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The continuous struggle for a free press

People's voices need to be front and centre for inclusive development

ON the 29th anniversary of *The Daily Star*, we express our heartfelt gratitude to our readers who have been our inspiration in the long and arduous struggle for a free press in the country. What we celebrate today is this struggle, and our perseverance amidst increasingly stringent restrictions on the free press over the last three decades. We had hoped that with the transition to democracy in the 1990s, we could take these freedoms for granted, but unfortunately, successive regimes have failed to see the importance of a free press in building an inclusive, just and pro-people Bangladesh. Perhaps our biggest regret over the years has been that those in power have, more often than not, seen a free press as a threat to their vision of the country, rather than as an enabler of a better Bangladesh.

Over the years, Bangladesh has achieved remarkable economic growth. It has also done extraordinarily well in addressing social concerns such as child and infant mortality, gender inequity, low life expectancy, low levels of immunisation and so on, surpassing India and indeed the region as a whole on a number of indicators. However, despite this progress, inequality in the country is at an all-time high. Income held by the poorest 40 percent of the population in Bangladesh has declined from 17.41 percent in 1991 to 13.01 percent in 2016, while the income held by the richest 20 percent of the population increased from 37.4 percent in 1991 to 41.4 percent in 2016. The real challenge that lies ahead for Bangladesh is figuring out a way to make its development process sustainable and, equally importantly, inclusive. Growth of the few cannot make up for the subjugation of the many.

For a development process to be sustainable and inclusive, there's no denying that the voices of the people need to be at the front and centre of any agenda. And how else but through a free press can people's voices be heard? We reiterate what we have always believed: that for the government, free media is a powerful ally that can provide a flow of information that is authentic, objective and nuanced, from the grassroots, which in turn can keep the state machineries accountable to the people.

If Bangladesh is to truly function as a democracy—one in which development uplifts not only the privileged, but the larger masses who most need it—then a free press must be allowed to first exist and, dare we say, flourish.

Rohingya boat capsizes adds to already long list of tragedies

Authorities must take steps to protect the refugees from trafficking

IN the early hours of February 11, a fishing trawler carrying over 135 Rohingya refugees—mostly women and children—from different camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox's Bazaar, capsized in the Bay of Bengal. Four children and 11 women have been found dead so far, with 50 people still missing. Out of the 72 people who were rescued, four have been identified as members of a human trafficking syndicate by the Bangladesh Coast Guard.

According to a report in this daily, the locals told law enforcement authorities that the traffickers operated out of the Noakhali Para area, which is considered a safe place for human trafficking since it is adjacent to the sea. Now the question is, if the locals were aware of this, why were the law enforcers not—especially since the police, BGB, and coast guard have already detained over 80 people for trying to travel to Malaysia illegally in the last four months? Given the heightened level of security that is now prevalent at all times at the Rohingya refugee camps, including the construction of a barbed-wire fence around them that has been roundly criticised by rights organisations, it is a cause for grave concern that traffickers are still being able to operate in this country.

The tragedy that unfolded on Tuesday is as disturbing as it was preventable. The local authorities, as well as UN agencies and other international organisations, are perfectly aware of a transnational human trafficking network that runs from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Thailand and Malaysia, preying on vulnerable refugees and often trapping them into a life of bonded labour and slavery. Despite this, very little has been done to dismantle this network. In Bangladesh, while there are regular reports of refugees being rescued and traffickers being held, the conviction rates for the latter are negligible. Although the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 calls for the implementation of a special tribunal to exclusively handle human trafficking cases, this is yet to be formed.

Bangladesh is already on the Tier-2 watch list of countries that do not fully meet the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking. We have been warned that if steps are not taken to implement the special tribunal, the country might be pushed into Tier-3 of the watch list. It is imperative that the government immediately take actions to implement this provision and ensure that traffickers are given the punishment they deserve.

Additionally, the government, UN agencies and international aid organisations must work together to create a camp environment that encourages refugees to not undertake this dangerous journey abroad. We must remember that the victims of the recent tragedy are the most vulnerable members of the refugee community. Bangladesh has already shown great generosity in hosting this persecuted population, but we must do better and create conditions where women and children are no longer lost at sea in the hopes of finding a better future elsewhere.

Key socioeconomic issues that we must address



ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

BA NGLADESH is, without a doubt, one of the most promising economies in the region. We have made considerable progress in many socio-economic sectors. But in recent times, the country has been facing some challenges and threats that, if left unaddressed, could seriously undermine the nation's development and damage our future economic well-being. Below is my compilation of some of those issues that need urgent attention.

POPULATION AND POVERTY

Bangladesh is the world's eighth most populous country and also one of the most densely populated. Even though the country has put a cap on unchecked population growth—and achieved considerable success in reducing fertility, from 6.3 children per woman in 1975 to 2.04 children per woman in 2018—the country is still adding two million people to its population every year. And if current patterns of growth continue, the population would reach between 230-250 million in 2050, according to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In general, the population of a country is seen as the most important economic resource, but unchecked growth can be detrimental to economic development. It diminishes the availability of capital per head by limiting access to food, housing, sanitation, health care, education, and employment, which in turn reduces the productivity of its labour force. High population density is often cited as a primary reason for degradation of natural resources and depleting both ecosystems and environment.

Today, some quarters in our country tend to see the large population as an economic asset, but we need to understand that whether a large population is an asset or a burden depends on how that population is being managed, trained up and employed. At present, more than 65 percent of our population is of working age, between 15 and 64 years. The country is going through a "demographic window of opportunity" but unfortunately, we could not take full advantage of that situation, simply because of not having enough skilled people. We are still struggling

with a huge low-skilled workforce; about 86 percent of the total employed population aged 15 and above are in the informal sector, which is insecure, poorly paid and has no social security, meaning that they cannot contribute much to economic development. Although the rate of poverty in recent times has gone down but the number of people living below the poverty line has gone up just because of our rapid population growth. Currently, almost one in four Bangladeshis (24.3 percent of the population) lives in poverty, while 12.9 percent of the population live in extreme poverty.

INVESTMENT

Bangladesh has shown a very welcoming attitude towards foreign investors, allowing foreign investment in most sectors and providing favourable conditions for doing business here, but still foreign investment has been comparatively low in Bangladesh compared to its regional peers. According to a report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the country received USD 3.61 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2018 as against USD 2.6 billion in 2017. Of the USD 3.61 billion that came in Bangladesh, USD 1.12 billion were in the form of equity, USD 1.30 billion as reinvested earnings, and USD 1.18 billion as intra-company loan.

Investment to GDP ratio was 31.56 percent in FY 2018-19, out of which 23.40 percent came from the private sector and only 8.13 percent from the public sector. Private investment, which typically accounts for about 75 percent of the total investment, has been stagnating for the last few years. Industry experts say, the deterrents that discourage investors include time-consuming bureaucracy, poor socio-economic and physical infrastructure, unreliable energy supply, corruption, low labour productivity, undeveloped money and capital markets, high cost of doing business, complicated tax system, delays in decision making, etc. Although Bangladesh advanced eight notches in the World Bank's ease of doing business 2020 ranking to 168 out of 190 countries, there are still significant bottlenecks in doing business. For instance, transferring a property title in Bangladesh takes an average of 271 days, almost six times longer than the global average of 47 days. Resolving a commercial dispute through a local first-instance court takes an average 1,442 days, almost three times more than the

590 days' average among OECD high-income economies.

EXPORT

In 2018-19, Bangladesh earned USD 40.53 billion by exporting goods. Of the amount, the readymade garment (RMG) sector alone earned USD 34.13 billion accounting for over 84.21 percent of total exports, followed by several other products including agricultural products, frozen food, jute and jute goods, and leather. Over the past 10 years, garment exports had been increasing at a year-on-year rate of over 13 percent. But currently, RMG is in a sluggish mode. In the first half of the current financial year 2019-20, garment exports to the European Union fell by 6.75 percent while the export earnings from the United States decreased by 3.67 percent.

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According to Export Promotion Bureau data, Bangladesh earned USD 3.05 billion in November 2019, down by 10.70 percent, which was USD 3.42 billion in the same month last year.

ECONOMIC GROWTH & EMPLOYMENT

Although the country has experienced exceptional economic growth in recent years, it has failed to create adequate jobs. Different studies show that between 2013 and 2017, while the average annual GDP growth was 6.6 percent, the average annual growth of jobs was only 0.9 percent. The employment share of the manufacturing sector declined from 16.4 percent to 14.4 percent. According to a report published by the United Nations

Population Fund (UNFPA), some 47.6 million or 30 percent of the total population are young (10-24 years), and of them, 25 percent—numbering around 11 million—are currently inactive, i.e. they are neither in the education cycle nor involved with any economic activity. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate is higher among the higher educated group of youth.

BANKING SECTOR

At present, one of the major causes for concern for the economy is our ailing banking sector which has been, on many occasions, tarnished by unwanted malpractices. For decades, banks are funneling loans worth billions of taka by violating banking rules and procedures to influential people, who have been known to be lax with repayments. As a result, as of September 2019, defaulted loans in the banking sector stood at a record Tk 116,288 crore. The rise in defaulted loans is another reason behind the declining private-sector credit growth and investment. A combination of strong policy reforms and good governance in the banking sector is the need of the hour.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In addition to factors discussed above, low-quality education, inadequate health care, unplanned urbanisation, pollution, climate change, severe urban-rural disparities, low tax-GDP ratio, good governance, rising inequality, corruption, etc. are also affecting our efficiency and productivity, as well as constraining businesses and industries that have the potential to grow. Therefore, the government needs to take immediate action to resolve these issues. It can start with revamping our weak education system, making it more suitable to the changing times so that young people can meet the needs of the jobs of today and tomorrow, because an unskilled, uneducated and unemployed population is nothing but a sheer burden for a country. Diversification of the export basket and tapping new markets are sorely needed. Also, we need to invest much more in education, health and infrastructure, and create a favourable environment for local and foreign investment, so that we can increase production, productivity and consequent employment opportunities for the future workforce.

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Strengthen readiness to respond to coronavirus



POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

THE outbreak of the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The highest level of international solidarity and cooperation is

needed to protect health and keep people safe. Since the novel coronavirus emerged late December, the number of cases reported globally has climbed significantly. Human-to-human transmission has been reported in a number of countries. It is imperative that countries report and share information on suspected cases early, provide detailed reports on confirmed cases, and ensure all people receive the care they need in accordance with the rights and dignity that are due.

The WHO South-East Asia Region must continue to strengthen its readiness to respond. In recent weeks, several countries in the region have detected and reported cases of 2019-nCoV. The vigilance of health authorities in each country is commendable, and reflects region-wide efforts to strengthen emergency risk management, which is one of the eight Flagship Priority Programmes in the region. Member states have made substantial progress in recent years to strengthen health systems to achieve universal health coverage and to build core capacities required by the International Health Regulations (IHR)—the

international legal framework that helps countries work together for global health security.

The response to the emergence and spread of 2019-nCoV has been rapid. Over the past month, WHO has worked with countries across the world to roll out a series of preparedness measures, including guidance on how to detect and manage cases, improve infection prevention and control, and reduce transmission. In the South-East Asia region, WHO and its member states

elbow, avoiding close contact with people with flu-like symptoms, and thoroughly cooking meat and eggs are all great ways to stay healthy and to limit one's exposure to pathogens.

The International Health Regulations and the region's own Delhi Declaration on Emergency Preparedness, which member states adopted in September 2019, are clear: By implementing evidence-based policies, health authorities can increase their capacity to detect and control emerging and re-emerging



Medical staff at the Jinyintan hospital in Wuhan, China. The coronavirus that emerged in central China at the end of last year has now killed more than 1,100 people and is spreading around the world.

PHOTO: REUTERS/DARLEY SHEN

have focused on increasing capacities to rapidly detect and care for patients, and to guard against onward transmission. To date, most cases reported in the region have been imported. It is imperative that countries in the region scale up vigilance and prepare to prevent, control and interrupt local transmission.

There is much that we do not yet know about the virus, but which we are working to find out. The world's best scientists are on the case. As we learn more, WHO will continue to provide member states and the public with high-quality information through regular situation reports and our social media accounts. Accurate, timely information empowers all people to assess risks and to take preventive measures. Regular hand-washing, coughing or sneezing into one's

diseases, care for affected people and protect health workers. As member states make all efforts to tackle 2019-nCoV, several priorities stand out.

First, we must strengthen early warning, alert and disease surveillance systems. To help individuals monitor their own health, authorities at ports of entry can provide information on the virus to incoming and outgoing travellers. Where they don't already exist, contingency plans to assess and manage ill passengers should be developed. Event-based surveillance should be scaled up, including via detailed case reporting, which will help authorities better understand the virus and more effectively respond. Regular risk assessments using multiple sources of data should be carried out.

Second, infection prevention and control (IPC) in health facilities should be stepped up. By ensuring IPC protocols are enforced, health authorities will limit the spread of the virus. By making personal protective equipment accessible, they will protect health workers. Triage systems for patients with acute respiratory illness will increase the efficiency of health facilities, as will clear patient placement and transportation procedures. WHO's technical guidance on clinical case management should inform facility-based care.

Third, rapid response teams must be equipped to act decisively. At national and sub-national levels, response teams must have adequate resources, both logistic and financial. They must have the skills to carry out contact tracing and collect biological samples for respiratory pathogens. It is imperative that national command and coordination structures for emergency response are activated, and relevant sectors—such as the animal health sector—are brought on board where appropriate.

Finally, the importance of providing accurate and timely information must be fully grasped across sectors, and at all levels of government. Streamlined procedures for developing and clearing transparent communication and messaging will increase responsiveness. Information that empowers people to protect themselves will promote trust. Systems to correct misunderstandings, misinformation and rumours will ensure all people can make health-positive decisions that are fact-based and evidence-informed.

The emergence and spread of the novel coronavirus highlight the need for all countries to be ready to respond to acute public health events by acting on the "four I's" of emergency risk management: identify risks, invest in people and systems for risk management, implement plans, and interlink sectors. As the current situation evolves, and the region strengthens its readiness, we must continue to implement the Delhi Declaration and achieve full IHR compliance. We live in a dynamic world that is interconnected and on the move. We are moving with it. Member states in the region will continue to step up and stand tall. WHO will continue to support them to secure health for all.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh is Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region.

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