

Prepare hospitals for winter surges

Poor people suffering disproportionately as winter brings diseases, injuries

The winter has predictably brought a wave of suffering in the country, and it owes as much to the cold weather as to the lack of preparation and resources, making the poor and homeless suffer disproportionately. Over the last few days, we have come across reports highlighting the many winter-related effects, including shrinking income opportunities for those in the informal economy, lack of food, lack of protection against the cold, winter-related diseases, etc. Photos of people suffering without warm clothes and blankets have gone viral. As the mercury dropped, so has their hope of a quick relief.

Another effect that hasn't been talked about enough is the struggle of patients with cold-related diseases to get treatment at hospitals. Reportedly, the rising caseload has overwhelmed many hospitals, with bed crisis emerging as a big problem. There are too few beds for too many patients. For example, at the Khulna Medical College Hospital, which has 500 beds, there were 1,083 patients admitted as of Sunday, most of them forced to stay on the floors in wards, corridors and balconies. The accommodation problem was also reported at Tangail's 250-bed General Hospital, where the number of patients has increased almost four times.

Most of the patients crowding public hospitals, including children and elderly people, are suffering from pneumonia, asthma, diarrhoea, etc. There are also those suffering from burn injuries, which they sustained while sitting by the fire or using cooking stoves or after falling into boiling bathwater. The burn hospitals in Dhaka are overflowing with such patients coming from different parts of the country. Those with minor burns are also visiting the outdoor units. Of course, negligence and lack of awareness are mostly to blame for these burn injuries. But the fact that hospitals treating them as well as cold-related diseases are having such a difficult time to accommodate patients shows how a predictable surge in winter patients has turned into a logistical nightmare thanks to lack of preparation, for which the higher authorities must take responsibility.

The question is, why haven't they increased the capacity of hospitals to deal with the extra load? Unfortunately, lack of preparation and resources – not just medical – has hurt the most in regions known for poverty. As per a recent study covering the period of 2009-2021, an average of 104 people die annually in Bangladesh due to cold-related diseases and injuries, with the mortality rates higher in divisions with colder winter and higher poverty. Rangpur and Barishal are, unsurprisingly, the most at-risk divisions. What this shows is a direct link between poverty and winter suffering. And that the authorities have been slow to respond to the multidimensional threats of this combination has only made things worse.

Only the other day, we have commented on the lack of relief efforts from the government and affluent sections of society. But only relief will be of little help if we don't take note of the many-sided effects of winter. We, therefore, urge the authorities, including district administrations and public hospitals, to properly respond to poor people's need of food, warm clothes, income opportunity, medicine and treatment.

A two-month wrong finally righted

Police and the judiciary must learn from Bushra's plight

We are delighted that Amatullah Bushra, an accused in the murder case of BUET student Fardin Noor Parash, has been finally granted bail after two months of undeserved detention. Although the time it took for the bail to come through is disturbing, we would nonetheless like to celebrate the freedom that Bushra can now enjoy and the relief that her family must feel. We would also like to draw attention to the unfairness that Bushra was subjected to as she was kept behind bars even after being exonerated by the police. She was detained despite there being no incriminating evidence against her – which is a gross violation of justice.

Bushra has gone through a tiring ordeal so far. She was on police remand twice. Her detention at the Kashimpur Women's Central Jail, according to her family members, had left her "devastated". Although she has been granted bail now, the trauma of being unfairly dragged into this case and later imprisoned may stay with her for long. We can only hope that as a promising university student involved with extracurricular activities, she will be able to get back to her life properly, leaving all the memories of jail behind. We also hope she will be able to overcome the stigma that society attaches to those jailed, even if they were innocent.

Bushra's bail was denied twice, once on November 16 and again on December 5. It was later revealed by DB and RAB in separate briefings that Fardin's death was a "suicide", and she had nothing to do with it. However, the damage to her "reputation" (a concept that is overvalued in our patriarchal society) had already been done by then. The media is partly to blame for this. The way her story was presented and sensationalised, especially about her purported relationship with Fardin, even before all the facts came out, has contributed much to the public imagination of Bushra.

When it comes to wrongful imprisonment or rejection of deserved bail, Bushra is not an isolated case, however, nor is she the latest even. We often come across cases where persons deserving bail have to wait indefinitely to get it. Often, the problem begins with police bringing unsubstantiated charges, which eventually erodes trust in the criminal justice system. We urge the authorities to ensure that all accused persons that deserve bail are given it in a speedy manner, so that they don't have to languish in jail unnecessarily. They must ensure no one is detained without any evidence of the crime they are being accused of. Proper procedure must be followed at all stages of a judicial process.

Finally, we think Bushra deserves a public apology, or at least damages, from the police or the home ministry for wrongfully implicating her in this case and the trouble that she and her family had to go through ever since. This is only the right to do.

Overcoming looming economic challenges in 2023



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In 2023, several economies globally will face recession, while three large economies – the US, the EU and China – will continue to slow down, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) observed on the eve of the new year. In October 2022, the IMF projected global economic growth to decrease from 3.2 percent in 2022 to 2.7 percent in 2023. This has been causing difficulties across countries and affecting the living standards of low-income households.

For Bangladesh, though inflation has subdued slightly in recent months, it is still much higher than the previous year and the government's projections. In December 2022, inflation reached 8.71 percent, compared to 6.05 percent in December 2021. Much of this is imported inflation since the country depends on imports of fuel and other essential commodities. Global inflation has also passed onto locally produced items due to high fuel, transport and logistical costs.

However, a part of this inflation is also due to the manipulation of a small group of players who hoard commodities and control the market.

Efforts to mitigate inflationary pressure are inadequate. The government initiative of selling essential foods at subsidised prices under family cards is not enough compared to the needs of low-income families. Besides inadequate coverage, there are also complaints of leakages in the distribution of subsidies and other social safety net programmes.

Fuel prices were raised by 51.2 percent for octane and 42.5 percent for diesel in August 2022. This has added to the pre-existing difficulties of the low- and fixed-income population, whose income is too inadequate to meet basic expenses. This also happened too soon after the last major hike of November 2021, when the government increased prices of diesel and kerosene by as much as 23 percent. Additionally, Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) increased electricity tariff at the bulk level by 19.92 percent



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

on November 21, 2022. This hike is apprehended to be passed on to consumers and push up their cost of living further.

High import growth and low remittance growth have resulted in a current account deficit. The external sector is also observing a depletion of forex reserves, which declined from USD 41.8 billion in June 2022 to USD 33.8 billion in December 2022. However, according to the IMF, Bangladesh's forex reserve is overestimated by USD 7.2 billion.

The domestic economy has limited fiscal space with a tax-GDP ratio of 8.5 percent in FY 2022, which is abysmally low. Due to trade misinvoicing alone, Bangladesh lost USD 8.27 billion between 2009 and 2018. If data on other types of illicit financial flows (such as tax evasion and smuggling) were available, this amount would turn out to be even bigger.

The weakness of the economy is vividly manifested through a vulnerable financial sector that is burdened by large amounts of non-performing loans (NPL). As of September 2022, the share of NPLs was 9.36 percent of total outstanding loans in the banking sector. The

culture of letting habitual, wilful loan defaulters go scot-free and providing them with endless flexibility further encourages them. This has resulted in several scams during the past decade, wherein individuals and business groups have swindled depositors' money from banks in the name of taking out business loans.

Bangladesh's policymakers have

against the dollar for a long time by injecting US dollars into the market. Meanwhile, several competing countries such as China, India and Vietnam had devalued their local currencies. This made Bangladesh less competitive for its exports and less attractive for remitters to send money through formal channels. Though Bangladesh Bank allowed the market to determine the exchange rate a few months ago, the market is yet to be corrected.

In view of declining forex reserves, Bangladesh has sought a loan of USD 4.5 billion from the IMF. However, to qualify for this, Bangladesh must undertake several reform measures for improved governance and efficiency. The key elements of the IMF loan programme to Bangladesh will include creation of additional fiscal space, containing inflation and modernising the monetary policy framework, strengthening the financial sector, boosting growth potential, and building climate resilience.

However, reforms should be designed and implemented by the country itself, since reforms under the directives of external agencies could limit the policy space and ignore the country's reality.

The ongoing global economic crisis has affected all countries irrespective of their level of economic achievements. However, countries with an efficient system and robust institutional mechanisms are in a better position to overcome the challenges.

The economic challenges faced by Bangladesh are partially due to the fallout of the pandemic and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. But the core problems of our economy are rooted in the very nature of the country's governance, which has long been neglected.

In the current context, while the government should deal with the immediate challenges of containing prices, enhancing supplies, and providing support to limited-income families, it must also carry out medium-term measures. Actions are needed for reduction of financial sector vulnerabilities, enhancement of revenue mobilisation efforts, creation of a conducive environment for private and foreign investment, development of human capital, and creation of employment opportunities.

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The rhetoric of 'it happens' and whataboutism in political apologia



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During my time as an academic at the University of Dhaka, there were some whisperings and mutterings of bewilderment among campus insiders about a political appointment in early 2009. In that air of confusion and perplexity, I overheard a conversation between two senior academics in the corridors of Kala Bhaban. Let's name them Y and Z. Y was known for his sympathy for the party in office and Z was a political incognito.

Z walked to Y and exclaimed: "Ki holo eta?!" ("What just happened?!"), expressing his shock over the political appointment and anticipating a word of condemnation from Y.

However, Y adopted a cavalier attitude towards what Z considered a serious matter. With a broad smile on his face, Y said: "Eta rajniti." ("This is politics").

In the above case, the excuse to condone misdemeanours or indiscretions is: "it happens." Unfortunately, this play is common among both unlettered and highly educated people and is used to defend, and provide blind support to, one's political camp. Worse, this pretext is applied selectively. The same people

would become moral absolutists and take a fiercely antagonistic stance if comparable offences were committed by people of opposing political parties.

The rhetoric of whataboutism is another apologist strategy for condoning the various types of human rights abuses perpetrated by a political party of one's affiliation or by a government of one's choice. It is a diversionary tactic to deflect attention from atrocities occurring under people's noses to other past events or trends. This argumentative technique is used by pseudo-neutral, partisan analysts, commentators and intellectuals. They resort to this logical fallacy to avoid the moral responsibility to intervene in instances of political authoritarianism, repression, and mass victimisation. The intention is to make the public indifferent to ongoing political oppression and to absolve the perpetrators of responsibility.

The specious pretext of whataboutism seems to have gained momentum with the defenders of the current government in Bangladesh

that is embroiled in innumerable controversies and allegations of gross human rights violations.

Electoral fraud and other forms of manipulation overshadowed the last two general elections – one non-participatory and the other tainted by nocturnal ballot stuffing. Innumerable opposition leaders and activists have also been subjected to forced disappearances, beginning with the disappearance of Dhaka City Corporation councillor Mohammad Chowdhury Alam on June 25, 2010. Both the cries of their children and the cries for justice have been falling on deaf ears. Limiting freedom of the press and gagging the expression of dissent have now taken on an institutional and legal shape, thanks to the Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018.

When conscientious intellectuals and citizen groups raise these issues of misuse to generate debates, ruling party sympathisers and peddlers of official narratives defend the regime by skillfully deploying whataboutism. Thus, they attempt to stifle legitimate political criticism and seek to dismiss the charges of current human rights abuses by referring to earlier precedents.

When the advocates of whataboutism are called on to condemn wanton harassment of opposition leaders, activists, and of journalists and writers (for exercising freedom of expression), they say that such repression is not new and they also happen in other countries.

Oppression and injustice in any shape or form are wrong and abhorrent, and suggest inherent

weaknesses of the perpetrators. Our condemnation of such acts must be absolute, without any subterfuge or reservation.

To use previous incidents of human rights violations to condone those of the present is hypocrisy and a macabre mockery of the past and present victims.

Perhaps, with a change of political power in Dhaka, today's proponents of whataboutism could change their colours. Such metamorphosis of Bangladesh's intelligentsia has happened, especially in relation to the rise and fall of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. As the *Associated Press* had reported on December 30, 1990: "Newspapers, including government-owned ones that once carried only laudatory accounts of Ershad's public deeds, now print saucy stories full of allegations of corruption and clandestine romances."

Freedom-loving and peace-and-justice-promoting writers and intellectuals should be above partisan politics and have the courage to stand firm for truth and justice. Using the tedious rhetoric of "it happens" and whataboutism to defend a particular political group is a sign of intellectual timidity.

As it appears, our country is poised for a further downward spiral – a total political, humanitarian, and economic crisis. If things turn worse and if slavery and sycophancy are the only options on the table for the educated gentry, it will be too late to wake up to the country's realities and to our responsibilities. The earlier we understand this, the better.