

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Lifting of restrictions untimely and dangerous

*The pandemic is far from being under control*

THE decision taken by the government to lift all restrictions on public movement and activities which were imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus is untimely and dangerous. The decision came at a time when the number of Covid-19 patients, including critical ones, is on the rise in our hospitals. It is also unfortunate that the government allowed public transport to operate at full capacity. According to health experts, in order for the Covid-19 outbreak to be brought under control, the positivity rate will have to fall below 5 percent. However, the current positivity rate in the country is still 20.16 percent, which is much higher than the global average. On what possible grounds did the government make such a decision?

The government's response to the pandemic has been slow and inadequate from the very beginning. It took quite some time for it to impose lockdown in the first phase of the outbreak. Then, it took some containment measures in consultation with the experts and formed a few committees to oversee the situation. However, when it came to implementing the measures, it failed miserably. Then the government withdrew the lockdown and experimented with a new strategy—marking the districts and city areas as red, yellow and green zones according to the number of patients. Unfortunately, this also could not be enforced properly for lack of an efficient plan. And during the last one month, we did not come across any measures from the authorities concerned to contain the outbreak. And in the absence of any strict containment strategy, the country has been witnessing a high number of deaths since last month.

Understandably, the government took the decision to revive the country's battered economy as well as to ease people's economic hardship. But questions remain as to what precautionary steps have been taken before lifting all these restrictions. Did the government take experts' suggestions before reaching the decision? Is there currently any monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that health safety guidelines are maintained in public places, including markets? It is common sense that maintaining physical distancing in overcrowded public transport is not possible. Therefore, we might see further transmission of the virus in the coming days. Will the government give the issue a second thought before it is too late?

# Rapist of minor girl fined Tk 10,000

*This is outrageous!*

ACCORDING to a report in this newspaper, a local Awami League leader—chairman of No-1 Mahalchhari Union Parishad—in Khagrachhari has “settled” the rape of an underage Marma girl by fining the rapist a meagre Tk 10,000. The victim's family are not even being able to file a case, as a result. How can the chairman even consider pardoning someone who raped an underage girl for Tk 10,000? How is that justice?

Unfortunately, hundreds of such cases in our country get “mitigated” out of court due to the victims or their families not having the means to pursue long-standing legal cases, or because of the power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator. Social stigma and lack of awareness about the legal assistance that is available are other reasons that prevent victims and their families from pursuing legal action. Whereas the authorities are supposed to help fight these problems, here we see a case where a local leader is actually downplaying the seriousness of the offence and allowing the perpetrator to walk away scot-free.

Earlier in June, this newspaper reported how a village leader took Tk 90,000 from another rapist, and forced the victim's mother to sign an affidavit saying that she was content with the arbitration even though the victim received nothing—not a single penny. Clearly, these examples show that leaving such cases to “local leaders” to arbitrate is not working.

Out-of-court settlement of civil cases is one thing, however, criminal cases should never be settled out-of-court, as many legal experts argue. Still, according to a 2017 report, less than 2 percent of rape cases filed in the country in the previous five years had ended in conviction. And such figures surely give victims very little hope of getting justice should they decide to pursue legal channels. What then are the victims to do, when neither arbitration nor the legal system are willing to deliver the minimum justice that they are owed?

We would like to draw the attention of the authorities to this case, and urge them to punish the perpetrator and also take action against the local leader who saw it fit to let him off the hook for a paltry sum of Tk 10,000—despite committing a most egregious offence of raping a minor girl. Moreover, the authorities need to look at the bigger picture too, and take measures that can change this overall grim scenario.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

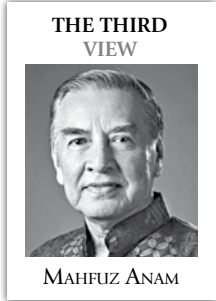
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### Walking the talk on skin colour

While we often talk about the equality of skin colours and every race deserving equal rights, it all goes in vain if we fail to act accordingly in our life. The white colour, in our society, represents superiority while being dark is synonymous with being ugly, a notion exaggerated by the beauty advertisements.

In truth, a person should never be judged by their skin tone. As human beings, we have come a long way but we have yet to get rid of certain prejudices that are entrenched in our minds. It is high time we filtered our thoughts and learned to respect all people, irrespective of the colour of their skin. We need to be more inclusive and open-minded as a society.

Fariha Alam Nijhum, Dhaka



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

our hands on their hard-earned foreign exchange—which we recklessly waste or allow scamsters to syphon away for their second, third or umpteenth home (or shall we call them villas or palaces?) in Canada, Malaysia, Dubai, or wherever.

But when it comes to helping our workers who are exploited, cheated, beaten, tortured, thrown out of jobs, or never given the job that was promised or at the level of pay promised, we turn our face away as if they don't exist and we even have the temerity to jail them when they—after indescribable hardship—manage to return home. On what grounds? “They have tarnished the image of the country.” The realm of the absurd appears to have no bounds when it comes to official justification to incarcerate ordinary and poor citizens. The case of expatriate workers is especially ironic because we so greedily seek the money they send home.

Of the two contrasting stories, the first entails praising them for sending 36 percent higher remittance this August compared to last year, belying dire predictions of economists. It was the third straight month of growth. It marked a 50 percent growth year-on-year for the July-August period amounting to USD 4.56 billion. The remittance continued to grow despite falling employment, much to the credit of our workers whose love for their families and the country makes them undertake perilous journeys, suffer immense indignity, and perform unbelievable hours of hard labour so that we are better off.

The second story deals with 81 migrant workers being thrown into jail on Tuesday after a court order following the expiry of their 14-day mandatory quarantine. In arguing for their internment, a sub-inspector (SI) of Turag Police Station reasoned, “Their criminal activities have tarnished the country's image and also put a negative impact on the labour industry.” If these workers were released, they could engage in various crimes including robbery, family

violence, killing and militancy, the SI argued. Are we to understand that they trained to become militants in Vietnam? Wow, ISIS has really spread. May be we are doing the Vietnamese government a great favour by letting them know something they are still to find out.

The police want them in jail till the “probe” is complete. The magistrate sent them to prison without specifying how long they would have to be there. If we follow the process of the probe, it will most likely consist of letters from the police being sent to the home ministry, which will forward it to the foreign ministry, then forward it to our embassy in Hanoi, which will contact the local police, who, having no reason or motivation to investigate the allegations anew, will send back



81 Vietnam returnees are being led to prison vans outside the isolation centre in Diabari area of Dhaka on Tuesday, September 1, 2020.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

the same official complaints that they lodged before, which will then follow the same serpentine route and find its way back to Turag Thana, which will then submit the “proof” of their crimes and seek conviction, all the while these “tarnishers” of country's image will rot in jail unless... and here, the possibilities are endless depending on the resource base of the workers, for whose hard-earned green bucks we send them all over the world.

When asked why the Vietnam returnees were in jail, the expatriates' welfare minister told *The Daily Star*, “Ask the Home ministry, they arrested them; we did not.” A correct answer, but not an empathetic one. It may fit a bureaucrat but not a people's representative which the minister is supposed to be. After all, he is the one heading the expatriates'

welfare ministry. Where is the “welfare” for the expatriate workers in this case?

The story from the side of the workers is totally different—one that the government is apparently not interested in learning about or investigating. Towards the end of last year and early this year, manpower agents offered these job-seekers employment opportunities in Vietnam for a salary ranging from USD 500-600. It was all official and seemed above board.

The plot thickens as we examine the role of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), the government body authorised to check, do due diligence, and give official “clearance” before workers are permitted to go abroad. The BMET is meant to prevent workers from going abroad on

fed or not fed, and treated without minimum pay or human dignity.

The story gets chilling when we hear that fellow Bangladeshis are as much a part of this inhuman chain of exploiters as the Vietnamese. These “wretched of the earth” went to local police who, as can be expected, did not extend any help. These fellow Bangladeshi workers, on whose “earnings” so much of our development depends, then found their way from various parts of Vietnam to Hanoi and sought help from our embassy there.

Our Ambassador in Vietnam, Samina Naz, speaking to this newspaper, said that she wrote several times over the last two years to our home and expatriates' welfare ministries, informing them of the rise of gangs that exploit our workers and have been carrying on this nefarious trade in human trafficking for some time. She did not receive any reply to her letters, not even an acknowledgement.

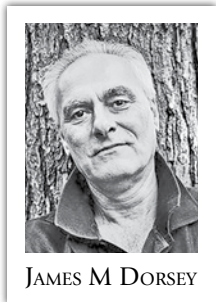
Given the above reality and the inhuman sufferings already endured by our fellow citizens, to jail them for “tarnishing the image of the country” and “harming our overseas labour market” can only be termed as the height of hypocrisy, corruption and exploitation of our expatriate labour class. As we have shown earlier, after having been robbed of their possessions, freedom and human dignity abroad, they will now rot in our jail till the “probe” is complete.

As for “tarnishing the image of our country” and “negatively impacting our labour market”—who are responsible, really? The victims of exploitation, or their perpetrators and the officials who are making such exploitation possible? How can the BMET shrug off its responsibility? If the home and expatriates' welfare ministries listened to our ambassador in Hanoi, much suffering and “tarnishing” could have been avoided.

Due to reporting in this newspaper and others, the concerned minister did set up an “enquiry committee” last July. Obviously, its works have not finished yet. The minister has already said that he does not want to be harsh on the agents because they have been adversely affected by the pandemic. I suppose he will also not want to be harsh on BMET officials who gave those official clearances, after all they are serving the country by sending workers abroad whether their jobs are real of fake. As for the real earners of the foreign exchange—the workers—who cares if they rot in jail?

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# UAE geopolitical gamble keeps Palestinian peace prospects on life support



JAMES M DORSEY

recognition in return for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied during the 1967 Middle East war even if it has not proven to be much of an asset.

Historically, forging diplomatic relations with the Jewish state has not been a magic wand to resolve a seemingly intractable dispute.

The carrot of recognition has not helped solve the Palestinians' problem 72 years after they were first displaced by Israeli occupation and independence and despite the conclusion of peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan—two states that, unlike the UAE, had and still have a direct stake in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Nor did it stop US President Donald Trump from accepting the legitimacy of annexation of occupied Palestinian land.

Nevertheless, the UAE move contributes to salvaging options for a peace settlement that could be acceptable to both Palestinians and Israelis.

Most importantly, it has helped take immediate Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank off the table by giving Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the opportunity to temporarily set aside his pledge to incorporate Palestinian land before the November US presidential election without being seen as caving in to American pressure.

To be sure, Mr. Netanyahu has suspended, not cancelled, plans for annexation in exchange for UAE recognition.

The reality is, however, that Mr. Netanyahu or whoever will eventually succeed him will unlikely get a US green light in the foreseeable future irrespective of who wins the American presidential election. Neither Mr. Trump nor his Democratic challenger, Joe Biden, will want to jeopardise evolving relations between Israel and Arab states that annexation no doubt would disrupt.

What that does is keep options open; it does not open doors, nor does it create

the basis for renewed peace negotiations. The UAE has all but officially embraced Mr. Trump's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan that explicitly endorses the principle of annexation—a non-negotiable non-starter for Palestinians.

In other words, Israelis and Palestinians will have to resolve their dispute themselves. External powers cannot do it for them. However, external powers can help ensure that Israelis and Palestinians have options and shape an environment that would be conducive to a peace process. And that is where the problems start.

Four decades of primarily US-led mediation efforts, often involving non-starters, have produced at best a seemingly

interests. Palestinians, moreover, were divided between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah movement—that clings to the hope of some miracle that will get decades of peace talks back on track—and Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip.

Stripped of its rhetoric, Hamas essentially argues that the Palestine Authority's strategy of surrendering its trump cards—recognition of Israel and abandonment of the legitimacy of political violence—has not persuaded Israel to make the minimal concessions needed. Those include an end to Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank, a Palestinian administrative stake in East Jerusalem, and an agreement on the final



Palestinians take part in a protest against the United Arab Emirates' deal with Israel to normalise relations, in Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, August 14, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/RANEEN SAWAFTA

intractable stalemate in which Israel has the upper hand. Blame for the failure goes round. Successive US administrations have favoured Israel and been reluctant to sufficiently pressure it to enable a viable solution.

Israeli governments diverged in their sincerity in adopting a two-state solution, with Mr. Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving head of government, making it clear that he does not want a truly independent Palestinian state to emerge. In fact, he has redefined the concept as one perceived by Palestinians as a Bantustan at best.

Similarly, Palestinians proved to be their own worst enemies. A corrupt Palestine Authority prioritised its own vested

borders between Israel and Palestine based on the pre-1967 war frontiers, albeit modified by land swaps that recognise facts on the ground.

The UAE's halting annexation for now and keeping the door to negotiations open constitutes a gamble. The primary risk is grey swans or predictable disruptions, not black swans or unpredictable events.

The biggest risk beyond an Israeli decision at some point to move forward with annexation is West Bank protest against Israeli policy to which Israel responds with a heavy hand and military escalation in Gaza. Palestinian protest is almost a given in a world that has just ended a decade of defiance and dissent, with the 2011 and 2019/2020 popular

Arab revolts as its centrepiece and the prospect of global social unrest in the 2020s as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the worst worldwide economic downturn since World War Two. Add to this the worldwide awareness of entrenched social injustice and racial inequality.

Protest is likely whatever happens. With hope for a two-state solution fading, the alternatives are a one-state solution or continued occupation. Both are potential drivers of social unrest.

Israeli warplanes pounded Gaza, one of the world's most densely populated regions blockaded by Israel as well as Egypt, on a nightly basis as Israeli and Emirati diplomats finalised terms of their establishment of diplomatic relations. The bombings were in response to the firing of rockets and flying of balloon bombs from Gaza into Israel.

Potentially, heavy-handed Israeli responses to Palestinian protest and Gaza attacks could put the UAE in an uncomfortable position.

With freedom of expression in the UAE and much of the Gulf severely repressed and in the absence of credible public opinion polls, it is hard to assess public empathy for the Palestinians. A rare poll in Saudi Arabia by a credible non-Saudi polling company showed that the Palestinian issue ranked second after Iran among foreign policy concerns of the kingdom's public. It is fair to assume that the UAE would not be much different.

While UAE-based tweeters overwhelmingly welcomed the UAE's outreach to Israel, it was left to Emiratis abroad to be more critical. “The dustbin of history accommodates all traitors, whatever their names and the names of their families,” tweeted an Emirati activist in exile.

The UAE may hope that diplomatic relations will enable it to nudge Israel towards credible peace negotiations with the Palestinians, in part by empowering Palestinian leaders beholden to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. It is a strategy that the United States adopted for much of the past four decades with little result. It's not clear why the UAE would succeed where others have failed.

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