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Gopalganj police brutality mirrors reality in wider society

Accused cop must not escape justice

THE case of a farmer killed following police contact in Gopalganj last week is but the latest in a long history of police brutality in Bangladesh. On Monday, Police Headquarters issued a statement saying that initial investigations have found ASI Shamim Hasan of Kotalipara Police Station guilty in connection with the death of 32-year-old Nikhil Talukdar, who succumbed to injuries sustained during an assault by the accused at a hospital in Dhaka. We are told that a murder case has already been filed, with ASI Shamim as prime accused, and he and another person were also arrested and produced before the court. We commend the swiftness with which police authorities have responded to the allegation of a death from excessive force by one of their own—for reasons still to be determined by a court of law—but this is hardly reassuring, given how few cases of police brutality end up in convictions in Bangladesh.

The impunity enjoyed by the police in this country is well-documented. Except for a few exceptions, the instances of a guilty police officer being successfully prosecuted for excessive force or extrajudicial killing or custodial deaths are rare. This year alone, even during the lockdown period, there have been a number of cases of police violence. According to a report prepared by seven eminent citizens and released in mid-April, at least 44 people were victims of extrajudicial killings between March 1 and April 10. Last year, between January and October, some 437 people fell victim to extrajudicial killings across the country, according to a report by Ain O Salish Kendra. Protests over such deaths are usually met with silence from the government or protestations of innocence that are far from being credible. In reality, the only possible explanation for such high numbers of incidents is a lack of accountability within the police force, which creates an impression that they are above the law, which they're not. This is also the reason for the near-complete lack of public trust in police and, by extension, the criminal justice system.

The government must bring an end to this culture of impunity by bringing those responsible to justice. The focus here is on "justice"—not on the tired theatrics of probe committees and "initial" investigations leading, almost always, to nowhere. For too long, the authorities have ignored calls for reforms in policing to make it people, as well as for strictly enforcing related laws and guidelines, including the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013, to establish accountability within the police force. This must end. Guilty officers, including the accused in the Gopalganj case, must face justice for their abuse of power.

Tackling the post-Amphan damage

The affected need both short and long-term support

A crisis like the one we are faced with in the form of Covid-19 is one too many for any country, but to be visited by two crises simultaneously is seldom encountered, if at all. Thanks to the now-well established system of evacuation implemented by the local administration, very few lives were lost in Cyclone Amphan, but the damage to property caused by the cyclone, whose maximum speed had reached about 150 km/h, was massive. The administration has reached aid to more than half the 50,000 directly affected people across 26 districts of the country, but the rest are in dire straits for want of immediate aid.

Reaching immediate aid for survival is only half the problem that the affected people are facing, and we hope the administration will move quickly to ameliorate the conditions of all the flood affected people who are in need of humanitarian support. Most of them have to make do with temporary shelters with very limited access to food, safe water and toilets.

What the government will also have to plan to address simultaneously is the consequence of a vast swathe of farmland going under saline water due to the washing away of a big length of embankment, destruction of fisheries which depend on fresh water, and the nearly 400,000 destroyed homesteads. Compounding the problem is the scarcity of potable water and the likelihood of the people in these affected areas being hit by waterborne diseases. The long and short of it is, it will take considerable time before the affected people can get back on their feet. Salinity can be removed only after the onset of monsoon and the hatcheries can go back to business only after they have access to fresh water. Till then, they have to depend on government support, more in kind, alongside the supply of other necessary inputs for the agricultural and fish farmers to start from scratch when the conditions are suitable for cultivation and farming.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Respect every race

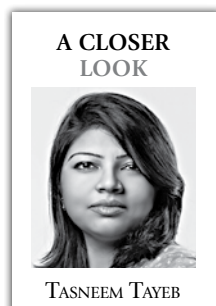
Our protests about race equality will be in vain if we fail to look at ourselves. Associating white with superiority is set deep in our minds while being dark is synonymous to being inferior in our society, which is exaggerated by beauty advertisements conveying that fairness is equivalent to success. A person should never be judged by a mere skin tone. Rather, an individual's intellect and quality should define who they are. We must put an end to such discrimination. It is high time for us to educate our minds and change our mentalities.

Fariha Alam Nijhum, by email



Covid-19 has increased children's exposure to traffickers

Families, communities and policymakers must now work in tandem to eliminate this life-scarring menace



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

WITH Covid-19 bringing economic activities across nations to a halt, more and more people are being pushed into poverty. Job losses, business losses and farming losses, leading to

economic stress, are pushing many to the fringes of poverty. And as families are being rendered helpless, the worst sufferers are invariably the children.

"46 percent children suffer from multidimensional poverty," suggests a report shared recently by Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS). And in the face of the growing economic hardships of the people, triggered by Covid-19, the number is likely to shoot up in the coming months.

From increased threats of modern slavery—domestic servitude, sex trafficking, and forced labour, such as begging—and reduced access to nutrition, basic healthcare facilities and education, to increased risk of emotional abuse and mental trauma, children today, especially the ones born into poverty, are at greater risk of exploitation.

According to Unicef, "The economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic could push up to 86 million more children into household poverty by the end of 2020."

Save the Children and Unicef suggest that, "Immediate loss of income means families are less able to afford the basics, including food and water, less likely to access health care or education, and more at risk of child marriage, violence, exploitation and abuse. When fiscal contraction occurs, the reach and quality of the services families depend on can also be diminished."

And with more and more people becoming jobless, chances of families abandoning their children, or using them to earn money is increasing by the day. According to a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, "due to the pandemic, more children are being forced onto the streets to search for food and money, thus increasing their risk of exploitation."

And more concerning are the lurking threats of the different ways in which

children, in the wake of Covid-19 are being forced into sexual exploitation. For one, families in this part of the world, unable to feed "extra mouths", often marry off their girls at an early age. Sometimes even in exchange for money. These little girls are subjected to marital rape by their husbands, and more often than not, suffer severe reproductive health damages due to the burden of early motherhood.

And if the girls are not so lucky, they



are sold to traffickers by their husbands for money. Sometimes, in fact, predators marry young girls to be able to sell them for good money into sex slavery. While writing a detailed piece on this issue last year, I found that at times of desperation, the families themselves sell girls into prostitution. There have been cases where young sex workers had claimed that they had been sold to *dalals* by their own mothers.

Young boys face a different kind of fate. They are sent away to work in the informal sector to earn money for their families. And some of these young boys are preyed upon by predators for trafficking as slaves and sometimes into male prostitution.

According to a 2014 report by The Scelles Foundation, 42 million worldwide

were involved in sex slavery. Of them, about eight million were men—it is not just women who are at the risk of being trafficked into sexual slavery. Male prostitution remains a less discussed issue, which is why when referring to sex slavery, the dialogues mostly centre around girls. But young boys do get raped and the possibility of them being forced into prostitution cannot be ignored.

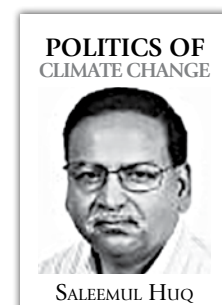
And the children who have been sent out of the house to earn their living as beggars live with the constant threat of being exploited by their ring leaders. These girls and boys are not only taken advantage of by their employers but are also at times abused by the people giving them alms. I was once horrified when I saw a driver holding on to a semi-clothed girl's hand while giving her alms. The girl—not knowing that it is not right for someone to touch her without her permission—was just happy that she got a note! Next time on the road, take a careful look, and the abuse of these children will become apparent.

But with Covid-19, you would think the demand for prostitution would have taken a hit, but you'd be wrong. The risk remains: according to Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, appointed by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Covid-19 lockdown has resulted in people finding newer ways of availing prostitution services—through "delivery" or "drive-through". According to Singhateh, people's tendency to access illegal websites featuring child pornography has also increased—"Producing and accessing child sexual abuse material and live-stream child sexual abuse online has now become an easy alternative to groom and lure children into sexual activities and to trade images in online communities."

A report published by the Council on Foreign Relations echoes the same fear—"While the current drop in global demand might temporarily disrupt exploitative circumstances, this effect is likely short-lived and eclipsed by increased vulnerability. Within sex trafficking, for example, the demand for commercial sex has dropped due to social distancing regulations. However, there is evidence that online sexual exploitation of children is on the rise, indicating that perpetrators are adapting in response to the environment."

Loss and damage from natural disasters made worse by climate change

Bangladesh can lead the way in discussing reparations at climate conferences



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

AS Bangladesh assumes the leadership of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) for the next two years, including at the next Conference of Parties (COP26) to be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021,

there is an opportunity for Bangladesh to push for the issue of loss and damage from climate change to be made a central topic for discussion at COP26. This is quite a politically sensitive issue that goes well beyond mitigation and adaptation, which have been the main focus of climate change conferences until now.

Loss and damage occur when the impacts of climate change cause permanent loss to human lives or animal species, and damage is caused to infrastructure such as roads and embankments. Thus, loss refers to things that cannot be brought back while damage refers to things that can be repaired. There are also economic losses, such as to agriculture and infrastructure, as well as non-economic losses to cultural heritage and human psychology.

The vulnerable developing countries have been arguing for loss and damage to be included in the annual global climate change conferences for many years and have achieved some limited success, such as the creation of the Warsaw International Mechanism on loss and damage at COP19 and also the inclusion of Article 8 of the Paris Agreement on Loss and Damage at COP21.

These achievements have enabled the issue to be further studied and discussed but the developed countries have refused to allow any discussions on financing loss and damage, beyond insurance.

Last year at COP25 in Madrid, Spain, the vulnerable developing countries pushed for both a new technical as well as funding wings for loss and damage. We managed to reach an agreement on the first, with the setting up of the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage, while we did not get anything on funding except to refer to the Green Climate Fund (GCF). At the same time, the actual impacts

of human induced climate change are becoming visible around the world. The scientific community is now well able to credibly attribute climate change impacts to the elevated global atmospheric temperature, as a result of climate change caused by the emissions of greenhouse gases.

For example, the recent super cyclone Amphan that hit India and Bangladesh, landing on our coastal areas on May 20, was considerably more intense than

event. There are also many other such examples of climate events—such as floods, wildfires, droughts and heat waves—the enhanced intensity of which is now directly attributable to the fact that the global atmospheric temperature has been elevated by more than one degree centigrade due to emissions of greenhouse gases over the last century.

The impacts of the pandemic are also compounding the adverse impacts on the most vulnerable communities

and damage, since it is a result of loss of livelihoods.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, on behalf of the CVF, has an opportunity to present evidence and make a strong scientific, as well as moral and political, case for funding loss and damage beyond insurance at COP26. Bangladesh needs to bring this issue up with the UK government, who will hold the presidency of COP26, to ensure that there is a satisfactory outcome on this



PHOTO: COLLECTED

normal cyclones due to the elevated sea surface temperatures of the Bay of Bengal, which made it a super cyclone rather than a more normal cyclone.

Although the loss of human life was minimised due to excellent warnings and millions of people being evacuated to cyclone shelters, there was considerable damage to crops and embankments as well as to flora and fauna in the Sundarbans, which bore the brunt of the impact.

This is thus attributable to loss and damage from human induced climate change and not just to a purely natural

in every country, including the wealthy nations, and the path to recovery will require investment in both better public health as well as concentrated efforts to deal with loss and damage from climate change.

Another aspect that is closely related to loss and damage is the loss of livelihoods of people due to the adverse impacts of climate change, which forces them to have to migrate either within the same country or across international borders. Migration forced by climate change is now becoming a reality and is part of loss

topic in Glasgow next year.

The UK also needs to work with Bangladesh to try to ensure an outcome that is acceptable to vulnerable countries, when dealing with this highly politically sensitive issue. Failure to come to a satisfactory outcome will put the success of COP26 in jeopardy. This cannot be left to the last minute but must be worked on well before the countries arrive at COP26. This work needs to start immediately.

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