The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

# It's not an accident if the same mistake is repeated

## Depot blast brings out the urgency of compliance

IT is said that a mistake, if repeated, is no longer a mistake; it is a choice. Any "accident" caused by the repetition of that mistake is not an accident then; it is premeditated. The same can be said about the BM Inland Container Depot blast that went on to kill at least 46 people. The blast's ferocity was blamed on the storage of hydrogen peroxide – an oxidising agent – inside some of the containers. What makes this more painful is a revelation by *The Daily Star* that this wasn't the first instance of fire caused by inept chemical handling by Al-Razi Chemical Complex, a subsidiary of the Smart Group of Industries that also co-owns the depot.

According to our report, Al-Razi was warned of the hazards of storing hydrogen peroxide in jerrycans before the Sitakunda blast. It was after an export consignment of the chemical caught fire as the carrier vessel was waiting for port clearance in Cambodia. The ship's floor was fully burnt in that fire, and a subsequent investigation identified unapproved jerrycans in which the chemical was stored as the cause of the fire. The jerrycans, as investigators pointed out, couldn't sustain the pressure of the chemical and exploded.

The Sitakunda blast is but a bigger, scarier and avoidable version of that accident. It owes as much to the unsafe and unauthorised storage of hydrogen peroxide in the depot as to its lack of a proper firefighting system and concealment of information. Had the supervising authorities taken appropriate steps following the Cambodian incident, perhaps we wouldn't have lost so many lives within mere weeks.

But the fallout continues. The Singapore port, which is used to export about half of our foreign-bound products, has reportedly announced a curb on Bangladeshi transhipment of hydrogen peroxide – generally used in the textile industry – through the port. Its export potential will not be the only thing affected by such restrictions and the negative word of mouth. The whole export sector may be affected as well if buyers and port authorities lose confidence in our ability to handle cargoes properly.

All this points to the need for compliance for all involved in the export-import sector. As things stand, our industrial safety record is already appalling, with poor infrastructure and institutional preparedness at odds with international safety standards that buyers have come to expect. We cannot appear to be overselling our competence and not delivering it when needed. Therefore, we urge the government and all responsible stakeholders to learn from the recent debacle and ensure that proper safety protocols are followed at all times so that the failure of one institution doesn't harm all others or lead to such catastrophic tragedies.

# The danger of driver fatigue should worry us

## Continued lack of concern for road safety is unacceptable

THE frightening regularity with which road crashes continue to occur makes us wonder if there is really any authority looking into this, and if the deaths and injuries being reported have any effect on them. In the first five months of this year, at least 2,785 people died in road crashes. This is a huge number by any margin, and would've been enough to shake the foundation of any responsible institution. But not in our case. Otherwise, why would the government still dilly-dally over implementing the Road Transport Act, 2018? How many more amendments to this law will need to be made until it is ready to meet its objectives?

Besides proper laws and their execution to fix the transport sector, there is also a need for looking at the plight of individuals involved in road crashes. We're talking about drivers and helpers whose employment is seldom formalised. The driver who caused the crash in Savar last week, killing four scientific officers of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, had allegedly been driving for 38 hours, according to a report. This is a common occurrence in the context of road crashes, as most drivers are paid on the basis of how many trips they are able to make. This naturally causes them to drive recklessly and for inhumanly long hours. Many also do not have licences or updated papers. It is perhaps no wonder that corrupt and influential transport owners would take advantage of this situation to further their profits, in a climate where the government itself looks the other way while a large number of unfit and unregistered vehicles ply the streets.

The authorities' apathy to the dismal road safety situation becomes clearer when you see how the recommendations of experts and professionals are jettisoned. For instance, Bhatiapara police had suggested that a "central reservation" or median strip be installed at the accident-prone section of the highway in Gopalganj where nine people recently died in a crash. Things could have been different if the authorities just listened to such recommendations.

We, therefore, urge the government to speed up the implementation of the Road Transport Act. More importantly, stricter traffic regulations are required on accident-prone areas of the highways. But it is also essential for transport owners to be held accountable when road crashes occur – not just drivers who are often held hostage by their need to earn an income. We need a complete overhaul of this sector.

EDUCATION IN BUDGET 2022-23

# Small mercies and dashed hopes

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MANZOOR AHMED

EDUCATORS and concerned citizens have been urging a major increase in public allocation for the education sector, as well as decisive steps for quality and equity measures in education. So far, they have been disappointed, their hopes dashed once again in the national budget for FY2022-23 proposed to the parliament. It may be argued that the proposed budget at least allows for schools to be kept open and running while confronting the extraordinary challenges for the economy to recover from the pandemic fallout, aggravated further by the Ukraine war. Should we not be thankful for the small mercies that at least keep the schools operating in the face of major adversities?

Children who have dropped out of school during the pandemic, boys and girls who have joined the ranks of child labourers, girls who have become child brides – who need help to be brought back to the classroom – may not quite agree. Those still in school, struggling to keep up with their lessons and looking for support such as tutoring or special classes to bridge the learning gap, will also not be satisfied with what is on offer.

Out of the total budget of Tk 678,064 crore for FY23, the allocation for the education sector is Tk 81,449 crore or 12 percent of the total, compared to 11.9 percent in FY22. In terms of GDP ratio, it is 1.83 percent, lower than the outgoing fiscal year's allocation. This is one of the lowest in the world – far below the recommended minimum of 4-6 percent of GDP and 20 percent of the national budget.

The problem is as much about meagre funding as about managing resources and deciding on priorities and strategies to make the system function better. Educators have pleaded for a recovery and remedial plan for education to help 40 million students catch up with the losses suffered due to the pandemic, which have run into a third academic year. Unesco, Unicef, World Bank and others have warned that for countries like Bangladesh, this situation portends a generational disaster unless effective remedial actions are taken.

The budget speech of the finance minister does promise a range of initiatives for "science-based education and development of education infrastructure." He goes on to speak about a list of accomplishments, essentially within the present pattern of expenditures to keep the educational operations going. Mentions have been made of teachers recruited, books distributed, stipends paid, ICT equipment installed in schools, TVET training expanded, and initiatives to introduce blended instruction, combining distance and in-person lessons. He suggests that the distance mode supplementing classroom instruction will be the main compensatory approach to learning losses. This smacks of business as usual that underestimates the severity of the situation.

Evidence from other countries as well as studies by Education Watch and others in Bangladesh show that a much more systematic and focused attention to recovery and revival is needed. Poor learning outcomes – such as more than half of children being unable to read, write and count after five years of primary education – were already a pre-Covid problem. The pandemic-induced education setback has amplified the problem.

**Children who are struggling to keep up with their lessons and looking for support, such as tutoring or special classes, to bridge the learning gap caused by the pandemic will not be satisfied with what is on offer in the proposed nation budget.**

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Our children are facing an extraordinarily difficult challenge of learning losses, and they need help. Educators have pointed out that children who were in Class V at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 are in Class VII now, skipping two school years and largely unprepared for their new lessons. They have suggested a recovery and remedial plan with four key elements: a rapid assessment of the students' core skill levels; a remedial plan for at least two years for the students to catch up with the losses; technical and financial support to teachers and schools to implement the remedial plan; and a working group involving parents, communities and NGOs in each school to support and carry out the recovery-remedial plan.

The budget statement and indicated allocations do not provide any hint of urgency for a major education recovery and revival plan. For all we know, the education authorities have not proposed specific budget lines for such a plan. They now need to adjust their expenditure plan to support these urgent activities. They should find a way to include and support non-MPO schools in the recovery plan; more than a quarter of primary school students and up to a third of the secondary-level students (even excluding Qawmi madrasas) attend schools not supported by the government. The plight of these children cannot be ignored.

All of this may mean pausing or slowing down some planned activities, such as rolling out a new school curriculum. The education agencies, including the curriculum and textbook board, NAPE, NAEM and the directorates, need to focus on implementing a recovery and remedial plan. A successfully implemented remedial plan will lay the ground for implementation of the intended curricular reform. It is generally agreed that the capacity to implement the curriculum in classrooms has been the problem and will remain the problem.

Beyond the urgency of the recovery and revival of the system, a longer-term perspective is needed. There is no national plan as yet for access and completion of secondary education for all young people, an education target under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The government has pledged to provide a "child budget" as a tool for directing and monitoring public resources to meet the essential survival, growth and development needs of children. No such document has been available from the finance ministry.

One year's budget cannot solve the myriad problems in the education sector. But it can signal the direction of change and seriousness of purpose if the authorities can decide what to do. The groundwork has to be done by the education authorities – the two ministries and three divisions in the education sector. For the child budget, the women and children affairs ministry has a major role to play. It has to make the case for larger budgets with credible plans and programmes that would address the public concerns about quality, equity and inclusion objectives of the education system. This discourse should have been ongoing through open dialogue with civil society and as part of a medium-term education sector development plan discussed and prepared in a participatory manner. Transparency and participatory dialogue have not been the hallmark of budget-making and broader priority setting, but it is never too late to begin.

# *Expanding RMG business now is risky*

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

BANGLADESH'S garment sector is booming. Our ready-made garment (RMG) exports hit their target for the outgoing fiscal year two months early; exports were USD 35.36 billion till April, crossing the target of USD 35.14 billion set for FY2021-22. Some are forecasting that the exports will hit USD 42 billion by the end of FY2021-22.

This is no flash in the pan. In fact, Bangladesh's RMG export market has been growing since autumn 2021. The country's RMG makers are likely benefitting from brands and retailers shifting production out of China, where supply chain issues and draconian lockdowns have been hampering productivity.

Bangladesh's RMG exports increased 36 percent in the first 10 months of FY22 compared to the exports during the same period in FY21, which was USD 26 billion, according to the Export Promotion Bureau. For context, FY21 was affected by the pandemic, while FY22 saw inflationary impacts.

What has been almost unprecedented in the current boom of the RMG industry is that some garment makers are even turning orders away due to their lack of capacity. The contrast between this and the despair of 2020, when many factory lines lay idle, could not be starker.

Will this situation prevail forever? The short and obvious answer is "no". Already, some experts are forecasting a global recession and even stagflation. It is the worst of both worlds and an economic phenomenon that is rarely seen. The other reason why orders may plateau and slow down is China, which is now opening up for business. It will fight to be competitive, and it remains a key strategic partner for many global fashion brands. China needs and wants growth.

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Enhancing production capacity now, without any feasibility studies or without regard to what future headwind we may be facing, would be risky and reckless. Now is the time to take stock and think strategically.

This brings to mind a broader issue in our industry: There is a lack of understanding about how big we are and of our total production capacity. Do our industry leaders have a clear idea about our overall capacity for denims, t-shirts or jackets? Is there a sense of a coordinated approach? Or are we all doing our own thing, without any idea about the bigger picture? We need to get smart here, just like our customers in the fashion space. Brands and retailers divide their orders into different regions and suppliers in order to minimise their supply chain risk. They know the capacities of their suppliers and are able to capitalise on that to play hardball on prices. We will always be price-takers until we better understand our capabilities.

Now, we need to think strategically before we proceed for expansion, because any surplus or unutilised capacity may handicap us in our relations with brands. Any additional investment would certainly bring additional revenues in the short term, but what kind of long-term impact would it have, and would it simply lead us to a situation of perennial overcapacity?

I believe we need a full assessment of the industry. That means our overall capacity, our key production areas, our main areas of competitive advantage, our strengths and our weaknesses. If we expand without knowing the answers to these questions, we risk being exposed in the long term. It is vital when doing this assessment that we include all non-legitimate production units that exist and supply indirectly into exports as well as domestic consumption. These factories are a substantial risk to Bangladesh's image.

By taking stock now and assessing the overall state of the industry, we can also spot bottlenecks and decide where investments need to be made.

The wider point is about having a strategy for our RMG industry, which is such a critical industry sector. If we are talking about an industry which could generate USD 40 billion in revenues, could we not, as an industry, spend a few million dollars to devise a broad industrial strategy? Could we not bring in a team of crack consultants to look at the overall makeup of our industry, and how well-positioned it is to meet the future demand for global fashion retailers and their customers?

This kind of deep market research is critical for us moving forward. Knowing your core markets and the key dynamics and drivers in them is critical for success in business. If we were to commission some research on the Bangladesh RMG industry, there are several questions I would like answers to: How large is the industry, and what is its overall production capacity? How does the overall production capacity compare with the current global demand? What kind of trends are we seeing in terms of orders, and are we seeing the start of a potential slowdown in demand? What kind of investment plans do garment makers have in place for the next 12 months? How much diversity are we seeing in terms of core production areas?

I believe the future looks bright for garment makers in Bangladesh, but let's not get too carried away. Let's keep cool heads and ensure that the decisions we as an industry make now ensure prosperity in the long term, rather than just a quick buck.