

Bangladeshi migrant workers stranded at home

Govt should make alternative arrangements

A large number of migrant workers, particularly those employed in Saudi Arabia, are facing a very uncertain future since there aren't enough flights for all of them to get back to their workplace in time. We are passing through very unusual times and facing unusual situations. A good number of our expatriate workers had to return home due to the pandemic, most of them from Saudi Arabia. Now, there are not enough flights or carriers that would ensure all the Saudi-bound workers go back to join their work in time. The consequence of that is loss of work permit and loss of jobs.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that our expatriate workers almost always get the raw end of the deal. This time has been no exception. They were left without any ostensible means of income after return, and many have returned without much savings to help tide them over during this pandemic. Considering that these workers contribute the major chunk to our foreign exchange coffer, the possibility of having their job terminated if they cannot fly on time has grave implications for our economy too. Reportedly, nearly seventy thousand workers with newly issued visas stand to lose their jobs because there are no tickets available. And the two airlines that are there for the purpose are able to operate only a limited number of flights weekly. The other airlines that used to operate flights to the Kingdom from Bangladesh have not resumed operations since air service was halted due to the pandemic.

We believe that the administration ought to go on overdrive to ensure that the migrant workers can rejoin their work in due time. The Civil Aviation Authority should be more proactive and get more airlines to resume their Bangladesh operations quickly, instead of vice versa. They should prevail on airlines such as Kuwait Airways to carry transit passengers, a practice they have stopped since the pandemic. The authorities should press into service all the Biman aircraft to ferry out the stranded workers. Additional aircraft should also be taken on lease for the purpose, as is done during the period of Hajj. After all, it is not the problem of the workers alone and it is not just for humanitarian reasons that they are helped so they can retain their employment abroad. Their earnings drive our economy.

Students, labourers worst-affected by pandemic

Govt must take steps to ease their financial hardships

ACCORDING to a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey conducted between September 13 and 19, students, rickshaw pullers and labourers have been hardest hit by the economic downturn created by the coronavirus pandemic. The report on this survey, which was released on Tuesday, stated that 85.71 percent of students, 85.11 percent of rickshaw and van pullers, and 84.16 percent of labourers said they had faced financial hardships as a result of the pandemic.

This is cause for concern indeed. While the economy is slowly picking up despite the strong presence of the coronavirus in Bangladesh (especially in urban centres), with lower unemployment rates in September compared to the dire state in which we were in July, when the unemployment rate rose to 23 percent—there are still countless Bangladeshis who are struggling to make ends meet. The government stimulus packages have provided support to formal industries, especially the export-oriented ones, and have most likely avoided a negative economic impact of far greater consequence than we are facing at the moment. However, the informal sectors have gotten less support, which is now evident from the financial struggles that are being faced by rickshaw pullers and day labourers. In early April, the government announced direct cash assistance worth Tk 7.6 billion for informal sector workers. How efficiently and transparently has this cash assistance been distributed? The next logical step, after the release of the findings of the BBS report, would be for the authorities to investigate this matter immediately.

The high proportion of students who are reported to be facing financial hardships also require the government's attention. The future of our students is already in peril as a result of the prolonged closure of educational institutions and the spectre of unemployment looming above the heads of soon-to-be graduates. In this daily, we have already initiated many conversations on online education and how students from low-income backgrounds may be falling behind due to the digital divide. We must also remember that these students and their families are highly likely to be struggling to pay tuition, rent and other education-related costs as well, especially those studying in private universities. We urge the government—as well as the educational institutions that they belong to—to implement specific policies aimed at easing the financial burdens being faced by these students, especially since the struggles they are facing now could end up hampering the flow of their education and having a long-term impact on their lives which, in turn, will affect the nation's development.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is rape being normalised?

A graphic video of a woman being raped and brutalised has caused a national outcry recently. The horrific incident reveals the audacity of sexual offenders in our country. I did not have the courage to watch the clip, but I read the transcript of what transpired and have been infuriated since. How many more women and girls will have to suffer before we see an end to this rape culture? How many victims will be deprived of justice? The offenders must be punished in a manner that they don't dare to commit such horrendous crimes ever again.

Nowreen Hasan, Dhaka

Time to initiate legal reforms in rape prosecution



TASLIMA YASMIN

THE alarming rise in the incidents of sexual violence against women and children points at the failure of the existing law and justice system in prosecuting offenders of rape and ensuring justice for the

victims. The sense of impunity among rape offenders seems so profound that even laws with the harshest punishments are not being able to create any fear in them. A timely and effective reform in the relevant legal framework is thus crucial.

There are currently 95 Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals in Bangladesh. Depending on the volume of cases, several districts have multiple tribunals. Rape is one of the several offences that these tribunals are authorised to try under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (WCRPA). In fact, a bulk of the cases these tribunals usually receive reportedly involve offences related to dowry demands. Considering the severity of rape and its current context, it is important to consider an option to prioritise trial of rape amongst all other cases of violence filed under the tribunals.

Instead of establishing a new tribunal for rape prosecution, a more practical option may be to designate a single Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal in each district to act as the specialised rape prevention tribunal, which would only try cases relating to rape filed under the WCRPA. In districts where there is only one tribunal, due to low number of cases, specific successive days in a week can be designated for the tribunal to function as the specialised rape prevention tribunal. Designating all rape cases under a single tribunal will not only help its judges to effectively monitor the progress of each rape case and to complete trial in a relatively speedy manner, it may also help identify the persons whose negligence or inefficiency had caused delay in a particular case. Having exclusive jurisdiction over rape cases would also ensure accurate and regular maintenance of case records, which will eventually help in ensuring monitoring and accountability of these specialised tribunals.

An effective system of accountability over rape cases is critical. To that end, creating a separate monitoring body in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh can be considered. The Chief Justice of Bangladesh may consider establishing a committee headed by a justice of the Appellate Division to monitor and evaluate reports and case records of the specialised rape prevention tribunals.

Regular monitoring would help the body to identify the legal and procedural loopholes as well as inefficiencies of justice agencies. The body can accordingly recommend changes to the Chief Justice as well as to the government where applicable. However, it needs to be emphasised that such a monitoring body should include opinions of key experts in formulating recommendations, and its reports on the progress of the specialised tribunals should also be made publicly

Neither is there any further specification as to how such reports will be prepared or how they will be evaluated by the Supreme Court. A relevant Rules with procedural details is necessary to be adopted for application of this provision of the Act. However, since the enactment of WCRPA in 2000, no Rules has been formulated on any matter under the law.

Together with ensuring the procedural changes and accountability in rape prosecution, it is absolutely essential

legislation that criminalise sexual offences.

Domestic legislation globally has also progressed remarkably with regard to protecting the legal rights of a victim of rape including protecting her dignity at all stages of the case. Yet, we are still holding on to the colonial evidence law of 1872, according to which, proving the "immoral character" of a rape victim may undermine the credibility of her testimony. Much has been written about the presence of the infamous "character evidence" provision



A protestor holds the national flag while demanding justice for rape victims amid the nationwide outrage over the brutal assault and gang-rape of a Noakhali woman, in front of the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka on October 6, 2020.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

accessible.

It should be noted that the WCRPA itself contains a provision specifically addressing the issue of accountability of the tribunals. Section 31A of the WCRPA provides that if any case cannot be disposed of within the time specified in the law, the judge of the tribunal and similarly the concerned public prosecutor and police officers will have to send a report to the Supreme Court and a copy to the government. Although the provision says that for delay in disposal of cases under the tribunals, "appropriate authority" will take action against the person at fault, there is no mention of who qualifies as the "appropriate authority".

to bring comprehensive reforms in the existing rape laws. Although we had enacted a law in 2000 to try offences related to violence against women, for legal definition of "rape" we are still hanging on to the colonial rape law provision incorporated in the 1860 Penal Code. From the absence of proper explanations for key terminologies (e.g. "penetration", "sexual intercourse", "consent") to allowing absolute exemptions for the rapists of child brides as young as 13 years old—the definition is archaic, vague and gender-insensitive. The definition clearly needs to be reviewed thoroughly in light of modern developments in other pieces of domestic

in the Evidence Act, yet the law remains as it is.

Reforming the law and justice system for prosecution of rape is, therefore, a timely need. However, unless the allegations of inefficiency, irregularity and insensitivity towards rape victims are also addressed properly, reforming laws alone will not improve the current scenario for rape prosecution. Most importantly, the issue of sexual violence needs to be prioritised at the highest policy levels in order to bring meaningful and visible changes.

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US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Unexpected twists or masterly staging of a reality show?



ATIQRUR RAHMAN

THE USA has been in turmoil in recent months with the Black Lives Matter activism, police brutality, countryside pro-diversity protests, show of strength by right-wing activists (mostly white supremacists),

with federal forces using heavy-handed tactics to "restore law and order", and a president seeking divine blessings with the Bible in his hands in front of a church.

But for President Donald Trump, who is now seeking re-election, chaos is order and showmanship is the centrepiece of his election campaign. For him, the priority is not limiting infections and deaths from Covid-19, but rather keeping trade and businesses going. His stand against the use of face masks and lockdowns, his rejection of suggestions given by the country's top health experts, his belittling of the medical profession as well as wrongly promoting dangerous concoctions as cures for the virus have all contributed to pushing the number of Covid-19 deaths in the country to over two million. He could have saved thousands of lives by listening to the country's health experts, but he chose not to. This is the most haunting image the president will have to defend himself against in his re-election bid.

Against this backdrop of chaotic social, political and health scenarios, the first US presidential debate, held on September 29, 2020, was unsavoury, to say the least. The president tried to bulldoze his way through the debate by refusing to stop speaking over his opponent, and to go by the agreed format of the presidential debate.

The debate, however, did not go in his favour. Opinion polls show him trailing by 14 percent behind his opponent Joe Biden. The president received scathing criticism from political commentators for

his uncivil conduct. His insecurity over his ability to stand up to public scrutiny for failures in handling Covid-19, his unresolved tax issues, and his persistent lies to the America people probably made him act the way he did. It was clear that he intended to leave as little time as possible for Joe Biden for making his points.

The debate, broadcast live on TV all over the world, projected a proud country at its very low. The country

rule, such run of events could be normal political activities in an election year. But for the USA, these events were almost like a reality show. The president, with his past history of running reality shows, is now taking it to a wider audience, to viewers around the world. The issue is whether he would be able to draw the curtain on a successful show of getting re-elected.

It is quite apparent to most that if the president continues to follow this course in the two forthcoming debates, it would

could not do so. Due to the surprisingly lax health screening of staff entering the White House for daily work, and the press core attending news briefs, the deadly virus has invaded the White House. It affected Hope Hicks, Senior Counsellor of the President, and then the President and the First Lady, the campaign manager Bill Stepien, chief of his Press Corps Zeke Miller, and others. It is an unexpected chapter in the drama, and perhaps not a scripted one.

The current health status of the president remains shrouded in a bit of mystery. Although he got himself released from the hospital after three days of treatment, his Covid-19 infection raises the questions: what can be the fallout of this unfortunate event on the 2020 presidential election? Will it go in favour of Trump's re-election bid or will it sink him further? How far can the Trump Campaign limit the damage of his already low reputation due to his inept handling of Covid-19?

Given the imminence of the final voting day for 2020 election (with only about 4 weeks to go), the president and his team would try to spin events as much as possible in his favour, both within the debate hall and outside.

The first debate probably sent a few messages to the president's campaign team: A quieter Trump is a better bet for winning the election than a talking one; his campaign could benefit from some sympathy dividends due to the president's Covid-19 infection; and he could take some time to assess the situation and avoid, if necessary, the repeat of another unsavoury debate. A quieter Trump could salvage some ground lost to Joe Biden after the first debate.

If these plays succeed in putting him back at the helm of the government for another four years, it will be the masterstroke of the president's showmanship. But the outcome is far from guaranteed. Whatever happens, I think the election will be a cliffhanger.

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US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS

which saved the world in the past through timely military and diplomatic interventions, spent billions of dollars as foreign assistance for reconstruction, education, fighting poverty, hunger and diseases like malaria, HIV-AIDS and other deadly disease, led the world's scientific innovation and space exploration, and which remained a great land of freedom and opportunity, was reduced in the eyes of its admirers.

For countries with streaks of dictatorial

further lower his position in the polls. The options to the president seem to be very limited. What could he possibly do to come out of this hole which he has been digging since the Minneapolis case of police brutality? What could he say to recover his image of epic failure in limiting the infections and deaths of so many Americans?

Unfortunately, no matter how much the president wanted the Covid-19 issues to be pushed to the back burner, he