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Make primary healthcare free for everyone

Health reform commission suggests sweeping overhaul, submits report to CA

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Health Sector Reform Commission has recommended that the government make primary healthcare its constitutional obligation and provide it free of cost to ensure universal access.

It also called for the formation of an independent and permanent Bangladesh Health Commission to formulate essential policies and strategies and to oversee the health sector.

The 12-member commission, led by National Professor AK Azad Khan, submitted its report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at the State Guesthouse Jamuna yesterday.

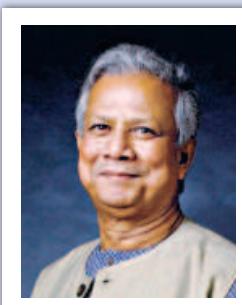
The proposed reforms, the commission said, would take around two years to implement and should be carried out by a powerful inter-ministerial committee.

The submission comes at a time when the health sector faces major challenges, including inadequate funding, a shortage of health workers, high out-of-pocket expenses, unequal access to services, and weak governance.



The problems in the health sector are long-standing. If we can resolve these issues through this [the commission's report], it will be a groundbreaking move.

PROF MUHAMMAD YUNUS



PROPOSALS

- Allocate 15% of national budget to health sector
- Establish separate Bangladesh Health Service
- Establish Bangladesh Health Commission
- Supply essential drugs at primary level for free
- Update essential drugs list every two years
- Prescribe generic names of 25% medicines immediately; of all medicines within 5 years
- Launch unique health ID and smart health card for every citizen
- Establish National Institute of Women Health

These issues, health experts say, deprive many people of quality treatment and compel many others to seek medical care abroad.

Upon receiving the report, Prof Yunus instructed the relevant authorities to act on the immediately actionable recommendations, stating that they could play a crucial role in resolving the problems in the health sector, reports BSS.

"The problems in the health sector are long standing. If we can resolve these issues through this [the commission's report], it will be a groundbreaking move."

Noting the shortage of doctors as a major concern, he added that even where doctors are posted, they are sometimes unavailable when needed. "This problem should be resolved permanently."

Stressing the need for decentralisation, Yunus said, "Without it, the...

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BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman bids his mother Khaleda Zia farewell as she departs for home from Heathrow Airport in London yesterday.

PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL

FY26 BUDGET Debt servicing costs, food subsidies to rise

IMF, ADB to back allocation for banking reforms

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and ASIFUR RAHMAN

The next budget may be slightly smaller than the current fiscal year's, but non-development spending is expected to rise by over 5 percent due to higher debt servicing costs, food subsidies, and a special allocation for bank reforms.

The size of the next budget would reach Tk 7,90,000 crore -- Tk 7,000 crore less than the budget for the ongoing fiscal year, according to a draft prepared at a fiscal coordination council meeting last month.

This is in contrast to the trend of raising the budget size every year during the previous governments' tenures, as the interim administration has adopted a fiscal tightening policy.

The non-development budget is expected to be set at Tk 5,60,000 crore, up by Tk 28,000 crore from the current fiscal year's allocation.

Finance ministry officials said the government is aiming to strengthen the banking sector with a special allocation to meet the capital shortfall of state-owned

banks. Some selective private banks would also get allocations on some conditions.

The funds may be disbursed as loans under the International Monetary Fund's guidelines, rather than budget-allocated capital given by the previous government.

IMF providing technical assistance for banking sector allocation

ADB may give \$500m

The IMF is giving technical support in this regard, and a team has already started working, finance ministry officials said. Besides, the government has received a green signal from the Asian Development Bank for \$400-500 million in loans for banking sector reforms.

Latest Bangladesh Bank data shows state-owned banks face a

capital shortfall of Tk 65,267 crore, with all except Sonali Bank and Bangladesh Development Bank falling below required levels.

Shariah-based banks also face a capital shortfall of Tk 58,780 crore, with eight out of 10 Islamic banks affected, excluding only Shahjalal Islami Bank and Exim Bank. A few of the conventional banks are also facing capital shortfalls.

Bangladesh Bank and the finance ministry have launched rigorous reform initiatives in the country's banking sector, with one package for providing capital support.

Finance ministry officials said the government's overall budget policy is to reduce expenditure, avoiding additional allocations for subsidies, salaries, and allowances.

However, some sectors will see unavoidable increases. High inflation is expected to push food subsidy costs up by around Tk 2,500 crore from the current fiscal year's Tk 7,250 crore. Additionally, the overall allocation for social safety net programmes may rise by Tk 10,000 crore.

Due to the devaluation of the

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Dhaka-IMF talks drag on Exchange rate remains unsettled; discussion set to resume today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has yet to reach a consensus with the International Monetary Fund on adopting a market-based exchange rate -- the only remaining condition for releasing the fourth and fifth instalments of the \$4.7 billion loan.

The two sides held a virtual meeting yesterday to resolve the issue, but Bangladesh maintained that fully liberalising the rate could trigger a sudden spike in the dollar's price, The Daily Star has learnt.

A high official at the finance ministry said there was no notable progress.

Another source said officials would resume discussions with the IMF today.

Since December, Bangladesh has held several rounds of talks with the IMF in Dhaka and Washington over the pending tranches.

Disagreements over exchange rate flexibility and efforts to raise the revenue-to-GDP ratio had delayed the fourth instalment.

Finance ministry officials said a consensus was reached on National Board of Revenue issues during the Washington talks, leaving the exchange rate as the sole sticking point.



Vendors selling daily essentials have set up shop right on the rail lines at the Joydebpur level crossing area in Gazipur. These floating shops move out of the way just before a train comes and return to their position as soon as it leaves. A slip-up in this everyday exercise can be fatal. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

VERBAL ABUSE

6 women serve legal notice on Hefazat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Six women -- three cultural activists and three leaders of the National Citizen Party -- yesterday served a legal notice on Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, accusing the group of verbally abusing women in public during its recent rally.

The rally was held on May 3 at Suhrabandi Udyan in Dhaka to press home Hefazat's demands, which included the dissolution of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission.

Filed through Advocate Palash, the notice was signed by three cultural figures -- Umme Rayhana, Umme Farhana and Camelia Sharmin Chura -- and NCP leaders Syeda

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WOMEN AFFAIRS REFORM

67 rights groups condemn backlash

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Samajik Protirodh Committee (Committee for Social Resistance), a platform of 67 women's rights, human rights, and development organisations, has condemned the derogatory comments about women and acts of aggression surrounding the recommendations of Women's Affairs Reform Commission.

Ten of the 11 reform commissions have submitted their reports; only that of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission has been met with such backlash.

In a statement on Sunday, the committee expressed grave concern over a rally, organised by Hefazat-e-Islam on May 3, where demands were made to dissolve the women's reform commission and reject its reform proposals.

The platform referred to a recent incident near the Raju Bhashkarjo at Dhaka University during the rally, describing the acts committed there as

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Be open to constructive dialogue
NCP urges all stakeholders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Citizen Party yesterday strongly condemned the "demeaning and disrespectful" remarks towards women made at rallies opposing the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's recommendations.

"The NCP deeply values the freedom of women, their freedom of expression and social struggle, and is firmly committed to upholding their dignity and rights," the newly formed party said in a press release.

However, it said some recommendations made by the commission have placed the state at odds with the country's social and religious values.

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