

Govt procurement process riddled with corruption

Procurement officials having a field day at the public's expense

A World Bank study has, unsurprisingly, found various corruption and discrepancies in the Bangladesh government's public procurement process. Although it is well known that the process is riddled with problems, the extent of these, as revealed by the study, is simply astounding. Bidders apparently need to give bribes in the form of financial benefits, arrange trips and host dinners for government officials to win public procurement contracts. And large bidders are increasingly monopolising the procurement markets, while small bidders are largely ignored.

About 31 percent of the surveyed bidders said they had offered gifts of more than USD 300 to procuring entity officials or others to tilt procurement decisions in their favour. Some 62 percent of bidders admitted to having given gifts worth above Tk 25,000 and 17 percent gave gifts below that amount to sway public officials. Moreover, 17 percent paid for dinners for government officials and 4 percent invited officials to trips, the study said. According to these statistics, it seems that public officials are getting bribed for nearly every single procurement decision!

What is even more worrisome is that bidders are often unlawfully granted information on the official cost estimates of bidding process, which are strictly confidential. Amidst this cesspool of corruption, no official has been prosecuted for any illegal behaviour—no wonder corruption in this sector has become so entrenched.

Favouritism is another major problem in the bidding process, as politically connected bidders often get picked over others. This is leading to greater and greater monopolisation of the sector already dominated by large contractors and will surely discourage honest and small bidders, even though the number of average bidders per contract is terribly low as it is.

The main loser as a result of this widespread corruption is the public. Cost escalation, project delays, etc. have become a common theme in Bangladesh. But when bidders are selected based on political connection or bribes, how can they be expected to fulfil their contract obligations on a timely and cost-effective manner?

The government has turned a blind eye to this for long enough. It is high time the government brought transparency and accountability to the procurement process. The World Bank has given a number of recommendations that can help reduce anomalies. Besides implementing them, the government must enforce strict monitoring of the bidding process and exemplarily punish those who try to illegally influence decisions.

Extension of visas and work permits a welcome move by KSA

All our returnees should be able to reach KSA on time

We are relieved to learn that the Saudi government has finally agreed to extend visas for the Bangladeshis who returned home on holiday but could not go back to the kingdom due to the pandemic and the subsequent suspension of flights in March. According to the foreign minister, our migrant workers could get their expired visas renewed at the Saudi embassy in Bangladesh from Sunday and their work permits (aqama) would remain valid until October 17. The minister also said that the Saudi returnees can now return to the kingdom by all Saudi airlines and Bangladesh Biman flights.

Around 35,000 Bangladeshi migrants were worried that they would lose their jobs if they could not return to Saudi Arabia by September 30, when their visas and work permits were supposed to expire. Now that their visas and validity of work permits have been extended, we hope our government will take all the steps to send them back to the kingdom. It is good to know that Saudia Airlines has already started regular flights to and from Dhaka and the first flight carried around 255 Bangladeshis to Saudi Arabia. However, according to the officials of the Saudi Arabian Airlines, only around 800 more would be able to go to the country on these twice-a-week flights by September 30. And even if Biman starts its four weekly flights to the kingdom, it would not be possible for all the migrants to return to work before October 17.

Therefore, for all our migrant workers to return to the KSA on time, either the two airlines will have to run more flights or other carriers will have to be given permission to operate flights. As Saudia Airlines has already sought permission to operate more flights, we think it should be given the go-ahead. Also, our government should put pressure on the Saudi government to extend the validity of visas and work permits by at least three months so that none of our workers remain stranded at home. Besides, our government must also help the migrants in submitting the necessary documents, including Covid-19 certificates, so that they do not have to face unnecessary trouble while travelling to the country.

No country for Bangladeshi women

How many female migrant workers need to be tortured before we speak up?



SHUPROVA TASNEM

THE story of migrant labour has two polar opposite faces in Bangladesh—one is the “success story” of hard-earned foreign exchange being sent back to the country by our dedicated migrant workers, keeping their families afloat and propping up the economy as well. The other side of that story is one of vulnerability, exploitation and the dehumanising of migrant workers, turning them into products for sale in a market where the cheaper the cost of labour, the higher the margin of profit.

Most recently, the face of this dehumanisation has been 14-year-old Kulsum, who was sent to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker with false documents in April 2018 by the recruiting agency M/H Trade International. On September 12, she was returned to her family in Bangladesh in a body bag. Her lifeless form was covered with signs of torture—her employers had allegedly beat her mercilessly, breaking her legs and arms and damaging her eyes.

Kulsum is not the first female Bangladeshi migrant worker to be tortured and killed in their host country. According to the Expatriate Welfare Desk at the airport, from 2016 to 2019, the bodies of 410 female migrant workers were returned to Bangladesh, with the highest number coming from Saudi Arabia (153), followed by Jordan (64) and Lebanon (52). What is the price of their lives? Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) suggests that out of the USD 16 billion of remittances sent home by migrant workers in the fiscal year 2019-2020, the highest portion came from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (USD 3.5 billion).

Given this amount, it is perhaps no surprise that the bulk of Bangladeshi migrant workers end up in the KSA—57 percent of documented Bangladeshi migrant workers were based there in 2019; out of over 18,000 documented female Bangladeshi migrants, over 10,000 were in Saudi Arabia alone, mostly working as domestic workers. This is despite the fact that Human Rights Watch (HRW) has described the conditions of foreign domestic workers in the country as “near-slavery”, attributing them to “deeply rooted gender, religious, and racial discrimination”. Last year, at least 800 female migrant workers returned from KSA after being tortured and sexually abused, according to the Brac Migration Programme. After Kulsum's death, *The Daily Star* interviewed other migrant workers, recently returned from the same country, who also recounted terrible stories of sexual violence, imprisonment and starvation. These women had no legal protections and no access to justice, were unable to contact their embassies, and were abandoned by their recruiting agencies.

It is not just Bangladeshis who have fallen victim to the terrible violence inflicted on domestic workers by certain employers—the KSA has been criticised for years by rights organisations for not

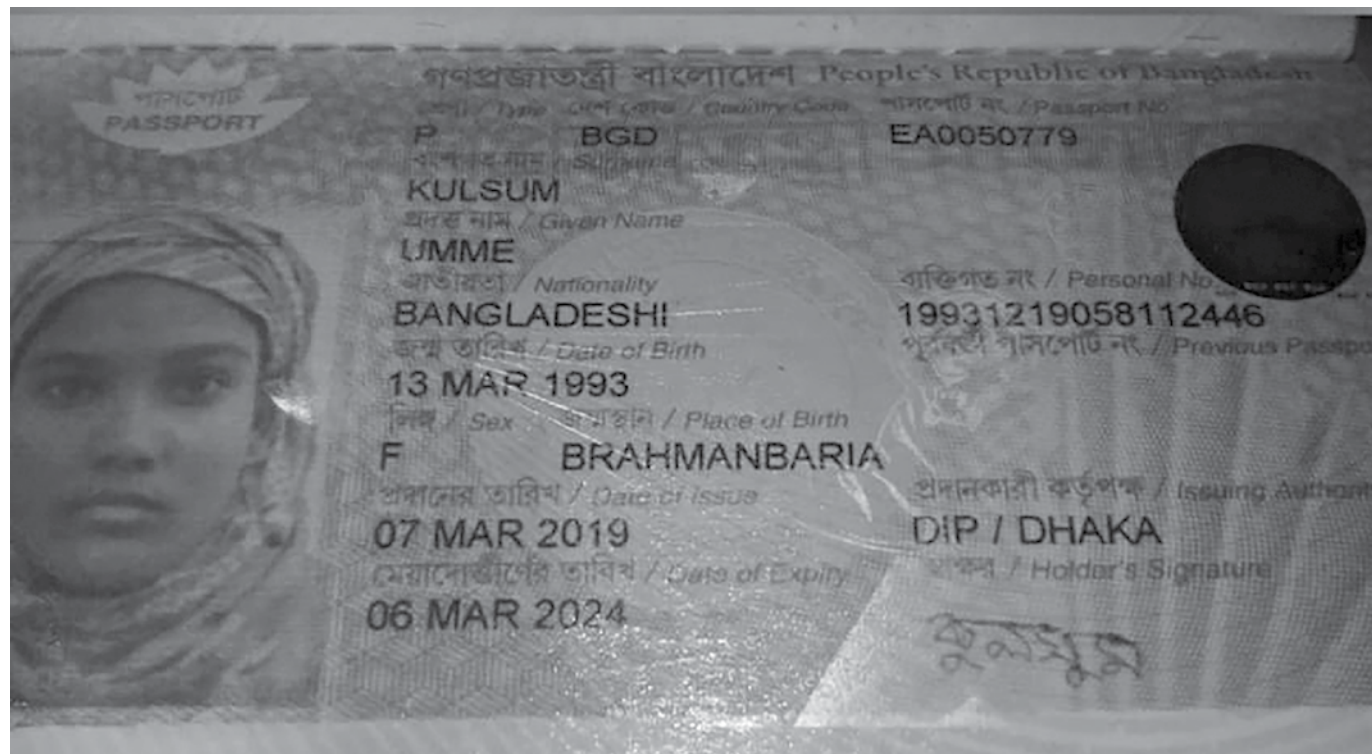
only failing to protect foreign domestic workers from their employers, but also for creating conditions that trap workers with their abusers with no recourse to justice. In a *Guardian* report from 2013, an HRW spokesperson said: “The Saudi justice system is characterised by arbitrary arrests, unfair trials and harsh punishments. Migrants are at high risk of being victims of spurious charges. A domestic worker facing abuse or exploitation from her employer might run away and then be accused of theft. Victims of rape and sexual assault are at risk of being accused of adultery and fornication.” Although a 2015 amendment to KSA migrant labour laws criminalised certain abusive labour practices (confiscating passports, working without contracts, etc.) and strengthened certain labour rights (paid leave, injury compensation, etc.), it excluded domestic workers, who are still at the complete mercy of their employers due to the horribly restrictive *kafala*

to save one of them. Can female migrant workers from Bangladesh expect the same treatment from our authorities?

If we look at the case of M/H Trade International alone, there is little room for doubt regarding our authorities' stance. The allegations against this agency surfaced as early on as 2017. In 2018, one returnee domestic worker, sent to KSA by this same agency, spoke out on how she was raped, starved and finally pushed off the roof by her employers, leaving her permanently disabled. Not only did M/H Trade International not help her, she was even raped by their local recruiting agent. Yet the Rab raid of this agency's office and arrest of its agents only occurred in 2020. Why did this take so long? How did this agency manage to get a fake passport for Kulsum and send her abroad through completely legal migration channels, with the blessings of the BMET stamped on her documents? Why did the Bangladeshi embassy in Riyadh fail to protect Kulsum

pocketed by those pulling the strings in the “manpower” trade. In fact, the only issue that Bangladesh and KSA are currently debating is the outrageous demand that Bangladesh provides passports to thousands of Rohingya refugees who are seeking protection within Saudi borders—the exploitation of our workers is almost always kept on the back burner.

Even as you read this, Bangladeshi workers are scrambling to manage airline tickets that will get them back to their workplaces in Saudi Arabia. Many of these workers were unjustly deported during the start of the pandemic, when foreign workers were scapegoated for spreading coronavirus. (The fact that high transmission in these communities reflected the often abysmal conditions they live in was swept under the rug.) Many are in debt after selling whatever little land they had to pay recruiting agencies for the visa sponsorship system



Snapshot of a page from Kulsum's passport.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

(visa sponsorship) system. If anything, the institutional bias against female migrant workers has become even more entrenched in Saudi law.

In 2014, the Indonesian government paid USD 2.1 million in “blood money” to save Indonesian maid Satinah binti Jumadi Ahmad in Saudi Arabia, who was on death row for murdering her employer. According to Indonesian rights group Migrant Care, Satinah had been regularly abused by her employer, and had finally snapped and retaliated in self-defence. In 2018, the authorities of this Gulf state were strongly condemned by Indonesian officials for executing domestic worker Tuti Tursilawati without even informing her family or the consular staff. Migrant Care alleged that Tuti had murdered her employer while defending herself from being raped. While these stories of abuse are eerily similar to the ones recounted by Bangladeshi workers who have returned from the KSA, there is a marked difference—their country of origin vocally and publicly condemned the country for violating the rights of these women, even going as far as paying two million dollars

and so many of our own?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no clear data on how much money the recruiting agencies and other interested parties (such as *dalals* or brokers) actually make from the trade in human labour. However, it is common knowledge that transnational syndicates resembling trafficking rings exist to profit from this lucrative trade at the expense of migrant workers. It is also quite clear that it is not possible for these agencies and brokers to operate, in both host and origin countries, without the support of corrupt officials who are getting a slice of the migrant trade pie.

And what do our female migrant workers—those who managed to survive their traumatic experiences but will carry these scars for the rest of their lives—get? No justice in either host or origin country, and the knowledge that their exploitation and torture is considered, by all accounts, to be the unfortunate side-effect of a multibillion-dollar and completely legal industry. The abuse of a few hundred women pale in comparison to the golden ticket of USD 3.5 billion, not to mention the unaccounted-for bulk profits being

and are tied to their employers, with no option but to return. Many of these workers are the sole wage-earners in their families and have no recourse to employment at home.

In all likelihood, a huge portion of these workers are also completely unaware of their rights and the potential exploitation they might face in their host countries. Cynics might ask, given that most of the developed world have no interest in the state of human rights and democracy in the Gulf states and are instead filling their coffers with oil money in exchange for weapons, what can smaller nations like Bangladesh do, especially when the future prospects of so many workers are at stake? But perhaps we should also ask ourselves: what is the price we are willing to put on the lives of our migrant workers, and is USD 3.5 billion worth the human cost of trading in their rights, autonomy and personhood?

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @shuprovatasneem.

75TH ANNIVERSARY OF UNITED NATIONS

The Future We Want, The UN We Need

ROBERT W. SANDFORD

AS we reflect on this week and celebrate the United Nations' rise in the war-ravaged world some 75 years ago, humanity is again being asked to lay the foundation for a new world.

As in 1945, we are asked to envision the world that emerges from a global catastrophe. Similarly, as well, in our post-pandemic world we will need to make not a partial but a full transformation, one in which human self-interest again aligns with planetary realities.

Such a global reset can produce universal benefits in the form of a healthier, more just, safer, kinder and more spirituality connected society.

As UN historian Paul Kennedy noted, it is difficult today to recapture the optimism and high spirits of those who, in the latter days of the most devastating war in history, thought that a new world order was possible, or had already arrived.

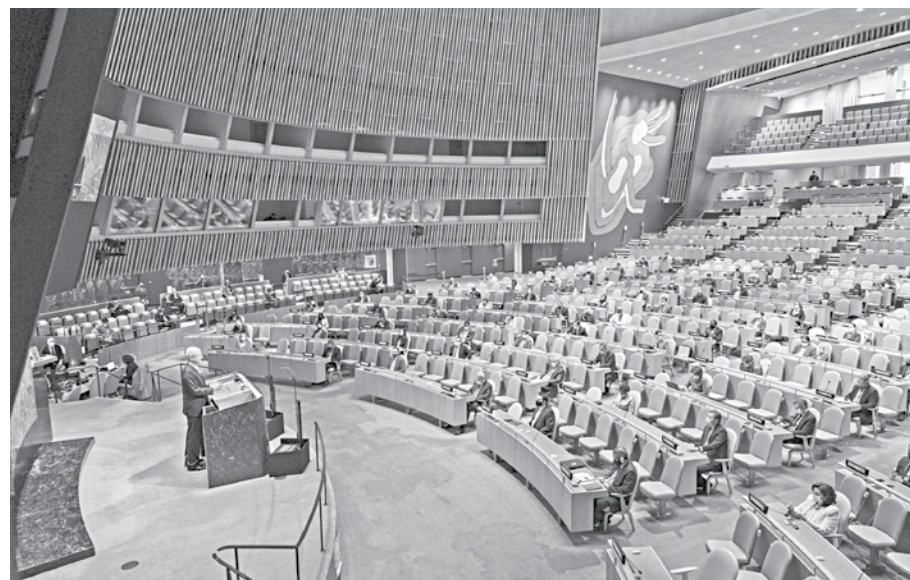
Of course, these visionaries were overly optimistic. All who roll boulders uphill are.

The lesson and inspiration for us is that they were able to look at a world reduced to rubble and see in it a transformational moment for all. If they did that then, surely we can also do so today.

In 1945, the UN inherited the same challenges faced by an earlier experiment in global cooperation, the League of Nations. For every voice favouring the creation of institutions committed to global cooperation, there was another warning against the erosion of national sovereignty. This fierce debate continues today.

Meanwhile, the UN remains unable to escape the fundamental paradox of all international bodies. It only performs as well as its member nations.

Former US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke expressed it famously:



Just as in 1945, this truly is a transformational moment—for the UN certainly, but also for the entire world.

CREDIT: UNITED NATIONS

“Blaming the UN for a crisis is like blaming Madison Square Gardens when the New York Knicks play badly. You are blaming a building.”

And, by virtue of its founding charter conditions, action against rogue states cannot be pursued if a Great Power—that is one of the five countries possessing the veto in the Security Council—is opposed.

It is impossible to understand the history of the United Nations without understanding that this tension was baked into the system at the time of its birth.

That said, even with this structural limitation, the UN has made enormous progress in domains in which individual nations could not adequately or satisfactorily act alone.

And the UN is unlikely to ever collapse because of the growing range of world issues such as climate change that cannot

be addressed alone by even the most powerful member states. As is often claimed, despite its many failings, “if the UN didn't exist, we would have to invent it.”

We live on a different planet than we did in 1945. How could it be otherwise when, in the span of a single lifetime, Earth's human population has swelled almost four-fold to nearly eight billion in 2020—and total global production has grown from USD 4 trillion to more than USD 140 trillion in the same period, with many consequences.

It is important to acknowledge that our current global situation is not all bad. There is, for example, the growing power of international opinion to expose human rights abuses and cause even the most recalcitrant and repressive regimes to consider the consequences of their

crimes. We cannot allow that pressure to let up.

If the Great Pause imposed on us by Covid-19 is to become a transformational moment, the level of change has to emerge from the hearts and collective conscience of humanity.

At minimum, that change has to manifest itself in action in the form of implementation of the UN's existing framework for creating a more just and more sustainable world: the UN's 2030 Transforming Our World global sustainable development agenda.

Difficult as the UN's sustainable development goals may appear to be, and distracted as we presently are by the pandemic, we cannot afford to lose sight of what this agenda can do for humanity. This agenda, if implemented now, may well be seen in time as the greatest gift the United Nations has given humanity.

The problems facing the UN as a world body 75 years into its mandate have not and will not deter it from trying “to save generations from the scourge of war,”

“to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights,” and to promote “social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”

Those ambitions in the original Preamble to the founding Charter of the United Nations had it right. The question now—in this new transformational moment—is, can we finally do it? And the answer is yes, we can.

The boulder is still only half way up the mountain. To advance it further, to create the future we want and the UN we need, much effort is needed.

Just as in 1945, this truly is a transformational moment—for the UN certainly, but also for the entire world.

Robert W. Sandford is the Global Water Futures Chair, UN University Institute for Water, Environment and Health in Hamilton, Canada. Copyright: Inter Press Service (IPS)