

Gruesome torture and death of child migrant worker

How long will recruiting agencies be allowed to act with impunity?

A report in this daily yesterday revealed the horrific sexual abuse and torture that is faced by female Bangladeshi migrant workers, some of them children, in the hands of their Saudi employers and even their Bangladeshi recruiters. While a large number of women have returned over the past few years to narrate horror stories of the ordeals they faced, these accounts have once again come to light after a Rab raid on Thursday on the office of the recruiting agency M/H Trade International, and the arrest of its owner Mokbul Hossain and his associate Parvez, for offences under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act. This recruiting agency is responsible for sending 14-year-old Umme Kulsum to a Saudi employer who tortured her to death.

This is not the first case of M/H Trade International trafficking women into what can only be described as slavery in Saudi Arabia. In 2018, a 28-year-old returnee migrant worker spoke of how her Saudi employers raped her, starved her and pushed her off the roof and left her permanently disabled. She also spoke of being raped by a local recruiting agent of M/H Trade International, and claimed that the arrested recruiting agent Mokbul knew of her plight and chose to do nothing about it. *The Daily Star* reporter also spoke to other women who recounted similar stories of sexual abuse and starvation, alleging that the recruiting agency was fully aware of their circumstances. Not only did M/H Trade International look the other way, most of these women did not even receive their full wages after the torture they faced.

Given that some of these allegations were made as early on as 2017, why was M/H Trade International allowed to continue to recruit migrant workers and send them abroad? Why was their office only raided in 2020? How did the agency manage to “convince” officials from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), whose immigration clearance is required to send workers abroad, that a 14-year-old child met the minimum age requirement for migrant workers? Why did BMET allegedly ignore the family’s requests to bring Kulsum back home? Why are so many recruiting agencies still out of the purview of the law, despite trapping Bangladeshi citizens in conditions of slavery in foreign countries?

It is not enough for the authorities to investigate individual cases only after the gruesome torture of female migrant workers have led to their deaths. The nexus of recruiting agencies and corrupt officials that allows trafficking through legal migration channels must be dismantled. The authorities must act quickly, before more Bangladeshi women get swallowed up into this abyss of violence and torture.

Saving project money praiseworthy

RHD’s proposal to build more bridges with the money also laudable

A time when cost escalations and time extensions of various infrastructure development projects in the country have become common phenomena, it is heartening that authorities of a project under the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) were able to save Tk 286 crore so far and are also on the right track to complete the project within the deadline. The Western Bangladesh Bridges Improvement Project, under which 81 bridges are now being built with Japanese finances, have also proposed building 10 more bridges under their ongoing project with the saved money. According to the project director, while the main reason for the save was the changes in the currency rate (Japanese Yen vs Tk), they have also saved money from the contract and contingency cost.

According to the road transport and bridges minister, the total cost of two other RHD projects were also reduced—more than Tk 1,000 crore was saved in a project under which three new bridges were constructed and three old bridges on the Dhaka-Chatogram highway were repaired, while Tk 220 crore was saved in a project under which the third bridge on Kamaphuli was constructed.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for the majority of the ongoing development projects in the country where cost escalations and time extensions have become the norm. For instance, the cost of the Padma Bridge project, the Khulna-Mongla rail track project were increased, while the metro rail project has also been delayed. Although the original cost of the Padma bridge was estimated Tk 10,161 crore in 2007 on the basis of a feasibility study, after several revisions, the cost rose to Tk 30,193 crore.

But this particular RHD project should serve as an example to the other project authorities who should try to complete their projects within the stipulated budget and on time. If they do so, this would definitely lessen the burden on the taxpayers. As for this particular project, we hope the authorities will be given the go-ahead for building 10 more bridges with the saved money as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Extending tenure of Wasa MD worrisome

I was shocked to find that Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) board members approved a proposal to extend the tenure of its present managing director by three more years. There have been many controversies around how he has carried out his responsibilities.

The current MD was appointed in 2009 and has been serving for five consecutive terms over the last 11 years.

Now, Wasa authorities will send a proposal to the local government ministry to reappoint him as MD for three more years. It is absurd to reappoint an MD, a position that demands fulfilling crucial responsibilities, when that person has such a history.

Jamshed A Khan, Dhaka

Peace in the time of pandemic

How is the world faring against Covid and conflict?

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

IN a time of an unprecedented global health crisis that is only spiralling from one peak to another, one would expect all parties—warring or not—to join hands and work together to establish peace. Not

that we should need added motivation to seek peace for anything other than the sake of peace itself; but as we are all painfully aware, we live in a deeply imperfect world. Not surprisingly, therefore, the theme of this year’s International Day of Peace is “Shaping Peace Together”.

This year, it has been clearer than ever that we are not each other’s enemies. Rather, our common enemy is a tireless virus that threatens our health, security and very way of life. Covid-19 has thrown our world into turmoil and forcibly reminded us that what happens in one part of the planet can impact people everywhere”, suggests the United Nations website’s page on International Day of Peace.

This approach towards forging unity against the common global enemy Covid-19 is in line with the UN Secretary-General’s earlier call in March to stop wars to fight Covid-19 together—“I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.” And that appeal by António Guterres—when the world was caught off-guard by the super-spreading pandemic—did indeed ignite a tiny ray of hope that perhaps under the unprecedented circumstances the world leaders would put their differences and personal agendas aside and work in tandem to fight the common enemy.

Reality unfortunately unfolded otherwise. What was expected to diffuse conflict and promote peace, unleashed a new set of challenges for the communities to fight. As Covid-19 brought nations to a complete halt for months, many—especially in the developing countries—faced, and continue to face, the brunt of nationwide lockdowns and its devastating impacts on economics.

Price hike of essentials; pay-cuts, even loss of jobs; reduced access to national resources, lack of access to healthcare facilities, often crumbling under the surmounting pressure of the pandemic, increased state intervention in public life in the name of flattening the curve, rise of racist and xenophobic tendencies,

have afflicted nations and peoples since the outbreak of the pandemic, and its ripple-effects have been faced by all. And with inequality and discrimination rising, economic pressures increasing, people are being left with no other option but to rise up for their rights.

While the United States has been rocked by the “Black Lives matter” protests with people raising their voices against the racist, white supremacist tendencies of a segment of people and policymakers,

overshadowed by the continuous conflict between Israel-Palestine that shows no sign of ease. Lebanon has once again erupted post the Beirut blast, and of course, life in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen remain as insecure and uncertain as ever.

In Asia, the repeated Indo-Sino border misadventures have put the region on edge, with neighbouring countries appealing for calm. But with sporadic skirmishes continuing along parts of the 3,440 kilometre disputed border between

over its equitable allocation. Turkey sending out the Oruc Reis, its seismic exploration vessel, into the disputed eastern Mediterranean region—the vessel had to be recalled recently though—had escalated tensions further. And this dispute over resources have ruffled feathers in Europe with France throwing its support behind Greek claims, and the German Chancellor—true to her poison nature—calling for dialogue to resolve the issue. But with tensions burning high in the Mediterranean, it remains to be seen if this fire can be extinguished before it destroys lives, unlike the one at the Moria refugee camp which has ravaged the lives of thousands of helpless refugees.

The refugees and the ones cursed with life in war-torn countries suffer, day in and day out, without home, without protection, without medical care and often without food. And the children are the worst victims. According to Save the Children estimate, “67,000 children are at risk of dying from extreme hunger across Sub-Saharan Africa before the end of the year as already dire circumstances are exacerbated by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.”

“Virus-linked hunger is leading to the deaths of 10,000 more children a month over the first year of the pandemic, according to an urgent call to action from the United Nations shared with The Associated Press ahead of its publication in the *Lancet* medical journal”, reported *The Washington Post* on July 28, 2020. And with the state of affairs as it is, the days ahead look grim and tense.

One only wonders how peace is going to prevail amidst all these challenges and uncertainties. While it is only rational to call on everyone, nations and individuals alike, to come forward and work to shape peace together, how realistic and feasible it is in the current context remains to be seen.

The world today needs much more than just a call for shaping peace together. The world needs rational leaders who can put aside their big egos and petty differences and engage proactively in taking constructive measures to bring peace within their nations and outside. A day to celebrate peace, a day to promote ceasefire is a noble idea. But making it sustainable, feasible and universal is a different ballgame altogether. As the world observes a different kind of International Day of Peace, let us hope that good sense prevails, among the political leaders and the people who elect them to power.

The newly discovered hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean have put Greece, Cyprus and Turkey at loggerheads

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Houthi rebel fighters inspect the damage after a reported air strike carried out by the Saudi-led coalition targeted the presidential palace in the Yemeni capital Sanaa.

PHOTO
AFP

in Belarus people are on the streets demonstrating against the malpractices of the Belarusian government and President Alexander Lukashenko. And the protests in Hong Kong continue in phases against Chinese manoeuvres to exert greater authority and control over the area.

In Latin America, malnourished, ill, and desperately in need of social safety assistance for survival, many have been forced to come down to the streets to protest against the government’s inability to support people and their basic needs in this time of unprecedented crisis. From Bolivia and Brazil to Chile, the continent has witnessed various scales of protest against the governments: form sporadic clashes to mass demonstrations, all because of the government’s response to the pandemic, which to the sufferers seem inadequate at best and selective towards the favoured few at worst.

And in the Middle East, the Trump administration’s cosmetic attempts to restore peace in the region through “normalisation” of ties of UAE and Bahrain with Israel, has been

the two neighbours, there is no sign of the unease subsiding anytime soon. Thailand continues battling its own internal political dilemma. And Myanmar continues persecution of the helpless Rohingya population unabated.

Meanwhile in Africa, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam had locked Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia in a tense dispute over the allocation of the Blue Nile’s water, with Egypt and Sudan fearing the dam would rod them off the much needed resource as Ethiopia announced that it has started filling up the reservoir of the dam. Apart from water security, poor healthcare infrastructure affecting both health workers and patients and corruption in managing Covid-19 resources have affected many countries. As late as September 3, 2020, health workers demonstrated in South Africa protesting poor working conditions and the corruption of the government in purchasing medical PPE.

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Covid-19 and the indefensible position of internally displaced people in Bangladesh

SHAWKAT ALAM

THE United Nations Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) has recognised the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on poor and densely populated urban areas, and particularly on informal settlements and slums. Bangladesh recorded its first case of Covid-19 in March, and the rate of infection has rapidly increased since then. The Bangladesh government has responded to the pandemic by raising a national-level alert and implementing a wide range of public health measures. However, when considering the high density nature of informal settlements and slums, preventing the spread of the virus through social distancing and self-isolation measures becomes hugely difficult, if not impossible.

These issues arise in the context of intensifying rural to urban migration patterns due to displacement caused by climate change, which has increased the density of informal settlements and placed extreme pressure on urban infrastructure. Although Dhaka has been the destination of choice for many new climate migrants, many migrants pass through secondary cities and regional centres along the way. These cities have the potential to become major population centres, however, pull factors such as employment opportunities, make Dhaka the primary city of choice for many new climate change migrants. To reduce the strain placed on Dhaka and ensure that all citizens have access to the essential services they require, secondary cities will play an important role in adopting new climate change migrants by creating competing pull factors against Dhaka.

Following the government’s “general holiday” declaration in the beginning of the Covid-19 transmission, many people left Dhaka, and it was reported that “Hundreds of thousands of people, who had come to Dhaka in hopes of leading a better future for themselves as well as for their children, are now being forced to leave the city of their dreams due to job cuts caused by the coronavirus.” According to a joint survey conducted by BRAC, DataSense and Ummayyeh Shamannay, the pandemic has put over 102 million people at financial and economic risk. Among those surveyed, over 34 percent of families said that at least one family member had lost their job. Meanwhile, 74 percent of families witnessed a fall in their income and 1.4 million expatriate

workers were found to be returning home after losing their livelihoods. With Dhaka already reaching its limit in terms of carrying capacity and ability to cope with the impacts of the pandemic, secondary cities across Bangladesh are well placed to absorb climate change migrants and create new economic opportunities. The Covid-19 situation makes addressing displacement, particularly with respect to resettlement, public health, and employment, more urgent than ever.

It is important that the response to the Covid-19 pandemic is equitable, and the framing of law and policy to allow for the effective development of secondary cities to accommodate climate migrants will be an important means of achieving

and tertiary hospitals, despite 70 percent of the Bangladeshi population living in rural communities.

Sound health policy must also be integrated with other policy disciplines in order to promote good health outcomes of emerging regional centres and a middle-class. Sanitation, clean drinking water, healthy nutrition, basic health education and family planning are all necessary to improve the health outcomes of displaced and vulnerable communities. Steps are already being undertaken to improve the health outcomes of Bangladeshis, however further coordination is required in order to future-proof existing policy and programmes so that it can better address the rising issue of climate change



Desperate to go to their village home, people rush to board a ferry at Shimulia Ferry Terminal in Munshiganj.

PHOTO:
STAR

this. As part of this framing, an awareness and understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of law and policy in secondary cities in the midst of the global pandemic is necessary.

A healthy, productive workforce is the backbone of economic activity. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the interdependency between a healthy workforce, robust economic growth and a rise in living standards. Without access to basic medical services, a supportive health infrastructure and nutrition, urban renewal or regional development is unsustainable. Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in improving the health outcomes of its citizens and developing the capacity to perform public health initiatives. However, significant challenges remain. Health workers continue to be highly concentrated in urban secondary

displacement and migration, particularly in the light of Covid-19.

The public health measures put in place thus far largely fail to recognise the realities faced in informal settlements where adequate healthcare, water and sanitation facilities are often not readily available. There has been evidence of minimal adoption of such measures by the public at large and a lack of public awareness of the measures, and the virus more generally. Without access to adequate health services, shelter, or social security to help them cope with the new measures, internally displaced persons are more vulnerable to risks of infection.

Thus, in addition to increasing the effectiveness of awareness programmes, public health measures ought to be reflective of the realities faced by climate migrants and the need for adequate

healthcare facilities to be made available to them. In this way, the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021 notes that “healthcare facilities will be taken to the doorstep of the people by constructing thousands of new clinics at the grass root level to provide primary health services to the rural community.” This position presents a clear iteration of developing the capacity for local and regional centres to provide healthcare services, and reduce migration to Dhaka that already faces significant strain on its healthcare infrastructure. Stronger emphasis is needed towards the provision of services to regional centres so that these secondary cities can create pull factors for future migration.

The commitment to provide quality health services is continued in the government’s 7th Five Year Plan which outlines health policies that have synergies with new city development for the relocation of displaced persons. The plan calls for, among other things, improved service delivery, the decentralisation of the management of facilities and protecting the interests of the poor. All of these measures are to take into account “deficiencies in governance and management of the health sector.”

The government will play an important role in facilitating and supporting an array of public policies which have an overarching objective of creating sustainable, secondary cities. Such policies ought to be in the forefront of the minds of policymakers and government officials alike, particularly within the present climate. Focus on equipping secondary cities with the resources necessary to accommodate climate migrants will be a vital strategy, not only serving as a long-term solution to ensure that climate migrants have access to the resources and infrastructure they require, but also in responding to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic which has seen many climate migrants leave Dhaka to return to rural villages. As has been observed, the realities of the way many citizens have to live makes following the current health guidelines very challenging. This is particularly acute with respect to climate migrants who, as marginalised populations, require recognition of their lived experiences and the challenges they face, within the laws and policies that are designed to assist them.

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