

Safety of border residents paramount

Fighting on the Myanmar side of border has raised security concerns

We are concerned about the escalating security threat to our border shared with the Rakhine state of Myanmar, which in recent days saw intense fighting between junta forces and the Arakan Army. Far from being contained at source, however, the conflict has seen undesirable spillovers reaching Bangladesh. Throughout Sunday, there were reports of bullets, explosives and even mortar shells falling on our border at the Naikkhongchhari upazila of Bandarban, terrifying local residents and injuring several of them. On Monday afternoon, two people, including a woman, were killed by a mortar shell, marking the first such casualties. But why would our citizens have to die or live in fear because of conflicts on the Myanmar side of the border? This is totally unacceptable.

Under no circumstances can the internal security situation of a country be allowed to compromise that of another country. The latest flare-up in the fight between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Coalition—made up of armed ethnic groups including Arakan Army—has had spillover effects for other neighbours of Myanmar as well. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has had to see the worst of it, most notably after a military crackdown in 2017 that led to the forced exodus of nearly a million Rohingya to Bangladesh. Already, there are reports of local Myanmar nationals trying to flee the bloodshed. Since early Sunday, about a hundred security personnel of that country, many injured, have crossed the border to seek refuge.

While Bangladesh again set examples of good neighbourly behaviour by giving them shelter and treatment, we should not lose sight of the potential ramifications of this situation. Bangladesh shares about a 283-kilometre border with Myanmar, which mostly falls in Bandarban and Cox's Bazar districts. A fluid security situation in Myanmar not only poses a direct threat to our border communities, but also raises the prospects of armed insurgents entering or regrouping in Bangladesh, further compromising our security. It also makes the prospects of Rohingya repatriation more uncertain.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh government has reportedly called for China's intervention. It has also vowed to not accept any more refugees from Myanmar. While efforts like this are crucial, we must also raise border security to protect local people. Amid escalating tensions, they are reportedly fleeing their homes, leaving behind belongings and livestock. We cannot be silent spectators in this chaos. The government must do everything it can to contain the effects of Myanmar's continuing civil war on our soil.

Ensure justice for JU rape victim

Accused BCL activists must be brought to justice

We are extremely disturbed by the news of the alleged rape of a young woman at a leading public university like Jahangirnagar University. Reportedly, six former and current students of the university—four of them leaders and members of Bangladesh Chhatra League's JU wing—were involved in the crime on Saturday night. Four of the accused have already been arrested and placed on remand, while two others, including a prime accused, are on the run.

The heinous act has sparked widespread outrage, as it should. Students and teachers alike have staged protests, demanding exemplary punishment for the perpetrators as well as full support for the victim. A teacher has rightly pointed out that the university authorities must take responsibility for incidents like this on the campus. A student expressed how their roommates were terrified by what happened. We find their fear and fury completely justified, and support their demands wholeheartedly.

To their credit, the JU syndicate has suspended the current students and withheld the certificates of all accused. As of Sunday, they also decided to file a case against all, and formed a probe committee as well. The JU BCL, too, staged a protest against the incident, while its international affairs secretary, one of the prime accused, was expelled.

We appreciate these prompt actions but remain concerned as to whether they will become token gestures. Time and again, BCL members have been found involved in rape, extortion, bullying, mugging and other crimes on university campuses. Connection to power and a certain degree of impunity have turned some BCL members unruly, who often got away with anything under the protection of party power. This mindset is dangerous and must be addressed. If the ruling party wants to fulfil its pledge of ensuring law and order in the country, it must discipline its student political activists first. We hope the ruling party will take some effective measures in this regard. We also urge the relevant authorities to ensure that the victim of Saturday's rape gets justice without delay.

New Message

To

Subject

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Textbooks, curriculum and the politics of education



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MANZOOR AHMED

The new school curriculum and textbooks have been grabbing headlines and sparking intense debate in the press and social media—and even prompting protests on the streets. All these have created a cacophony of noise, but have not shed enough light on the problem that could lead to a reasonable understanding of the issues and finding practical solutions.

Raging controversy and wide public interest about textbooks and the curriculum are understandable. Decisions and actions in these matters affect 40 million children, their parents and at least two million teachers and administrators involved in the nation's school system. The stakeholders add up to a large majority of the nation's population. Besides, these are matters of raising the next generation and building the future we envision for the nation.

Controversies about the contents of the curriculum and textbooks have arisen from time to time. For example, in 2013, media reported more than 200 errors—misinformation, wrong names of writers and grammatical mistakes in sentences—in the higher secondary economics textbook. In 2017, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) drew public flak by dropping contents from Bangla textbooks that were mostly written by non-Muslim writers. Textbook contents can change from time to time. But this time, the omission and commission allegedly happened in response to demands by Hefazat-e-Islam, a Qawmi madrasa-based group, and without following NCTB's own deliberative process. Incidentally, the omissions made in 2017 remain in the textbooks still in use.

The new round of curricular reform and textbook re-writing that began to be implemented in phases since 2022, has given rise to a spate of debate—sometimes acrimonious—pointing to different kinds of problems with the new initiative. In 2023, a demonstration called by the Khelafat Majlish in front of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque declared the new curriculum to be propagating Hindutva, undermining contribution of the Muslim rulers of Bengal, and insulting religious beliefs of Muslims by teaching Darwin's theory of evolution.

Parents and teachers' groups have expressed their concerns about the change in the pedagogy practices in the classroom and the assessment of students' performance required by the new curriculum. They have complained about what they saw as drastic changes for which the teachers and students were not prepared and which would not lead to better learning outcomes.

The education authorities have defended the changes as necessary to prepare the next generation for the changing times, weaning them away from memorising guidebooks and relying on private tutors.

A recent controversy arose when a university instructor, in a public event, ripped off pages from a Class 7 textbook about the experience of a "third gender" person. The incident received wide publicity on social media and in the press. Rights of individuals, respect for diversity, religious sensitivities about genders, teaching empathy for the marginalised, and age-appropriate learning content—all came to the fore



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because of this incident. Different protagonists became vocal with their own respective agenda. A reasoned consideration of the issue, if there was an issue, became the casualty.

Plagiarism, factual errors and inconsistencies, and spelling errors have been cited in the past about the textbooks. Nadim Mahmood, who is an instructor at the Department of Neuroscience, University of California at Irvine, and a writer about Bangladesh education, reviewed the science textbooks, the Bangla and English versions, for Class 7 and Class 9-10. He has written a two-part analysis based on his review in *Prothom Alo* on January 29 and 30.

Mahmood concluded that sections of the books were copied in part or fully from different online blogs, the website of the Indian online instruction platform Byju's, and other sources. In preparing the English version, Google translator was extensively used. Mahmood found that relying

consult various sources, should be able to prepare texts with illustrations and narratives of their own that are particularly relevant and appropriate for students in Bangladesh. "Copy-paste" is certainly not acceptable for NCTB textbooks.

The authorities have tried to convey two messages: that much of the criticism of the curriculum and textbooks is motivated by political agenda rather than concern for children's education, and that the teething problems in the reform efforts are being addressed and would be mitigated in time. There is truth in these arguments, but not the whole truth.

I wrote earlier that at least three major problems intersect in this controversy: a) the handling of content regarding the matters of religious beliefs and views about history and culture while those of fundamentalist inclinations stoke the dispute; b) capacity of NCTB to avert deficiencies in factual errors, printing mistakes

transformative reform. Urgent steps to this end will include:

- A committee of experts and practitioners, including teachers and some who are not directly involved in the current initiative, should be appointed to assess objectively and rapidly the problems encountered in implementing the proposed pedagogy and assessment approaches.
- The committees should recommend necessary adjustments in pedagogy and student assessment, teacher and school support and supervision, articulation and continuity of curricular content among grades and parent involvement.
- The timetable for rollout should be adjusted taking 2024 as a period of learning and reflection.

Textbook content and quality are not the only obstacle to improving school education. The NCTB needs to be more serious about addressing the recurring problems in this respect. It needs political backing to achieve this goal.

Our footpaths need to be freed

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The Detailed Area Plan (DAP) 2022-2035 outlines a grand vision of creating an "urban lifeline." The concept envisions a healthy urban dwelling revolving around footpaths. Citizens of metropolitan areas would be walking, cycling, jogging and even resting in benches set up along the footpath. The pathways would demonstrate a glimpse of urban lifestyles. Office goers, school children, elderly citizens—people from all classes and ages would fill the footpaths with their vibrant presence. But this idea is far from how footpaths are being used at present.

It is a common sight that every footpath is densely occupied by small businesses. While some are temporary and mobile, others are extensions of large, permanent shops. Generally, hawkers and vendors of clothes, shoes, leather items, and accessories encroach the footpaths along primary

roads. Vegetable and fruit sellers station themselves by secondary and tertiary roads. Sometimes, these businesses take over the left-most lanes too, leading to the disruption of traffic flow, as vehicles cannot gain speed.

What's more, the lanes are frequently used for parking cars. This effectively reduces the space for vehicular movement, and the gaps between parked cars invite more encroachers. While footpath vendors invite crowds, hindering pedestrian movement, frustrated pedestrians get off the footpath and intrude the road's left most lane, leading to even more disruption. Urban aesthetics are also compromised. It's often observed that one side of the footpath houses permanent shops, while the other hosts hawkers and mobile vendors. Suffice to say, illegal occupation brings immense misery for city residents.

It is important to note that products and services provided by encroachers—like street food, books, toys, electronic accessories—are largely recreational in nature. Because these items are also available in dedicated markets nearby, albeit at a higher price, getting rid of this encroachment should not disrupt market mechanisms. Footpaths

offer supply-induced demand. They function by attracting pedestrians going to attend some other business. Furthermore, these groups of sellers are not licensed. They don't pay taxes to the government but do financially patronise local influentials. Sellers in established markets and permanent shops pay high licence and other informal fees to stay operational, which for hawkers and mobile vendors on footpaths are conveniently lower.



These economic incentives need to be addressed to resolve this issue.

It is high time authorities restored the city's aesthetics and footpaths' mobility by taking stern actions. For example, parking on the road must not be allowed and be met with stringent consequences.

It must be ensured that hawkers and mobile vendors cannot invade footpath space with ease. Stuck in traffic jams, bikers too intrude the footpaths to evade traffic. Guardrails along footpaths do a fantastic job of

keeping bikers on the road without requiring any monitoring. They also prevent mobile vendors from taking over.

Building pedestrian shades is necessary to keep passengers from waiting on the road for transport. Benches could be built on the footpaths near bus stoppages for commuters. Frequent drives by the city corporation and law enforcement agencies should be conducted to keep encroachers off the pathways.

While it is true that encroachment benefits a certain group of people, it can also be argued that such opportunity to profit off footpaths is keeping them from exploring other business options. There are places in Dhaka where no such encroachment takes place, and livability of those areas is much better.

Encroachment-free footpaths do not necessarily eliminate the existence of mobile food carts or hawkers. Rather the new plan will ensure an organised and planned operation of such businesses, so as to not overcrowd the footpaths and compromise pedestrian mobility. At the same time, it attempts to achieve urban aesthetics. It's now on the authorities, who have the capacity, to monitor and eliminate illegal occupation.