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How did we get to this point?

Lawmakers demand the law be done away with

WE are stunned at the demand of senior lawmakers to have rapists killed "in crossfire". How can individuals who are supposed to make the laws of our nation stand in the middle of parliament and ask that the most basic of all laws in any civilised society—that of due process—be violated in this most appalling manner? The concept of due process has developed over time from Clause 39 of the Magna Carta—one of the greatest achievements of human civilisation. That our lawmakers can dismiss it so trivially in this day and age is shocking beyond belief.

This is not a matter of downplaying an offence. Rape is a most egregious crime, for which a person must be held to account and exemplarily punished. However, in a nation that believes in the rule of law, and is governed by it, due process cannot be violated for any reason whatsoever.

Unfortunately, according to reports submitted by human rights groups to the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1,335 people were extrajudicially killed by law enforcing agencies through crossfire between January 2014 and May 2019, demonstrating the corrosion of due process and the rule of law that has happened in our country in the recent past—and many MPs had even indirectly admitted in parliament that the state is using crossfire in the war against drugs launched in 2018, by asking why the state cannot use similar tactics against rapists. That deterioration will only speed up if we have MPs believing and promoting the use of "crossfire" to do away with suspected criminals, regardless of the alleged offence.

One MP even went so far as to say that "you will go to heaven if you kill rapists in crossfire." This is the type of rhetoric we have grown accustomed to hearing from extremists, not MPs.

It is extremely saddening to watch discussions in our parliament being reduced to such levels. At the same time, it is a perfect example of the risks we face of going down the slippery slope, once we abandon the most basic of laws—for once the use of crossfire is normalised, as it has been against alleged drug dealers, it was only a matter of time before it was expanded to include others as well.

This entire episode demands some serious reflection as to the direction we are headed as a nation. We hope the MPs will immediately retract their absurd statements and acknowledge the importance of due process—and in light of that, investigate the countless violations of due process that have occurred in recent years. As without that, the rule of law, we fear, will be in terrible jeopardy.

Use of surplus funds of state agencies

Commendable, but we should proceed judiciously

WE welcome the initiative taken by the government to utilise the surplus funds of the state enterprises to implement various development projects. The organisations with the highest surplus funds include Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), Petrobangla, Rural Electrification Board, Rajuk, Titas gas, etc. According to the finance ministry, the state-owned autonomous organisations held Tk 218,839 crore at banks until June 30 last year.

As of June 30, 2020, BPC and BPDB alone had a surplus fund of Tk 21,611 crore and Tk 19,474 crore, respectively. It makes absolutely no sense as to why such large sums of money should be lying idle in the banks while many of the development projects taken by the government remain unimplemented because of fund crisis. This daily reported earlier how many infrastructure development projects remained unimplemented or could not be completed in time because of uncertainty over financing. While the move to use underutilised funds is welcome, we hope the government will make good use of it and not spend it on vanity projects.

The government has already placed a bill in the parliament in this regard to bring the surplus money held by 61 state organisations to the national exchequer. According to the bill, the surplus funds will be deposited to the national exchequer after keeping aside the operational cost, additional 25 percent of the operational cost as emergency funds, money for general provident fund and pension, etc. It also states that the agencies will have to deposit the funds to the national exchequer within three months of completion of a fiscal year.

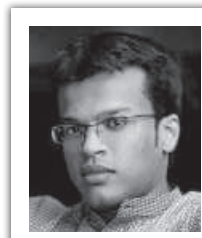
However, the fear of the bankers—that the law would hit hard our already cash-starved banking sector—in particular, should be taken into account so that the soon-to-be-passed law becomes implementable and people-oriented. Since the bill has now been with the parliamentary standing committee on finance for examination, we hope the committee will examine all the pros and cons before finalising it. The government should take expert opinions from those in the state enterprises and especially the banking sector, which would be the worst affected as most of the money was deposited with them.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Monitor cigarette sales

Recently, the National Heart Foundation disclosed an alarming survey report finding which mentioned that the evidence of smoking such as cigarette butts and odor were found at 71 percent of public hospitals in Dhaka, which goes against the Smoking and Tobacco Control Act. As per the tobacco control act, hospitals in the country are supposed to be completely tobacco-free. Smoking in all public places are strictly prohibited by the law yet it is such a rampant practice no matter where we go. In public places, if one requests a smoker to put out their cigarette, they retaliate often with aggression and disregard, even when children are present. There should be separate zones for smokers so that the non-smokers can be at ease. The concerned authorities must take steps to restrict the sale and smoking of tobacco within hospital vicinities as well as public places.
Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

IT is dark. There seems to be light on the other side, but it seems very distant. You see only parts of objects, and it makes it hard for you to discern what the entire thing may be. Since you are acclimatised to seeing the picturesque panorama of the world from childhood, even momentarily restricting your vision makes you feel confined and confused. Yet, those who are unfortunate enough to be born into poverty, live their entire lives inside the clenched fist of the world. Such an existence is characterised by persistent pressure from all forces—natural, social, economic and political. It is a deprivation that degrades humans into lesser beings. Those who are cursed with poverty from birth have committed no crime. They were only born to the wrong parents.

In his book, "Challenging the Injustice of Poverty", eminent economist Professor Rehman Sobhan advocates that poverty is not merely income deprivation, but rather a multi-dimensional exclusion from opportunities for development and decision-making in society. Professor Sobhan argues that injustice lies at the crux of poverty, and it is an unjust social order which creates unequal opportunities that lead to unequal outcomes. Such injustice is structural in nature, since it stems from a social order which determines the operation of both market forces and institutions. He points out that structural injustice originates inequalities in terms of access to assets, participation in the market, access to human development and governance. To correct structural injustice, Professor Sobhan proposes several measures, such as expanding the ownership and control of the excluded people over productive assets and strengthening the capacity of the excluded people to compete in the market.

Bangladesh has made commendable progress on the first sustainable development goal (SDG), which calls upon countries to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. According to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the proportion of population living below the national upper poverty line in Bangladesh has fallen from 56.7 per cent in 1991-92 to 24.3 per cent in 2016. However, in order to reach the government's milestone of having

a maximum of 18.6 per cent of the population living below the national upper poverty line by 2020, the rate of poverty reduction needs to be increased.

The total number of underprivileged people in Bangladesh has been reduced from 83.06 million in 1992 to 39.60 million in 2016. Thus, roughly halving the incidence of poverty between 1991-92 and 2016 has resulted in around 43.46 million people coming out of poverty in a matter of only 24 years. Bangladesh's accomplishments in reducing extreme poverty are even more impressive. The percentage of population living below

2010 to 2016, poverty rates fell by 1.2 per cent. This means that as the last mile is approaching, Bangladesh may find it challenging to repeat its miraculous poverty reduction record of the past.

Concurrent with poverty alleviation, Bangladesh has also managed to expand the coverage of its social safety net programmes. The proportion of households receiving social safety net benefits increased from 13.06 per cent in 2005 to 27.80 per cent in 2016. This is clearly a step in the right direction, in terms of making sure that "No One is Left Behind". Nevertheless, there is still

gradually shift from the humanitarian approach of safety nets to the rights-based approach of social protection.

Nonetheless, ultimately it must be kept in mind that there is no elixir that can magically end poverty. As long as the unjust economic, political and social structures that produce and perpetuate poverty are not decisively dismantled, the deprivation of the poor shall persist. The first step towards rejecting the socio-economic order that prevents elimination of poverty is to understand the sufferings of the poor. But for most



Ultimately, there is no elixir that can magically end poverty.

PHOTO: SYED YUSUF SAADAT

the national lower poverty line decreased from 41 per cent in 1991-92 to 12.9 per cent in 2016. At this rate, it is likely that Bangladesh will reach the government's milestone of having a maximum of 8.9 per cent of the population below the national lower poverty line by 2020. Nevertheless, the pace of poverty reduction has been slowing down. Between the period 2005 to 2010, poverty rates fell by 1.7 per cent annually on average, whereas between the period

much that needs to be done. For example, the social safety net allocation has been hovering at around 14 per cent of the total national budget during fiscal year 2008-09 to 2018-19. Additionally, the bulk of funds allocated for social safety nets is earmarked to provide pension for government officials. Therefore, in order to ensure that the "farthest behind are reached first" it is important to decouple pension of government officials from the social safety net budget allocation, and

of us, this will be no easy task. Since privilege usually goes unnoticed to those who are privileged, it is unlikely that we will be able to empathise with the plight of the poor. This is why we need to view the world through a loosely clenched fist, because it is only through the act of closing down our field of view, that our eyes will really be opened to poverty and the limited lives of the poor.

Syed Yusuf Saadat is Senior Research Associate, Centre for Policy Dialogue

An argument for nuance

One Bangladeshi man's story shows why linking climate change with conflict is no simple matter

SONJA AYEY-KARLSSON

FROM Sudan to Syria to Bangladesh, climate change is often presented as a powerful and simple root cause of violent conflict and mass migration.

These narratives can be dangerous. Directly linking climate change with aggression and mass migration risks dehumanising those vulnerable to environmental stresses, and casts their attempts to escape a problem caused by mainly rich nations as a security threat. It promotes fear and isolation, rather than compassion and assistance. It also frames conflicts as "natural", ignoring myriad preventable causes.

The truth is more complicated than a hotter planet inevitably meaning more violence, war and chaos. Research uncovering the individual life experiences of vulnerable people on the ground show that the link between climate and conflict is not simple, nor linear. A destabilising climate merely adds extra pressure to a great many pre-existing difficulties.

My research in Bangladesh, and the story of one man in particular—55-year-old Muzaffar from Babupur in the north-east of the country—perfectly illustrates this complexity. In order to truly defend his future, and that of countless others in similar positions, we must understand and tackle structural and social causes of conflict.

Muzaffar's story begins like so many others here: with a difficult past. Poverty forced Muzaffar to work as a child and he never had a chance to attend school. The day he got a family of his own, his main concern was putting food on the table.

At the time, food in the area was scarce due to the lack of rain and, as the local climate became less stable, his village struggled increasingly with drought. It was difficult to make money in the village, so Muzaffar decided to leave his wife and eight children behind and migrated to the capital, Dhaka.

Here, he worked as a day labourer in the harbour, carrying sand and stones on his head. Unable to afford a house, he lived in a shared dormitory shed made of tin, and full of mosquitoes and ants.

I suffered a lot. We were about 50-60 people stuck in there... As I was not educated I could not really change my profession or build up a career. I just made sure to care for my family. That was all that kept me going.

After deciding to return home,

Muzaffar settled down close to a pond on government-owned land. The local government reassured him that he could stay there. However, powerful men, who had already filed a claim to the land in the local court, showed up one day planting trees next to his house—a common land-grabbing strategy in the area. Muzaffar described their encounter:

I told the man... If you win, you will get the land, but for now I will not allow you to plant trees on my land. You can plant [your trees] in the open land instead... They did not want to listen and kept on planting trees.

The police came to the village to investigate what had happened, but Muzaffar could not afford the payment or bribe commonly required for their service. Unable to pay the police, the case is still running in the regional high court, decades later. In the words of Muzaffar, "he who is poor cannot afford to pay the price for justice".

Thankfully, Muzaffar's life took a positive change. He did not get justice in court, but a few years ago a local NGO gave him a few goats and a sheep, and Bangladesh's largest NGO gave him a

bachelor's degree.

Others, of course, are not so lucky. Some are unable to pay their loans, some are forced to sell their land and assets to pay them off—and some lose their livelihoods or end up in jail.

Complex causes

The loss of natural resources in the area due to climate stress played a role in the conflict Muzaffar faced. However, so did land politics and power dynamics, social stigmatisation, discrimination, and the legacy of colonialism.

Muzaffar was poor. He was landless. He was not protected by the law. The justice system made it easy for those with more power to take his land. The men who attacked him had powerful connections in the village.

Many of these power relations, both in Bangladesh and elsewhere, owe their existence to decisions made during colonial rule. For example, while colonial laws governing the division of land no longer apply, they entrenched inequality in access to resources and influence that still persists today, giving rise to conflict that may never have occurred had countries developed autonomously.

Muzaffar is a man of working age, but many in similar positions suffer added structural barriers. Women, the elderly, and children suffer more from the impacts of both conflict and climate change. Unless we address the social power structures responsible for these inequalities, they will continue to be disproportionately affected.

We have surprisingly little empirical evidence of how social, psychological, financial, geographical, and political factors contribute to conflict, and how climate change interacts with them. We need much more diverse and interdisciplinary research to better understand how to protect vulnerable people from both conflict and climate change.

Arenas such as COP25, the latest iteration of the UN's annual climate change summit, have the capacity to advance these research efforts. Our children recognise the urgency and are demanding that we look at the science. It is time to listen.

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Muzaffar's life story illustrates the complex linkages between climate change and conflict.

So after a while I went over there to reason with him and pulled away his hand to stop him. He stood up abruptly, and hit me with his spade. I tried to protect myself with my hand, but it cut straight through my hand into my face, here, right next to my eye.

Muzaffar fainted as soon as the spade hit his head. His landless indigenous neighbours tried to help him and put him into a taxi to the hospital but his attackers tried to stop him from getting into the vehicle. They would not allow the taxi to leave until Muzaffar's uncle screamed: "If you want him dead, you better kill him now!"

PHOTO: SONJA AYEY-KARLSSON

cow. Muzaffar decided to sell his animals, using the money to get a loan, buy a harvester machine, and start a small business.

These days he keeps livestock, harvests other people's land, rents out his machine, and does share cropping – a collective form of agriculture in which a landowner allows people to farm their land in return for a share of the crops. He has already started to pay back his loans. His eyes were filled with pride during my last visit as he shared the news that his youngest daughter had just finished her