



Aastha, a safe haven for slum children

REHNUMA SHAHREEN

In the relentless pace of Dhaka, where surviving often means long hours of work, day-care centres have become a saviour for many families. Scattered throughout the city, they offer a haven for children, while parents plunge into their daily grind. But beyond this routine, a quieter revolution is happening -- a group of unsung heroes is nurturing a generation that often slips through the cracks.

Utsho Bangladesh, with their initiative, Aastha, a day care centre for children from the slums, stands out in this landscape with something uniquely transformative. At Aastha, children as young as six months to six years old are nurtured, educated, and protected. Across seven centres in Dhaka, Aastha serves as a place of care and foundation, shaping the futures of nearly 150 children, and giving them hope and the start they deserve.

The risks are immense for children growing up in vulnerable conditions, while left unattended, they could easily fall into dangerous paths, be exposed to unhealthy influences, or even become involved in illegal activities.

But Aastha steps in to change that narrative. A typical day at an Aastha begins at 8:00am, as children are dropped off by their parents.



PHOTO: COURTESY

From breakfast to lessons, playtime to showers, and lunch, followed by a much-needed nap, these children are introduced to a routine that nurtures their bodies and minds.

Under the watchful eyes of in-charge personnel, caregivers, and supervisors, the children are taught more than just ABCs -- they learn how to dream, how to grasp the basics of reading and writing, and essential life lessons.

Momtaz Akther, who has been the in-charge of the Aastha Daycare Centre at Shanti Niketan for two years, says, "Even

my child grew up here. I treat every child like my own."

But it's not just the children growing under the Aastha banner, their parents are learning too through training sessions which are helping them understand the importance of their children's care.

The beauty of Aastha's model lies in how deeply rooted these centres are in the community. Each day-care centre is independent, standing as a microcosm of sustainability, and managing its own funds and operations. It's not bound

by foreign donors or flashy initiatives that fade once contracts end. For last 30 years since its foundation, Utsho's approach has been building resilience from within -- like a body developing its own immune system, strong enough to resist the discrimination and challenges surrounding it.

Mahbooba A Mahmood Leena, also known as Leena Apa, the visionary behind Utsho, says, "We are not dependent on foreign funding like typical NGOs. Our people are our funding source."

Contributions flow in from all corners -- one family donates rice, another brings vegetables, while someone else volunteers their time.

It's a mosaic of support, pieced together by those who believe in the cause. Even the smallest contributions, often unmeasurable by conventional standards are what keep Aastha's wheels running. As Leena notes, "Everyone wants to be part of a good initiative, no matter how small their role."

However, to keep these centres running smoothly, Utsho organises fundraising events. One such event is "UTSHO Sandhya 2024", a musical show on October 25 at the Krishibid Institution Bangladesh Complex. Artists like Masha Islam, Nandita, and Rituraj will perform in support of this cause.

JULY VIOLENCE

7yr-old shot in the head flown to S'pore

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Musa, a seven-year-old who was shot in the head during the violence centring the quota reform protests on July 19, was sent to Singapore yesterday for better medical treatment.

He left from the Dhaka airport on a Singaporean air ambulance, arranged by Channel i under the supervision of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, according to Channel i sources.

Musa, who was shot near his home in the capital's Rampura while he was with his grandmother, has been fighting for his life for the past 94 days.

The child was initially treated at Dhaka Medical College Hospital and later transferred to the intensive care unit at the Combined Military Hospital. He was put on life support there.

The arrangements for the treatment in Singapore were made based on his doctors' advice. He will be admitted to the National University Hospital upon his arrival there, the sources added.

Hasina sued at ICT over journo killing

BSS, Dhaka

The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) yesterday received a complaint against eight people, including ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, over the killing of photojournalist Tahir Zaman Priyo during the quota reform protests. Martyred Priyo's mother Samsi Ara Zaman filed the complaint with the ICT chief prosecutor's office.

Priyo used to work for online news portal The Report. He was gunned down behind Lab Aid Hospital in the Dhanmondi area of Dhaka around 5:00pm on July 19.

"Someone from a group of gunmen wearing APBn uniforms shot him from behind. There are video footage of the gruesome killing of my son," the grieving mother said in the complaint.

Scrap '72 constitution

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to operate freely to safeguard the future of Bangladesh.

Hasnat in a Facebook post last night said, "The advisory council of the interim government has given us time for a discussion tomorrow [today]. We expect that the interim government will make a decision after the discussion to implement the five-point demand of the student community."

Hasnat said, "We want to ensure within this week that Chhatra League, Jubo League, Awami League, and the cultural, media organisations that follow Mujib's ideology and its way of life would be uprooted from the country forever."

said, "We don't want any part of the fascist government to be in the country. The president was part of the group that opened fire on students and the public. We, too, demand his resignation."

He also called for justice for those involved in state-run agencies responsible for numerous enforced disappearances and murders and demanded that the Awami League be banned.

The protests erupted after the president was quoted by the media that he had no documentary evidence that Hasina resigned.

"I tried [to collect the resignation letter] many times but failed. Maybe she



Student leaders addressing the crowd and the media at the Central Shaheed Minar. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

He said, "Our revolution is not over. On August 5, we ousted mafia Sheikh Hasina. But we have not yet been able to establish a new political settlement."

"Many political parties have been persecuted, oppressed, and victimised over the last 16 years. We have seen BNP and Jamaat being oppressed and persecuted. My brothers from Chhatra Dal could not come to campus. They were beaten like animals on the streets by Chhatra League terrorists. Killing Shibir members had become justified."

"Across the country and on campuses, there are democratic political parties, the BNP, Jamaat, right-wing, left-wing, or any other ideology, who engage in politics for the future of the country. Until we can restore their legitimate and democratic rights, our revolution will not be over."

At the gathering yesterday, Nasir Uddin Patwary, convener of the Jatiya Nagorik Committee,

did not get the time," the president said when Manab Zamin Chief Editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury met him and wanted to know about Hasina's resignation letter.

The daily's political magazine "Janatar Chokh" on Sunday carried a piece on the conversation.

"There is no room for debate in this regard anymore. The prime minister has left and that is the truth. Even then, just to ensure this question never arises again, I sought the Supreme Court's opinion on the matter," he was quoted as saying.

The Bangabhaban in a statement on Monday urged everyone to refrain from stirring a debate out of a settled issue and embarrassing the government.

Hasina fled to India on August 5 amid a mass student protest that started in early July. The president during his address to the nation on August 5 said he received Hasina's resignation letter.

Pressure piles

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He, however, stated that the government was yet to make any move to remove Shahabuddin.

Earlier in the day, student leaders demonstrated at the Central Shaheed Minar. They threatened to take to the streets if the government failed to meet their demands within this week.

They said the president lost his moral authority to stay in office.

In another development, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul and Information Adviser Nahid Islam held a half-hour long meeting with Chief Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed at the latter's Supreme Court office around 2:00pm, said Aziz Ahmed Bhuiyan, SC registrar general.

He did not say what was discussed at the meeting.

As per section 106 of the constitution, if at any time it appears to the president that a question of law has arisen, or is likely to arise, which is of such a nature and of

such public importance that it is expedient to obtain the opinion of the Supreme Court upon it, he may refer the question to the Appellate Division for consideration and the division may, after such hearing as it thinks fit, report its opinion thereon to the President.

PROTESTS In the capital, demonstrations in front of the Bangabhaban started in the afternoon and the Gulistan road was blocked in the evening.

Protesters under the banner Shadhinota-Sharbobhoumotto Rokkha Committee marched from Dhaka University campus towards the Bangabhaban, reports UNB.

Police stopped them at the High Court Mazar intersection, but they managed to march to the Bangabhaban. They attempted to stage a sit-in inside the Bangabhaban, but the members of law enforcement agencies barred them.

IMF slashes

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by political unrest in July and August.

The IMF Outlook did not mention the reasons behind the lower growth and high inflation forecasts.

However, an IMF team visited Bangladesh in September and issued a statement where they said economic activities have slowed markedly, while inflation remains at double digits owing to the recent turbulence and major floods.

"Nothing happened in the last three months that would continue the economic growth -- it was supposed to be negative growth," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the WB's Dhaka office.

Hussain is on the committee formed by the interim government to prepare a white paper on the economy.

"We have to repeal the losses first by bringing GDP growth to zero and then push for positive growth," he said, adding that if the country achieves 4-4.5 percent GDP growth, it can be viewed as a good performance.

Political uncertainty, industrial unrest and the recent flood have eaten up GDP, Hussain said, adding that the elevated inflation level is not helping matters.

The IMF has projected an average inflation of 10.7 percent for this fiscal year.

The main driver of economic growth is

industries, which have been stagnating in the last couple of months, Hussain said.

During the protests in July, no industry was functioning.

The law enforcement situation is yet to stabilise and the labour unrest has buyers' confidence, resulting in weak export orders.

Besides, agriculture activities were hampered by the recent flood, he said.

"There is uncertainty in the upcoming days as well. We are living one week at a time. We don't know what is upcoming next week and there will be lots of uncertainty in future."

Besides, economic growth is adversely affected by the contractionary position the government has taken to control inflation.

It is tough to bring down inflation with only the contractionary policy because food inflation is the main issue in Bangladesh and it is not possible to bring down food inflation by only stabilising the foreign exchange rate.

"We need to reduce the food prices by monitoring the supply side. The strategy of the interim government is no different from the previous government as they are doing market policing."

By policing the market, it will not be possible to stabilise a market, he said. "Policing is required in only controlling the extortion."

BB expands inflation battle

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up efforts to curb inflationary pressure, but the real policy rate, adjusted for inflation, remained negative.

The central bank in its latest move also raised the standing lending facility rate by 50 basis points to 11.50 percent and the standing deposit facility rate to 8.50 percent from 8 percent. The new rates will be effective from October 27.

Despite a slight ease in consumer prices to 9.92 percent in September from 10.49 percent in August, inflation remains a significant concern, particularly for lower- and fixed-income households.

A recent report by Bangladesh Bank indicates that domestic products are the primary drivers of inflation, accounting for 74 percent of the overall inflation rate in September.

This is a notable increase from 61 percent in June, highlighting the growing influence of local factors on price levels.

The contribution of import-dependent items to inflation has declined from 39 percent in June to 26 percent in September.

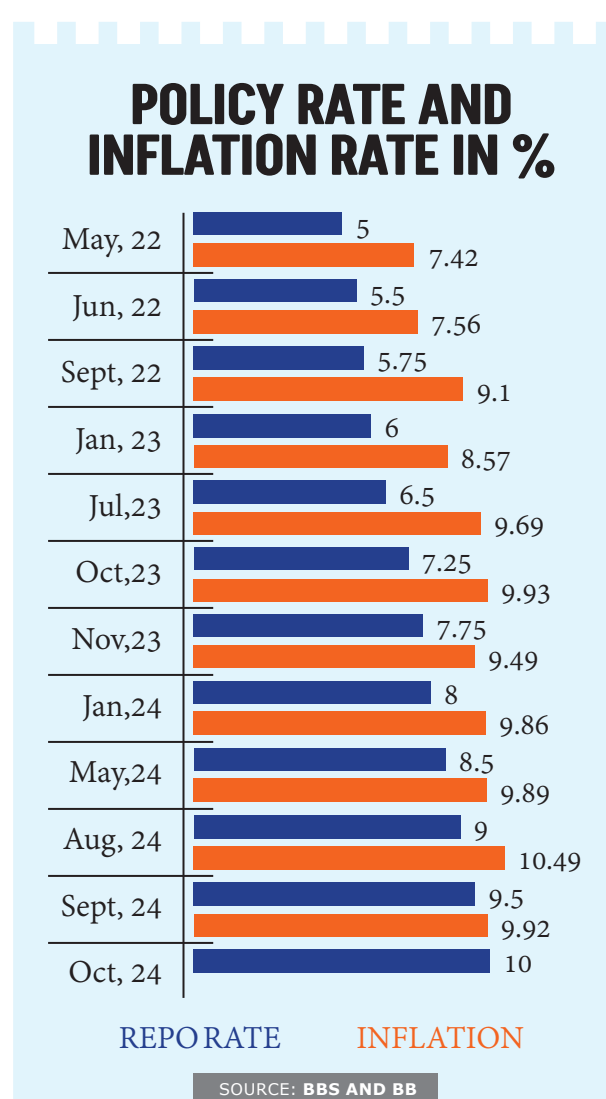
NOT THE ONLY SOLUTION

Experts said that while raising policy rates is a critical tool in controlling inflation, it is not the only solution. Other factors must be addressed concurrently for effective alleviation of inflationary pressure.

They also observed that comprehensive strategies, which deal with supply chain dynamics, production costs, and domestic market conditions, are essential for a holistic approach to managing inflation.

"Monetary policy alone is not enough to curb inflation," said Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). "Because other factors are working in our country. Fiscal policy is very important here. Different costs of the mega projects such as operational costs and administrative costs are examples of overspending. We have to prioritise those things."

Ashikur Rahman, principal economist at the Policy Research Institute, said, "If we revisit how India and Sri Lanka have controlled inflation over the last two years, it is evident that they followed an orthodox monetary



policy that relied on increasing policy rate to control their inflationary pressure -- and it has worked."

"If we remain committed to a tight monetary policy and also parallelly commit to addressing disruptions in the supply chain of essential commodities, then I am cautiously optimistic that inflation will come down in the current fiscal year."

"This should also create conducive conditions for broader macroeconomic stabilisation, which will benefit everyone in the medium term," Ashikur said.

Monzur Hossain, research director at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said: "I think it's going to be an ultra-tightened monetary policy. It will increase interest rates further, making investments supply gaps, and reducing transportation costs and market mismanagement would also be needed to ease inflation, he said."

"If other measures are not taken together, raising policy rates or interest rates would not be effective, rather it would hurt growth momentum

in the medium to long run," he added.

Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration and Development, said that although inflation was not decreasing much, there was no option but to increase the policy rate.

"Not only has the policy rate been increased, but fiscal policy adjustments have also been made. ADP spending has been cut. The central bank doesn't print money or give loans to the government," he said.

The researcher thinks it will take some time to get the outcome of these measures.

He believes normalcy in the supply chain of essential commodities should be prioritised while keeping the policy rate high.

Recently, the government has lowered the import duty for some daily essential items, such as rice, wheat, and egg, and started selling some key commodities at subsidised rates.

CPD's Fahmida called for lower tariffs on the import of other essential commodities and measures to increase the supply of local products, stressing the need to curb

market manipulation.

The effectiveness of the Competition Commission must be enhanced along with the readjustment of trade policy, according to her.

She also emphasised accurate data on supply and demand, which she said is crucial for understanding market dynamics.

Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, said that the previous government did not raise the policy rate when it was crucial, contributing to prolonged high inflation.

He argued that simply increasing the policy rate will not suffice; it will take time to reduce inflation through this measure alone.

To effectively tackle inflation, he said, ensuring a steady supply of essential commodities is critical.

Raihan also said action should be taken to stop anti-competitive practices in the market.

"If the Bangladesh Bank, commerce, finance and food ministries, and the National Board of Revenue collaborate on a unified platform to tackle inflation, their efforts will be more impactful."

"Without this coordinated approach, combating inflation will remain a challenge," he said.

Ex-Abercrombie CEO charged with sex crimes

AFP, New York

The former chief executive of the Abercrombie and Fitch clothing empire has been arrested and charged with the trafficking of male models for sex parties around the world, US prosecutors said Tuesday.

Ex-CEO Mike Jeffries, his partner Matthew Smith and the pair's fixer James Jacobson allegedly used a "casting couch" ploy to groom aspiring male models to attend sex parties at which victims were plied with alcohol and drugs.

They were taken to Jeffries's and Smith's homes, as well as venues as far afield as Britain, France, Italy and Morocco for the events, at which some of the men were given Viagra and muscle relaxants, prosecutors said.