

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 1, 2020, BHADRA 17, 1427 BS

# The uncomfortable truth about enforced disappearances

How long will justice remain elusive?

WHEN we hear the law minister himself claiming ignorance of the meaning of the phrase “enforced disappearance,” it seems we are barking up the wrong tree in making so much noise about enforced disappearances, demanding a stop to the atrocious practice and legal remedy for the victims’ families. Contacted several days ago by this newspaper to comment on the issue of enforced disappearances, he said that he had no understanding of what enforced disappearance was and would comment only after he had grasped the meaning of the term. This is a cruel joke to those who are shedding tears every moment for their loved ones who have disappeared, most of them picked up by people claiming to belong to the law enforcing agencies.

The statistics related to enforced disappearances are a damning narrative of the country’s state of governance and rule of law, and perhaps even more so, of its legal justice system. According to a local leading human rights watchdog, as many as 553 people have become victims of enforced disappearance between 2009 and 2019. The eyewitness accounts and the circumstances of their disappearances point to the law enforcing agencies, sponsored by the state. We ought to remember that the practice predates 2009.

It is frustrating that we are still suffering the blatant practice of forced disappearance, which is a gross violation of human rights. It is even more frustrating that there seems to be no legal remedy. Law enforcers cannot get away by saying that so and so are not in their custody. It is the responsibility of the state to discover the whereabouts of those gone missing. And it is not just one or two persons, but more than 500 people who have gone missing, with the administration claiming no knowledge of where they were or might be.

We understand that there are limitations of the courts, but we believe it should take cognizance of the gravity of the issue and direct the government to take such steps as would ensure that the practice ceases immediately. But much would depend on the government’s sincerity to stop this and ensure justice for victims’ families.

# Ministry okays buses to run at full capacity

Will they now take responsibility for negligent operators?

EVEN with the death and infection rates increasing at an alarming rate, the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association recently wrote to the road transport and bridges ministry that all other modes of transport were carrying passengers at full capacity as the coronavirus situation was “gradually returning to normal” and that they should be allowed to do the same. Following this, what we dreaded has become a reality—the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges gave the nod to carrying passengers at full capacity, starting today. The government has also decided to slash the 60 percent hike in bus fares to the previous rates, but how much of it will be implemented by the operators remains to be seen.

The government allowed the move provided that no standing passengers would be allowed once all the seats were occupied, that all passengers, drivers and bus staffers would have to wear masks and that the transport must have hand sanitisers and other hand-washing essentials. Moreover, the buses have to be disinfected before and after each trip. We have witnessed the carelessness of the bus service providers in maintaining safety precautions when the buses were operating on a limited scale. At full capacity, one can only imagine the chaos that may ensue and the fatal effect it can have on the populace.

Even though the authorities state that the Highway Police, and district and police administration will take action against those who violate the directives set forth, we remain skeptical of the practicalities of ensuring proper implementation, given their previous track records. Earlier, we had warned about the risk of operating at full scale based on expert opinions—a warning which has clearly not been heeded. Now, the authorities must answer to the public if they fail to guarantee an end to negligence by operators and keep transmission of the deadly virus in check.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Help the university students

I am a student of one of the top private universities in the capital. Unfortunately, our institution is pressuring us continuously and giving everyone harsh grades so that we are bound to retake the courses. Given the financial constraints many of us are facing, it is impossible to retake a course. Many of us have to go through terrible hardships in order to continue our studies. University students have even committed suicide due to the pressure. I earnestly urge the concerned authorities to look into the matter with importance. Investigations will reveal the roots of such corrupt practices. Please put a stop to this to save the youth of our nation. This education business should be controlled. I strongly believe that the truth needs to be told.

Shams Ali, Dhaka



# Women’s access to stimulus packages and post Covid-19 gender equality



MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

ALL crises—natural disasters, wars, pandemics— affect different sections of people in different ways. Like any other crisis, Covid-19 has differing impacts on society. It has affected men and women, rich and poor, and adults and children differently. Since the ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic vary across people, measures towards the recovery from this crisis should also be focused towards each section of society distinctively.

Since the outbreak of coronavirus, several studies have revealed that the pandemic is not gender blind. They have indicated how the extent of women’s sufferings is more than that of men. Women have been the hardest hit both economically and socially. Women, being at the frontline of the crisis as healthcare workers, as caregivers at home, and as managers of the household, are having to bear the brunt of the coronavirus crisis more intensely than anyone else.

In Bangladesh, more than 85 percent of women are engaged in the informal sector to earn their livelihoods. Thus, a large number of women workers became unemployed overnight when the country went under lockdown. Most of them are yet to get back their jobs even though the economy has started to open up gradually. During the ongoing pandemic, domestic violence has also increased as economic stress and frustrations rose in the face of job losses. Girl children are being married off by poor parents as educational institutions are closed. Only a handful of urban schools can offer technology based online education to a privileged group of students. This could reduce the educational attainment of girls and reverse gender parity in primary education, which was achieved over the last few decades. Early marriage among girls will also increase their health risks, as they would become mothers at a very young age. Thus, the maternal mortality rate can rise too. While the wrath of the pandemic continued for the last six months, severe monsoon floods recently affected at least 50 million people’s lives and livelihoods in Bangladesh. Women and girls are again among the most vulnerable groups during such natural disasters.

In view of the negative impact of Covid-19, the government of Bangladesh has taken initiatives to support the affected sectors of the economy through various stimulus packages. It has announced a number of stimulus packages amounting to more than Taka one trillion, which is equivalent to about 3.7 percent of Bangladesh’s GDP. These packages, which are mainly credit facilities to businesses by banks, have been allocated for export-oriented sectors, the service sector, cottage, micro, small

and medium enterprises (CMSMEs), large businesses, the agriculture sector and pre-shipment loan refinancing.

The government has allocated a share from the stimulus for the CMSMEs (Tk 20,000 crore) of women entrepreneurs. They will receive five percent of the total CMSME allocation, which is equivalent to Taka 100 crore. The recognition of women entrepreneurs’ needs in the CMSME category is well appreciated, especially since women entrepreneurs have been demanding dedicated support for the revival of their businesses. However, the overall disbursement of most stimulus packages is still not encouraging. This is no different in the case of women entrepreneurs also—the majority of them have not been able to receive the benefits of the credit support provided to them. The central bank has advised banks to disburse loans to affected businesses on

collaterals to take loans. Fifth, access to information is limited to many women entrepreneurs outside big cities.

However, during the Covid-19 period, these small entrepreneurs will not be able to stay on course without government support. Except a handful of women entrepreneurs who have been fortunate to have their families support them, the others have been facing challenges throughout their journey. Barring a few in the urban areas, families take a skeptical view when a woman proposes to become an entrepreneur. Thus, many do not receive financial support from their families either. With limited financial and operational capacity, women entrepreneurs have fallen into a dire situation during the pandemic.

Banks are yet to appreciate the underlying challenges of small women-led enterprises. In this respect, the role

that stimulus packages do not create further inequality, not only between the rich and the poor, but also between men and women.

We must not forget that the high economic growth in Bangladesh during the past years has been on the back of its hardworking people. In this journey of economic prosperity, the contribution of Bangladeshi women cannot be undermined. Over the years, women’s participation in the labour force has increased and the nature of activities performed by women has also changed. They are not only working in traditional sectors, but many have stepped into non-conventional jobs and businesses. Supportive policy measures from the government of the day have also contributed to Bangladesh’s economic and social achievements. This has helped to lift a large number of people out of



Women in the informal economy have been especially hard-hit by the pandemic.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

the basis of bank-client relationships.

This is not working. There are a number of issues attached to loan disbursement to women. First, many micro and small entrepreneurs do not have records of bank loans, and thus there is no record of loan servicing or relationships with banks on this ground. Despite several dedicated loan schemes for them from many commercial banks, many women still find the procedures complex and do not feel encouraged to go to banks for loans. Second, many banks are not interested to give loans to women entrepreneurs. Banks do not find women’s business proposals bankable as their ticket size is small, which will increase banks’ operational costs. Third, banks are also not sure whether their loans will be repaid in time. Fourth, a large number of women entrepreneurs do not have

of a number of organisations such as Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Foundation, and Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) is critical. These organisations can help identify women entrepreneurs across the country who are often outside the radar of financial institutions. Associations of women entrepreneurs can also facilitate the process and guide women entrepreneurs in accessing the stimulus package.

It is now well established that the recovery from the fallout of Covid-19 will be a long and arduous process. While the government has attempted to support the affected sectors through credit-based stimulus packages, its implementation will have to be monitored carefully so

poverty and has also contributed towards gender empowerment.

In order to protect the progress made so far and to reverse the damaging impact of the pandemic on gender equality, government policies should be crafted through a gender lens. The private sector and women entrepreneurs themselves should also be part of the recovery planning. Economic prosperity cannot be sustained by ignoring women’s problems and by keeping women outside the economy. Since the objective of the post-pandemic recovery plan is to “build back better”, policymakers will have to create more opportunities for women to regain the momentum on gender empowerment and gender equality that was created before the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue

# Bangladesh is not a risky destination

US needs to reconsider its Level 4 risk advisory



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

MY heart sank when I saw the headline in *The Daily Star* on August 17, which reported that the US had updated its periodic travel advisory on August 6, 2020 and urged its citizens to exercise “increased caution in the country due to crime, terrorism, and kidnapping.” This news was particularly jaw-dropping for many of my fellow Bangladeshis. On the brighter side, Bangladesh is not alone in this roster of Red States since India, China and Bhutan are also in the Level 4 category. However, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka are in the Level 3 category which means that these countries are in the Orange rather than the Red Zone.

“J’accuse.” Emile Zola’s citizen’s protest was on my mind when I read about the travel advisory. As a US citizen, I question the justification for this decision and find that the State Department’s analysts used arbitrary standards and issued the advisory in haste. The US Government should reconsider and eventually revise the Travel Advisory issued earlier this month, which advises US citizens to abstain from visiting Bangladesh and slaps my birthplace with the label of a Level 4 (or “Red”) destination, putting it on a “do not travel” list.

The crimes of which Bangladeshis and the government are accused of in the advisory are all-inclusive catch-all offences such as muggings, traffic jams, poor infrastructure and terrorism.

The implication of this Advisory is that my government is now trying to steer me away from going back to Bangladesh, where I have an extended family, including my mother-in-law and a brother. Only a few airlines are flying to Bangladesh, and the other hurdles or roadblocks that stand in the way of

my travel plans are mind-boggling. We have to consider not only the known logistical challenges but also to factor in the uncertainties and make contingency plans in case of unexpected glitches, including illnesses, while in Bangladesh. A traveler has to get tests done and obtain certificates, plan for possible quarantines both in Bangladesh and the USA, and take leave from work. To be on the safe side, one also needs to apply for additional “Covid-19 sickness” sick-time.

*If one exercises social distancing, keeps away from crowded bazaars and parties, and practices the health and safety protocols of CDC after you land in Bangladesh, there is no reason to consider the country any more dangerous than other South Asian countries.*

My family in the USA have been waiting to go to Bangladesh for the last six months, but we are not alone in this situation. Between one and two million people of Bangladeshi origin live in the USA. A sizeable number of them travel to Bangladesh for multiple reasons: personal, business, tourism etc. This year, they have all been forced to constantly revise their future plans to travel to Bangladesh, and while Covid-19 is still raging in all countries, the Travel Advisory has also put students, non-residents and businessmen with ties to Bangladesh in limbo.

As I review the reasons for judging Bangladesh to be a risky place to visit, it

is evident that apart from the impact of Covid-19, the conditions on the ground have not gotten any worse in the last few months. If one exercises social distancing, keeps away from crowded bazaars and parties, and practices the health and safety protocols of CDC after you land in Bangladesh, there is no reason to consider the country any more dangerous than other South Asian countries.

I, therefore, feel like shouting at the top of my voice like Zola—“J’accuse”. The eminent French writer accused his own government of injustice against its citizens. The celebrated open letter from Emile Zola to the president of the French Republic was in defence of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer who had been accused of treason by the French army. Zola pointed out judicial errors and lack of serious evidence. It was published in the newspaper *L’Aurore* on January 13, 1898.

If we take the most recent data from Johns Hopkins University, Bangladesh has the lowest per capita infection and death rate when compared with India and Pakistan. As of August 31, the numbers are as follows—India had more than 3.6 million confirmed cases and almost 65,000 deaths, and Pakistan had almost 300,000 confirmed cases and over 6,000 deaths. In Bangladesh, there were 312, 996 confirmed cases and 4,281 deaths. So, the numbers speak for themselves.

The warning against travelling to Bangladesh will be a big setback for many like me, who have been waiting since last year. I don’t care whether it is winter or summer, I want to go there whenever I desire. This freedom to visit Bangladesh eases the pain of living so far away, and of not seeing my family, friends, and near and dear ones. It cannot be taken away. I also need to visit the final resting place of my parents and brothers.

There is a song by Carol King where she croons—“Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you have to do is call, and I’ll be there”.

I have always said the magic words to my mother, and my three aunts—I’ll be

there. My youngest aunt, the eminent litterateur Asma Abbasi and her husband, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi, the scholar and musician, are homebound, and my aunt needs her dearest nephew to be near her.

It must be mentioned that the State Department’s website has some admirable suggestions for travellers and concedes that “In Bangladesh, the crime rate impacting foreigners is generally low... there are no indications foreigners are being targeted of their nationality.” However, it is off the mark when it also declares that “Terrorism events can happen with little or no warning, with terrorists targeting public areas such as tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, restaurants, places of worship, school campuses, and government facilities.” Really?

My protest is not only against the US government but also some of its biases. A recent study shows that countries led by women had “systematically and significantly better” Covid-19 outcomes than those led by men. The analysis of 194 countries, published by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum, suggests the difference is real and “may be explained by the proactive and coordinated policy responses” adopted by the female leaders. And Bangladesh is one of them.

Crime rates are significantly lower in Bangladesh, in sharp contrast to the level of violence recorded in Pakistan. According to published data, the violent crime rate (intentional homicide) in Pakistan is three times more than in Bangladesh. Admittedly, some areas of Bangladesh might be considered risky for foreigners. The State Department Advisory warns, “Travel is dangerous to the Chattogram Hill Tracts due to occasional communal violence and other security risks”. However, that does not in any way imply that the country is unsafe!

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and currently works in information technology. He is also Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.