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Indiscriminate use of Digital Security Act against journalists

Is it for justice or intimidation?

We are worried at the way the Digital Security Act has increasingly been used to arrest and intimidate journalists across the country. In a recent incident, three journalists were sent to jail by a Narsingdi court in a case filed under this draconian law over quoting a police official without contacting him. According to our report, two local newspapers in the district, one of them online-based, published reports about a man’s death in police custody in which they quoted a police inspector allegedly without contacting him. The police inspector immediately filed a case against the journalists under the Digital Security Act to “protect his dignity.”

If the journalists were indeed guilty of publishing “fabricated and baseless” news, or if they included the inspector’s comments in the reports without contacting him, the police could have addressed the issue in other ways. They could have simply sent a protest letter or rejoinder to the newspapers to address this. But instead, the police official sued them under the Digital Security Act. The speed at which the arrests were made leaves us wondering about whether the act is being used to get justice or as a tool of intimidation.

We feel that the so-called Digital Security Act has been used more to stifle the voices of the journalists and create fear among them. Very recently, four journalists, including bdnews24.com Editor-in-Chief and jagonews24.com acting editor, were sued under this very law for reporting on alleged embezzlement of aid for coronavirus victims. There had been many other instances of the “misuse” of this law in which journalists were targeted.

As journalists across the country have been going through a hard time, there is a positive development that gives us some hope: photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol who went missing on March 10 from Dhaka, has been found in Benapole, Jashore, 53 days after his disappearance. The Benapole Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) deserves our heartiest thanks for finding him and connecting him with his family. A case was filed against him along with 31 others under the Digital Security Act just a day before he went missing. Now that he has been found, we would like to know the reasons for his disappearance and what happened to him during this time. We demand to know the truth.

Police personnel need more protection from the virus

They are the frontline fighters

It is disturbing to learn that the police hospital in Dhaka has been overwhelmed by patients due to the number of COVID-19 infected police personnel. As of the time of writing this editorial, one hundred and thirteen police personnel have tested positive for Covid-19 across the country, according to statistics reports of the Police Headquarters. Of these, 93 are members of the DMP. The total number of infected policemen now stands at 854. And unfortunately, we have lost five infected police personnel so far. It may not be remiss to suggest that the matter of PPE for personnel engaged in the frontline of the battle has, particularly, not been adequately addressed.

The type of work the police are doing at this time, the chances of their catching the coronavirus are perhaps more than any other citizens—they being in the thick of the battle to prevent the spread of the virus. Unlike the other citizens, stay at home order does not apply to them and they have to be on the job 24/7. But even considering their susceptibility, when they are engaged in ensuring social distancing, with most people preferring to disregard the instructions, and people coming out in droves in markets, the infection figure among the police, which is nearing a thousand, is indeed too many. The cramped living conditions in the police lines increase the chance of spread of the virus among the police.

We believe that firstly, adequate and appropriate personal protection equipment should be provided to the police, particularly to those who are on the streets. Secondly, testing for the virus should be carried out on the members of the law enforcing agencies, so that the positive cases can be segregated. Thirdly, their living conditions must be made more hygienic. Last but not the least, the efforts and resources of the police hospitals in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country must be supplemented so that fatalities can be kept to a minimum. The country can ill afford the police overtaken at any time, more so now.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pay teachers their dues

A friend who once served as a faculty member at private universities recently informed me that selective private universities are not paying teachers their due salaries, while some have managed to pay a certain percentage of the total amount for the month of March. This has gotten them worried as to whether they will now receive their salaries for April. It is not only the teachers of these universities who face such crisis, but other staff as well.

This lockdown has created a variety of problems for people from all walks of life. To make matters worse, prices of goods and essentials have also gone up. In such a situation, how will the teachers provide for their families? Even if the students are not paying tuition fees, the authorities are capable of paying the teachers from their funds. But unfortunately, they have not. I urge the government to take necessary measures to ensure that the teachers get paid.

Mizanur Rahman, Madaripur

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

SINCE the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic we have begun to analyse, forecast and speculate the impact on economies, societies, political systems, governance mechanisms, and on many more areas. We have started to imagine a world after COVID-19 through a variety of lenses based on our own understanding and experiences. The innumerable research that are being carried out on the impact of COVID-19 throughout the world have flooded our minds, and sometimes made us confused as to what life after COVID-19 would look like.

The implications of COVID-19 on the global economy and on individual countries are becoming obvious as time goes on. The shutdown of almost all economic activities have brought miseries to economies of all strata and phases. Production and supply chains have been disrupted, exports and imports decelerated, transportation system collapsed and service sector interrupted. These have changed the lives and livelihoods of people across the world. Unemployment has soared, poverty has surged, food insecurity has increased, and above all, loss of lives is increasing by the hour.

Barring a few, most governments have undertaken policy measures to address such a rapid and massive impact of corona pandemic at large scales. Health expenditures have been topped up to mitigate the health risks. Stimulus packages for various sectors of the economy have been announced with the objective being increase spending following the Keynesian theory to rejuvenate the economy. Relief packages are also in place in many countries to extend income and food support to the poor to save them from hunger.

These are of course immediate responses to rescue the lives of people and also pump oxygen into the economy. And, hopefully it will work sooner rather than later. Scientists and doctors have shown some rays of hope to tackle the disease. And once health is under control, human beings are smart enough to work through in reviving the economic activities and recover the lost gains to the best of their ability. At least, history has pointed out clearly how economies could get back to life after several crises in the past. The World Wars, the Great

Life after the pandemic

Depression, the Spanish Flu and many more examples will confirm this.

However, apart from economic recovery, will there be any changes in social, cultural and institutional norms, political systems and governance patterns? Change is a continuous process. It happens for good or for bad. Changes emanated from crises may sometimes become beneficial for humanity. What changes will COVID-19 lead to? It depends on what changes we want to see. And how we work towards that. It is not automatic.

At the onset of COVID-19, people talked about the universal nature of this pandemic. We were reminded of how every person—rich and poor, man



A peanut vendor in Dhaka's Farmgate sits idle at around noon. Typically at this time of the day, he is busy selling peanuts to school children. But due to the outbreak of COVID-19, people are staying away from the streets leaving him with next to no income.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

and woman, powerful and weak—is vulnerable to this pandemic. COVID-19 does not distinguish among race, colour, gender, location, profession, position or riches. But it has been proven wrong when immediate research in many communities in several countries showed that COVID-19 also has a bias against certain groups of people. That is why African-American were more affected in the USA or the underprivileged with weak immune system in poor countries are becoming victims of COVID-19 more than others. This bias is of course not created by COVID-19. Rather it is the outcome of the biases that have been created by government policies which favour the rich and ignores the impoverished.

universal.

The second situation will be such that the global economy slides so much that it takes a long time to recover. Poverty, mortality, morbidity, food insecurity and unemployment increases. All forms of inequality within and among countries accentuates. All global targets—Sustainable Development Goals, providing support to poor countries by developed countries equivalent to 0.7 percent of their gross national income, Paris climate agreement to limit the increase of global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius—fail to be achieved. As a result, countries become inward looking and resort to protectionism. And the effectiveness of global institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade

Ensuring food security during lockdown

Saving smallholder and women farmers must be a priority

TANJIR HOSSAIN

THE government has already taken a number of measures to save Robi Crop considering the lockdown and because the haor region—especially Sunamganj, Sylhet and some northern districts such Gaibandha, Jamalpur—may suffer flashflood. These measures include regular weather forecast, early warning, arranging harvest machines and so on. These are some of the most important and timely decisions by the government as first steps to ensure food availability.

The government has also issued cyclone early warning for coastal areas and is taking actions to save crops. The Agricultural Loan Department of Bangladesh Bank also declared Tk 5,000 crore for agricultural loan, especially for the horticulture, fruit, fisheries, poultry, dairy and other businesses. This is also a great initiative considering that these small businesses have already been affected due to the pandemic.

The concerns related to food security, however, remains unaddressed by and large due to a number of factors. Everyday food items such as rice, vegetables and other necessary perishables are produced by the smallholder and women farmers in Bangladesh. And these farmers are already suffering. For example, Taslima Begum of Chorgacha, Ghoraghat is a small poultry farmer. Due to the COVID-19 crisis she cannot sell her chickens at the market, so she is forced to sell the poultry items at a loss of Tk 50 per kg to her neighbours in fewer quantity.

Afroza Begum of Fulchari, Gaibandha is a vegetable producer. Because of the lack of market access, she is selling pumpkins at Tk 5 per kg whereas the regular price is Tk 25-30 per kg. It is watermelon season in Bangladesh and farmers normally sell their products at Tk 30-40 per kg. The farmers in Patuakhali are currently selling watermelons at Tk 8-10 per piece whereas their cost of production is over Tk 20 per watermelon. How are these farmers going to recover the loss they are already suffering? We need to take note that these farmers’ livelihoods are depended on their produce and any loss means they will not be able to go into production next season without external assistance.

Coming back to paddy, with the hope that flash flood or other natural hazards will not cause any disastrous situation in any parts of Bangladesh and farmers are able to get their desired harvest, question remains whether the farmers

will be able to sell their crop at a fair price. In 2018 hundreds and thousands of farmers protested across the country demanding fair price. The response from the government was helpful, but it was late and inadequate in solving the matter. At present, even if the government manages to buy the paddy and other ROBI crops, how are those going to be processed and stored? This will mean that the rice mills will have to be re-opened during the crisis, risking the spread of the virus. Furthermore, given that inter-city transportation systems carrying food products are yet to be re-established, unless major changes are made and government facilitates are opened for the distribution and redistribution of food



The policymakers and city dwellers may be buying food from the supermarkets now, but supermarkets do not produce crops and will never do.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

products, a food crisis may be inevitable in the long run. The solution lies in following the right strategy considering different timescales.

For immediate action, it is important to set up an oversight committee headed by the Ministry of Agriculture with appropriate representatives from key relevant ministries and civil society organisations. In each district and Upazila, a committee should also be established where local transportation authority is represented. Government has already taken the initiative to open school fields for local market to operate. This

Amanproduction. Seed and fertiliser supply will become a challenge. The smallholder and women farmers will require access to interest free loans with the option to repay post Aman harvest. This will be the most critical stage of intervention in terms of ensuring food security for the remaining year. Considering the worst case scenario, the government and other actors must map possible solutions including countrywide planning of distribution and redistribution of the products. We also need to ensure quality seeds where community seedbank initiatives can play

Organisations and the like decelerates.

Third is the optimistic case. The economies around the world not only recovers but, moves further ahead. Governments invest more in areas such as health, education, technology, climate and work towards ending poverty, improving inclusivity, establishing good governance and creating democratic spaces. Cooperation among nations improves and commitments toward fulfilling the global promises get implemented. This is the situation where crisis will be turned into opportunity by global and national leaders.

What do we expect in Bangladesh during the aftermath of COVID-19? The outcome of the greatest crisis in Bangladesh’s history—the Liberation War in 1971—was regaining our prized possession, that is, an independent country. We faced the crisis in unity and solidarity. And following the war we also got a progressive constitution that upholds the dignity and rights of every citizen of Bangladesh. Social justice and equality are also enshrined in our great constitution. After 49 years of our independence, we however, cannot claim that we could keep our promises to those who sacrificed their lives for the country.

Rather, the spirit of our freedom fighters is being undermined by the way some of us conduct ourselves each day and even during crisis. Politically connected people who steal relief for the flood affected people and get away with such misdeeds are also active now during COVID-19. With shame we observe when people go hungry, these people in charge of distribution of food and support have the audacity to commit such heinous crimes. With frustration we see how public representatives are nowhere to be seen to coordinate the relief work and help their voters to survive. With sadness we note how people behave with the frontline workers of this crisis who are risking their own lives and also how health workers mistreat patients by forgetting the core values of their profession. With discouragement we learn how faulty and corrupt the health procurement is and how the poor are deprived of medicines allocated for them.

And, all of a sudden, it seems everyone has become poor in Bangladesh! The way every business—irrespective of its size and strength, is seeking stimulus packages from the government reminds us of the old story of greed, not need.

One wonders, will people change in their attitude and behaviour or keep repeating their old acts once COVID-19 recedes?

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Addressing overall market mechanism to support the smallholder farmers will be the key challenge in the medium term. Due to the current travel ban, buyers from distant places are failing to reach the market and the producers are deprived from optimum price of crops especially vegetables and seasonal fruits. Lack of infrastructure to preserve vegetables or perishable products has been one of the biggest challenges for small farmers for a long time contributing to their losses every year. Considering the products that are to be harvested between July to September, the government must take measures including flood preparedness, etc. Given that there could be a global food crisis, the government should strengthen its safety net programme ensuring that food is available, accessible and affordable for the poor and marginalised. Special schemes for the smallholder and women farmers is needed to ensure they survive until the next harvest. The government must also ensure the transportation system is functioning well considering that the COVID-19 crisis may continue. Guaranteeing transparency and accountability throughout the process to stop theft and exploitation by the powerful and the middlemen are must.

In the long term (6-12 months), it will be important to monitor the global food security situation, market system as well as climate condition. We must not forget that Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change and throughout the year, we may face flood, river erosion, cyclone and hailstorm—and dry period at the end of this year. It is important to note that even if everything goes right and there is no climate induced disaster in 2020, we will still continue to carry the loss that we already suffered due to the current crisis. Therefore, the government must be ready to continue prioritising food producers, the smallholder and women farmers, along with the small and medium agricultural businesses.

The policymakers and city dwellers may be buying food from the supermarkets now, but supermarkets do not produce crops and will never do. It is the smallholders and women farmers like Taslima and Afroza who produce the food we eat. If they do not survive, it will be only a matter of time before we face a food crisis in Bangladesh.

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