

We need an efficient healthcare system

Unimplemented health budget remains a major concern

At a time when healthcare experts are urging the government to increase the allocation for the health sector to 15 percent of the national budget or five percent of the GDP, it is deeply concerning that the two government divisions responsible for healthcare delivery have not even been able to utilise their Annual Development Programme (ADP) allocations. Reportedly, over the past 10 months, these two divisions—Medical Education and Family Welfare Division and Health Services Division—spent only a small portion of the funds allocated to them, making them the poorest performers in utilising their development budget. One of them spent only 2.34 percent of its Tk 2,283.16 crore budget by April this year—the lowest among all ministries and divisions—while the other used 14.9 percent of its Tk 5,673.51 crore budget, also nearing the bottom of the list. Unless the government addresses the factors behind such dismal performance and seriously considers the recommendations of the Health Sector Reform Commission, the much-needed change in our health sector will not come.

Reportedly, the factors identified by experts for poor ADP execution include the implementing agencies' lack of capacity, inexperienced project directors, dependence on the Public Works Department for construction, outdated budgeting methods, and leadership changes following the July uprising. In addition, government agencies often lack the necessary managerial and administrative capacity and experience to implement projects in the health sector. Many implementing agencies also lack financial autonomy, requiring them to seek the ministry's intervention, which is often a lengthy and bureaucratic process.

One crucial health project that has been delayed over the years is the one to establish fully fledged treatment centres at eight divisional headquarters for cancer, heart, and kidney patients. The project, approved in July 2019 and originally scheduled for completion by 2022, has undergone several revisions but still remains unfinished. Many other infrastructure development projects—for hospitals, medical colleges, universities, diagnostic facilities, and medical research centres—as well as the procurement of medical equipment are also facing similar delays. This means that the budget allocated for these projects remains unutilised.

While successive governments' neglect has completely crippled our health sector over the years, the situation has sadly remained the same during the interim government's tenure. We urge the government to address the issues hampering the health sector budget utilisation. The health budget must also address sector-specific needs, ensuring that adequate funds are allocated for the most-needed areas. The health sector must also have efficient leadership to ensure these projects are designed properly from the very beginning. The reform commission has put forward some pragmatic recommendations to overhaul our healthcare system, which should be implemented to make it efficient, pro-people, and accessible to all.

Dhaka still not prepared for the rains

Free the canals and flood flow zones, stop encroachment

The ordeals faced by many Dhaka dwellers on Thursday and Friday, who experienced heavy rainfall due to a depression at the Bay, give an idea of the suffering we may face in the coming days. Many commuters were stuck in traffic jams throughout the city for hours, while others had to navigate the precarious roads that became waterlogged. Continuous rain submerged many areas such as Shantinagar, Mirpur, Shewrapara, Green Road, Nilkhet and parts of Old Dhaka.

Dhaka's horrendously poor drainage system has continued to be a bane for its dwellers despite the ambitious Tk 262 crore investment by the two city corporations over four years (till 2024) to solve the waterlogging problem. The project included constructing 334.19 km of drainage infrastructure, including culverts and drains.

But the main reason for Dhaka to experience such debilitating waterlogging is the indiscriminate filling of water bodies and canals, a result of unplanned urbanisation and corruption of authorities responsible for preventing encroachment. Flood flow zones have been filled up, so there is nowhere the water can be held during heavy rains. A report published by this daily cited a study that revealed Dhaka has lost 3,440 acres of its designated flood flow zones, retention areas, and water bodies. Although some canals have been cleaned recently, the problem still persists as tertiary drains connected to them have not been upgraded.

Experts have stressed that the WASA 2015 Drainage Master Plan needs to be revised in keeping with the changing rain patterns caused by climate change. We urge the authorities to prioritise the cleaning and desilting of canals and other water bodies and making sure that whatever flood flow zones remain are free from encroachment. The drainage network also needs to be expanded to cover all areas. Both city corporations must devote their efforts to carry out these cleaning drives.

Future infrastructure development, moreover, must be more resilient and should include elevated roads, flood barriers, and efficient drainage systems. All urban development in the future must be in alignment with flood risk management. The authorities must also create awareness among the public about not littering water bodies. Fines should be introduced for littering and blocking drains and canals. As residents of the city, we also have a responsibility to keep it clean and free from waterlogging.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

CNN launched

On this day in 1980, the Cable News Network, popularly known as CNN, the world's first 24-hour TV news network, made its debut. The network signed on from its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia in the US, with a lead story about the attempted assassination of civil rights leader Vernon Jordan.



Jamaat leader's apology and the bigger question



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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TANIM AHMED

It was during the Third Crusade that Richard the Lionheart fell dangerously ill. His condition worsened and the news reached his enemy, Muslim commander Salahuddin Ayyubi. Instead of taking advantage of the situation, Salahuddin sent his doctor to treat Richard and also sent snow to cool his fever. Salahuddin, who had liberated Jerusalem in 1187, said about Richard, "He is a noble foe. Let him not perish needlessly."

In another instance, the last Khwarezmian emperor, Jalal al-Din, made a defiant stand on the banks of the Indus (in what is now modern-day Pakistan) despite being vastly outnumbered with no hope of victory against Genghis Khan's army. Refusing to surrender to the Mongol onslaught, Jalal dived into the river with his horse and swam across under a hail of arrows. Watching the whole scene from a hilltop, Genghis, the great Khan, said, "Such a son is worthy of a father." (*Baaper beta*, as we often say in Bangla.)

History is replete with such instances of warriors admiring their worthy adversaries. There is a strange code of honour among soldiers who return from the battlefield. They seem to develop a strong sense of camaraderie not just with their comrades but also with their foes from battle. But the enemy within, who side with the invaders, have no such code. I realised this a long time ago from something my uncle once said.

He was among the first batch of officers to be inducted into the Bangladesh Army. Like many others from the First War Course (Murti Commission), my uncle soon found himself at the front, leading men to battle. He had learnt to kill almost as soon as he had learnt to shave. He had not even turned 20 when the war was over. Chachchu once said, "I don't mind sitting down to tea and a chat with those I fought against on the battlefield. But I will never be able to tolerate these people." He was referring to the vile collaborators who abetted the Pakistan Army in 1971.

It is well-established in documents and widely reported events that Jamaat-e-Islami, as a party, devoted itself to defeating the liberation forces in 1971. The party's leadership met with the Pakistani military commanders

during the Liberation War pledging whole-hearted support for a unified Pakistan.

Jamaat and like-minded parties joined forces to set up vigilante militias like the Razakars, Al-Badr, and Al Shams to act as auxiliary forces of the military junta. Jamaat leaders spearheaded the Razakar units, while the erstwhile Islami Chhatra Sangha's leaders were put in charge of Al-Badr



In this photo taken on April 6, 1971, then Jamaat-e-Islami chief Ghulam Azam, far left, is seen at a meeting with Gen Tikka Khan of the Pakistan Army, sitting on the left of the large couch, and Nurul Amin, right, who was the chairman of Pakistan Democratic Party.

SOURCE: ARCHIVE

units. It was the atrocities of these vigilantes against unarmed civilians and non-combatants that evoke the strong sense of betrayal we still feel. Despite being born here and despite being Bangalees, they turned and sided with the Pakistani military junta. In many areas of Bangladesh, it was these groups who helped identify the families and homes of the liberation forces and Hindus who would later be taken away, tortured and, often, executed.

The Jamaat chief of that time, Ghulam Azam, spearheaded the East Pakistan Reclamation Committee after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. In his bid to "reclaim East Pakistan," he travelled around the world to build opinion against

Azharul Islam's involvement beyond reasonable doubt.

But it appears from the jubilation among certain quarters and the nonchalance among others that people, especially the youth, need to be reminded that the 1,200 villagers of Jharuarbeel are still dead. Those professors of Carmichael College are still dead. Those women confined at Rangpur Town Hall were still raped.

The Jamaat chief seized the moment to apologise unconditionally if his party or its members had hurt or caused harm to anyone, anywhere. But the manner in which Jamaat members still hero-worship their past leaders, who firmly stood against Bangladesh, does not convey a sense of their realisation of their crimes. Also, "hurt

the resolve to speak up, and the courage to stand the ground despite the risk were like a rejuvenation of the spirit of independence. My heart went out to the protesters of July. With them, I too rejoiced when Sheikh Hasina fled Bangladesh.

But ever since July, there have been subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, attempts to deride and disparage the spirit of the Liberation War from the same quarters that had opposed us in 1971. If it ever transpires that the July uprising is used to wash away the past, then that is where I will draw a line. I hope that day never comes. But if it should, I will not hesitate a moment.

Without a flicker of doubt, without a shadow of retreat, I will stand for 1971.

The case for a prompt election



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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As Bangladesh awaits the date for the 13th parliamentary election, there seems to be a growing consensus among the major political parties and opinion makers that the election date ought to be announced sooner rather than later. Over the last nine and a half months, various reform commissions, advisory committees, and task forces have offered their views on what has to be done to clean up the mess left behind by the 15 plus years of Awami League's rule. There is no doubt that a consensus on the immediate need to restore democracy and the national election exists. However, there is still some disagreement among the various vocal entities, including the interim government, the army, and the most popular political parties, on the timetable for the election.

The existing uncertainty in the country revolves around mainly three tasks that the interim set out to accomplish: reforms, trials of those responsible for the July killings, and the election. It was obvious from the outset that the reforms and the trials might take longer than a few months, or even a year or two, to complete.

On the other hand, the election could be held while the reforms and trials were in progress if all the

parties involved agreed. This view was expressed succinctly by Mujahidul Islam Selim, former president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, who said the reform process should engage people, and the interim government might not have enough time to implement the reform proposals. He suggested that the interim could address some "necessary reforms" and leave the "fundamental issues" to the elected representatives. Other discordant voices have even questioned the legitimacy of reforms and administrative measures undertaken by the unelected government.

The discussions that are now taking place, be it in the print or social media, are: the offer made by the chief adviser to resign; the decision or proposal to establish a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine; the timeline for the July killing trials and the judicial process; priorities of the new budget; and clarity in the decision-making process within the government. Without a national parliament with elected members, speculations are also rife about the motives behind each move undertaken by our neighbouring countries as well as the big powers. The guesses, rumours and conjectures are abundant and widespread. As a result, there is

a lot of discussions and uncertainty regarding these issues, leading people to make predictions or assumptions without sufficient evidence.

We heard that the interim government's cabinet, i.e. the advisory council, requested the chief adviser not to resign. He got a vote of confidence from them. Several hypotheses have emerged regarding

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the background for his move.

However, the question remains: what made him decide to consider resigning? There's still a lot of fog, but we don't know yet what prompted him to state that "the country is in a state of war." Nonetheless, seeing that he handled it the right way is comforting. However, the nation needs to know what is happening in the nation's corridors of power.

The army chief's speech to the brass is now in the mix. He appeared to have

anticipated the feeling among the masses when he expressed his dismay at "being kept in the dark" on critical national matters.

The recent actions taken by the government have cast the spotlight on the twin issues of transparency and accountability. Political scientists and management theorists have consistently raised the need for a system that meets these two criteria. Decisions made behind closed doors must be transparent, and those involved must be accountable. Accountability means that those making decisions are answerable for the choices they make and the subsequent actions taken.

Now, imagine a hypothetical scenario. If we had a democratically elected parliament that represented divergent political views, the questions and the conjectures mentioned above could have had a fair hearing. MPs would have raised a point of order or filed a similar motion and drawn the concerned cabinet member's or the prime minister's attention to hash it out in parliament. Other members would have debated it, and things would have been laid to rest rather than allowed to simmer for weeks.

To sum it up, there is an urgent need for an announcement on a deadline for the election. An elected government may not lead us to El Dorado, but it is the better option in the current state of affairs. Democracy is messy, but to paraphrase Winston Churchill, it is not the worst form of government if you consider the alternatives. Elections will not only bring about accountability and transparency but also restore people's representation and the government's legitimacy.