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Dastardly attack on UNO

Even state employees are not safe!

ALTHOUGH it would not be fair to conclude the motive of the beastly attack on UNO Ghoraghat and her father inside their official residence, in Dinajpur, in the absence of detailed information, it is difficult to accept the initial explanation of Rab regarding the motive of the attack. The account that the purpose was burglary does not stand up to even a perfunctory scrutiny of the circumstances and the crime scene. Nothing, as far as we know, is missing from the house of the UNO. Even the local member of parliament has suggested that the motive was to kill the UNO.

While we strongly condemn the attack and wish the UNO Wahida Khanam a quick and full recovery, we cannot but be alarmed at the incident that exposes the deep crevice in the security system in the country. A UNO is the chief executive of an upazila. So what should we make of a situation where the state cannot provide an official in employment of the state and one who represents the state authority in the area under her or his responsibility with proper security, not to speak of providing security to ordinary citizens?

The incident also reveals the criminalisation of politics that has driven the state of governance to an abysmal state. It also demonstrates what impunity amongst some ruling party cadres can do to the legal system and the state of law and order. Among the arrested, although one has been released later, are local Jubo League leaders. It is not quite clear why they were arrested and why one was released soon after. We hope that the authorities would clarify the matter.

The incident also betrays the bureaucratic red-tapism that hamper proper functioning of the system. We understand that the PM had ordered provision of Ansar security to Upazila level officials two years ago. We demand an answer as to why that has not been carried out yet.

Wahida Khanam is known to be a no-nonsense functionary who was addressing several law and order issues in right earnest. We believe there is more to the reason for the attempt on the life of the UNO, than what appears now, and hope that the investigation would be able to reveal both the motive and the perpetrators.

Helping hospitals install centralised oxygen supply systems

Buet alumni group sets a great example

WE sincerely appreciate the hard work of a group of 14 Buet alumni who have been helping hospitals install central oxygen supply systems for the last three months. Ideally, all public and private hospitals should have centralised oxygen supply systems. However, in reality, only a few of them have it and the rest use oxygen cylinders to support the critically ill patients. Although most hospitals across the country have been facing this issue, it was only exposed when they were struggling to ensure uninterrupted oxygen supply for critically ill coronavirus patients who were suffering from respiratory distress. During the last few months, many patients with breathing difficulties died without getting the much-needed oxygen support at hospitals.

Amid such a situation, this group of engineers, architects and planners, from Buet's graduating class of 2012, formed the group Projotne Canvas and started their work to improve our healthcare system. They used their technical skills to develop small centralised oxygen supply systems and installed them in nine public and private hospitals at district and upazila levels. And they plan to continue their work. The hospitals where the systems were installed now have the capacity to support around 34 critical Covid-19 patients with oxygen at a time.

It is amazing what our young professionals can do if they get only a little support from society. While for their first project at Chattogram Field Hospital the team had to collect funds from their batchmates, after the successful completion of the project, some donors came forward to finance them. While each of the projects would cost around Tk 25 lakh if commercially installed, they did it at a cost of Tk 5-10 lakh, without technical cost.

We urge the government as well as other donor agencies to come forward and support the team financially as they have been working for a noble cause. With central oxygen support systems, the hospitals will not only be able to ensure oxygen support for the Covid-19 patients, but other patients needing oxygen support will also benefit from this arrangement.

We also hope that our young professionals will be encouraged by this team's work and come forward with their own expertise to improve the country's overall healthcare system.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We must focus on integrity

The definition of values has changed dramatically in recent times, as people prioritise money more than relationships and other human beings. Corruption has become a regular phenomenon, and the people involved in such activities appear to have no guilt or shame.

The plague of dishonesty has spread everywhere. However, such exploitations can be minimised if people learn to value relationships more than the temporary wealth of this world. We must learn to set greed aside. It is our responsibility to improve our moral values in every way, which will eventually benefit us and the nation as a whole.

Md Yeasin Hasan Abir, by email



From remittance-warriors to criminals

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

If life were a film with a wholesome ending, traffickers of the 106 Bangladeshis stuck in Vietnam would have been swiftly arrested. Officials who assisted registered agencies to exploit these aspiring and desperate migrants would also have been convicted. In an inevitable tear-jerking climax, a state representative might even have apologised to the migrants and their families for their sufferings, and for the failure of multiple state mechanisms to protect them from their terrible fate.

But life in Bangladesh only really mirrors a horror or a dystopian film. Eighty-one of the trafficked migrants, most of whom were starved, beaten or tortured while in Vietnam, have been thrown in jail following the end of their 14-day quarantine. Just as they were rejoicing at the thought of seeing their families again, after months of worrying about whether they would even make it out of Vietnam alive, they were arrested under the highly controversial Section 54 of The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898. Their crime? The unforgivable: "Tarnishing the image of the state and putting a negative impact on the labour industry."

The FIR states that the police received information that they were involved in various criminal activities abroad but that their sentences were pardoned in view of Covid-19. It also says that, if released, they could engage in various crimes including robbery, family violence, killing, and militancy, and that while in institutional quarantine, they plotted in groups against the state, according to information received by the police through anonymous sources.

The charges would have been convincing had it not been for the fact that the FIR is identical to the one submitted for the 219 other returnees from Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain on July 3. Unlike these 219 migrants who were pardoned for their petty crimes in their host countries (many were detained in violation of their rights and oftentimes for as simple a reason as stepping out to buy some food), the Vietnam returnees were not actually convicted of any crime or jailed during their stay there, as far as we know. In fact, for the last seven months, the migrants have tried all possible means of communicating with the authorities in Vietnam and Bangladesh, including the Bangladesh Embassy in Vietnam. They have consistently maintained that

they were trafficked into Vietnam by licensed agencies who provided them with clearances from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) for Tk 3.5-5 lakh. They have named the agents who preyed upon them in their villages and hometowns, and they have provided convincing accounts of the whole process of being duped in Bangladesh and being exploited once in Vietnam.

They have even admitted that they were made to carry USD 5,000 by their agents,

ambassador, will realise the true meaning of the term 'illegal'."

And this, really, is their true crime—that they did not suffer in silence, that they dared to ask, nay, demand that the government give them some dignity and ensure justice for the inhumane crimes committed against them.

On July 6, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in a press release admitted that these Bangladeshis were lured by human traffickers in Vietnam. However,



Some of the trafficking victims travelled to the Bangladesh Embassy in Ho Chi Minh City seeking justice and assistance to return home.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

which was subsequently taken from them by the Bangladeshi traffickers in Vietnam. They have uploaded photos and videos depicting the miserable conditions they were in, and of the callousness of the Bangladeshi embassy when they reached out to them begging for help. They have gone "live" on Facebook to entreat the prime minister to rescue them and to plead with embassy officials to provide them with some food so that they didn't starve to death. They have broken down into tears talking about how helpless they felt, how scared and hungry, and they have highlighted, again and again, how desperately they craved intervention from the state!

"We don't have any money to feed ourselves, how are we going to fund our flights?" one returnee exclaimed passionately during a Facebook live session of Noakhali TV on June 26. "That's why we said we will take to the streets, if necessary. We will break the rules and regulations of Vietnam and stage a hunger strike—that's when Bangladesh, i.e. the Bangladesh

it went on to add that 27 "illegal Bangladeshi migrants"—not victims of human trafficking, mind you—"tried to forcibly occupy the Hanoi embassy of Bangladesh," and that they went live on social media "making derogatory comments against Bangladesh". It also said that "a certain quarter is trying to tarnish Bangladesh's recent success in controlling human trafficking by threatening to attack Bangladesh missions abroad involving illegal Bangladeshi migrants." The Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen even blamed a new organisation called "Prabashi Odhikar Parishad", led by Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) VP Nurul Haque Nur, for patronising the migrants (a proposition so ridiculous it does not even merit a response), and suggested that those who go abroad illegally should be sent behind bars alongside traffickers.

The government's tendency to criminalise migrants, especially victims of trafficking, is, unfortunately, nothing new. We frequently hear how it is really

Covid-19 and the challenges of trade for Bangladesh



SELIM RAIHAN

THE Covid-19 induced economic crisis has affected the export and import of Bangladesh by large margins. The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the closure or limited operation of businesses

during the lockdown at home and abroad. In the financial year 2019-20, there was a very high negative growth in exports (17 percent)—which was unprecedented in the recent history of Bangladesh. Although the situation has improved somewhat since the beginning of the current financial year 2020-21, it is uncertain whether exports will return to normal. There are fears that the economic recessions in the United States and Europe, two main export destinations of Bangladesh, are likely to be prolonged, which will slow down the recovery of the export sector in Bangladesh. In the last financial year, there was high negative growth in the import trade (8.6 percent) too. The plight of the import trade is by no means conducive to investment and business expansion in the days to come.

Despite several rounds of downward revisions, the IMF still hopes for a global recovery in 2021. According to the World Economic Outlook Update in June 2020 by the IMF, global growth will be a negative 4.9 percent in 2020, which is 1.9 percentage points lower than the April 2020 World Economic Outlook forecast. Though the IMF projects for a positive 5.4 percent global growth in 2021, it admits that the recovery will be more gradual than previously forecasted. Even with a 5.4 percent growth in 2021, the global GDP in 2020 will be 6.5 percentage points lower than the pre-Covid-19 projections made by the IMF in January 2020. Europe, on average, will experience a negative growth of 10 percent in 2020 and a positive growth of 6 percent in 2021. In the USA the GDP growth will be negative 8 percent in 2020 and 4.5 percent in 2021.

However, the positive economic growth in 2021 remains to be dependent on some factors, the primary factor being the availability of reliable vaccines for Covid-19. Nonetheless, only the

availability of vaccines in some countries would not help recover business confidence worldwide. There is a need for a fair distribution of vaccines across countries. The fact that world trade is heavily dependent on global value chains, unless business confidence rebounds in all segments of the value chains, world trade will continue to remain depressed. According to the WTO's June 2020 estimates, based on a year-on-year basis, in 2020 the volume of merchandise trade shrank by 3 percent in the first quarter and further dropped by around 18.5 percent in the second quarter. No doubt, these declines are historically large.

As far as the major export item of Bangladesh, the readymade garments (RMG), is concerned, in the financial year 2019-2020, the earnings from RMG

developing country Bangladesh has little to influence the recovery of global trade, Bangladesh needs to get its domestic business fronts right to cope up during the crisis time and to register a substantial recovery in the post-crisis period. In this context, there is a need for developments in five major areas:

First, while the government announced stimulus packages for all affected industries, so far, the access and benefit of the stimulus packages have remained unequal. There are complaints that, apart from the RMG, most of the other export-oriented sectors have been facing numerous challenges in availing the stimulus packages. The firm-level survey conducted by SANEM on Business Confidence Index in July also confirms this situation. These challenges include



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exports declined by 18.12 percent from the previous year. With a much smaller fall in RMG exports, by around 3 percent, Vietnam outperformed Bangladesh to become the second-largest RMG exporter in the world. Therefore, the negative impacts of depressed global trade are not uniform across countries. While Bangladesh has been struggling to cope up with the disastrous situation, its major competitors, like Vietnam, are in a better position to combat the crisis. The differences in impacts are primarily due to domestic business enabling factors in which Bangladesh seriously lags behind its major competitors.

Given the fact that being a small

lack of stimulus package for the industry, lengthy procedure, difficulty in bank-related services, difficulty in understanding application procedures, and corruption. There is a need for quick and effective measures to address these challenges.

Second, the lack of export diversification remains a daunting challenge in Bangladesh. While there are pro-RMG biases in the policies and programmes, inadequate and ineffective policies and strategies for the non-RMG sectors are also hurting them. Furthermore, the high cost of doing business disproportionately affects the non-RMG sectors. Low public spending on health and education also leads to low productivity and skill

"greedy" migrants who are to blame for their ill-fates when they get duped by trafficking agents. "You cannot teach *these people* any better," say our policymakers and bureaucrats disdainfully, as if talking about the scum of the earth, "they will go abroad through illegal means no matter how much you try to help them, get caught and give us a bad name." Our learned bureaucrats refuse to acknowledge the socio-political realities of aspiring migrants' lives which compel them to seek fortunes abroad, selling their homestead land or borrowing huge sums of money they don't even know how they would pay back if things don't go as planned.

A recent study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that 99 percent of potential migrants would choose to remain in the country if they had better job opportunities in Bangladesh. But for our bureaucrats, acknowledging this would entail actually admitting that despite the glitzy promises of growth and development, large masses of the population are still deprived of basic necessities, including a living wage, financial security, and a social protection system. These bureaucrats will not address the corrupt officials in their own ranks who sell off people into modern slavery to make a quick buck. And they will skillfully skirt around the fact that state negligence and complicity enable both registered and unregistered errand agencies to prey on vulnerable populations with complete impunity. They see no hypocrisy in the reality that the state has no reservations about receiving billions of dollars in remittances to keep its economy going, but when it comes to protecting the migrants to whom we owe this GDP growth, it is happy to label them as criminals and miscreants and, in this case, throw them in jail and leave them there to rot.

Government officials are keen on using the term "illegal" to dismiss the legitimate claims of these workers, but as the latter have pointed out on multiple occasions, "How are we illegal if we have clearances from BMET? How are we illegal if we trusted the government agency in charge of protecting us and our futures?" It is outrageous that rather than put BMET and the concerned ministries on the dock, we are having to defend the victims of trafficking for speaking out about their plight and for demanding justice. From the government's end, they have said they will cut the concerned agencies some slack because they have "already suffered enough" due to the pandemic. Our workers, on the other hand, apparently need to suffer a lot more.

Sushmita S Preetha is a journalist and researcher.

development which are not conducive for export diversification. Therefore, this Covid-19 crisis time can give policymakers a much-warranted opportunity to undertake reform in critical economic domains. No doubt, these reforms should aim to reduce the cost of doing business and establish a favourable environment for the flourishing of non-RMG export sectors.

Third, the low FDI orientation also acts as a large barrier for further export expansion and diversification in Bangladesh. The challenges in attracting FDI in Bangladesh include high cost of doing business, unfavourable regulatory environment, bureaucratic red-tape, uncertainty in the reform of policy regime, weak enforcement of intellectual property rights, and slow implementation of infrastructural projects including the SEZs. Therefore, reforms should focus on simplifying regulations, enforcing the IPR, and faster and cost-effective implementation of mega-projects and SEZs.

Fourth, as in a few years from now, Bangladesh will graduate from the LDC status and will thus lose trade preferences in its major export markets, it needs to start FTA negotiations with its major trading partners. In particular, Bangladesh should start FTA negotiations with the EU, the UK, India and China for the continuation of the zero-duty trade preference for its export in the post-LDC graduation era. It is noteworthy that such FTA negotiations take a long time, and a lot of effort and homework will be needed to secure special provisions to safeguard Bangladesh's interests in these FTAs.

Finally, Bangladesh's graduation from the LDC status by 2024 will lead to the loss of trade preference in major export destinations and loss of other preferences (i.e. TRIPs waiver for pharmaceuticals). Bangladesh will also face more stringent trade rules as a non-LDC. As the Covid-19 crisis has put Bangladesh into the back foot, there is a need for rethinking the LDC graduation decision. Considering the ongoing crisis time and uncertain future, Bangladesh may reconsider pushing back the transition from the LDC status by three more years.

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