choosing the beneficiaries, the government should prioritise the elderly and disabled people as well as widows, deserted and destitute women. Reportedly, there have been many irregularities in selecting the right people for such schemes. We have seen this during the pandemic, when the government struggled to provide cash incentives to the right people.

Direct cash transfer programmes through mobile financial services have been found to be more helpful than the provision of family cards or products at subsidised rates. However, the current allowance of Tk 500 is just not enough considering the rising costs of essentials.

In order for the government's safety net programmes to address the real plight of the poor and ultra poor, the most important work would be to enlist the right beneficiaries. Merging the NHD with the dataset collected by the local government bodies during the pandemic could be a good starting point, as experts have suggested. In addition, the latest edition of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, which is expected to be completed by December this year, should help in identifying the right beneficiaries. Moreover, the importance of updating these databases on a regular basis cannot be underestimated as only with updated data can the government take appropriate monetary policies to eradicate poverty from Bangladesh.

# Stuck in an endless loop

Last week saw another reiteration of corruption and violence on our campuses



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**L**AST week was not a good one for those of us involved in academia or academic administration. We hit the press for all the wrong reasons.

We saw helmet-wearing, stick-wielding students of Dhaka University swooping on their opponents as the advanced guard infantry who fought to retain their campus territory. One would have thought that, after the recent Dhaka College fiasco, sanity would prevail and the ruling party's student wing would not engage in activities that could further smear its party's reputation before the upcoming national election. I have no way of knowing whether these students act on divine instructions or on their own volition, but it seems some student leaders are interested in scoring personal political mileage by strangling the voice of their opponents. Thanks to their over-enthusiastic intervention, an otherwise insignificant rally became national news.

Their action made me reflect on the wise words of the cricketer-turned-politician Mashrafe Mortaza, who pleaded with the party men of his constituency not to unwittingly give in to the wills of the central leaders to "size up" random people. He told them to think twice—e.g. "What is it in for me? Who will face the consequence? Who will feed my family or foot my bills if I go to jail?"—before indulging in violence at the whim of some leaders with remote control.

Last week, we saw police nabbing a member of the board of trustees of a university, who was trying to disgracefully dodge a court order. Four members of the Board of Trustees of North South University (NSU) were sent to jail in a case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for pilfering Tk 303.82 crore. Their dark infatuation with luxury cars, insistence on an obscene amount of meeting allowances, embezzling funds through the purchase of university land, and corruption in admission have recently come to light.

There are many other "crooks" in the private university sector who, for myriad reasons, have not only vitiated the system, but also choked the growth of higher education in Bangladesh. We have 108 private universities (including some black-listed ones) and 51 public universities and their affiliate colleges to cater to the needs of four million students. The growing demand for higher education has allowed many fraudsters to operate in the market. I use the word "market" with caution, as education today is pitched as an investment. It offers opportunity costs for those students who want to benefit from the educational capital and move



▲ VISUAL: STAR

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up the career ladder. It has also become a profitable commodity for investors. The actions of the latter group have led the overseeing body, the University Grants Commission (UGC), to distrust other noble and philanthropic gestures with which the private sector emerged as a non-profit alternative to the public system. As a result, private universities are getting one after another office orders that go against the spirit of higher education: standardise the

crore for research indicates that there are no real incentives for innovation. But more importantly, such meagre allocations can be justified through the acts of mishandling of the higher education system. For instance, we trust military institutions to offer the highest academic degree, but not the private universities with a high concentration of faculty members with PhDs and overseas exposure. Last week, we also read the sarcastic

curricula, offer cluster admission tests, introduce centralised "unique" ID cards for all private universities, retain just one campus in the officially designated plot; maintain one bank account; no public fund or research grants for the private system; no PhD programme. The list goes on to trim the edges that give the private system its edge and force it to behave more and more like state-run universities. The latest office order to follow the semester system in place of the trimester system is a case in point.

Last week, we also heard that the UGC is currently investigating the misappropriation of funds in three public universities. Earlier, it was reported that they had found allegations against 19 VCs of public universities. The UGC has also set a 60 percent cap on the use of admission fees as remuneration. The issue became scandalous following a report that the faculty and staff members of Jahangirnagar University "shared the spoils" of Tk 8 crore received through the admission process in the 2019-20 session. The UGC has also stopped increments for faculty members with PhDs.

While the board of trustees of some private universities have defiled the trust of their students, the offices of certain public universities (not without the blessings of their political patrons) have tarnished the trust of the taxpayers. This year, the government allocated Tk 10,444 crore for 51 public universities for the next fiscal year. This figure, significantly lower than any of the megaprojects that are making the news, shows the lack of priority given to education. The allocation of Tk 130

comments made by Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam, who at a seminar at Dhaka University proposed the establishment of a BCS University where students would simply learn to join the public service sector. Islam knows the importance of the highly competitive exams through which officers are recruited. But his mockery is hinted at the mad rush of joining the government sector as the only objective of higher education.

While the better private universities have realigned their focuses on creating a "whole" education with a 360 degree perspective, the public system has reached the nadir from which students have a tunnel vision of becoming government cadres. I am sure many of these students become officers to dedicate themselves to repaying the debts of the taxpayers who once paid for their education; unfortunately, there are many others who are drawn to the public system for its power base that can be abused for personal gains. The initiation takes place on campuses. That's why wielding sticks while wearing helmets is as important as memorising guide books and specialising in topics that would yield high marks in BCS exams, more than mastering their own disciplines or acquiring essential skills for the job market. Campus corruption and violence are helping other agents to relegate our social role, and grabbing our budgetary allocation. No wonder, civil and military bureaucrats are now leading many academic projects.

I wish last week was different from the other weeks of our academic calendar.

## MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY 2022

# Time to put policy into action

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**M**ENSTRUATION or period is a natural phenomenon for women of reproductive age and indicates a healthy life. Yet, many people—both men and women—consider the monthly period cycle as an illness. In recent years, awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) has received considerable tailwind from the policymakers in the Bangladesh government. Most women and girls in Bangladesh often face adversities regarding menstrual hygiene due to a lack of access to accurate information and sufficient knowledge. Over the last three years, the Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28) movement has been calling for more action and investment in menstrual health and hygiene. Using the hashtag #WeAreCommitted, organisations all over the world will start to publicly announce that they are committed to contributing to the creation of a world where no one is held back because they menstruate by 2030. The aim of this day is to increase transparency by making public commitments, provide a basis for accountability, and encourage others to follow our example.

In Bangladesh, menstruation is a taboo topic. Girls and women are still taught to be discreet about their periods and resort to secrecy in their hygiene maintenance while menstruating. Sanitary napkins and other menstruation hygiene products are still wrapped very promptly in brown bags at local drug stores, as if they are selling something illegal or immoral. This needs to

**Things need to change in order to create an environment where talking about menstruation is considered normal. People should feel the same level of ease when buying sanitary napkins or tampons at drug stores as when they buy cough medicine.**

change in order to create an environment where talking about menstruation is considered normal. People should feel the same level of ease when buying sanitary napkins or tampons at drug stores as when they buy cough medicine.

In terms of awareness about menstruation and MHM, Bangladesh has achieved progress in some key areas in the recent years. Bangladesh is one of the only two countries (out of 46 countries) that have reported on Menstrual Health Indicators in the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) 2021. The National Hygiene Survey in 2018, conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), reported that 97 percent of women had a place to wash and change during periods. However, only 32 percent knew about menstruation before they had it, and 30 percent used disposable sanitary napkins. School absenteeism of girl students due to a lack of proper menstrual hygiene facilities, for three days per month on average, was 40 percent in 2014, which reduced to 30 percent for 2.5 days per month on average in 2019. In 2014, around 85 percent of women used old cloth during menstruation, which reduced to 63 percent in 2019.

Another important milestone has been the publication of the National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy, 2021. This national strategy aims to facilitate programmatic and systematic approaches to improve MHM across a range of diverse sectors, such as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), health, education, and environment. The national strategy identifies five guiding principles: 1) MHM information, material, and facilities should be made a fundamental right for girls and women to empower them; 2) The private sector should be enabled to bring MHM products to the market that are affordable and easily available all over the country;

3) Male engagement should be facilitated to create a friendly environment for MHM practices by girls and women; 4) Gender-friendly policies should be adopted and MHM mainstreamed in all relevant sectoral strategies and activities; and 5) No girl or woman should be left behind. The strategy also includes the way forward for improving the current practices and key MHM actions and responsibilities of government agencies and other stakeholders at households, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, workplaces, and public places. However, enacting sound policies will not bear much fruit unless they are implemented with commitment and vigour.

High prices make sanitary napkins less affordable for the poor. That forces girls and women from less privileged backgrounds to resort to using unhygienic means during their periods, often leading to infections due to unsafe menstrual management. Since only 23 percent of the menstruating girls and women use sanitary napkins, if the prices go down, the use of sanitary napkins is likely to increase massively in the country. The government's commitment to support girls and women has been well reflected via the withdrawal of VAT from locally produced sanitary napkins in the 2021-22 budget. However, market monitoring by the relevant agencies is essential to understand the impact of VAT repeal on sanitary napkins. In addition, necessary steps are required to make people aware about the VAT exemption for locally produced sanitary napkins, as well as having dialogues with the manufacturers to understand the impacts of the prices and come up with strategies to reach more marginalised women and girls. The government's commitment towards implementing the national MHM policy should also be supported by different development partners.