

The Daily Star

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Austerity in budget spending a welcome move

Efficient implementation of govt directives needed to reduce pressure on our economy

WE appreciate the government directives, given to the field-level administration, to practise austerity in spending from the budgetary allocations. Reportedly, the public administration ministry issued the directives to all upazila and district administrations as the country's economy is under growing pressure from rising inflation, strained foreign currency reserves, and global price hike of different commodities.

The directives include stopping the spending spree by field-level administration at the end of the fiscal year, consulting with the public administration ministry if there is any confusion regarding budget allocation, cancelling honorarium for attending meetings of different project related committees, paying electricity bills timely and explaining to the ministry in case of outstanding bills, stopping spending additional money which surpasses the amount allocated in the national budget for 2022-23, etc. The instructions, if properly implemented, will definitely reduce the pressure on our economy, as at least 1,700 crores can be saved from these austerity measures.

Most importantly, these directives send a very important and urgent message that local governments and public officials need to play their part in bringing stability back to the economy instead of partaking in their usual ill-conceived and often unnecessary spending sprees. Usually, a large sum of the budgetary allocations remains unutilised by different ministries at the end of a fiscal year. In a desperate attempt to meet their targets, many local administrations try to spend as much of their funds as they can in the last quarter of a fiscal year, often leading to wastage and inefficient use of public money. Meanwhile, suspending implementation of low-priority projects is the need of the hour since a lot of our foreign currency is spent on importing different raw materials, particularly for development projects.

The directive that did not make it to the official notification – but one that needs to be highlighted equally urgently – is for officials and local administration to put a check on corruption. We know all too well how much of public money is hemorrhaged through corruption, particularly during any big government project. According to the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), at least at least 5 percent of the GDP is lost due to corruption each year, if we consider large public procurement along with corruption in health, education, police and judiciary. At a time when the whole world has been practising austerity to check the impacts of rising inflation, can we expect our government officials to not take their usual unfair cut from public money and add to people's suffering?

We hope our public officials respond to the call for austerity with sincerity and that the government monitors that the directives do not fall by the wayside. We all must go above and beyond to address the critical situation we find ourselves in.

Have some 'doya' for Doyagonj!

Fix the crucial connecting road, ease people's suffering

A crucial road which connects four areas – Dholaikhal, Tikatuli, Dholaipar and Jatrabari – is in a debilitating state, causing immense suffering to commuters and communities living near the juncture. As per our report, Bangladesh Railway is erecting an overhead rail bridge under the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project, completely blocking a lane of the road, while another lane has turned into a small ditch, due to waterlogging. The existing road is filled with so many potholes that commuters report feeling sick from the trip, and it is particularly difficult for patients travelling to and from two diagnostic centres adjacent to the road. All other alternatives to this route are blocked as well, which means commuters have no choice but to make this treacherous journey day in and out.

The significance of the Doyagonj road has increased substantially since the inauguration of Mawa-Bhanga expressway. It is all the more astonishing, then, that the authorities are so impervious to the road's condition. As is the case with most city-related problems, the authorities concerned seem more interested in playing their favourite "blame game" than taking responsibility to fix the issues. According to Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) officials, the project authorities responsible for building the overhead rail bridge have blocked all drains and have not left any channels open for water to pass. Meanwhile, officials linked with the project blame locals and the DSCC.

The project director, who has apparently been requested by the DSCC to take measures to solve the problem, did not reply to the paper's repeated queries, so we take this column to ask if the allegations of the DSCC are, indeed, true. Why would a multi-billion dollar ambitious government project, which was designed (one would assume) by the most competent and best minds of the country, lead to such problems in the first place? When was the problem first identified, and what steps, if any, were taken by the project authorities to address the glitch since then?

We also want to draw the attention of the DSCC, whose go-to response to any crisis is to shift the blame to someone else. We are honestly tired of this charade. What have they been doing, since the project first began, to reduce commuters' suffering? Beyond sending a letter to the project authorities – that too, as late as June 26 – have they taken any urgent steps to open up the lanes, fix the potholes, remove waste, reduce waterlogging, and so on? What about the alternative routes that are blocked as well? Have any steps been taken to make them functional so that the pressure on Doyagonj road can be reduced?

The sad story of Doyagonj road is unfortunately an all-too-familiar one for city dwellers of the country. We urge the authorities concerned to work together to urgently fix the road and ease the sufferings of the public who already pay too high a price on a daily basis to simply survive in this city.

The fault in our stargazing



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THERE are two versions of this story. One describes the merciless beating of a college principal by a member of parliament allegedly because the teacher failed to prevent his colleagues from slandering a senior politician's wife. The second version shows the same principal sitting next to his alleged beater to claim "all's well." Apparently, the MP tried to stop a brawl in which the principal likely hurt himself. The "misunderstanding" is water under the Padma Bridge now.

Then comes a random warning: The government is closely monitoring social media for teachers fishing in the murky water. Why specify teachers with the not-so-subtle hint of a threat? Aren't we all being watched? Are teachers banned from expressing their opinions? How will they teach, then? Simply by repeating the text?

Recent incidents of humiliation and persecution of teachers confirm such suspicions. One teacher was beaten to death for "insulting" a student before his girlfriend. Some were forced to wear garlands of shoes or made to squat while holding their ears to remind them of their "true" positions in the institutions, run by not "tender" students but by tender politics. With so much going on, Mr MP perhaps chose the wrong time to teach the principal of his constituency "a lesson." The administrative warning shows how seriously the government is gauging the situation.

If a country fails to protect its scholars and teachers, they will be forced to either leave their jobs, change professions, or move abroad. Nobody wants to relive Satyajit Ray's political satire "Hirak Rajar Deshe," where the idealist school teacher Udayan Pandit had to flee to the mountains to secure his values. A teacher today can get into trouble even for restating a scientific theory such as Darwinian evolution. Teachers are humiliated and punished and stripped of their power to wield the minds of the young generation. They are reminded of their rank in the cadre services or food chain through a taste of their own medicine – "lessons."

While teachers, scholars, and researchers in the developed world expand their horizons to brace the first light of the cosmos, we embrace ours with shoe garlands and treat them with hockey sticks and cricket stumps. While the whole world is progressing to see images of galaxies that formed 13.7 billion years ago, we are regressing to celebrate our animal instincts. Notwithstanding the Nasa images that humbled us with a reminder of our minuscule existence in the grand scheme of things, we prefer to display a primitive form of power. The infrared images of multiple galaxies in just a corner of space prove that our earth is

nothing more than a speck of dust. Our atom-like status in the infinite world was argued by Greek philosopher Epicurus in the 4th century BC through his theory of atomism. The Nasa images prove how "finite" we are in size, but how "infinite" we are in our faculty. The stargazing made me navel-gaze on the state of our faculty members.

A teacher is not encouraged to give the

My reality as a university teacher, however, is different from that of my colleagues in government colleges or schools, who have to engage with local MPs, bureaucrats, or political goons. I do not share their concerns of postings, transfers, or ACRs that lead many of them to make professional compromises or lose their dignity. True, there are university teachers who act like political agents, but



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spark of imagination to their students. Our teachers are relegated from their niche in the superstructure to the base, if I am allowed to use Marx. While the developed world races forward to reach "space: the final frontier," we race backward to "withdraw pace out of's pace."

Yet there is no shortage of talents in our country. The presence of a Bangladeshi-born astrophysicist from the University of Toronto in the Nasa team is an example. In an interview for a Bangla science magazine, Lamiya Mowla discussed the James Webb telescope that captured images from the ancient galaxy. After finishing high school in Dhaka, Lamiya went to Wellesley College in the US to study neuroscience. But while doing a course on astrophysics, her previous passion for physics was rekindled. Did a teacher give her the spark? She pursued her PhD in structural evolution of galaxies at Yale University. At that time, she was running an after-school programme for Bangladeshi students. Through this Science Outreach Program, she aimed to encourage students to ask questions that they could not do in their schools. "In Bangladesh, asking questions is a taboo. You can be bullied into silence for doing so," she observed.

Lamiya's comment struck a raw nerve in me. If teachers cannot entertain the questions of their students, what good are they? If teachers cannot work or think freely, what good are they? I do not believe that teachers deserve automatic respect for their sacred profession. Teachers earn love and admiration through years of dedication to their profession and students.

they are likely feared, never revered or loved.

The beating of the principal is symptomatic of a time when teachers have lost their "value" in the system. Students pick up on this social signal and act accordingly. Many argue that the family as an institution is failing to teach students to respect their teachers. But they forget that most of our students today are first-generation learners who do not have the cultural orientation of respect in their homes. A teacher is seen as a service provider; teaching is a commodity that parents purchase for their wards. A teacher is a strategic political partner as their institution is a potential polling centre where the teacher is likely to be a polling agent. A daily dose of "lessons" is therefore devised for the teachers so that they know the alpha male in their tribe.

Such political concerns have stopped educational institutions from being seats of learning where curious minds would explore answers to questions. Education has become all about certificates, with teachers as delivery personnel. The politicians and bureaucrats want a culture of obedience and compliance where questions are redundant. Without questions, we become unthinking parrots. We memorise whatever answer is given to us. We do not venture out to find truth; we wait for truth to come to us, by chance.

It is about time we ask: How can Lamiyas abroad do star-gazing with immense possibilities but Lamiyas in Bangladesh cannot go beyond navel-gazing? Whose fault is it?

Why Bangladesh needs retirement homes



M Makbul Hossain is a retired rear admiral of the Bangladesh Navy.

M MAKBUL HOSSAIN

IN Bangladesh, the current average life expectancy is 73 years, and the number of people who are aged 60 and above is expected to double by 2050, according to research by ARC Centre of Excellence. With the rise in the elderly population, the demand for holistic care for senior citizens tends to grow. At present, the population of Bangladesh is 171.68 million, which will rise to 216.46 million by 2051. In 2020, the elderly population of Bangladesh was 14 million as per projected survey, and it is expected that the elderly population aged 65-plus will rise to 30.04 million by 2051.

In the current year, the dependency ratio of the age groups 0-14 and 65-plus is 0.469 percent, which will rise to 0.524 percent by 2051, whereas the labour force ratio of the age group 15-59 is now 0.651 percent, which will drop to 0.604 percent by 2051 (BBS population projection 2011-2061 and BBS elderly population in Bangladesh Vol-4). Bangladesh is going to enter the intermediate stage of ageing. In addition, the number of nuclear families is rising. In that regard, there are many older people with savings and good experience in different sectors who have the potential to be an asset to society. But there still remains a huge gap when it comes to providing them with the necessary support facilities that might enable them to lead the rest of their lives peacefully and productively.

Not every senior citizen has the same care needs. Therefore, a balanced and holistic care system should be designed to help seniors focus on healthy lifestyle

habits such as eating nutritious foods, exercising regularly, and maintaining strong social ties.

Bangladesh is a land of culture and tradition, and the elderly are an integral part of our society. As the country shifts its focus from agriculture to industries, traditional culture and family structure are also changing – thus, the joint family system is gradually losing its importance. Industrialisation has created more job opportunities than before, and it is anticipated that in the days to come, there will be hardly any house helps available. On the other hand, the number of children per household has also come down to one or two and many children are going out of the country for education or employment; some may also choose to work in a different region within the county. Thus, it is becoming almost impossible for the children to look after their parents physically or to keep their parents with them without any domestic help. As such, the next logical step is to shift the elderly parent to a care centre where they can have good company, and stay engaged and active. But the crux of the matter is, there are hardly any good care centres available in Bangladesh.

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Senior citizens are considered as the pillars of society for their contributions and their experience. To provide the elderly with the required support/facilities, different organisations or industrialists may come forward to establish care centres for them. There could be three different types of care centres, namely, Premier Living, which can target higher income elderly people; Seniors Living for the middle-income elderly people, and Retired Living for the lower-income elderly people. This could be a cost-effective, self-sustainable model, where the Retired Living group may pay a nominal charge and the Seniors Living group may pay for the actual cost, while the Premier Living group will pay a premium charge for all

premium services that they will enjoy, and their surplus amount may be utilised as subsidy for the Retired Living group.

Due to the social stigma surrounding old homes, in the beginning, the challenging task may be to find people to accommodate in the care centre – as the concept is not yet adapted in our society. This challenge can be mitigated by active online and offline campaigning, by emphasising on the importance of elderly care and how care facilities can provide a safe space for them.

The socioeconomic consequences of having an ageing population are emerging issues in Bangladesh. So, coming up with new policies and increasing awareness in this regard is now a necessity. Integrated, assisted living facilities need to cover the needs of the increasing number of elderly people. About 77 percent of elderly people do not have enough income to meet their basic needs and 71.4 percent are dependent on siblings for financial assistance. Most of the poor families cannot ensure separate living spaces for their senior members, as they live in one or two room houses consisting of more than five family members.

Under the social welfare ministry, there are currently six old homes. Several shelters and traditional old homes are also run by private institutions. If organisations and wealthy individuals step up and establish standard care centres, they will not only provide the elderly population with necessary healthcare and space, but also inadvertently preserve a wealth of unmatched experience that the elderly people will offer to society. Thus, if need and good intention are at the core, there will come a day when such elderly services will be normalised, and not frowned upon.

Our senior citizens have given a lot to society through their lives and their careers. Now, it is upto society to pay it forward and provide them with the space to flourish.