

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Where piety ends and devilry starts DGHS raids on illegal clinics expose the rot in health sector

**W**E lack words to describe the devilry that has been afoot in some private hospitals and clinics operating outside the law in Bangladesh. According to a report by this daily, the ongoing crackdown on unlicensed health facilities has brought out some disturbing truths about how these are run, with no regard for the sanctity of the profession and zero accountability. In one of them in Narayanganj, called Padma General Hospital, doctors, nurses and other staffers abandoned a mother and her just-born baby on the operating table after hearing that health officials were raiding unlicensed hospitals in the area. Three other mothers and their newborns were also left behind. All of the patients had undergone C-section surgeries.

How can a hospital endanger its patients like this? The illegality of its operation alone cannot explain this behaviour. There must be something deeply rotten in how our healthcare system has been built that makes the lives of patients secondary to self-serving interests. The DGHS drive—which, as of May 29, reportedly closed over 880 unauthorised private hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres and blood banks across the country—also brought out how these establishments exploited the lack of regulation and loopholes in the system. In one instance, a clinic even managed to secure contracts from two embassies to conduct medical assessments of people travelling to those countries. But its name was found neither in the list of licensed hospitals, nor in the list of those with pending applications for licences.

The issue of licensing for health facilities has frequently come up during the pandemic period. The DGHS itself courted controversies by allowing unlicensed facilities to run and even secure government contracts for Covid tests and treatment. The whimsical manner in which it adopted policies and conducted drives like the current one—with barely any follow-up action to check resurgence of such facilities, or ensure their lawful operation—makes any regulatory intervention untenable. It doesn't prevent corruption; if anything, it only temporarily suspends it. We've seen the futility of such efforts as even licenced hospitals felt emboldened to charge exorbitantly high fees from patients, and make them suffer even after that.

That said, we're glad that the authorities have finally conducted a largescale drive against unlicensed facilities. It will help them get a clearer picture of such operations, the exact number of which has long eluded us. But we urge the authorities to ensure proper follow-up actions, including by closing or revoking licences of any facilities or health practitioners found in breach of the law. Unregistered doctors too must be identified and punished. At the same time, registered hospitals and clinics should also be kept under observation so that they follow the standard operating procedures at all times.

## Another road crash, another pointless tragedy Govt must enforce transport act, make roads safer

**W**E'RE disturbed by the news of the deaths of 10 individuals, including a nine-year-old, in a road crash in Barishal's Ujirpur area early Sunday morning. Reportedly, the driver was dozing off and speeding before the bus crashed into a tree, almost splitting it into half. Despite requests from the passengers to drive slowly, the driver would not listen as he was allegedly an hour late as per his duty roster and tried to make up for lost time. There is no denying that the fault lies with his reckless driving, and he should be held accountable, but the driver was also a victim of the difficult circumstances that prevail in the transport sector. It is these systemic problems that are responsible for so many deaths on our roads.

It can be noted that those employed under the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) usually receive formal contracts, but the majority of bus drivers outside this group have to operate under uncertain working conditions. Many work to tight deadlines for long hours, and are paid meagre wages. Often, bus owners rent out their buses to the drivers. So, the more trips a driver is able to make, the higher the amount of money he can take home. Realistically, with such pressure or expectations at play, it is no wonder that they would drive so recklessly sometimes.

Then, of course, there is the lack of accountability for transport owners and workers, coupled with the tendency to break the law at will or not enforce it as it should be, further endangering the passengers. The Road Transport Act-2018 is still a long way from being implemented or even finalised, as it went through frequent revisions to accommodate the demands of transport associations. Meanwhile, in April 2022 alone, around 543 people were killed and 612 others were injured in road crashes.

We're told that the families of those killed in the Ujirpur crash will receive a compensation of Tk 20,000 each, while a three-member investigation committee has been asked to hand in their report within seven working days. We hope all that is necessary will be done without any delay. We also hope the authorities will speed up the finalisation and implementation of the Road Transport Act-2018. Moreover, the need for formalising employment of drivers with flexible work hours and decent wages in line with the labour law cannot be stressed enough. Doing this will help not only transport workers, but will improve the safety of ordinary passengers as well.

# Of Lemon, Soap, Vaseline and EVMs



Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is deputy chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

**I**N the Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC) election earlier this year, most polling centres looked pretty much how they should look. There were voters standing in long queues, waiting for their turn to exercise their voting right. Polling agents, officers and law enforcement officials were seen doing their usual election day duties. However, there was one element at almost every polling centre that was very unusual: hand-washing arrangements. At first glance, you would think they were there as part of the usual Covid safety protocol. But if you waited long enough, you would see people actually washing only their thumbs, used in the electronic voting machine (EVM) for identification.

As it turned out, the EVMs could not read many people's fingerprints, especially of the elderly voters, and every time that happened, they rubbed petroleum jelly on their thumbs, which were kept at the polling officers' tables. Some also used other remedies such as lotion and slices of lemon.

Fingerprint mismatch on the EVMs was one of the reasons that slowed down vote-casting during the NCC polls; there was a number of cases where people could not even cast their votes as their fingerprints did not match with the machine. In addition, many voters were confused during voting as they were not familiar with the process. Some were seen expressing frustration as they waited a long time in the queues to vote. But there was the opposite picture, too: it took a considerably short time for young people to cast their votes.

The NCC election was free, fair and peaceful, except for the EVM trouble. In a city corporation election where only 500,000 voters were supposed to cast their votes, EVMs appeared to be a major problem. I saw how the election officials were struggling to manage the situation. If EVMs are used in all 300 constituencies of Bangladesh in the upcoming general election, where some 120 million people are supposed to cast their votes, what would happen? I, for one, am worried.

The issue of EVMs came to the fore as the top leaders of the ruling Awami League said EVMs would be used everywhere during the parliamentary election scheduled next year. It may be the ruling party's desire, but the whole issue grabbed public attention as the performance of the last two Election Commissions in holding free and fair elections was a cause for sheer frustration.

The current Election Commission, formed in February, said they were yet to decide on the matter, and were debating whether they would make the decision after speaking with the political parties and other stakeholders. The BNP and some other political parties are completely against using EVMs, terming them "automated vote-rigging machines." They

Commission, led by KM Nurul Huda, held talks with various stakeholders, where many were against using EVMs in the polls. The newly formed commission also held talks with various stakeholders, where the majority opined against using EVMs, without reaching consensus. Many even suggested including the Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) in the EVMs

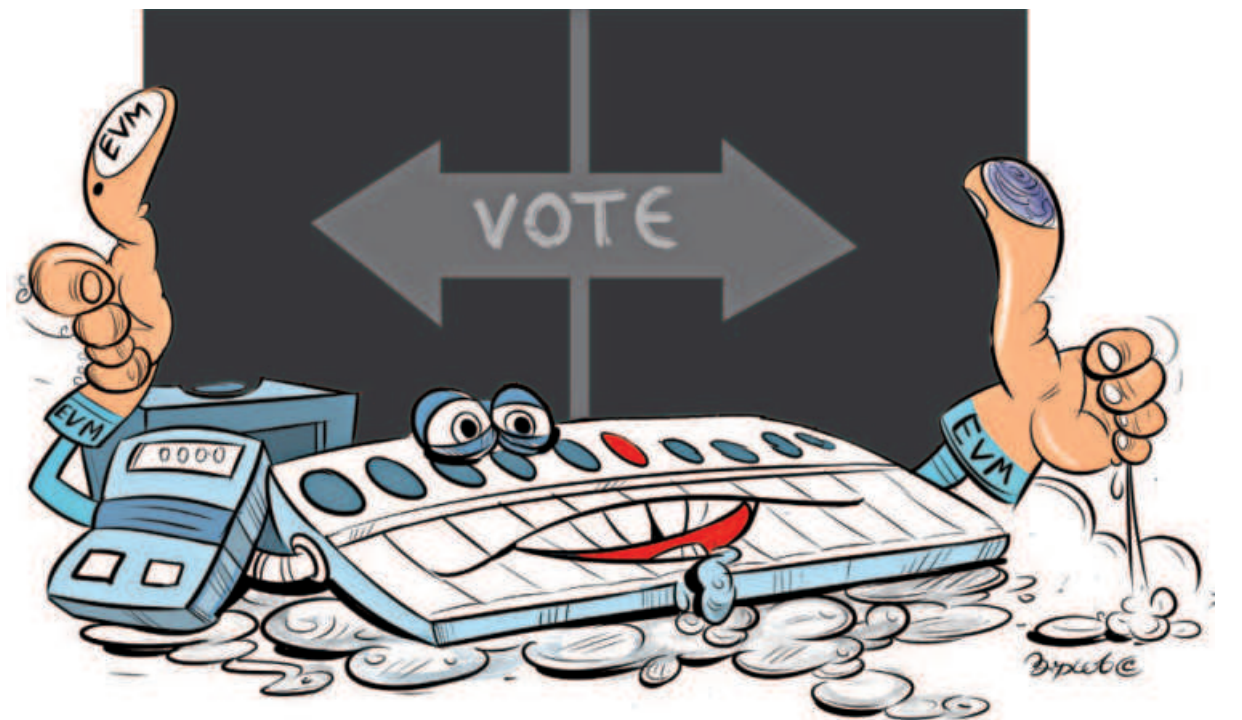


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

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said these machines could be programmed in such a way that, no matter which symbol a voter pressed on in an EVM, the vote would go to a preselected symbol. There would be no paper trail or proof on paper of voting. Although it is absolutely at the Election Commission's discretion whether EVMs will be used in the polls or not, the ruling party's desire for EVMs has put the commission under pressure, and now it has to walk a tightrope.

According to media reports, countries like Namibia, Nepal, Armenia, Bhutan, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Venezuela and the US use some form of electronic voting. Meanwhile, in October 2006, the Netherlands banned the use of EVMs. In 2009, the Republic of Ireland declared a moratorium on using EVMs. Italy followed suit. In March 2009, the Supreme Court of Germany ruled that voting through EVMs was unconstitutional, saying that transparency was a constitutional obligation, but efficiency was not a constitutionally protected value. Norway stopped using EVMs in 2003. Pakistan, the UK, and France used EVMs once, but these countries stopped it as well.

In Bangladesh, EVMs were used for the first time in 2010, as an experiment, at 14 polling centres of a ward in Chattogram City Corporation polls. The last Election

so that voters would get a printed slip after casting their votes. The Election Commission held talks with information and communications technology experts last week, where they said it would be almost impossible to manipulate the EVMs.

The issue of EVMs is now more of trust than technical. When the distrust between the ruling party and the opposition parties are very high, this EVM debate will do nothing but widen the gap and may foil the government's intention to bring the BNP in the next election. In countries like Bangladesh, voting is a festive activity where people enthusiastically go to the polling centres to cast their votes. But in the last two general elections—in 2014 and 2018—many people were denied their chances to cast their votes. If the Election Commission can ensure a congenial atmosphere where voters will be able to cast their votes without any hassle, that should not be hampered by a controversial issue like EVMs. Machines are supposed to make a task smoother, but if it creates hazards instead, people will be discouraged to cast their votes, and the election will come under question. Moreover, as I said earlier, it is a matter of trust, not a technical issue. If trust is lacking, why make the situation difficult by using EVMs instead of ballots?

## Why revisit SDG financing strategy in Bangladesh?



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SK ABDULLAH JONAYED

**R**ECENTLY, the United Nations published the Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2022, highlighting the slow progress of Covid-19 recovery in developing countries due to fiscal constraints, while developed economies recovered quickly by borrowing a record amount of low-interest loans. This discrepancy among countries has been defined as the "Great Finance Divide."

Bangladesh, which is set to become a developing country by 2026, started to meet the SDGs early, backed by strong political commitment as well as the achievements during the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era. But like the rest of the world, Covid had a negative impact on Bangladesh's economy, causing a setback to the hard-earned progress in poverty alleviation. Consequently, the GDP growth has slowed down since FY2019-20 (3.5 percent), and is predicted to continue at 6.7 percent in FY2022-23. As a result, investments into SDG-aligned projects have shrunk. It is, thus, critical to address how Bangladesh, as a lower middle income country, is strategically preparing to respond to the crisis and access to productive investments, which are pivotal for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

**Setting up Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF)**  
The INFF is the tool to implement the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (the framework outlined in 2015 on financing for development) at the national level by supporting countries in their planning process and overcoming their barriers to SDG financing. The Bangladesh government and the UN are jointly

implementing a programme titled the Integrated National Financing Framework for Accelerating Achievement of SDGs in Bangladesh (INFF4SDGs), which began in 2020, to support the government in mobilising resources and filling up the financial gaps for attaining the SDGs.

**Calibrating the Development Finance Assessment (DFA)**

Currently, the Economic Relations Division (ERD) under the finance ministry, with technical support from the UN Development Fund (UNDP), has been re-assessing the development finance landscape (first conducted in 2016) to identify the gaps, opportunities, and options of policy reforms that can mobilise new forms of public and private financing, strengthen collaboration across the ministries and with the private sector, and boost government policies for managing, measuring, and influencing financing in the context of the 8th FYP, Agenda 2030 and Covid recovery. The findings of the DFA will support the government and other stakeholders—e.g. the private sector, development partners, civil society organisations, etc—to take a more integrated approach to SDG financing.

**Re-estimating SDG financing requirements with new realities**

The SDG financing strategy lies at the core of INFF operationalisation. Therefore, the General Economics Division (GED) under the planning commission prepared the first SDG financing strategy in 2017 to estimate the overall additional costs of implementing all 17 SDGs. However, considering the new realities—e.g. graduation from the LDC status, the Covid pandemic, need for creating innovative fiscal spaces and developing business models for the private sector to strike a balance between profit maximisation and social objectives—the financing strategy has been re-calculated with technical support from the UNDP.

**Unlocking market opportunities of the private sector**

While the public sector and public finance are central to the implementation of SDGs, the private sector and capital markets must also play a key role. According to the SDG financing strategy, Bangladesh requires an additional USD 928 billion to implement SDGs by 2030, of which the private sector accounts for 42 percent. Therefore, to unlock the private sector's potential, UNDP Bangladesh has initiated an SDG Investor Mapping to help investors identify investment opportunity areas (IOA) by providing real-time market intelligence needed by the private sector to increase investments towards achieving the SDGs. Collaborations between the right matches are the next step, catalysing the financial flow into SDG-aligned investments. A database of these projects will be hosted in a pipeline builder (Virtual Investment Platform), offering an avenue for an investor to search, select and invest in potential projects based on certified investment and market analytics.

**Uncapping Bangladesh's potential in financing SDGs**

Innovative instruments like the potential of Islamic financing (e.g. Zakat Fund) and SDG bonds in Bangladesh can be new sources of resource mobilisation. Also, Blended Financing, an instrument to use public funds to unlock private investment in support of the country's efforts for sustainable development, could be a useful frontier.

Institutionalisation of a national-level multistakeholder platform can strategically guide the updating process of existing policies and strategies, monitor and review the public and private investments in light of SDG financing, and build a concrete pipeline of bankable projects.

Finally, the implementation of this ambitious Agenda 2030 requires not just more financial resources, but collective efforts and coordination to improve efficient allocation, effective operations, and the impact of SDG-aligned projects and programmes.

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