

## Student protests must respect public welfare

### Disruptions, violence by Titumir College students unacceptable

The daylong blockade of roads and railways by the students of Government Titumir College on Monday, causing severe disruption for commuters across Dhaka, is simply unacceptable. Even more appalling was the reckless act of some students throwing stones at a train they forced to stop, injuring at least 15-20 passengers, including children and women. Disturbing images published by the media showed bloodied faces of passengers, highlighting the trauma caused by this senseless behaviour. How could these students, who are demanding the establishment of a university transforming their college, believe that causing panic and disruptions would further their cause? Did they consider the harm inflicted on innocent travellers? What justification could they possibly offer?

Needless to say, the protests on Monday created massive traffic congestion across the Mohakhali Flyover and Airport Road areas, as well as surrounding streets, leaving countless commuters stranded for hours. The rail blockade further disrupted railway connections between Dhaka and the rest of the country, exacerbating the public's distress. Such actions reflect a disregard for public welfare and cannot be condoned.

This is not the first instance of students disrupting daily life with similar demands. Previously, students from the seven colleges affiliated with Dhaka University—including Titumir College—protested for an autonomous university for their institutions. Their actions, too, brought significant parts of Dhaka to a standstill over several days. In response, the government formed a committee to address their concerns and held multiple discussions with student representatives. This shows that the authorities are actively working towards a resolution. While progress may be slow and additional dialogue might be necessary, it is unreasonable for one college to paralyse daily life by blocking roads and railways, especially when an official process is already underway.

Upgrading a college into a university—or creating an autonomous one combining all seven colleges—is not a decision that can be made hastily. It requires a thorough assessment to ensure the institution meets necessary qualifications and possesses the infrastructure and resources to function as a university. The interim government has repeatedly urged those with grievances to approach them for resolution. Representatives from Titumir College eventually did so, engaging in discussions at the Secretariat. However, dissatisfied with the lack of immediate results, the students resumed their protests on Tuesday. This impatience and unreasonableness are disappointing.

We strongly urge the students of Titumir College—and all others engaging in similar protests—to stop causing suffering to ordinary citizens. They must exercise patience and seek solutions through dialogue. Students should also carefully evaluate the legitimacy and practicality of their demands. Continued unreasonable and disruptive protests risk alienating the public and may ultimately do more harm than good to their cause.

## Govt must rein in rising drug prices

### DGDA should strengthen oversight to keep medicines affordable

It is no secret that Bangladesh has one of the highest out-of-pocket health expenditures in the world, with the majority of costs going toward buying medicine. Under such circumstances, it is concerning to learn that the prices of about 50 life-saving drugs have been raised by 10 to 50 percent since September. A report published in *Ajker Patrika* presents a grim picture of the increasing prices of drugs used to treat common ailments such as fever, acidity, pain, breathing difficulties, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.

Of the 219 medicines on the list of essential drugs approved by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), prices for 117 are fixed by DGDA. The prices for the remaining drugs are proposed by manufacturers and approved by DGDA. The drug watchdog told *Ajker Patrika* that it approved proposed price hikes for about 10 drugs in the last three months, but none of the mark-ups exceeded 10 percent. However, the report cited a packet of locally manufactured painkillers whose price rose from Tk 600 in August to Tk 1,000 in September—a 40 percent increase. Similarly, the price of a solution for treating scabies, manufactured by a well-known local pharmaceutical company, rose by 68 percent. Such increases have led to a 50 percent rise in people's medicine expenditure over the last three months.

When asked, drug manufacturers cite the rising import costs of raw materials as a primary reason for the price hikes. While the dollar crisis impacted import costs, import duties—which are not waived for all pharmaceutical raw materials—also add to the cost, according to some company owners. However, economists argue that a higher production cost alone cannot justify such steep price hikes. Under these circumstances, it is imperative that the DGDA fully carries out its responsibility to monitor drug prices. In the past, we have urged the authorities to also strictly monitor and regulate pharmacies, many of which arbitrarily mark up medicine prices. Many, especially in rural areas, even sell expired, substandard or counterfeit drugs thanks to poor monitoring.

At a time when dengue and other viral fevers are circulating and food inflation is skyrocketing—causing an unbearable cost of living crisis—the drug authorities must be prudent in approving and monitoring drug price hikes to prevent further public suffering.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Mexican Revolution launched

On this day in 1910, Francisco Madero launched a failed revolt that nonetheless sparked the Mexican Revolution by inspiring hope in leaders such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who then mobilised their ragged armies.

# Hundred days of hope



Manzur al-Matin is an advocate of the Supreme Court and a freelance anchor at Channel 24.

MANZUR-AL-MATIN

I was far from home attending a conference when I saw the tweet from Donald Trump. He was trying to tell the world that Bangladesh was in chaos, that minority communities here were being subjected to “barbaric violence.” This was the same narrative that the Indian media has been promoting all along. It reminded me of a cartoon by Debashish Chakrabarty, whose work moved many during the days of the July uprising. The cartoon tells India, “Stop acting like you’ve lost your colony.” The US president-elect’s tweet reminded me that the India media isn’t going to stop its propaganda against Bangladesh anytime soon.

Recently, while addressing the nation on the 100 days of the interim government’s rule, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has warned of deep-rooted conspiracies against Bangladesh. It’s a grim reality we face every day. The murderous dictator, Sheikh Hasina, fled the country on August 5 when millions marched on the streets of Dhaka. None of the parliament members were to be found. It was as though the Awami League, which had ruled the country for over 15 years, vanished into thin air. Unfortunately, it was too late for many. By then, Hasina had claimed the lives of at least 1,500 individuals, many of them children and students.

During AL’s reign, the country’s economy was pushed to the brink of collapse. Money laundering reached new heights, essentially bleeding the country dry. Now, we can feel this huge amount of black money playing its part in conspiracies against Bangladesh. Sajeeb Wazed Joy, son of the former dictator, has been reported to have hired a US lobbying firm. There are also reports of a massive number of bot accounts on social media. Although the rank and file of the former ruling party have disappeared from the streets, they are still very much active online. Their role in creating divisions among the forces of the July movement and attacking prominent figures of the uprising seems well-organised.

During the July uprising, the entire nation was united for one purpose

alone: the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. People from all walks of life joined the movement. Different political parties, with different visions for Bangladesh’s future, came together to address the immediate threat. When the edifice of AL’s fascism collapsed, however, that single uniting goal was gone. For over a decade, we had lived in an environment where only a few dared to speak, and those who did were often tortured or forcibly disappeared. Now, in the newfound



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

freedom, everyone has found their voice. There are countless gatherings and seminars across the country. People are flooding auditoriums, participating in debates about what the new nation should look like. When people speak their minds, differences of opinion naturally emerge. That is the essence of democracy—people agreeing to disagree. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that there are strong forces at play, both domestic and foreign, that would exploit any opportunity to disrupt the

inclusive Bangladesh where everyone—regardless of ethnicity, religion or political views—enjoys the same rights. Unity and equity among the people, while recognising our differences, is also something we can all agree upon. People took to the streets with the hope that the growing economic disparity would be reversed someday—another area of consensus. By holding onto this short list of achievable goals, we can remain united for the cause of Bangladesh while agreeing to disagree on the more complex issues.

exclude or annihilate one’s political opponents lead only to chaos, and rarely succeed. Over the past 15 years, the Awami League has done everything possible to eliminate its political opponents, which eventually only strengthened opposition. This should serve as a warning to those who continue to promote division. It’s time we started walking away from exclusionary politics and toward inclusivity. If we fail to do so, fascism will inevitably return, in one form or another.

## WORLD CHILDREN’S DAY

# Helping street children requires a holistic, evidence-based approach



Debra Efroymson is executive director at the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh, and author of ‘Beyond Apologies: Defining and Achieving an Economics of Wellbeing.’

DEBRA EFROYMSON

In Bangladesh, people may not be as exposed to the types of ads that are common in the Global North, seeking support to sponsor a poor child in an impoverished land. The images in those ads, though good for fundraising, are problematic. The child is portrayed in a vacuum, without a family, in a dehumanising way, rather than as a fully sentient human being who experiences joy as well as anguish. It is essential that we acknowledge the horrific situations faced by many street children: violence (including sexual violence), exploitation at the hands of employers, extreme discomfort, chronic hunger, and lack of educational opportunities, among others. But we must also remember that they are human beings. They may have loving families—however incapable they may be of taking proper care of them. These children and their families need support, but it must be delivered respectfully and with an appreciation of the full rights of the children.

Having good intentions towards street children is not enough. We must ensure that our actions are based on evidence of what will benefit them, that we don’t simply remove them from the streets so as to rid ourselves of the guilt. We need to question why there are so many children roaming the streets of our cities—more than

34 lakh, according to UNICEF. Why does this situation persist when Bangladesh’s economy has done so well? In 2021, while just 21 percent of national income went to the bottom 40 percent of Bangladeshis, 27 percent of income went to the richest 10 percent. The added wealth continues to go to the top, and poverty remains widespread at the bottom. Until we address income inequality, it will not help even if the GDP continues to expand.

It is easy to speak in generalities. Far more difficult is to implement programmes and actions that achieve the needed results. In its report “Transformative Action to Accelerate Results for Children in Street Situations in the Decade of Action,” UNICEF recommends a number of integrated approaches to the issue, including social protection, ending poverty, preventing family-child separation, improving educational outcomes, strengthening child protection policies and programmes, working with local governments, and investing in evidence-building.

Social protection and poverty alleviation require an ongoing shifting of financial resources from the wealthiest to the poorest. The simplest mechanism is a high tax on the wealthy, which then goes to support well-funded and well-managed

programmes to support the poor. One aspect could be to give the same payment to all families to support their children; the rich will always pay vastly more in taxes, but are less likely to object when they themselves are the recipients of the aid.

More complicated is the need to protect children from violence. Evidence-based approaches, not simply the desire to help, are vital. It is also important that the police understand that children are victims, not criminals. Laws to prevent the exploitation of poor children need strong enforcement, which also requires a social pact not to tolerate such activities. The common practice of using poor children as household help, without ensuring their rights, is not compatible with an interest in protecting children.

It is not enough to prevent children from labour exploitation; they also need the education and skills to obtain a decent job. UNICEF emphasises that “children and young people must have access to technical and vocational training and 21st century skills they need for productive lives and work. This in turn will increase and improve the number of quality work opportunities available to youth, while at the same time they will stay protected from violence and exploitation.”

The focus on cities and local governments is also complicated, but basically involves ensuring that local governments prioritise and strengthen child protection services. This means putting aside sufficient budget and making the protection of street children and other vulnerable children a priority. In order to enact effective programmes, money must also be set aside for research. The role of civil society is both to provide

services to children directly and to hold “local governments accountable to protecting children’s rights by promoting active participation of children in the civic discourse.” That final phrase bears repeating. Adults don’t always understand what is in the best interests of children. Children themselves need to be involved in planning; for instance, my colleagues have used the computer game Minecraft to enable children to give input into an urban design of open public space.

Many street children rightly fear law enforcement and thus wish to hide from surveys. The understandable fear children have of authorities needs to be respected when data collection is undertaken. We need to know not only how many children are on the streets, but also what challenges they face and what interventions can prove effective. Important areas of study include exposure to violence, “access to justice, birth registration, gender equality, child labour, education and reduced inequality.” Programmes to assist street children require rigorous evaluation to measure their effectiveness.

It can be more pleasant to indulge in platitudes and generalities while ignoring root causes and effective solutions. But if we really wish to solve the problem, we need to understand it better and acknowledge the role of conventional economics. Assisting street children without simultaneously helping struggling parents, and looking at poverty without simultaneously studying wealth inequality and solutions for it, will get us nowhere. And those children we feel so bad about—even if for a day on World Children’s Day—deserve better.