

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY AUGUST 18, 2020, BHADRA 3, 1427 BS

Dr Khan's biodegradable PPE invention is revolutionary

It should be developed for mass production

WE are delighted by the news of an innovative invention by Dr Mubarak Ahmad Khan—a biodegradable protective gear used by healthcare professionals and others using easily available, natural material—jute and the shell of crabs, lobsters and shrimp. As incredible as it sounds Dr Khan, a scientific adviser to Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation, has come up with this biodegradable, non-toxic material that can make personal protective equipment (PPE) which can be easily discarded without causing any harm to the environment.

This is a revolutionary invention that can solve the growing problem of toxic waste created by discarded PPEs made of polythene-like material that poses high risks in terms of contamination and environmental degradation. We are already aware of hazardous Covid-19 related plastic waste being discarded improperly that can spread the disease further.

Dr Khan's endeavour follows his earlier discovery of a jute polymer to make the famous "Sonali Bag" that can replace the environmentally hazardous polythene that is still rampantly used and discarded indiscriminately, causing irreparable damage to water bodies, the ocean floor, aquatic life and the environment in general.

It is exciting news that the scientist has made this PPE with cellulose extracted from jute and chitosan, a natural fibrous material made from the exoskeleton of aquatic creatures such as crab, lobster and shrimp. These are readily available in Bangladesh and the material developed is also cost effective. According to Dr Khan, chitosan has been shown to provide anti-viral immune protection and is a component of vaccines and other drugs. This kind of PPE, moreover, is easier to decontaminate and dispose of as it disintegrates in water within seven days and in soapy water, it dissolves in three minutes, during which most viruses are also destroyed. Thus the potential to use this material for PPEs, which are so crucial for Covid-19 management, is huge. There are also important implications in terms of marketing this product internationally if it can be produced on a mass scale.

It is wonderful news that already Dr Mubarak has received the approval from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and is about to test it at the Shishu Hospital, and he will work with ICDDR,B to develop the protective gear. The scientist has also mentioned that this material can be used to for packaging purposes and to make shrouds for dead bodies.

We deeply appreciate Dr Khan's timely research and invention and hope that it is given due recognition by the international scientific community, and that the government will support him in every way so that this material can be produced on a mass scale to make such protective gear as we continue to battle with Covid-19. It goes to show how, with the right support, our scientists can discover innovative, indigenous solutions to the most formidable problems, especially during such crisis periods. Dr Khan and his team's efforts are truly achievements to celebrate and be proud of.

Another case of embezzlement in the healthcare sector

Public procurement must be cleansed of corruption

A report published in this newspaper sheds light on the recent enquiry by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) at Sheikh Hasina Medical College in Habiganj. It was revealed that the principal of the college, along with two other suppliers, pocketed nearly Tk 3.43 crore back in 2018 through inflating prices of items purchased. The ACC filed two separate cases against the principal and the two other proprietors.

On May 15, 2018, according to the case statement, the principal floated tenders in two packages for medical and sports equipment, chemical reagents, furniture, computers and books without following an annual procurement plan, and later awarded the tenders to two suppliers. Unlike the usual snail's pace at which such processes are completed, this time the products were supplied, and bills approved and paid for very speedily, which raised suspicions. By inflating the price of each and every product—various types of microscopes, LED TV and A/C, digital weighing machines, books and journals, etc—by multiple folds, the named culprits managed to embezzle nearly Tk 3.43 crore.

We commend the ACC for unraveling this shameful scam and for taking steps against those involved, but it also reveals the level of corruption in these institutions where accountability seems to have disappeared completely. How could such bills be approved when the prices were so obviously inflated? It's a shame that funds that were intended for a rightful purpose, were deliberately misdirected in order to maximise the benefits of an authority figure and his cohorts.

Obviously, the hyped up prices were "overlooked" to serve the interests of certain individuals. In fact, this seems to be a theme oft repeated in many of our public institutions. Time and again, we read reports in the paper of procurement of equipment or machines at exorbitant prices. It begs for greater monitoring by the government and basic accountability of these institutions. If these institutions were properly audited and their procurement activities monitored, such large scale corruption could not have occurred. Unfortunately as we have seen, there is rampant corruption in both public and private institutions. That this should happen in the health sector and continue even during this pandemic when all healthcare resources are overstretched, is indeed an added tragedy. It is reassuring that the ACC is going after these fraudulent activities, but the government must install efficient oversight of all such institutions where public procurement entails large sums of money.

Pardoned in host countries, incarcerated in Bangladesh

The bizarre tale of our mistreatment of deported migrant workers for "conspiring and tarnishing the state's image"



C R ABRAR

He told us he is in Kashimpur jail," narrated Shaheen's disappointed father to a reporter of *The Daily Star*. Shaheen worked as a pipe-fitter for four years in Bahrain. Not being aware that an application for visa extension has to be launched before its expiration, Shaheen was arrested by the authorities in Bahrain when he went to file for the extension. It was not only this one family's hope of celebrating Eid together with their long absent loved one that was dashed; 219 other families across the land endured the same heartache. Subsequently, another group of 36 deported migrants were detained.

At a time when these families are struggling to cope with the consequences of the unexpected returns of their migrant family members, the latter group's unpredicted incarceration is devastating. The families are given very little information about the detainees. Meanwhile, their deeply concerned spouses and siblings try to figure out how they would secure their release, worried parents pass sleepless nights wondering what the future holds, and restless children pester their mothers of when they would get to see their fathers.

That the returned migrants were sent to Kashimpur prison directly from the quarantine centre was perhaps the only clear information these families have. The detainees were charged under the much contested Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure "for suspicious activities". The Investigating Officer of the case justified the move saying, "All had gone abroad to work but got involved in different criminal activities instead". Meanwhile, a court rejected bails of those who lodged petitions and on July 10, instructed the police to submit a report within 10 days. The deadline was extended. On August 4, the Turag Thana Police asked for 15 more days to submit the report. In the interim, the pardoned repatriated workers continue to remain in the high security prison.

Police sources have informed the media that they may be charged with sabotage and terrorism. The Home Minister has confirmed that there are allegations of "conspiracy" against these individuals. His ministry sources inform that in the General Diary lodged with Turag thana, the police has claimed that by engaging in criminal activities, these people have "tarnished the image of the country abroad". It further claimed that the authorities did not have their exact addresses and so if they are released, they may disperse and commit crimes, including murder, robbery,

terrorism and sabotage.

At the court, while justifying their detention, the police claimed that during their stay in quarantine in north Diabari, they were engaged in consultations with various groups to commit "anti-government and anti-state" activities, including violent acts. Hence, they appealed to detain the accused until their investigations are completed.

It is noteworthy that the police could not provide any credible evidence of the charges being framed against them. In a report from *The Daily Star*, the investigating officer was quoted as saying "We don't know yet what the crimes are, but we have sent 'enquiry slips' to the police stations of the villages they came from to probe on their behalf". The Officer in Charge of the Turag thana did not mince his words when he said, "We are investigating their crimes. It's only after the investigation that we will be able to ascertain who is guilty and who is not."

This *en masse* incarceration of the



PHOTO: COLLECTED

pardoned, deported migrant workers after finishing their quarantine has raised some serious questions pertaining to the protection of rights and liberty of individuals.

Firstly, can this be an acceptable proposition that each and every member of a squad of 255 persons would engage in hatching a conspiracy, albeit in groups, at a time when they would be too eager to return to their loved ones after a prolonged and rough experience abroad? Secondly, isn't it imperative on the part of those levelling such serious charges to provide at least a shred of evidence of the alleged "suspicious activities" to the court to justify their plea for detention? Thirdly, if indeed crimes were planned, then does not it rest on the authorities to establish the motive? One fails to understand what axe would a band of returnee migrant workers have to grind against the government and the state, when the state authorities quarantined them for their own safety and safety of their loved ones?

Fourthly, the candid admission of the police that they were not aware of the actual crimes committed and was waiting for responses from the police stations of the villages of the accused also appear to be frivolous. One is not sure what information would be forthcoming from the villages of the migrants. Are the police expecting the families of migrants to divulge the crimes their migrant family members had committed? Or are they more interested to know if the concerned migrants had committed crimes prior to their departure abroad? If it is the latter case, then should this not have been an issue when passport and immigration clearances were granted to them? And finally, is not the investigating officer grossly wrong when he says all in the pack have veered towards committing crimes in destination countries instead of working there?

The assumption that if these people were released they could commit "murder, robbery, terrorism and sabotage" and "other violent acts" is also deeply flawed.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

This is simply because barring one or two cases, all those detained in Kashimpur prison were in custody in their countries of destination either for administrative infractions (such as overstay of visa or work permit) or minor offences such as consuming alcohol, robbing a tire or misusing telecom rules.

Criminal records obtained from the Middle East by credible media outlets inform that their "crimes" fall into two broad categories: being in an "undocumented status" or "petty narcotics charges, including consumption of liquor". Those belonging to the second category received state pardons commuting their sentences. Bangladesh embassy officials in Kuwait and Qatar confirmed that all inmates of drug charges secured state pardons from the Emirs. The counselor (labour) in Doha was quoted by *The Daily Star* as saying that barring one or two murder convicts, most inmates were in jail on narcotics charges and had served two-thirds of their sentences. Some were

convicted for rather innocuous offences such as selling cell phone talk time, which is widely practiced in every nook and corner of Bangladesh, and not deemed as a crime.

This bizarre tale also raises issues regarding the just application of the law. The crimes were committed abroad and all concerned had served more than half of the terms before they were pardoned. They were not returned under any extradition arrangement and as free persons. Rudimentary knowledge in jurisprudence informs that a person cannot be tried and punished for a crime more than once. Any attempt to put them on trial in Bangladesh will be a travesty of justice.

Jurist Shaheen Malik has denounced the move as "entirely illegal", maintaining that if someone has served a sentence abroad or his sentence is commuted, then making him serve a fresh tenure at home does not have any legal foundation. He further asserted that mere suspicion is not a sufficient ground to deprive a person of his liberty. Former chair of National Human Rights Commission Mizanur Rahman of Dhaka University noted "such acts of the executive branch are damaging the minimum democratic space that people are enjoying. It is ominous for our state, (enjoyment of) human rights, and for the common masses."

"All citizens are equal before the law" stipulates Article 27 of Bangladesh's constitution. One of the principal aims of a key European Union project on migration being implemented by a leading NGO of the country (following due clearance by the government of Bangladesh) is to "(a)ssist returnees to become financially independent through tailored economic reintegration plan." Bangladeshis in irregular status in Europe is the principal target group. The question therefore arises—if the government is okay with programmes for reintegrating this cohort of irregular migrants, what drives it to resort to such draconian measure against those (most, if not all) who went abroad through legitimate channels following procedures laid out by both governments of origin and destination, to eke out a living, but were forced by circumstances to fall into an irregular status? Often, it is the *Kaifeels* (employers) and the facilitating agencies at the destination end who create conditions for such irregular status, without migrants having any redress.

So far, the predicament of these returnee migrants have drawn little attention from public representatives, the agencies that are meant to uphold the rule of law and deliver justice, the passionate public intellectuals, the otherwise vibrant civil society and the media in general. It is time we all stand by these defenceless subalterns, prove our commitment to the principles of rule of law and equality in treatment, and acknowledge that they too are equal stakeholders of the state.

C R Abrar is an academic with interest on migration and rights issues. He acknowledges the support of reporting done by Rozina Islam (Prothom Alo) and Zyma Islam (The Daily Star).

Ending violence against children must be a national priority



LAILA KHONDKAR

ACCORDING to the Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020, each year, half of the world's children (approximately one billion) are affected by physical, sexual or psychological violence, suffering injuries, disabilities and death. The report was published in June this year by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, UNESCO, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the End Violence Partnership. It charts progress in 155 countries, including Bangladesh, against the INSPIRE framework (a set of seven strategies for preventing and responding to violence against children).

This is the first time ever that governments have self-reported on their work to address violence against children. While there are some methodological concerns, the report provides a good overview of the progress that countries have made in implementing interventions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on ending violence against children, and makes recommendations for the future.

Violence is a serious violation of children's rights, which affects their health, education and development. This also has serious economic impacts. According to an estimate, violence against children results in a GDP loss of USD one trillion every year. The report suggests that while nearly all countries (88 percent) have key laws in place to protect children against violence, less than half of countries (47 percent)

said these were being strongly enforced.

In Bangladesh, there is a culture of impunity. Perpetrators of violence against children are hardly brought to justice, which contributes to continuing violence. In the past month alone, 89 percent of children (1-14 years) in Bangladesh experienced violent discipline. Due to my work on protecting children from violence, I am painfully aware of how socially acceptable the practice of corporal punishment is. In addition to physical and mental violence, children of our country are subjected to rape, torture, child marriage, trafficking, abduction etc.

A lack of proper coordination across departments that are responsible for children, health, education, social work etc. makes it challenging to address violence against children in a holistic way in Bangladesh. This is combined with inadequate professional capacity and limited budgetary allocations. Shouldn't we do more and be better at ending violence against children?

Between 32 percent to 37 percent of countries considered that victims of violence could access support services. Bangladesh has also responded positively. However, the "perceived reach" is quite low; 26 percent of countries provide programmes on parent and caregiver support and 15 percent of countries had modifications to provide safe physical environments for children. Bangladesh does not have interventions in these areas.

The report has been published at a time when most countries are struggling to cope with Covid-19. This global pandemic is primarily a public health emergency, but it has a lot of secondary impacts on children's education, health and protection, in the short and long run. Due to prolonged school closures, restrictions in movement and social isolation, children have lost their regular lives and support

networks. Unequal gender relations and patriarchal norms are important causes of violence against women and children, and these get magnified during a humanitarian crisis, making them more vulnerable.

From media compilation reports by various child and women's rights organisations and networks in Bangladesh, we have seen an increase in domestic abuse, violence against children, rapes, child marriage, cyber-crimes, trafficking etc during Covid-19. This must be considered while we respond to the crisis.

The report highlights that countries have mechanisms to support national violence prevention work. But only one-fifth of the countries have fully funded national action plans or plans that include specified indicators on the prevalence of violence against children with baseline and target values. Decision-makers in every country accept the need to scale up their efforts.

Isn't it tragic that violence against children continues to shatter children's lives even when we know what works in preventing it? The report suggests that drastic effort is needed to scale up our collective support for evidence-based prevention efforts if we are to end all forms of violence against children by 2030. I believe strong political commitment is required to make this happen.

The report makes a number of recommendations. Some are worth highlighting for Bangladesh. An appropriately resourced agency should be mandated to coordinate multisectoral action to end violence against children. Countries should prioritise data collection on key violence-related indicators as part of regular SDG reporting and use these to set measurable targets in data-driven national plans. Governments should ensure a renewed commitment to the implementation and enforcement of laws.

Funding for evidence-based approaches to ending violence against children must be increased and be embedded in medium-term expenditure frameworks in national and sub-national levels. All these recommendations can be implemented if we make ending violence against children a priority.

Violence against children risks efforts to achieve SDGs. Let us be committed to create a society where all children can be free from violence and realise their potential. There is a need to establish a functional and well-funded child protection system (mandated by the Children Act 2013 of Bangladesh) at all levels to protect all children from all forms of violence. The government should lead the process and parent/caregivers, teachers, community members, health professionals, social workers, civil society, media, academia etc will have to play their roles to prevent and respond to violence against children. It is very important to change social norms and learn to treat children with respect and dignity. A social movement is required to stop tolerating violence against children.

One of the recommendations of the report asks governments to initiate policy dialogues to review the status of their violence against children prevention programmes with relevant stakeholders from government, NGOs and international partners. They are encouraged to use the country profiles and national recommendations included in the report as starting points. Will there be a policy dialogue in Bangladesh to rigorously review where we are and identify what more needs to be done to bring momentum to end violence against children?

Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.