

Rising debt burden threatens our future

Govt must ensure that the rich duly pay their taxes

The continued increase in the government's debt burden amid insufficient revenue collection has emerged as a big concern. Despite public expenditure on development rising every year, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) has not been able to ramp up tax collection as much as the government had hoped for. Consequently, Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio still stands below 10 percent, one of the worst in the world.

The ratio has not been good for the past two decades, which indicates how deeply rooted this problem is. Data from NBR and the finance ministry show that in the last 10 years, the amount of domestic and foreign loans has increased by 9 percentage points in proportion to the revenue collection of NBR. In other words, government borrowing has increased every year. In FY2013-14, the government reportedly had to borrow 44 percent of the amount that was the NBR's income. In FY2022-23, compared to the amount of money that NBR was able to collect, it was forced to borrow 53 percent more money to meet expenses. According to an IMF report, the amount of money Bangladesh has to spend on domestic and foreign debt interest payments is equal to 71.8 percent of revenue collection and grants. In the current fiscal year, that amount may increase to 101 percent, it said.

If a country has to spend the same amount (or more) that it earns as revenue to pay interest on debt, then it will have to borrow constantly to meet development and other expenses. Therefore, the government now finds itself in a tight spot. If it borrows from domestic sources, it will slow down investment (due to the crowding-out effect). But if it continues to borrow heavily from foreign sources, then it will lose foreign currency while paying interest.

In FY2022-23, foreign loan repayment stood at \$4.78 billion, up 32.8 percent year-on-year, according to the Economic Relations Division. And going forward, the repayments are expected to increase further. Therefore, the only way out of this trap is to increase revenue collection. That should be more than possible if we can make the rich pay their taxes. Currently, an estimated 87 percent of rich people do not pay taxes, heavily contributing to the revenue and debt management problems. Therefore, it is high time the government reformed its tax collection system and ensured that the wealthy cannot continue avoiding taxes.

Another death from a botched anaesthesia job

Institutional reforms vital to prevent such tragedies

We are shocked to learn of another child who died allegedly due to the administration of general anaesthesia during a circumcision procedure on Tuesday night, less than seven weeks after another death under a similar circumstance. According to a report, Ahnaf Tahmin Ayham, a 10-year-old boy, did not regain consciousness after the procedure and was declared dead an hour later. His father blamed attending doctors and authorities of the JS Diagnostic & Medical Checkup Centre and Hospital in Malibagh for the tragedy.

On January 7, five-year-old Ayaan Ahmed also died following a similar procedure under the influence of anaesthesia. His father, too, had blamed negligent treatment. Even the day before Ahnaf Tahmin's death, Raahib Reza, a 32-year-old IT consultant, died of a cardiac arrest he suffered during an endoscopy procedure. His family too alleged that anaesthesia had been administered without proper examination of his medical reports. The manner in which such incidents are occurring is really frightening. The question is, why can't the authorities stop the incidence of medical negligence?

While we usually talk about this issue only after a death, such negligence has been known to affect patients in various other ways, whether reported or not. If the recent series of tragedies proves one thing, it is the ineffectiveness of existing administrative safeguards as well as the punitive measures that are usually taken. We, therefore, must delve deeper into the root causes of such incidents and implement comprehensive reforms to prevent their recurrence.

First and foremost, there must be a robust regulatory framework to monitor and enforce standards of care in every healthcare facility, private or public. Licensing requirements for private facilities should be stringent, mandating adherence to protocols, staffing qualifications, and equipment standards. Routine inspections should also be conducted to ensure compliance and prompt corrective action in case of violations. The authorities cannot jump to action only after a tragedy has struck and expect long-term results. Equally vital is the promotion of a culture of patient-centred care across our healthcare system. Beyond institutional reforms, there is also a pressing need for public awareness of patient rights and safety.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Young women unemployed

It does not bode well for a growing economy like Bangladesh that three out of every five young women (aged 15-24) in the country are in the NEET (not in employment, education or training) category. This is a huge waste of resources for a country that is on the verge of graduating out of LDC status. If we want to continue on our desired growth trajectory, the government must find a way to utilise this untapped segment of human resources. After all, our future is in the hands of our young generation.

Nasrin Akhter
Chattoogram

GENOCIDE IN GAZA

Another veto prolongs it



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

My last column on this subject (November 17, 2023) was titled "Israel's 'right to self-defence' and Palestinians' fate to be slaughtered." Three months later, the fate of Palestinians has become worse. The killings have carried on unabated, and now millions wait in Rafah to be decimated en masse. Bombing is going on and ground assault has been warned about.

Israel has been allowed to carry on a genocide in Gaza, killing at least 29,410 Palestinians and injuring 69,465 (between October 7, 2023 and February 22, 2024), according to Palestinian sources. But the figure that stands out most shockingly is the killing of at least 10,000 children since it started, making for more than 70 children killed every day over the last four and a half months. As of writing this column, Israeli bombing of Rafah has intensified.

The latest veto by the US of an Algerian ceasefire resolution—supported by 13 of the 15 Security Council members, with the UK abstaining—reveals that, whatever US President Joe Biden may say, the US is not that concerned about civilian deaths, including deaths of children. The excuse given was that such a resolution would obstruct the ongoing negotiations among Israel, Egypt, and Qatar. Doesn't that mean that killing in Gaza can continue—including that of women and children—while the negotiations drag on? In fact, one could argue that the agreement could deliberately be delayed by Israel so that the butchery can continue and many more Palestinians can be killed. After all, there is enough evidence on the ground to surmise that Israel wants as many Gazans dead as possible and then push the rest to Sinai in Egypt, emptying the Gaza Strip of all its inhabitants. This is genocide and ethnic cleansing coming together, the precedent of which is very rare. The goal is clearly to take over this land.

When the ground operations started, the Israelis asked the Gazans to move from the northern half to the south, doubling the latter's population. With continued bombing, it razed most of the north. After the move to the south, some areas were designated as "safe" and Israel bombed the rest. Rafah, the southern tip (point) of the Gaza Strip bordering Egypt, where millions of Palestinians gathered, is now being threatened with ground assault within two weeks (by Ramadan) if the hostages taken by Hamas are not released. Even then, Israel will not withdraw from the territory, demanding which has been



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Palestinians inspect a house hit by an Israeli strike, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on February 16, 2024.

termed "delusional."

Over the last 75 years, the process has been one of relentless expansion of Israel into Palestinian land and pushback on the inhabitants to abandon their birthplace. Before the UN partition, Jews were a minority in Palestine. The UN partition in 1947 gave 55 percent of the territory to the Jewish state and 45 percent to local Arabs, which was opposed by all Arab states. In the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, Israel took 78 percent of Palestine's land, which further expanded to nearly all of Palestine in the 1967 Six-Day War. Since then, all of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem were considered as occupied territories by the world, but Israel acted as if they were theirs. Through its policy of illegal "settlements," especially in the West Bank, Israel brought about a change on the ground that practically amounts to Israel taking over Palestinian lands flouting all international laws, conventions and UN resolutions. The Golan Heights and East Jerusalem have already been swallowed with US approval.

The brief overview above should explain to our readers that taking over the Gaza Strip and killing and forcing Palestinians to Sinai is a part of Israel's grand design which the extreme right, headed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is pursuing with unspeakable atrocity.

and continues to do so, and for which the Jews enjoyed global sympathy ever since World War II, is now being enacted by the ultra-right Zionists on the Palestinians. Anti-Semitism cannot and must not find any place in our thinking, just as racism in all its forms should be most vehemently rejected, as should all forms of stereotyping and ethnic profiling.

Having said that, the continued genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, including women and children, and the planned destruction of Palestinian homes, schools, and even hospitals speak of a level of dehumanisation we haven't seen except during the Holocaust.

A simultaneous loss—and a very heavy loss for us all—is the erosion of the prestige, importance, dignity, and credibility of Western powers, especially those of the US, in allowing this to continue for so long and in such a shameful, inhuman and incomprehensible way. All issues of human rights, child rights, women's rights, and all the rest, and the whole range of international laws built patiently over the decades, following the death and destruction of World War II, stand today ridiculed and thoroughly, deeply, and overwhelmingly mocked by Israeli actions and the West's unquestioning support for them.

The retort that "Israel is only fighting Hamas and not the

allegedly use, and hence destruction of all hospitals with patients in them is justified. Of course, announcements are made to evacuate, but evacuate to where and how? How can totally paralysed, bedridden patients move? How can children and adults with severed limbs move? Where ground troops can enter anytime, what is the need for indiscriminate bombing?

An equally important loss is the credibility of the Western media. As journalists, this phenomenon is of particular concern to our community as the loss of credibility of Western media in an indirect but important way impacts the credibility of media on the whole. The unsubstantiated stories against the Palestinians, the one-sided stories in support of the assault, and half-hearted criticism of the extreme brutalities have all created such a deep and all-encompassing lack of trust in the media in general and Western media in particular that they are casting doubt everywhere and giving more space to fake news and untruths.

The whole world must unite and rise to save the Palestinians. Might must not be allowed to win over right, if we want to hold on to the fundamental values that our civilisation stands on. Defence of the Palestinians is the most important and relevant moral task before humanity. The price of failure in this instance will see the rise of brutality, illegality, and inhumanity everywhere.

The grave irony of medical negligence causing deaths



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MONIRA SHARMIN

My next-door neighbour recently cited a precarious reason for why she hasn't been getting a much-needed surgery, despite her doctor's recommendation to get it done immediately. She said, "I'm afraid that after being put under anaesthesia, I won't be able to regain consciousness. What if this is the last time I leave my house and I'm never able to return?"

I told her that she was overthinking it. She gave me a crooked smile and said, "Don't you see the news? People are going to the hospital for medical care and coming out dead." At that point, I had to concede.

The public concern about the standard of medical care and the management of healthcare facilities are getting more and more heightened in recent times, especially after the recent deaths at JS Diagnostic and Medical Check Up Centre and LabAid Hospital in Dhaka. Most of the family members of the deceased allege that the negligence of doctors, a lack of

accountability in healthcare facilities, and adequate regulation of medical practices are to blame.

One of the cases concerns 10-year-old Ahnaf Tahmin Ayham, who passed away during a circumcision procedure. Although Ahnaf regained consciousness following the procedure, he soon began vomiting. Previously, on December 31, 2023, a five-year-old named Ayaan Ahmed met the same tragic end while undergoing a circumcision procedure at United Medical College and Hospital. And just on February 19, Raahib Reza, a young IT professional, died from cardiac arrest at LabAid during an endoscopy procedure. Raahib's family members claim that the consulting doctor at LabAid anaesthetised him without studying his test results. Conversely, the doctor asserts that he was unaware about his prior medical issues. Raahib was moved to the ICU right away. But after 72 hours, he passed away.

Regrettably, instances of medical

malpractice are not uncommon in Bangladesh. The latest incidents shouldn't come as a surprise to those who are aware of the condition of the healthcare sector in the country and the general negligence and malpractice of the medical staff. In the last six months alone, there have been cases where patients have lost their lives to medical malpractice, and doctors' ineptitude have been constantly highlighted by the media.

The Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC), which is in charge of monitoring medical ethics, has a record of 455 complaints against doctors, received by the council since 2010. Of those, 143 were not investigated further, 274 were dismissed, and 38 are currently pending trial. Merely two percent of the grievances received any sort of resolution. The Bangladesh Law Commission put forth legislation in 2013 in an effort to address the pervasive claims of medical malpractice in the nation. A bill protecting medical care was eventually drafted, but it hasn't moved past the drafting stage since 2016. Meanwhile, media reports imply that the standard of medical care has not been upheld by any of the relevant authorities.

In Bangladesh, a patchwork system is used, even in the absence of a unified statute, to combat medical malpractice through a variety of current laws and regulations. Allegations such as drug

adulteration, endangering life, and negligently causing death or harm are covered under the Penal Code, 1860. Individuals are classified as consumers and medical institutions as service providers under the Consumer Rights Protection Act, 2009. It permits the filing of complaints against medical malpractice, with the prospect of monetary penalties. Patients who suffer physical harm, emotional distress or loss of income due to medical malpractice may file a lawsuit to recover damages. Under applicable provisions, patients may file writ petitions to seek remedies for constitutional rights violations.

When it comes to the ratio of doctors to patients, Bangladesh suffers from a drastic disparity. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the country has just 5.25 doctors for every 10,000 people. This is evident in all hospitals, public or private; they are always packed. And since there are more patients than doctors, it is nearly impossible for the doctors to give their patients enough time.

Additionally, due to the doctors' poor communication skills, patients rarely understand what's ailing them. The healthcare sector should serve as an oasis for service delivery rather than a source of money-making opportunities. They are working with human life, and thus must adhere to the highest level of care and caution.