

Safety above everything else

As people leave cities for Eid celebrations, we urge caution

As the month of Ramadan begins to end, let us not forget to carry forward with us its messages of charity and moderation. These are the lessons we are supposed to reflect upon not just in these days of fasting but also afterwards. And they acquire additional significance because of the acute struggles that many of our fellow countrymen are facing due to the ongoing inflationary pressure. And so, let us extend our hand and support to those who are struggling, and make this Eid a joyous occasion for all.

Ensuring the safety of everyone during the Eid holiday is another issue of immense importance. As tens of thousands of people journey home to celebrate the occasion with their loved ones, and then back, their safety is a crucial concern. Every year, we see many lives needlessly lost during this time. Such tragedies must stop. The government must take all precautionary measures to ensure it, not just on our roads and highways, but also across all modes of transportation. People themselves should also be careful and put safety above everything. We also urge our law enforcement agencies to be on the lookout for any sign of trouble on the highways—extortion, robbery, reckless driving, etc—or charging of extra bus fees, and take preventive steps.

We have already mentioned in this column the danger of dengue spread during this time. Those leaving their homes during Eid should ensure that they do not leave stagnant water lying around to create a breeding ground for aedes mosquitoes. Additionally, it is expected that the holidays may see significant rainfall and perhaps even thunderstorms. According to a report, seasonal thunderstorm across six districts have already left at least 11 people dead. As more people gather in open spaces during Eid celebrations, it is imperative that people ensure their own safety in the midst of extreme weather events.

These concerns notwithstanding, we want to focus on the brighter side of things: the lessons of the holy month and the prospects of the coming days. Let us hope that as the Ramadan nears its end, we will have rekindled its values within ourselves and indeed passed them on to others. As a nation, let us work together for the greater good of our society. We wish everyone a safe and joyous Eid.

Bridge the linguistic divide

Enable Bangladeshi migrant workers to flourish overseas

Bangladesh has long been a significant contributor to the global workforce, with over 91 lakh of its citizens pursuing opportunities in the Gulf countries since 2004. Yet, our migrants remain woefully ill-equipped to navigate the challenges abroad, including not knowing the language of their host countries. Surprisingly, there are no government initiatives to teach them the linguistic skills needed to integrate and flourish overseas.

According to a recent report by The Daily Star, the current three-day mandatory pre-departure orientation (PDO) provides only a cursory introduction to language skills. There is also a two-month housekeeping course designed for female workers, which dedicates one of its seven units on communicating in Arabic language. However, expecting workers to grasp a foreign language in such a short timeframe is unrealistic and ultimately ineffective. Meanwhile, several training centres under the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) currently offer separate courses on Korean and Japanese languages, but they do not conduct language courses on Arabic, Malay or any other language of popular migrant destinations. There is not even enough emphasis on imparting basic English lessons to aspiring migrants.

When asked why workers are not provided Arabic training, for instance, the response from BMET was that language proficiency is not mandatory in the Gulf countries. Such a short-sighted response only goes to show our authorities' lacklustre approach to the complex realities and needs of migrants. Language proficiency is not merely a matter of official procedure but a fundamental requirement for workers seeking to build meaningful lives and careers abroad. As highlighted by experts, the inability to communicate effectively in the host country's language exposes workers to multifaceted challenges, including exploitation and hindered access to essential services. Not only do they find themselves unable to negotiate terms of their contract, they also cannot turn to anyone for help in cases of rights violations.

As Bangladesh continues to be a significant source of labour for global markets, prioritising language proficiency must be integral to any strategy aimed at empowering migrant workers and safeguarding their rights. Arabic and Malay courses, among others, must be introduced on an urgent basis, and basic English skills must be imparted to all aspiring migrants to enable them to communicate effectively in the host countries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Caution on the streets for Eid

While it is quite a relief to have traffic-free roads during Eid holidays, owing to homeward bound people leaving the cities to celebrate the festival with their families, I can't help feeling anxious thinking of how unsafe our "free roads" may become. Even on usual days, drivers exceed speed limits on the highways and the expressway, so one can only wonder how reckless certain vehicle users might become seeing the roads are empty, especially given the past records of accidents during the holidays. I urge those who are travelling to maintain road rules in order to ensure a safe Eid celebration for everyone.

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BANGLADESH'S AMAZING GROWTH

A potential catalyst for increased investment

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There cannot be any doubt that Bangladesh's development has exceeded all expectations of critics, foes, and even friends—especially more so in the last decade under the judicious leadership of the current government. The resilience of Bangladeshi hearts and minds have led us to the next step: the country is set to graduate from the United Nations' LDC list to the developing country status by 2026. This is a proof of acceptance of the country's leaps in development by the international community.

Investment in infrastructure

In 2009, during the global low-interest regime, the Bangladesh government undertook massive infrastructure projects that were implemented with not only local funds, but bilateral and multilateral loans, resulting in extraordinarily low cost of funds. Some of the examples of the country's infrastructural achievements in recent years include: the Padma Bridge, which stretches over six kilometres and is the longest bridge spanning the Ganges; the Dhaka metro rail; highways; Digital Bangladesh that provides access to internet for all; investment in the energy sector ensuring electricity for all; and deep sea ports, which all lay the foundation for future economic growth. These projects enable the whole of Bangladesh to be productive, including regions that were previously less connected. Expansion of the country's international and domestic airports have also created a degree of nationwide and international connectivity, which has visibly contributed to the enablement of every Bangladeshi and international investor.

Bangladesh's national grid now has a capacity of over 25,000MW, which provides enough electricity margin to accept new foreign direct investments (FDIs) or domestic manufacturing and industrial development. Towards further energy security, Bangladesh has two Floating Storage and Regasification Units (FSRUs) and is working to add another two to its fleet, providing much needed energy of regasified imported LNG to natural gas. These could provide 2,000 mcmcf of natural

gas to industries, fertiliser production, electricity generation and households.

Bangladesh has also established domestic and international connectivity digitally. Now, access to information is available at one's fingertips, with a nationwide network of telecommunications and internet connectivity. The vision of Digital Bangladesh promulgated in 2008 brought about significant improvements in mitigating the "digital divide," impacting economic,



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

educational and social inequality. Info-Sarker, an e-governance initiative, has made numerous government services available online and improved ease of doing business. The rapid development of necessary infrastructure for economic growth has provided a platform for the country to boost its potential even further.

Nestled between South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh enjoys a strategic geographic advantage and acts as a bridge for trade and investment between these regions, as well as the Seven Sisters of India, i.e., the northeastern states. As a result, its position provides it with significant opportunities to engage in regional connectivity and trade, especially with India, China, and Asean countries.

Transition readiness

Currently, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry is dominant and accounts for over 80 percent of the country's exports. Through the expertise garnered from the growth of the RMG industry, Bangladesh is well-positioned to make the transition to a more diversified manufacturing base. This shift is evident in the rapid growth of leather, jute products, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, ceramics, and internet service industries.

The foundation for a "green transition" has also been laid with IT-enabled activities; investments in Bangladesh's technology sector have increased significantly, creating a large pool of entrepreneurial service providers.

Bangladesh has made major efforts to reach the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and last year, the country successfully achieved

indicators. Notably, the literacy rate has increased to 74.7 percent in 2022 from 51.6 percent in 2004, which enables the country to reap the benefits from its favourable demographics. Gender parity in education has improved, and child mortality rates have demonstrably decreased. These advancements have contributed to a more productive and skilled workforce.

An increasing flow of inward remittances from more than 10 million hard-working non-resident Bangladeshis, especially from the Middle East, have financed the country's trade deficits of around six to seven percent of the GDP. As a positive result, Bangladesh has never experienced a balance of payment (BOP) crisis—a testament to its remarkable economic resilience and growth over the past few decades across the country's ever-evolving economic landscape. Furthermore, a large number of women are employed by the RMG sector strengthening gender equality and pay parity within the country.

With this, a fast-growing middle class has emerged within the country. The expansion of Bangladesh's middle class is driving domestic consumption and contributing immensely to the growth of the retail, real estate and services sectors. As a result, this emerging middle class is attracting FDI in consumer goods, financial services, technology, e-commerce, healthcare and other sectors.

Regional markets, especially in Bhutan, Nepal, and India's northeastern states, have benefited tremendously with Bangladesh's diversification; a potential consumer base is emerging from the rise of a new middle class within these markets.

The journey ahead

Bangladesh's development journey serves as a model for other developing nations. The stability and progressive policies of the current government have undoubtedly played a crucial role in facilitating this remarkable economic growth and social progress. Bangladesh's debt-to-GDP ratio, given the remarkable infrastructure growth, remains at 39 percent, which is low in comparison to other developing countries.

The Bangladeshi public and businesses are reaping the benefits of this infrastructural development—physical and social. It is being utilised, bringing in unprecedented levels of revenue. This will enable Bangladesh's GDP to grow at a rate of six to eight percent, from a base of \$460 billion.

Is our research supporting our policymaking?



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I often wonder: how much of the large amount of research that we conduct at different universities and research centres in Bangladesh, on the country, is used to formulate and update our policies and development plans? To answer that, I have gone through six such plans. For simplicity, I divided all documents cited in these plans in three groups: i) research (e.g., journal articles, book chapters, academic books, and also research reports by non-government Bangladeshi research institutes); ii) government (documents prepared or published by government agencies); and iii) non-government (e.g., published by NGOs, think tanks, international organisations, donors, multilateral banks, and UN).

Formulated in 2018 by the General Economics Division (GED), the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 is the longest plan the country has ever produced. The Delta Plan (Volume I: Strategy) contains a list of 237 unique references. Of these, 97 are research, 62 are government, and 78 are non-government documents. The Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2020-2041 (PPB2041), on the other hand, has been guiding our journey to become a high-income country. This GED-

prepared plan has a list of 22 references, of which two are research, and 10 each are government and non-government documents.

The Bangladesh Climate Fiscal Framework (CFF2020) is an updated version of the same prepared by the Finance Division back in 2014. Its reference list contains 13 government and 16 non-government documents, but lacking any original research. The updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC2021) doesn't have any reference list, although many government plans and projects are mentioned in the main text along with a few global climate change documents. Prepared by a team of consultants working for the UNDP, the National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh 2023-2050 (NAP2050) has a list of 97 references, of which 26 are research, 46 are government, and 25 are non-government documents. Drafted around the same time, the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041 (MCPP2041) is a revolutionary investment plan shifting the country's development philosophy from resilience to prosperity under the climate crisis. It has 46 unique references as footnotes: six research, six government and 34

non-government documents.

Overall, the research document category shows the lowest proportion (30 percent) and the non-government the highest (38 percent), followed by the government documents (32 percent). These numbers highlight three issues. First, team composition matters. The highest proportion of research (41 percent), for example, is seen in the Delta Plan indicating the drafting team's inclination towards evidence-guided long-term planning. The highest 74 percent of non-government documents was seen for the MCPP2041. This plan was initially drafted in 2021 by several diverse international agencies, which could be a reason for this percentage.

Second, knowledge mobilisation—when a piece of new knowledge is used for policy making—is not happening in Bangladesh to a satisfactory level. In general, it may seem that the government is developing its new plans, building on its inhouse research and existing plans, as seen in the NAP2050 (government contribution is 47 percent). This is in fact a norm to include new assessments to fit the purpose of a plan while designing a plan-formulation project, and sometimes exclusively relying on expert consultations (e.g., NDC2021). This also explains the low citation of available research in the new plans. But, this may also mean that the studies our researchers are publishing outside the policy formulation processes are not useful for our policymaking.

Third, our recent development plans are not always promoting research and knowledge management. For implementing the Delta Plan, the "Delta Knowledge Hub and Data

Management" is envisaged as a significant component. Knowledge creation and management is a core component of the NAP2050 detailed out under the "Capacity development, research and innovation" sector. On the other hand, while knowledge is widely mentioned throughout the PPB2041, and sufficiently noted in the "Skills and Capacity Building" section of the CFF2020 and in the Key Priority Area 3A (Locally Led Adaptation) of the MCPP2041, no standalone knowledge component is outlined in them. Research and knowledge management is hardly mentioned in the NDC2021, let alone having a separate theme on it.

The global understanding of the climate crisis and climate action against it have always been guided by scientific evidence. It is therefore disappointing to see that our policy formulation and academic research are not interacting enough, at least in the climate change arena. I wonder if the situation is any different in other sectors: poverty alleviation, agri-food system, water, education, gender equity, energy, or financial sector.

The core purpose of academic research and publications can't be appointing and promoting university teachers, or getting into university rankings. To create an effective link between academic research and policymaking, we need regular conversations between researchers and policymakers of a sector. With its rejuvenated leadership, our environment ministry could be a pioneer in organising such dialogues by providing policymakers and researchers a space to understand each other better.