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Political patronage of rapists, criminals must stop

Why was Delwar not arrested for his previous crimes?

AS is the case with most rapists and criminals in the country, Delwar Hossain, the prime accused in the recent gang-rape case in Noakhali, was also engaged in various crimes under the patronage of local politicians from both the ruling Awami League and the BNP. Reportedly, after the 2014 elections, Delwar joined Jubo League's politics and formed "Delwar Bahini" which has 40-50 members. Before joining the AL youth wing's politics, Delwar used to be a follower of a BNP-leaning criminal and was engaged in different criminal activities in his area. Although "Delwar Bahini" committed crimes like rape, extortion, land grabbing and robbery, and used drugs to recruit youths of the village to the "Bahini", unfortunately, people of his village and of the entire upazila were so afraid of him that they never dared to speak up against any of his crimes.

According to the Begumganj circle's Additional Superintendent of Police, Delwar is a wanted criminal in three cases—two for murder and one for possessing illegal arms. However, he was never arrested and used to move around freely in the village. The impunity enjoyed by Delwar and his gang only emboldened them to commit more crimes and become more ferocious. The recent gang-rape and torture of a woman in Noakhali is a horrifying example of what happens when identified criminals go unpunished. According to the National Human Rights Commission, Delwar previously raped the survivor of the gang-rape in Noakhali multiple times at gunpoint. Needless to say, he has always gone scot free with impunity because of his affiliation with local ruling party leaders.

There is a dangerous similarity in most of the rape incidents that have taken place recently across the country—most of the rapists were somehow affiliated with the ruling party's student or youth wings. We have seen it in the case of the recent gang rape of Sylhet's MC college where all the rapists were involved with Bangladesh Chhatra League. Evidently, such horrible, inhuman crimes cannot take place without any political patronage.

Therefore, first and foremost, the ruling party leaders must stop patronising these identified criminals in the party in order to stop crimes like rape and break the existing culture of impunity. At the same time, the law enforcement agencies should be given the freedom to do their duty without any political influence. If Delwar was arrested for his previous crimes, the woman in Noakhali could have been saved from being gang-raped and tortured by him and his gang members.

Stranded, despite nod from government

Apprehend syndicates that are exploiting helpless migrant workers

FOLLOWING the suspension of international flights, the government recently permitted their resumption, but due to the soaring demand for tickets and the limited frequency of flights, many expatriate workers, especially those based in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, are in danger of losing their jobs if they cannot travel on time. We are dismayed to learn from a recent report in this daily that a syndicate of travel agents and a section of officials of Biman Bangladesh Airlines are cashing in on this crisis and taking money from the workers in return for confirming their tickets. Some agencies are working on social media as well to avoid detection.

Despite Biman's claim—that tickets are only reissued to those who have return tickets for flights to KSA, and the service can be availed free of cost from Biman's sales centres as no other agency was given permission to reissue Biman tickets—the migrants who fell victim to this trap claimed they had to pay somewhere from Tk 25,000 to Tk 40,000 to officials of respective airlines to have their return tickets reissued. If our national carrier is confident about its own claim, then who are these middlemen meddling to make a quick buck?

Though it is reassuring to know that the Saudi government has extended the validity of visas till October 30, given the fact that around 55,000 Bangladeshi expatriates returned from KSA amidst the pandemic, if we are to send our migrant workers back by the revised deadline, we must realise that time is of the essence. And if they have to fall victim to such corruption where they need to pay "additional" amounts despite the tightening noose on their income, it will further delay their return. The sooner they go back, the sooner they can send back remittance that has proven all the more crucial for our economy, both pre- and post-Covid. The authorities must immediately investigate the matter and bring these syndicates to book. At the same time, they must ensure the timely return of the stranded migrant workers so they can resume their work.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Govt must address the rape endemic

The recent series of rapes should really jolt us. How did we get to this point? Why is it that the most basic human rights of so many women are being violated this disdainfully?

Although the recent cases are especially horrific, rape has been happening at an alarming rate in the country for some time now—so much so that special steps to address the problem should have been taken. We are yet to see the government even talk about it—let alone act.

Politicians and public officials often come out and condemn this or that when it is in their interest. Why is it that no high official is condemning this in the strongest possible way and then taking stern action? This is just unacceptable.

Rezwana Kabir, Dhaka



KAJALJE SHEHREEN ISLAM

last week, 975 women have been raped in Bangladesh between January and September of this year. Of them, 43 women were killed following rape, while 12 women committed suicide. That was before the news of rape in Sylhet, Rajshahi, Sunamganj, Habiganj, Gopalganj; the rape of the madrasa student; the teenage girl raped by her father-turned-"saint"; the 13-year-old pregnant as a result of rape and now being threatened to withdraw the case; the 12-year-old with special needs allegedly raped by an 85-year-old man; and the pages of news on rape reported in the last week. There is a flurry of media reports following every sensational case, but the heinous crime of rape is committed every single day. While the numbers are slightly less than during the same time period last year when 1,115 women were raped and 57 women were killed afterwards, the brutality of such crimes has increased, according to the ASK report.

The video gone viral last week depicting the gang-rape of the woman in Noakhali is just the tip of the iceberg, but which raises several questions. What kind of families, society and legal system do we have, where a woman can be raped for multiple days at gunpoint and does not feel she can report it? When the same woman is recorded being stripped and raped by multiple men with sticks while begging for mercy? When, for over a month, she still does not dare to report the crime, and it is actually the perpetrators themselves who release the video to shame her, the victim. When, after everything, and feeling like her own life has been "ruined", the woman worries about her daughter's in-laws seeing the video and taking it out on her daughter by throwing her out. Because that is the kind of society we have made for ourselves, where women's bodies are not only sites of hatred, violence, venting of frustrations and abuse of power, but where women themselves are often held responsible for the crimes committed against them.

If rape was not "okay", then victims of rape would not be questioned about when and where they were and why, what they were wearing, what relationship they had with the rapist, or whether they were sexually active. Every woman, no

matter who they were or what they said or did, would not be threatened with rape on social media, the comments section of online mainstream media, and even in person, with the most violent and violating language. Perpetrators would be immediately arrested, tried and convicted, regardless of whether or not the crimes went viral in the media. Justice would be done, whether the crime occurred in a madrasa, in the hill

husbands. It would not just seem "not okay" for those with the same beliefs and ideologies. It would not just seem "not okay" only in the cases where we speak, write, and take to the streets in angry protest and not the countless others.

If rape is not okay, it is not okay for anyone, no matter who they are, where they were, when and with whom, what they were wearing, what they said or did, or what their "character" is like. We

their sexuality, and men implicitly learn about the worst weapon to use to destroy women. If rape is not okay, each and every legal, political and social institution must be sensitised to deal with victims/survivors as being just that. If rape is not okay, it is the rapist whose life should be "ruined", and who should live in fear and shame forevermore. If rape is not okay, it is the survivor who should be free to live in society with their honour



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PHOTO: MUNTAKIM SAAD

tracts, or at a late-night party. Rapists would not dare to keep raping repeatedly, assaulting the victims and their families, and threatening them with worse if they dared to report it to the authorities. There would not be debates over what does and does not classify as rape based on archaic laws. There would be more and harsher punishment of rapists. Court judgments that would "deter other men from going down the same wrong path" would be highlighted in the media, as it was in the recent case of a woman convicted of murder. If rape was not "okay", rape jokes and metaphors would not be normalised in sports or under any circumstances, and rape would not have become an acceptable weapon for terrorising (mostly) women, with threats, the actual act, threats of consequences after the act, and the shame of it forever.

Rape would not just seem "not okay" if the victims were children, or covered in a burqa, or accompanied by their

cannot pick and choose the victims we think did not "deserve" it and show them our support, while others are raped over and over again—by the rapists, at the police station, the hospital, in court, in the media, and with our own judgment. Neither can we choose to punish some perpetrators and not others based on their money, political influence, official positions, or simply whether or not they fit our "image" of a rapist. If rape is not okay, every incident needs to be reported, every case filed, taken to court and issued a prompt and fair judgment, with severe punishment for the perpetrator which will serve to deter every other potential rapist.

If rape is not okay, change must come at every level, from changes in the law in order to make it more relevant to crimes committed today, to changes in our culture, society and family, where women are explicitly taught that their lives and reputations begin and end with

intact, because their honour does not lie in their chastity and their shame is not in its violation. If rape is not okay, women need to be seen not only as sacred mothers and sisters and daughters and friends who need protection from being violated and ensured justice if they are, but as human beings with basic human rights to safety and well-being.

While we express outrage at the most gruesome crimes committed because we cannot turn away from what is literally staring us in the face, let us not neglect to demand justice for those who suffer in fearful silence every day. And while we protest the rape and other atrocious war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in our history, demanding that harsh justice be done, let us not forget the crimes that are going down in our history today.

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From lockdown towards opening up the economy

How to achieve our GDP growth target?



NAWSHAD AHMED

quantifiable progress indicators in this respect are: higher export of ready-made garments and increased flow of foreign remittances, in the last three months. We can also observe a sizeable movement of people back to the cities and increased traffic on the roads. Government offices, banks and private offices are almost functioning normally now. In residential neighbourhoods, more and more "To-Lets" are being removed from buildings as owners are finding people to rent out their houses again.

In the midst of a global slowdown, one vital question is, can Bangladesh stand out and ride on a positive growth path over the next nine months? The question is pertinent because South Asia's economy as a whole is predicted to contract by 2.7 percent. It is however promising to note that whereas the government expects GDP growth to be in the vicinity of 5 percent in the current financial year, the Asian Development Bank forecasts a GDP growth rate of 7.5 percent.

What are the economy's drivers at the moment? In the first three months of this financial year, the signs in case of the main growth drivers which are agriculture, RMG exports and remittances are encouraging. But it is still difficult to predict if the same momentum will continue over the next nine months. If it does, that is well and good. The two major export destinations of our garments which are Europe and North America, are set to grow at minus 4.7 percent and minus 3.5 percent, respectively. So there is a big risk there.

The BGMEA claims that garment factories are almost back to operating normally and according to its own survey,

at the end of August, only 113 factories laid off 51,500 workers. It is difficult to say due to data constraints how many workers were laid off at the peak of Covid-19 induced shutdowns in March-June period. The figure that was quoted was one million workers lost their jobs but this number was contested by the BGMEA—which thought it was much lower than this number.

In case of foreign remittances which picked up in the month of June, 2020,

mostly engaged in low-paid jobs. After paying for food and house rent, many workers are left with little to remit back to the country. Historically speaking, there has been a positive correlation between oil prices and per capita remittance flow to Bangladesh.

The health of our local economy, in a big way, is dependent on the three major economic drivers mentioned above. If agricultural production falls, garment workers are laid off due to weak



A jam-packed New Market in July.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

its sustainability is again to be cautiously observed in the coming months. While remittances rose to USD 1.83 billion in June, USD 2.6 billion in July, it went down to USD 1.96 billion in August. Remittance contributes to 6 percent of Bangladesh's GDP. The crude oil market is down. As of September 28, the global crude oil price was USD 41 per barrel. This has an obvious link with the regularity of salary payment of workers in the oil producing middle-eastern countries where 80 percent of Bangladeshis are working—and are

international demand, and remittance flow comes down due to low oil prices, the likely effect is low overall consumer demand, higher poverty level and a cyclical impact on other sectors. As we have seen, the three major growth drivers are showing early signs of recovery, another important sector for the country which is the service sector, is still to show promise of a turnaround. Private sector housing, tourism and hospitality, public construction and maintenance of roads and buildings, are yet to recover from the shocks of the pandemic.

It was generally perceived to be a good decision to lockdown the country from end March to June, 2020. Also, it makes sense now to open up the economy, as has been observed since July that the pandemic has not caused any significant havoc despite widespread economic activities being pursued. For the government, there was no option other than cautious and gradual opening up on all fronts, except in the education sector as yet, to resume the cycle of growth. There is no doubt, however, that there is a cost to bear due to the opening up of the economy.

The total number of confirmed official Covid-19 cases in Bangladesh till September 28 was about 362,000. This translates roughly to one affected person per 460 population. No doubt, the number of affected persons increases every day. The work-days lost by 362,000 persons so far, with an average medically required minimum quarantine period of two weeks, comes to 5.07 million man-days. Although it is difficult to put a monetary value to the lost work-days, taking the average USD 2,064 annual per capita income as a measure of convenience, the total loss of income incurred by these people comes down to USD 29 million. This amount, if a rule of thumb calculation applied, as a percentage of total annual exports in 2019-20, comes to 0.86 percent which is less than one percent. If we do this calculation for the total GDP of the country, the total loss of income will be about 0.08 percent only.

From the above calculation, we can make a strong justification in favour of opening up of the economy in full, which would save us from the scourge of unemployment and poverty, which Bangladesh as a developing country cannot bear for an extended period of time. It is hoped that with more and more sectors fully opening up, the possibility of the economy reaching its full potentials will be achieved in the remaining nine months of the current fiscal year.

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