

A facility encouraging malfeasance

Provision granting amnesty for black money holders is a disgrace

We condemn the parliament's decision to once again approve a provision allowing black money holders to legalise undisclosed wealth without any scrutiny by paying a 15 percent tax, despite protests over the past few weeks. The provision is set to come into effect from July 1. While the country's highest income tax rate stands at 25 percent, allowing black money holders—many of them accumulating their wealth through corrupt means—to legalise it at a much reduced rate is truly befuddling. Experts, anti-graft watchdogs and even some lawmakers had strongly opposed the move which would send a wrong message to both individuals amassing black money and honest taxpayers.

The message is simple: the law is set in such a way that it favours black money holders over honest taxpayers. The former will no doubt be encouraged by it. And when those who earn their money legally are made to pay higher taxes compared to those who do so illegally, why should they, too, not try to game the system? Because the Awami League government has regularised this budget provision over the years, citing scenarios that defy logic, honest taxpayers (belonging to the higher tax slabs) may be forgiven for thinking they would be better off by not filing regular taxes, and making use of this provision later to pay a reduced tax. When laws are designed to create such discrepancies and encourage immoralities, it is not difficult to understand the moral standards of those arguing for these laws.

Given how widespread corruption has become in the country, the provision would come as a huge relief for the corrupt. They would be assured to know that despite massive public outcries, many in key positions are still willing to bend the rules in their favour. Not only that, they are even willing to undermine Article 20(2) of the constitution to do so. Except in 2020-21 (during Covid-19), the amount of black money whitened through this process has been a drop in the ocean compared to the estimated size of our black economy. The data clearly debunks the government's narrative that providing such a facility is going to bring significant amounts of black money into the mainstream. But even if it did, why would lawmakers accept money made from drug dealing, human trafficking, or other criminal activities being legalised under a special provision in the first place?

Having provided this facility repeatedly, has the government succeeded in reducing the size of the shadow economy? Has it improved its tax system or revenue collection as advertised? Has it managed to reduce corruption and strengthen rule of law? The answer to all these questions is a resounding "No". The government should, therefore, immediately withdraw the provision, and make sure black money holders—particularly those involved with criminal and corrupt activities—are held to account.

A monument to systemic negligence

Chattogram testing lab remains inoperative even after nine years

It is disheartening that Chattogram's Modern Food Testing Laboratory—a Tk 34.4 crore project funded by the Asian Development Bank—has remained non-operational despite its completion in 2015. The facility, intended to enhance food safety, began trial testing in January 2016. However, according to a report by this daily, the lack of a signing authority has rendered its results useless, as no official certifications of food safety can be made. This is a glaring testament to the systemic negligence and inefficiency that so often stymie the functionality of government facilities.

The laboratory, divided into two sections, is equipped to test a wide range of food items including milk, meat, vegetables, edible oil, etc. It's a pity that such an important and expensive facility would sit idle year after year just because no one in the administration cared to provide the support necessary to make it fully operational. Normally, the first order of business in any such project would be appointing an appropriate signing authority, since no actionable steps can be taken without one regardless of how dire its findings. The second priority would be having adequate and properly motivated manpower. Reportedly, out of the 24 officials initially appointed in the laboratory, only seven remain due to delays in regularising their jobs. So the question is, why would these basic issues remain unresolved even after nine years, and despite receiving operational approval in as far back as 2016?

Unfortunately, we have seen too many cases of vital technical or medical projects languishing after completion of construction to consider the Chattogram case as an isolated one. In fact, the government has a rather unenviable reputation when it comes to operationalising such public interest initiatives. Among the issues that new projects usually suffer from are staff shortages, lack of equipment, lack of power supply, coordination issues among the relevant institutions, etc.—all of which can be attributed to bureaucratic inertia and mismanagement. The gap between the completion of projects and their actual operationalisation can be overwhelming.

We, therefore, urge the government to remove all barriers to the seamless operation of the food testing laboratory in Chattogram so that it can serve its intended purpose. As well as the problems mentioned above, another issue delaying its operation is that the Chattogram City Corporation has yet to assume control of the lab despite this transition being scheduled post-2021. All this should be addressed urgently.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

8 years of Holy Artisan terrorist attack



On this day in 2016, five militants with firearms, machetes, and grenades stormed the Holy Artisan Bakery, an upscale eatery in Dhaka's Gulshan area, and held the diners hostage before killing 22 people, including three Bangladeshis, seven Japanese, nine Italians, and one Indian.

Can the latest school census data help curb dropout?



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The Annual Primary School Census (APSC) 2023 report published by the Directorate of Primary Education provides an account of children attending and completing primary education and of institutions at this level. It says little about what students take from primary schools by way of knowledge, skills and values that can make a difference for the next stages of their education and life.

Rumana Ali MP, state minister of primary and mass education, said in a preface to the recently published report that insights from it would help undertake "targeted actions and strategic measures" to enhance the "educational journey and achievements of every Bangladeshi child." Shah Rezwana Hayat, director general of primary education, added that the insights and recommendations of the report would serve as a "fundamental platform for fostering informed discussions and collaborative actions."

What are the insights offered by the report, and what are the recommendations? There are two pieces of advice: about improving the quality of data for the report itself, and about improving primary education outcomes. Let's look briefly at them.

As the report notes, a post-enumeration quality check of the APSC data, undertaken by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), showed that there was an estimated error of 3.44 percent in coverage of institutions in the school census. This means that over 4,000 primary-level institutions may have been missed out by the census.

More importantly, the quality check also showed that there was a measurement discrepancy of five percent (plus or minus) between the school census data and the post-enumeration check. The report claims that a probability of five percent error was "negligible" and the results "seemed to be good and acceptable" for policy measures. Actually, the under-coverage of institutions and the error margin do cast doubt on the validity of the findings as the basis for corrective actions and policy measures.

For example, the drop in student enrolment by about 8.5 lakh from the previous year is under 0.5 percent of total enrolment, well within the

five percent plus or minus margin. It is also noted in the report that accuracy regarding the data from kindergartens and private schools has been challenging and no data has been collected from Qawmi madrasas. These institutions together are likely to be enrolling one-third of the primary-level students. The declining birth rate in recent years also reduces the number of children seeking primary education enrolment.



The latest Annual Primary School Census report points to problems, but does not provide a full and reliable picture.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The report mentions that better methodology and tools such as the Integrated Primary Education Information Management System (IPEIMS) may have helped to correct past data biases, and that the improved tools as well as verification through post-enumeration check should be applied to maintain data quality. These are reasonable advice and deserve serious attention to come out with reliable educational input data regarding students, teachers, and institutions.

At the same time, it is necessary to remember that by its very nature and intended purpose, the APSC lacks outcome data regarding how much and what students learn. The annual school census is far from a comprehensive and holistic picture of primary education.

So, should we not be concerned about dropout and exclusion of children from school? Yes, we should, and the APSC points to problems but does not provide a full and reliable picture. We should also ask what light the school census throws on improving primary-level performance and student-learning outcomes.

Drawing conclusions from the collected input data about institutions, students, and teachers, the report suggests a number of action steps. These are based more on general discourse on education equity, quality and inclusion issues, rather than extracted specifically from the census findings. They include: targeted interventions to engage all primary school-going children more effectively in education; expanding access to pre-primary education for equitable participation across genders; strengthening special needs education

in Classes 3 and 5 had below grade-level competencies in Bangla, and only a third of the students achieved expected grade-level competencies in mathematics. These were results largely similar to those seen from the NSA in 2017 and earlier rounds. In other words, more than half of children who attend and complete primary grades do not achieve the expected basic skills in literacy and numeracy, and the situation has not improved over the years. By contrast, the primary school completion examination (now discontinued) and Class 5 annual examination routinely showed pass rates of over 95 percent.

It has been noticed that there is a greater involvement of education officials and external development partners, much fanfare and public discussion associated with the annual APSC reports than with the less regular NSA reports. The policymakers seem to be more interested in inputs than outcomes, and there is an antipathy towards connecting the two.

Periodic assessment of learning and annual reporting on inputs have not been undertaken systematically at the secondary level, which is under the jurisdiction of a different ministry. But available evidence suggests that learning outcomes at secondary level could not be any better. A reason, it may be plausibly argued, is that poor foundational learning of children at primary level has knock-on effects on later stages of education.

A pragmatic, relatively simple and easily implementable assessment of learning known as Annual State of Education Report (ASER) has been pioneered in India by the NGO Pratham, and replicated in Pakistan, Nepal and a number of African countries. An NSA or ASER model, with adaptation as necessary, developed and applied systematically to school education can be a way to better understand the interplay of learning inputs and learning results. Thus, policy and action can be better guided and implemented to ensure basic education for all children with equity, quality, and inclusion.

As argued by this writer and others, taking the sustainable development goal for education (SDG4) and the education imperatives for scaling the heights of a higher-middle-income country status seriously means that basic K-12 school education must be ensured for all children.

We cannot continue to keep primary and secondary education in discrete boxes and try to plan and manage these separately just because the education bureaucracy has been set up in a certain way. Denial of basic education to more than half of the children should not continue.

power and hydro also makes significant contributions.

The country has implemented various incentives, including feed-in tariffs and purchase guarantees, to encourage investment in renewable energy.

However, the transition is challenged by economic instability and fluctuating policy environments, which can impact investor confidence.

Overall, the renewable energy transition in China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Pakistan, and Turkey highlights diverse paths and challenges. China's leadership in capacity and investment sets a global benchmark, while Vietnam's rapid adoption showcases the potential of favourable policies and incentives.

Pakistan's journey emphasises the need for policy and financial frameworks, and Turkey's balanced approach reflects a strategy of building energy security through renewables.

But what about Bangladesh? We must improve the supply of renewable energy available to our industrial base. Our government, regional authorities, garment manufacturers and international fashion brands must collaborate on this issue to better understand the current state of our energy mix, decide how it can be shifted heavily in favour of renewable energy and then work out what this will cost—and, most importantly, how it will be funded.

Bangladesh has a chance to lead on this issue, but China, Pakistan, Turkey, Vietnam and other garment producing countries will also be looking to boost their own renewable energy use. The race is on.

Bangladesh on the renewable energy race track

RMG NOTES

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When deciding where to source clothing from, an increasingly important factor will be energy use as fashion brands and retailers look to reduce carbon emissions in supply chains.

A country's energy mix may even one day override all other issues given the climate crisis we face. Here I look at progress made by five garment exporting countries—China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Pakistan, and Turkey—in their transitions to renewable energy sources.

China

China, the world's largest energy consumer, has made significant strides in renewable energy development. The country's energy mix is still dominated by coal, accounting for more than 50 percent of its energy consumption in 2021.

However, China is the global leader in renewable energy capacity, with extensive investments in solar, wind, and hydropower. As of 2023, China has over 500 GW of solar and wind capacity combined, with ambitious plans to reach 1,200 GW by 2030.

Hydropower also plays a significant role, contributing about 20 percent to the national grid. The nation has committed to achieving carbon

neutrality by 2060. Government policies, substantial subsidies, and advances in technology have propelled China's rapid growth in renewables.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's energy mix is heavily reliant on natural gas, which accounted for about 62 percent of its total energy consumption in FY 2021-2022. Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in solar home systems, with over five million installations serving rural households. Despite this, renewables contribute only around three percent to the national grid as of 2023.

This has to improve if we are to remain internationally competitive. Our customers will demand that it does. To this end, the government has set a target to generate 10 percent of its electricity from renewables by 2030, but achieving this goal requires significant investments and policy support. The energy mix also includes imported oil and coal.

Vietnam

Vietnam, the third largest exporter of clothing after China and Bangladesh, has a diverse energy mix, with coal being the predominant source, accounting for more than 40 percent

of the total energy consumption in 2023. Hydropower is also significant as well as natural gas and oil.

Vietnam has seen a dramatic increase in its renewable energy capacity, particularly in solar and wind power, thanks to favourable government policies, including feed-in tariffs and tax incentives. The wind energy sector is also growing, with projects like the 99.2 MW Bac Lieu wind farm. Vietnam aims to have 30 percent of its electricity generated from renewables by 2030.

Pakistan

Pakistan's current energy mix is dominated by fossil fuels, with natural gas, oil, and coal making up the majority as of 2023. The renewable energy sector is still in its early stages, but the country has significant potential, particularly in wind and solar power.

As of 2023, renewable energy accounts for about six percent of Pakistan's total energy mix, with plans to increase this share to 30 percent by 2030. Key projects include the Quid-e-Azam Solar Park and various wind farms in the Sindh province.

Government initiatives and international support have been crucial in advancing these projects. However, Pakistan faces challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles, financial constraints, and a need for more robust policy frameworks to attract private investment.

Turkey

Turkey's energy mix is quite diverse, with natural gas (27 percent), coal (25 percent), and oil (29 percent) being the primary sources of energy in 2022. Renewables including wind, solar