

The Daily Star

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How are banned hospitals still operating?

DGHS drive must not be yet another failure of implementation

IN yet another show of how rotten the roots of our health sector is, a 13-year-old child died on Sunday after she underwent an appendix removal surgery at Al-Hera Clinic and Hospital in Khulna's Shalikha upazila. The claim from Nirjala Khatun's uncle is that, after hospitalising her the night before, the clinic informed them that the surgery had been completed, but also "forced" the deteriorating young patient to be taken to Jashore Sadar Hospital, where she was declared dead upon arrival. Apparently, the surgeon left right after the surgery, without ensuring if the patient had been brought back to consciousness by the assigned anaesthesiologist. All this aside, what is perhaps most contemptible is the fact that the Al-Hera Clinic and Hospital was sealed by district health authorities eight days prior. So, the question is: How was this clinic still operating openly?

Despite the DGHS' rocky track record regarding the regulation of healthcare facilities – fully demonstrated during the peak of the pandemic – we have been slightly hopeful about this much-needed large-scale drive against illegal establishments. But we wonder what the point is of making such a fuss about quickly shutting down 882 facilities countrywide for being unauthorised, if the authorities will not follow up to ensure that these facilities remain closed until they have obtained a proper licence. Even more concerning is the Magura civil surgeon's query to this newspaper: "If anyone runs the hospital ignoring our ban, what can we do?" If this is the response of someone who is in a position to actually prevent unauthorised facilities from operating, we cannot help feeling hopeless regarding the outcome of the DGHS drive.

In another incident on May 29, doctors and nurses reportedly abandoned a mother and her newborn on the operating table at a Narayanganj hospital upon hearing that DGHS officials were raiding unauthorised hospitals in the area. Paperwork and licences aside, how is it that those in charge of looking after the citizens' health do not possess the least amount of humanity?

While we believe that some good will certainly come out of the DGHS' drive to only allow licensed healthcare facilities to operate, we urge the health directorate to also ensure that this does not turn into just another government step failing at the implementation stage. If successful, this could also lead to less exploitation of patients by private hospitals, and also allow only authorised medical professionals to practise. A country which had to deal with the overwhelming effects of the Covid pandemic just last year must realise the value of a properly-regulated health sector.

2.1m new poor in five months!

Is the government taking note of inflation inequality?

A new study has confirmed what we have been fearing all along – that the number of "new poor" has increased between January and May of this year. After two years of Covid-induced hardships, all had hoped for a speedy recovery of the economy as well as of people's lives and livelihoods. Such hopes soon turned to despair, with unbridled inflation wreaking havoc on people's lives and eating away at their ever-shrivelling incomes.

According to a multisectoral research report titled "Inflation, Coping and Recovery Challenges," jointly prepared by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), the number of new poor in the country stands at 30.9 million, which is 18.54 percent of the population. A year ago, the same researchers found that the pandemic had pushed 24.5 million people – 14.75 percent of the country's population – into poverty in one year.

The findings, based on a survey of 3,910 households, show that most of the surveyed households have drastically reduced their consumption of major food items; in fact, as many as one in five urban households said they had to skip at least one meal in the last month, while two-thirds of the respondents had to cut back expenditures on healthcare and children's education. Thirty-eight percent need to borrow money but cannot do so because they are already struggling to repay their existing debts.

We seem to have ushered in a new era of inflation inequality, in which poor households are having to bear the brunt of rising costs, and more and more new poor are being created. But the question is: Is the government taking note of people's lived realities, or is it content simply touting inflated figures of GDP growth and per capita income? Unfortunately, we are yet to see any active effort from the government to even count these people in official statistics, much less make targeted interventions to bring them out of poverty by providing stimulus packages or including them in various social protection programmes.

The respondents noted that they were in need of TCB food supply, but 50 percent of them said they could not buy what they needed from the TCB trucks because of a lack of opportunity, lack of TCB family cards, and long waiting time in the queues. A whopping 57 percent respondents believed that the government should take stern action against market manipulators to stabilise prices. We agree wholeheartedly with the proposals put forth by the households most affected by the inflation. In addition to addressing the governance oversights, the government must prioritise the realities and needs of these vulnerable groups as it finalises the national budget, scaling up targeted social protection programmes, creating new jobs, and providing policy support to revitalise local economies and SMEs.

A company's negligence killed 43 people. What price will it pay?



'JUSTICE' IN PRACTICE

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TAQBIR HUDA

THE deadly fire and explosion at the BM Container Depot Ltd in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila have killed at least 43 people, and injured over 300 others. The revised death toll was announced during a press briefing held by the Fire Service and Civil Defence on June 7 afternoon, which also disclosed that 12 of the 43 people killed were Fire Service personnel. Therefore, it is likely that the remaining 32 deceased individuals were workers of the depot.

This explosion comes less than a year after the horrific fire at Hashem Foods Factory, which killed 52 workers, including at least 17 children, which the Nagarik Tadantya (Citizens' Investigation) Committee found was caused by lethal corporate negligence. It comes as yet another brutal reminder that, despite our much-celebrated growth and development, the occupational safety of workers who made them possible remains a painfully distant dream.

The Department of Explosives has stated that BM Container Depot Ltd did not obtain any licence to store hydrogen peroxide, the presence of which initial reports suggest caused the explosion. Tofazzol Hossen, inspector at the Chattogram office of the Department of Explosives, told *The Daily Star*, "We were not informed that chemicals were stored there. They did not take any licence or approval from us. There is no legal scope for hoarding dangerous goods in such a space surrounded by locality."

The inspector also mentioned that the storage of such chemicals requires a specialised facility where temperatures can be controlled, and which must be situated far enough from the nearest locality – and that neither of these conditions were met by the BM Container Depot authorities.

What I wish the inspector had also mentioned is the last time the department had sent an inspector to inspect this 30-acre depot.

Fire Service officials have also alleged that they were not informed that chemicals were being stored in the depot. If they had that information, they could have taken cautionary and responsive measures accordingly to not only put out the blaze more effectively, but also protect the lives of firefighters and bystanders. Fire Service and Civil Defence Director-General Brig Gen Md Main Uddin told *The Daily Star*, "I've been working with the Fire Service for almost 25 years. In all these years, I have never seen this many deaths [of firefighters] in a fire incident."

Some of the surviving workers told *Prothom Alo* that the pocket gate on the



▲ **The 'financial assistance' that BM Container Depot Ltd is offering to pay the fire victims is only 0.2 percent of Smart Group's self-declared annual revenue of USD 160 million from RMG exports alone.**

PHOTO: STAR

business must always go on.

So, what is the price of 32 dead workers to a company that seemingly puts profit over people?

Well, according to Chapter XII of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (read with the Fifth Schedule to the Act), the owners of BM Container Depot Ltd are only required to pay Tk 2 lakh for every worker killed in the explosion. However, the depot authorities have published a press statement declaring that they would pay Tk 10 lakh of "cash/financial assistance" ("*nogod shohayota*") to the families of those killed in the "accident" ("*durghotona*"). Therefore, the total amount of "financial assistance" they are planning to pay to the families of 32 deceased workers is Tk 3.2 crore. Whether any "assistance" would also be paid to the families of the 12 dead Fire Service personnel was not clearly mentioned.

The press statement also mentions that the company would pay an adult family member of each of the deceased workers a monthly amount that is equal to the monthly salary the worker used to earn, until the worker's children reach adulthood. However, in the absence of any legally enforceable mechanisms, such voluntary commitments have amounted to little more than empty promises in the past.

The director of BM Container Depot Ltd told *Prothom Alo* that his company

between charity and accountability. "Compensation" and "damages" speak the language of accountability – and corporations refuse to be held accountable.

For perspective, BM Container Depot is one of the many companies owned by the Smart Group of Industries, an industrial conglomerate that owns corporations in an array of sectors ranging from the energy sector to the RMG sector. The Tk 3.2 crore that the depot authorities are offering to pay is only 0.2 percent of Smart Group's self-declared annual revenue of USD 160 million from RMG exports alone, as mentioned on its website.

When the price of a worker's death is limited to Tk 2 lakh in the very law that was meant to "ensure labour rights," employers (who store hazardous chemicals without proper licence, putting workers lives at acute risk) can then advertise the payment of Tk 10 lakh as a grand act of magnanimity or "unprecedented instance of humanity" – instead of having to fear unlimited liability from a class action lawsuit that would sue them for all they're worth for committing gross corporate negligence that led to the preventable loss of lives.

As long as there is no real price to pay for corporate negligence, companies won't have the incentive they need to stop acting so negligently, and workers will continue dying preventable deaths.

Celebrating 50 years of global environmental movement



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SALEEMUL HUQ

THE global environmental movement started in 1972, with the first global environment conference held in Stockholm, Sweden, hosted by then Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. Among the heads of governments who also attended was the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who famously declared that environment and poverty were two major global issues that needed to be tackled together.

Since that watershed event, the United Nations set up the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and different environmental treaties such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), and UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) have been enforced, which are moving forward with their respective annual conferences of parties (COPs).

To commemorate the event, the Government of Sweden, together with the Government of Kenya and UNEP, held Stockholm+50 in Stockholm last week, with participants from around the world to take stock of the environmental movement and plan the next phase.

I had the privilege of attending the event, and will share some of my reflections on both the event and what

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needs to happen next.

The two-day event started with a high-level opening session, where the heads of governments of Sweden and Kenya as well as the UN secretary-general and the head of UNEP all spoke, followed by plenary sessions for ministers from many countries, including Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen.

However, the most interesting sessions were the many side events where different groups such as scientists, women, youth, farmers, indigenous groups, businesses, and many others, were invited to share their work and views about the future.

The main theme of the overall conference was to reconnect the different strands of the original environmental movement, which has become divided over the last 50 years, as well as to galvanise actions at a faster pace involving all stakeholders, rather than just governments.

I had the opportunity to share my reflections at the concluding session of the conference and said the following.

While there is much to celebrate in terms of having raised global awareness of the importance of the environment over the last 50 years, as well as some progress on different aspects such as climate change, biodiversity and pollution control, the progress has been too little, too late, and hence we needed to change our approach going forward.

The first task is to stop relying on government leaders to come to global events once a year and make promises and then go home and fail to implement their own promises. This has clearly failed as a process. Hence, there is a need to have other global stakeholders involved in such meetings and in implementing the decisions once they are approved. This

includes the private sector as well as civil society networks and groups.

The second new element that needs to happen is to make the youth more prominent in the decision-making process, and even the implementation, and not just in advocacy as they are now. Young people around the world have already demonstrated their capabilities to take actions and support environmental causes locally as well as globally. I suggested that we turn the annual pre-COP of the UNFCCC into a Youth COP as well as an "Accountability COP" henceforth. This was in fact done quite successfully by Italy, who hosted the pre-COP26 in Milan last year before the main COP26 in Glasgow in November.

The upcoming pre-COP27 will be hosted by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Kinshasa prior to COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt this year. This could be an opportunity to make it into a youth COP again.

Finally, the biggest shift we need to achieve is in the consciousness of every person in the world, where they start to think of themselves as the citizens of Planet Earth first, before thinking of themselves as the citizens of their countries and cities. This means that each and every one of us need to do whatever we can as conscious citizens to preserve our environment, while also looking after our own development and well-being. This is possible to do, but will require a major paradigm shift in our thinking and commitment starting from the individual level upwards.

It is important that we solve these problems in the next 50 years, or the future will be unthinkable for our children and grandchildren in the coming decades.