

Criminalisation of criticism

Why fear the free flow of information?

We are deeply alarmed by the accelerating assault on free speech in the country since the onset of the pandemic, with the authorities seeming more eager to criminalise criticisms of the health sector and other public services rather than in ensuring accountability and transparency of its institutions. Each passing day, we seem to be falling further and further down the rabbit hole of repression—so much so, that it is no longer safe for the media, general populace or civil servants to raise questions, comment on or even “like” posts that are mildly critical of state mechanisms, even if they are objectively accurate.

According to data gleaned from the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO), a project by Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies, at least 142 people, including journalists, have been arrested or detained since March for reporting, spreading so-called “misinformed” news, or their social media activity. This excludes people who have been penalised within their workplaces for their expression of critical views or whose cases under the Digital Security Act were not reported in the media. Meanwhile, civil servants and health sector professionals have been instructed through multiple directives to stay silent and refrain from sharing any information with the media or on their social media platforms—or risk being arrested, suspended and transferred by being made “officer on special duty”.

Under the circumstances, media professionals are finding it extremely challenging to carry out their mandate of providing accurate and reliable information to the public. The situation is even more dire as journalists are unable to follow-up on or ask questions to top officials of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) since April 8 regarding the daily press briefings as no question is permitted. Yet, do the public not have a right to know and hold state institutions, which are run by taxpayers' money, to account? During a pandemic, when the public is particularly susceptible to misinformation and fear mongering, they need the free flow of authentic information to constructively engage in the decisions that affect them. The authorities in turn, need to listen to the grievances of the people, and take timely and adequate measures to address legitimate concerns rather than quell them through increasingly repressive measures, which only erode trust in state institutions.

Why are we so bent on criminalising criticism and controlling the free flow of information? No democratic government worries about an informed, connected and empowered populace.

Protect migrant workers and their families

Immediate steps are necessary to prevent them falling back into poverty

A recent report published in this daily highlighted the call made by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for supporting migrants and remittance-dependent communities who are impacted by the pandemic. The report forecasts that hundreds of thousands of migrant workers are expected to return to Bangladesh by the end of this year, and join the pool of the already existing domestic informal and formal sector employees who remain jobless.

The ongoing exodus sheds light on the plight of migrant workers, who play an integral role in keeping their households and local communities afloat, and keep the wheels of the economy turning with their remittances as well. Last year, Bangladesh was the third highest recipient of remittance in South Asia, with \$18.32 billion being sent back by an estimated one crore Bangladeshi migrants. However, the UN agency has warned of the stigmatisation of returning workers and urged their reintegration into the economy before there is too huge a detrimental impact on remittance-receiving households and communities.

The government announcement of Tk 700 crore for low interest loans that will help returning migrants to start new businesses, and its plans to re-skill the job-seekers for overseas employment, while commendable, are not enough. An IOM study found that the economic return on migration remains inferior in Bangladesh compared to other countries, since the majority of our migrants are low-skill workers who tend to remit less, and a larger portion of their earnings are spent on meeting short-term needs or paying off loans. In this scenario, it is imperative to make long-term investments in education and skills for lower skilled migrant workers so that they have better paid jobs in the future. The authorities should also consider incorporating the returnees and their families into government social safety net programmes in the short-term to prevent them from falling further into poverty. Financial literacy and remittance management capacity of households should be focused on as well.

It is unfortunate that the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment received an insufficient allocation in the recent budget to deal with Covid-19-induced unemployment. It will be a herculean challenge for the government to create enough employment to make up for the jobs that are lost abroad. A comprehensive plan is crucial to ensure that migrant workers do not become even more vulnerable upon their return.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Deal with deforestation

Recently, we witnessed how Sundarban protected us from the super cyclone Amphan. In the process, a large number of trees were damaged. We must compensate for such a big loss and build a coastal green belt. Deforestation and the lack of tall trees have also increased the number of deaths from thunderbolts. Palm trees not only serve as natural lightning conductors to save lives but also protect coastal areas from storms and cyclones. Planting trees will address issues like soil erosion and climate change. With the help of government and NGOs, we should start planting trees wherever possible. But care must be taken to maintain safety measures during the pandemic.

Fawzia Khanum Ahona, Rajbari



STEVEN CORLISS

changing the ways we live in profound and possibly lasting ways. We are in the fight of our lives and, at the same time, another human tragedy continues to smoulder and burn: the global displacement crisis.

Today is World Refugee Day, when we celebrate the resilience, tenacity and human dignity of refugees, asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced people. Every day, they show their will to face danger, overcome adversity and rebuild their lives. Place yourself for one moment in their shoes. Imagine how you would want others to see and treat you. Anyone can become a refugee.

Each year on World Refugee Day, a key report known as the UNHCR Global Trends in Forced Displacement is released. Every year for nearly a decade, UNHCR has announced that the number of forcibly displaced people has hit a new record high. We have also reported that lasting solutions remain elusive.

At the end of 2019, some 79.5 million people were displaced worldwide. This means that more than one in every hundred people in the world is a refugee, internally displaced person or is otherwise forcibly displaced. Behind this enormous figure are people—individuals and families. They are young people with dreams and older people who deserve better in their later years.

On World Refugee Day, UNHCR remembers with gratitude the humanity and compassion of the People of Bangladesh who received hundreds of thousands of desperate Rohingya refugees who fled across the border from Myanmar in August 2017. This was the largest and swiftest movement of refugees in Asia since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

The Rohingya refugees have also not forgotten. Bangladesh offered them safety and shelter when they needed it most. Many people—both Government officials and ordinary people—have told me how they dropped everything and went to Cox's Bazar to respond to the unfolding human tragedy.

These Bangladeshi “first responders” also included the poorest of the poor in the rural areas where the refugees arrived, who opened their homes and shared what little food they had. These true heroes will remain a bright point of light in the history of Bangladesh and humanity. They are the living embodiment of this year's World Refugee Day theme: “everyone can

make a difference, every action counts.”

Nearly three years on, the Rohingya refugees are facing a new crisis—one they share with everyone in the country. The Covid-19 pandemic is a viral cyclone that has now made landfall in Bangladesh. The virus is a great equaliser. It does not ask to see your passport or to know your status. Everyone is at risk, Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees alike, as well as aid workers who have come to help.

Decisive action by the Government of Bangladesh restricting the humanitarian response to critical activities only and limiting contact between people inside and outside of the refugee camps delayed the arrival and slowed the spread of the

United Nations and NGO workers are on the job, working alongside government partners. For weeks, we have been in a race against time to strengthen the district's public healthcare facilities and build new isolation and treatment centres for Covid-19 patients—Bangladeshis and Rohingya alike.

For the Rohingya refugees to continue to shelter in the camps, critical humanitarian activities must continue. Frontline humanitarian workers—although in dramatically reduced numbers—are delivering lifesaving health and nutrition programmes, ensuring the distribution of food, fuel, soap and hygiene supplies.

health at risk each day so that others might pass safely through this tempest, reach the other side and have a future.

As we rise to meet the challenges of Covid-19, we cannot forget that no one should be a refugee forever. We have recently seen what happens when refugees lose hope and turn to dangerous, and for some deadly, journeys by sea in search of a better life.

Since the day that I arrived in Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugees have sent me a clear message, “We want to go home to Myanmar.” With equal strength, though, they say they want their children to live free from violence and have the most basic human rights, including



Hundreds and thousands of desperate Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh in August 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

Covid-19 virus. We used this window of opportunity to prepare as much as possible, heeding the advice of Rabindranath Tagore that, “You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.”

Preparations for the Covid-19 continue at full speed, but the time for action has now come. Yesterday, the Civil Surgeon reported 1,852 confirmed Covid-19 cases in Cox's Bazar district, including 43 Rohingya refugees. These statistics are based on testing results. The actual number of persons infected is certainly higher, and each day brings reports of new cases in the camps and the surrounding Bangladeshi communities.

Even as we mark World Refugee Day,

Rohingya refugees are at the centre of efforts to support their own community. Refugee volunteers—thousands of them—work hard every day to ensure that people know how to protect themselves and their families against Covid-19 infection and what to do if they become ill. They play important roles in healthcare, sanitation and community mobilisation programmes.

We are facing the challenge of a lifetime in Bangladesh. I have been moved to see how the Rohingya refugees and local Bangladeshis have stepped forward to care for their communities. I am also inspired by the humanitarian commitment of government, UN and NGO partners and my own UNHCR team, who put their own

freedom of movement, and have a pathway to citizenship.

An important first step would be for all to heed the United Nations Secretary General's call for “an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world,” including in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Peace with justice must follow, so that Rohingya refugees can go home again voluntarily in safety and dignity and also sustainably, so that they are never again forced to flee.

Let this be not only our wish for them but also our commitment to them and to all forcibly displaced people on this World Refugee Day.

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Time to rethink our examinations



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

had other plans to befool more than a million students who were supposed to occupy 9,000 educational institutions under eight general, one madrasa, and one technical education boards for their GPA chase. Compelling medical evidence now suggests that it may not be possible to hold the exams any time soon. Then the options are either to wait for a final clearance from WHO (pun added) or to treat the students' earlier results as predicated grades. Many countries have already done it, are we up for it?

The UK government website reports, “The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak is expected to continue having a significant impact on the education system, and the country, for months to come. Therefore, exams and assessments have been cancelled to give pupils, parents, and teachers certainty, and enable schools and colleges to focus on supporting vulnerable children and the children of critical workers.”

Both GCSE and International Baccalaureates (IB) have decided to release their predicted/calculated grades so that there is a seamless transition from the secondary to the tertiary. Desperate times require desperate measures. Even our big neighbour is considering the grades received in their 11th grades as the calculated grade for school leaving certificates. We are yet to hear any such whispers, let alone announcements. To leave over a million of students waiting in uncertainties is a dangerous proposition. It will not only see the return of the academic session jam which haunted the university system for a long time but also create social unrest and economic loss. The demographic dividends that we want to profit from will receive a dent if these students are not made ready for the workforce. I cannot imagine what

these candidates, their parents, teachers and mentors are going through at this point. These terminal exams are a major source of anxieties and stress for students who have to retain knowledge of the large syllabus taught over two years. The system therefore encourages, if not obligates, students to memorise for their examination.

Then again, when they move beyond their colleges, how much value does our

changed their position.

UGC's benchmark is the public system, where competition for seats is very high. These publicly funded subsidised universities with more prestige factors are the top choices for candidates. The institutions rely on a testing system that aims to eliminate admission seekers. HSC and SSC results are given little or no weightage, but they are mostly treated as qualifying points. The primary emphasis is on testing. There are some prestigious institutes that do not even give any weightage to public examination results as they rely on their own written and oral examinations. The last example testifies the autonomy exercised by, and the anomalies that exist among, the universities. At the same time, it shows that the universities do not necessarily think of examinations as shapers of learning. In most cases, universities feel that the grades are indicative of students' over reliance on rote learning, and may not reflect students' real aptitudes.

If that is the case, what is the point of having two public examinations in such close proximity whose value is of little consequence? The GPAs, indicative of summative assessments (i.e. evaluation after the course completion), are ultimately reduced to qualifying points, and universities set their own admission criteria. Can we not have an integrated test for middle school and high school? Students have to sit for Primary School Certificates after grade five and Junior School Certificate after grade eight. Four public examinations in the primary and secondary system—yet our universities do not properly acknowledge their outcome. What is missing in this assessment process is an emphasis on the formative assessment (evaluation during the learning process). In the public schooling system, the formative assessments carry no weightage (tutorials, quizzes and presentation); labs are the only exceptions. In the public tertiary system, the mid or semester ending exams are summative tests where questions are set theoretically to judge what students have learned in the course. Such exams can easily be phased out and evaluated through frequent class tests and class performance.

The problem is that there is no

academic system actually ascribe to these school leaving exams? Of course, they are national events studded with golden stars and sweet-meats. The importance of exams became contentious when the University Grants Commission (UGC) asked private universities to refrain from admitting students during the migration to online teaching. When some private universities started admitting students based on their HSC marks, UGC intervened saying that students should not be admitted without any admission tests. After a parley, they have slightly

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institutional trust. In the absence of accountability and transparency, we have cultured mistrust. In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, UGC, for instance, initially allowed the universities to teach but not to assess online. The implied logic was that students could cheat if they attended their exams without any faculty invigilation. How do we re-instill the trust that is gone? In the long run, we can do it by revamping our entire academic infrastructure, but in the short haul, we can change our evaluation and assessment system.

The current education system was founded on the Industrial revolution model. The work environment required a limited skillset, knowledge and intelligence (IQ). The organisational behaviour, inherited from our colonial past, focused on whether we could follow instructions and maintain the required standard of the institution. It was aimed at creating a middle class who will be a cog in the machine. In this revolutionised era of innovation, when we are entering the fourth industrial revolution, the education system must learn to adapt constantly. So if students are tested for their memorisation and standardisation, they will soon be replaced by the machine. Just remember how obsolete the times table has become now that your phone has become a super computer.

Exams must go beyond testing IQ alone. In order to unleash a student's potential, a student must be tested for a cocktail of IQ (intelligence), EQ (emotional intelligence), and RQ (resilience). These tests can be done when a teacher is teaching and observing each individual's growth. A large hall exam with a larger syllabus may miss those fine shades latent in an individual. The change in exam system will require a change in the teaching method. We will need a lot of trainings and piloting for sure. Once the public exam system is revised, we will start getting creative individuals who are not only ready for the tertiary level but also for the brave new world where they will have to compete against smart machines for jobs.

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