

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY JUNE 11, 2020, JAISHTHA 28, 1427 BS

Malaysia cannot shift responsibility for refugees to Bangladesh

International community and all involved nations need to work together to protect the rights of the persecuted Rohingya

ON June 8, Malaysian authorities detained 269 Rohingya refugees—a huge number of them women and children—on a suspected smuggling boat, which also held the body of a dead Rohingya woman. Two human rights groups have told Reuters that this boat is believed to have left Bangladesh in February with between 700 and 800 aboard, but the fate of the rest of the passengers remains unclear.

However, the desperation of the rescued Rohingya, on the brink of starvation after being adrift for months, was clear from the start. Even while the boat was at sea, 53 people jumped off and tried to swim to shore. The boat is also said to have been intentionally damaged, possibly so that it could not be pushed out to sea again. Given that Malaysia, earlier in April, turned away a boat carrying some 200 Rohingya refugees, including children, these desperate actions are not unwarranted—they show just how dire the situation is for the world’s most persecuted minority.

Malaysia has stated that not only will they not allow these refugees to stay within their borders, they will also ask Bangladesh to relocate them, preferably to Bhashan Char. This apathy towards human rights, and specifically the rights of refugees, is reprehensible. Malaysia must be held to account for not recognising the status of refugees and continuing to call them illegal migrants, thus dismissing the struggles of refugees and their right to not face deportation after surviving genocide. Malaysia’s excuse for its poor treatment of refugees and migrants—including migrants from Bangladesh—is that they must tighten border controls to rein in coronavirus. But with only 8,338 reported infections and 118 deaths from Covid-19, it is inconsiderate, to say the least, to even suggest that Bangladesh, with its Covid-19 death toll soaring past 1,000, should be the only country to continue to take in Rohingya refugees.

Last month, the Bangladesh foreign minister called upon European Union countries to share responsibility with Bangladesh and relocate Rohingya refugees. Malaysia also plans to ask UNHCR to resettle refugees in a third country. The concerned nations and agencies must come together and work with Bangladesh, Malaysia and other host countries to come to a diplomatic solution regarding the refugees. But most crucial of all, the global community must hold Myanmar to account for its persecution of the Rohingya.

Remove barriers to radioactive isotope import

Patients’ lives are at stake

WE are concerned at the way hospitals are refusing critical cancer, heart, kidney and liver patients who need to have emergency medical tests done for their treatment. Reportedly, the patients’ treatment has been on hold for the last two months, because of a lack of supply of radioactive isotope, an essential component for over 80 percent of nuclear medicine procedures. Bangladesh imports this element—also known as Technetium-99m or Tc-99m—from Turkey. But since the suspension of international commercial flights with Turkey in mid-March after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the country, it has not been able to import Tc-99m.

The crucial medical tests done using the radioactive isotopes are conducted at 14 centres under the Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS), which are attached to government hospitals across the country. Besides, the National Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (NINMAS) at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) also conducts the tests. And all the 15 centres are managed by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC), which is under the Ministry of Science and Technology. Although 15 lakh cancer patients in the country depend on these institutions for their treatment and well-being, it is unfortunate that neither the INMAS Dhaka nor BAEC websites have an announcement that these crucial medical tests are unavailable at present. Meanwhile, thousands of patients are left in uncertainty as the hospitals did not even provide them with any information as to when they might start the tests again.

Under the circumstances, to ensure treatment of the critically ill cancer, liver, heart and kidney patients, the government must take immediate measures to resume the operation of special cargo flights with Turkey so that this crucial element can be imported without further delay. The government should also look for other countries from which it can import radioactive isotopes, if it fails to import the element from Turkey on an urgent basis. Besides, since radioactive isotopes are very crucial for cancer treatment, the government should discuss with the BAEC if it is possible for them to locally produce the material to treat our cancer patients in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Ride-sharing services must commence

Since the easing of lockdown, we saw a steady rise in the number of vehicles on the roads. Regular bus services resumed to facilitate public transportation. What I can’t understand, however, is why the authorities did not permit the ride-sharing services to resume. I feel this is a much safer option under the present circumstances, as one does not have to come into close contact with a large number of passengers like in a public transport. If allowed, these services will help the commuters travel safely and the riders make a living in these difficult times.

Max Costa, Dhaka



DEBAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA

statistics” was mistakenly attributed by author extraordinaire Mark Twain to British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Whereas, it is highly possible that the instructive comment was made by the English radical politician Sir Charles Dike. Whoever may have first voiced this sentence, the fact remains that the authority of statistics had been on the back foot ever since. And those who make a living by using those statistics, like us, had to be doubly careful regarding their proper use.

The immediate relevance of this lead-in relates to the upcoming national budget (Budget21) and publication of the estimated growth rate of Bangladesh’s gross domestic product (GDP) for the elapsing fiscal year. It is no secret that the economic growth story of the country is bitingly embedded in its development narrative. In the recent past, however, independent sources have raised concerns about the serious lack of consistency between estimated GDP growth figures and related performance indicators of the economy. These proxy indicators include private investment, credit growth to private sector, revenue intake, capital machinery import, energy consumption. Last year, I said that “the economic growth figure is now more like a flying kite not attached to its string and spool,” implying that the estimated numbers are not substantively supported by the revealed developments in the linked sectors.

This apparent disjuncture between the economic growth figures and observed changes in the associated sectors led to intriguing interpretations of our recent development episode. The most dominant elucidation was the one espousing the theory that Bangladesh economy is experiencing a spectacular productivity growth—i.e. more is being produced with less capital and inputs—although evidence on this professed technological transformation is still awaited.

Early signals about the GDP growth estimate for the concluding fiscal year indicate that the concerned estimate for 2019-20 may give rise to fresh debates about its veracity. This data debate may distract us from the evidence-based substantive policy discussion on the much-needed socioeconomic recovery and

rebound interventions in the context of the ravages of Covid-19.

Regarding the GDP growth rate in 2019-20, there is a general consensus that it will be significantly lower than the planned target of 8.2 percent. Following the outburst of the pandemic, IMF came out with a projection of 3.8 percent of economic growth for Bangladesh. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) made a similar allusion. The latest forecast of the World Bank mentions 1.6 percent growth for Bangladesh in this fiscal year. The Economist Intelligence Unit made a similar prediction earlier. Recently, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has estimated that the growth rate is likely to be about 2.5 percent.

Against this backdrop, one of the senior political officeholders suggested that the country’s economy, notwithstanding the pandemic-induced economic collapse, will



record a 6 percent growth in the outgoing fiscal year. Indeed, it prompted Bloomberg to feature an article mentioning that this pace could make “Bangladesh an outlier in a world set to contract.” One wonders whether there was a hint of subtle sarcasm in that reportage.

Many countries have addressed the challenge of producing robust GDP estimates by introducing the practice of having quarterly GDP. Notwithstanding repeated promises by the mandarins of the establishment, this good practice is yet to come by in Bangladesh. Rather, the quarterly assessment of labour market dynamics, once introduced under the Labour Force Survey, was swiftly abandoned. Incidentally, in one of our neighbouring countries, a recent attempt to tackle GDP growth figures by independent experts suggested a discernible degree of overestimation,

leading to a huge political debate.

The adequacy of statistics acquires special significance this time around. Data collection and collation were not considered to be an “essential service” during the protracted “general holiday” preceding the budget session of parliament. Given the continuing catastrophe, we have not been able to produce a set of nationally representative impact assessments concerning specific groups of affected people, activities and institutions. Because of such an uncertain baseline, the projections for the medium term (3-5 years)—usually accompanying the budget—will be on shaky grounds. This creates an interplay of “adverse selection” and “moral hazard” problems while trying to tune our fiscal priorities in favour of the traditionally left behind groups as well as the *nouveaux pauvres* (newly poor persons).

estimation coverage. Delayed publication of the figures limits their usefulness. In many cases, data discrepancy arises due to lack of harmonisation of concepts and definitions as well as owing to difference in estimation procedures and accounting practices.

The case of misleading data use may be illustrated by the way figures for the fiscal framework are derived. The government’s income-expenditure balance is conventionally based on the figures obtained from the Revised Budget (usually produced with data up to March), not on the “projected actual” figure for June-end. Because of this practice, for instance, the target set for revenue collection apparently seems to be modest but, in reality, very high because of the inflated base figure. As a result, the revenue shortfall from the target for 2019-20 may be to the tune of Tk 125,000 crores—that is, a whopping one-third of the annual target.

Policy makers (and analysts) in Bangladesh are hugely handicapped by data deficit as they do not have real-time information on many critical variables, such as investment, employment and consumer demand. On the other hand, demands on data and information are growing exponentially, unlocking a phenomenon known as Data Revolution. In the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the citizens are no longer content with averages; they would like to have a disaggregated picture to establish “who are being pushed behind”. Processing of administrative data, remote-sensing data, “big data” from private entities, robust data from non-government sources, etc. are opening up new horizons of solutions for our national data challenges.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), under the Ministry of Planning, mandated by the Statistics Act (2013), is the custodian of official data. It has quite an impressive National Strategy for Development of Statistics (NSDS). A number of international development partners are engaged in building the capacity of the organisation, particularly in the area of core statistics. However, enhanced professionalism of the experts may not be enough to deal with the tradition of politically vetted numbers.

In the parlance of judicial praxis, it is occasionally mentioned that there are three types of liars: simple liars, damned liars and expert witnesses. We, those who have to deal with statistics of dubious quality, need to be mindful—particularly during the Budget season—that we are not disposed of as belonging to the third category.

Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya is a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Dhaka.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Together, we can stop the scourge

This op-ed has been written by members of Bangladesh UN Network on Migration and the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Technical Working Group.

THE Covid-19 pandemic is putting the world under enormous social and economic strain. The major disruption to the global economy has resulted in the near collapse of overseas employment for millions, with devastating implications for migrant workers including in states heavily reliant on a foreign labour force. As a result, millions of Bangladeshis are now at the edge of subsistence with little or no social protection available.

Among the country’s 10-million-strong migrant labour force, many are stranded in countries of transit or destination, unable to travel home and with little access to healthcare and other basic services. Of the estimated 500,000 Bangladeshis who have returned to Bangladesh since the outbreak of Covid-19, many have endured great financial losses, discrimination and rejection from their communities.

At the same time, trafficking and smuggling networks are taking advantage of the Covid-19-induced economic downturn, offering risky survival alternatives to migrants who are increasingly destitute, without income, with very limited mobility and no access to domestic remedies or support.

The recent tragedy in Libya serves as a stark reminder of the threat trafficking and smuggling networks pose to migrants. On May 27, 30 migrants, including 26 Bangladeshi nationals, were killed by traffickers in a warehouse holding approximately 200 migrants in Mezda, Libya. The horrendous incident in Libya brings into focus the reality of the abuse and torture people face at the hands of traffickers and smugglers. It also highlights the close link between the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking along routes that are used by a number of people with varying needs (known as “mixed migration flows”), such as asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people, or unaccompanied or separated children.

Bangladesh is familiar with the increasing challenge of human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants. The great demand for low-skilled migrant workers, coupled with limited access to safe regular migratory routes, excessive recruitment fees, and low awareness of trafficking and smuggling risks, result in many Bangladeshis making perilous journeys

facilitated by smugglers and traffickers.

The major destinations for Bangladeshi migrants include Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where many allegedly end up in forced labour, sexual exploitation, debt bondage or working in slave-like conditions. Migrants are also often at heightened risk of financial exploitation and associated violence as a result of taking out loans from informal moneylenders.

To effectively fight trafficking, the capacity of social welfare authorities, law enforcement agencies and the justice system must be enhanced, and support should be provided to migrants’ organisations and civil society bodies which are working to help migrants access justice.

Bangladesh is the seventh largest recipient of global remittances and has made significant progress toward ensuring that the rights and interests of its migrant workers are protected both at home and abroad.

The government has passed the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 and its Rules (2017), acceded to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) in July 2011, and in September 2019, acceded to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UNTOC (Palermo Protocol).

Further, Bangladesh is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Families,

has adopted the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act in 2013 (OEMA 2013) and ratified ILO core conventions on forced labour (No. 29 and No. 105). The country is currently implementing a National Plan of Action (NPA) for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2018-2022.

While progress has clearly been made by the government of Bangladesh, there are still some areas that need to be addressed.

To effectively fight trafficking, the capacity of social welfare authorities, law enforcement agencies and the justice system must be enhanced, and support should be provided to migrants’ organisations and civil society bodies which are working to help migrants access justice.

As outlined in the 2012 Act on Human Trafficking (PSHTA 2012), a separate/ dedicated special anti-trafficking tribunal should be established to address crimes related to human trafficking. This year, the government has pledged to establish seven divisional level Special Tribunals on human trafficking cases. The establishment and full activation of these tribunals must be prioritised to ensure protection for and access to justice for survivors and victims of trafficking.

Bangladesh is yet to ratify the UN Protocol against Smuggling of Migrants, the purpose of which is to prevent and combat the smuggling of migrants, as well as to promote cooperation among States Parties to uphold the rights of migrants. Ratification of this protocol would help build on the significant progress that Bangladesh has already made in protecting its migrant labour force.

Reducing the operational space for organised trafficking and smuggling networks is also key. Promoting safe migration is a proven strategy to reduce vulnerability to trafficking. Investment in skills development of prospective migrants is viewed as a key factor in securing greater security, remittance and better employment for Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Investment in higher quality pre-departure information is equally important, as is the provision of protection by Bangladesh representations to migrants abroad.

Covid-19 is presenting new challenges to the protection of migrants, and it is widely known that the pandemic impacts men, women and children including adolescents differently. Since the onset

of the health crisis, female migrant workers who already face great risks of discrimination and exploitation are particularly susceptible to being subjected to violence of various forms.

Within the national context of human trafficking, persons with disabilities and children are also very vulnerable and risk being exposed to exploitation, violence, discrimination and organised crime. This calls for an expanded rights-based, inclusive, gender-sensitive and age-specific policy response rooted in a whole-of-community approach. This ought to be reflected in the NPA and its implementation.

With the recent decision to lift Covid-19 restrictions imposed with the lockdown since March 26, it is important to look beyond the borders of Bangladesh and actively engage migrant-receiving and sending countries, in pursuit of solutions.

Bangladesh could also seek support through international human rights mechanisms such as the Special Rapporteurs on Trafficking or on Migration, which could support the government to assess situations of exploitation and adapt policies and strategies aimed at increasing protections for migrants and victims and reducing the risk of trafficking and smuggling.

Lastly, the fight against trafficking and smuggling of migrants requires multi-stakeholder engagement. It is, therefore, urgent to strengthen and institutionalise the National Counter Human Trafficking Authority to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the NPA.

To counter the increased risk of smuggling and trafficking of migrants, the UN calls upon the government of Bangladesh, global partners, the private sector, and civil society actors to focus their efforts on advancing a robust, rights-based approach aimed toward preventing exploitation and shrinking the space in which trafficking and smuggling networks operate.

The authors of the op-ed are Mia Seppo, UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh; Giorgi Gigauri, Chief of Mission, IOM Bangladesh; Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO; Steven Corliss, Country Representative, UNHCR; Shoko Ishikawa, Country Representative, UN WOMEN; Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh; Asa Torkelson, Representative, UNFPA; Tomoo Hozumi, Representative, UNICEF; Sergey Kapinos, Representative, UNODC Regional Office for South Asia; and Dr. Bardan Jung Rana, Representative, WHO.