

Attack on anti-rape long march condemnable

The attackers backed by a ruling MP, protectors of rapists must be punished

WE condemn the repeated attacks on the anti-rape protesters who were on a long march from Dhaka to Noakhali by the men of ruling party MP in Feni. According to the president of Bangladesh Chhatra Union, goons of the local Awami League MP in Feni launched attacks on the protesters with sticks and rods after the demonstrators concluded a rally in the Shaheed Minar area. And the police present there did not do anything to stop the attackers; instead they joined the ruling-party men and chased the protesters. According to news reports, the protesters also alleged that plainclothes men in DB jackets took part in the attack which left at least 35 protesters injured, 10 of them suffering severe injuries. What is even more horrifying is the fact that those injured could not take any treatment in Feni as the Chhatra League and Jubo League men took up positions on the sides of the road from Feni to Noakhali to stop them from seeking treatment and terrorising them further.

The long march was arranged in the wake of a dangerous rise in the incidents of rape and violence against women across the country. After the gang rape in Sylhet's MC College and the gang rape and torture of a woman in Noakhali, which shook the conscience of the entire nation, we are coming across many other reports of rape and gang rape and other forms of violence against women on a regular basis. This long march is a protest against the prevailing culture of rape and sexual violence against women in the country and against the impunity enjoyed by rapists and criminals.

While the demands of the protesters—exemplary punishment for those involved in gender-based violence, reformation of the Evidence Act, implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) charter, put an end to repression of women in the hills and on plain land, etc.—got support from the general public all over the country, it seems that the ruling party backed student organisations are against it. Otherwise, why would they attack the peaceful protesters of the long march? In fact, in most of the recent rape cases across the country, the members of the youth organisations of the ruling party were found to be involved, which explains their anger against the protesters.

The role of the police was also questionable in this incident. Why did the police not stop the attackers in the first place becoming their associates instead? Why did they attack the protesters when their mandated duty was the opposite—to help them? Whose side are they on? The police must answer these questions.

The unwarranted attack on peaceful protesters has only served to damage the image of the government and erode people's trust. We demand immediate arrest of the attackers on the long march and expect that rapists and their protectors will be made to face justice according to our law.

Air quality dips again so why do we tolerate polluting factories?

The govt must put an end to this

A photo published in this paper yesterday of a steel rerolling mill in the residential area of Munshikhola in Pagla of Narayanganj emitting toxic gas, is nothing out of the ordinary, yet it highlights how the authorities seem to have turned a blind eye to such flagrant degradation of the environment. The factory management violated the existing environmental rules by operating such a mill.

It is not fog that we see enveloping the entire area but smog from the hazardous fumes that leads to severe consequences on public health. It is incomprehensible that such a grossly illegal act is taking place under the watchful eyes of the administration. If only their regulation was impactful, it would have helped to reduce air pollution—one of the leading causes of death in our country—through targeted policy measures.

Dhaka, one of the most polluted cities in the world, yesterday ranked worst in the Air Quality Index (AQI) and was classified as "unhealthy". As per World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution kills an estimated seven million people worldwide every year largely as a result of increased mortality from stroke, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer and acute respiratory infections.

Despite the many laws regarding our environment, including The Environment Conservation Act 1995 and The Environment Court Act 2010, why have we failed so miserably to safeguard it? Is it our greed? Or is it our disregard? Or is it both? How are factories operating without environmental clearance certificates, and if they do possess it, why aren't actions being taken against their crimes? The harm we have caused our environment thus far is a ticking bomb. How much has the Department of Environment been doing remains a big question. Being such ardent advocates of reducing activities that contribute to global warming why are we allowing such pollution to perpetuate? It is due time the government act with diligence and make policy decisions to shut down mills that pollute our air so indiscriminately. If we do not immediately address air pollution—that results from burning fossil fuels, industrial activities, transportation, poor waste management, etc.—we may end up "choking" ourselves sooner than we think.

Why Bangladesh and India's per capita GDP should not be compared

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE latest report on World

Economic Outlook by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) published in October 2020 has created a lot of noise both in Bangladesh and India. To recap, the IMF has projected that in 2020 per capita GDP of Bangladesh will be USD 1,887.97 at current prices. India will have a per capita GDP of USD 1,877 in 2020. These changes in the respective economies will be due to a 3.8 percent increase in Bangladesh's GDP and 10.3 percent decline in India's GDP in 2020.

The IMF outlook also indicates that in 2021 India will see a rise of its per capita GDP by 8.8 percent while Bangladesh will see a rise of 8.0 percent. As a result, in 2021 India's per capita GDP will reach USD 2,030 and Bangladesh's USD 1,990. IMF's projection till 2025 indicates that in 2024 India will surpass Bangladesh and in 2025 Bangladesh will be ahead of India in terms of per capita GDP.

Reactions to these estimates have been divergent in both the countries. In Bangladesh, the government is understandably happy and proud of this accomplishment. Some analysts have credited the government for its efforts while many others have suggested it should do better by addressing existing challenges.

In India, a number of media outlets have lauded Bangladesh's achievement and suggested the Indian policymakers reflect on what went wrong in India and what worked for Bangladesh. Indian opposition political party saw it as the failure of the current Modi government. Many have blamed the weak management of Covid-19 which had a negative impact on the Indian economy.

Yet another group of Indian media was rather unkind in expressing their views on the IMF's projections. While interpreting the numbers, they stretched their words to undermine Bangladesh's achievement. They referred to non-compliance in the readymade garments (RMG) industry, violent political confrontation, corruption and Islamic radicalism.

But not all of it is correct. Also, these are not unique to Bangladesh.

Many countries around the world which have much higher incomes than Bangladesh are facing various types of limitations. Political violence and corruption are typical to all least developed and developing countries including the South Asian countries. During the last several years, Bangladesh's RMG entrepreneurs have been working hard to improve compliance and have been successful in earning buyers' confidence by doing so. The current government of Bangladesh has been strong-handedly controlling Islamic radicalism in the country after a few incidents. One should not forget that this

is a global problem and therefore, without global effort it is not possible to root out religious extremism.

For both countries, there is no reason to overreact to these projections on per capita GDP for a number of reasons. First, using GDP as an indication of achievement has been criticised by economists for long. The very method of calculating GDP is flawed and it fails to show the real health of the economy. To avoid repetition, I am not discussing

India is the largest democracy in the world. It is a much larger economy than Bangladesh. Still, having economically stronger neighbours is good for India. Higher purchasing power of Bangladeshi people will create higher demand for Indian goods and services. This will in turn increase India's export income from Bangladesh. Medical tourism to India by Bangladeshi patients is increasing every year. A large number of Bangladeshi students are also pursuing education

higher per capita gross national income, and meeting the human assets index and the economic vulnerability index of the United Nations, Bangladesh has also fulfilled all three criteria to graduate from an LDC to a developing country by 2024. Also, in 2018 Bangladesh achieved the status of a lower middle-income country graduating from a low-income country, according to World Bank's classification criteria.

However, Bangladesh should not be



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PHOTO: REUTERS

those here. But readers may refer to my earlier pieces on this topic ("Our incomprehensible obsession with GDP", May 19, 2019 and "Bangladesh's GDP growth number does not hold water", August 17, 2020). Second, comparing nominal GDP of one country with another is not correct. One dollar does not have the same value across countries. For example, one dollar in Bangladesh will not buy the same amount of goods and services in another country. The cost of living varies from country to country. That is why GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) is used while making GDP comparisons among countries, instead of nominal GDP. Hence in terms of PPP based GDP India is still ahead of Bangladesh. India's GDP at PPP is USD 6,284 and Bangladesh's USD 5,139.

Third, these GDP numbers are only projections and they keep changing as economic performance changes. Sometimes they change radically due to circumstances beyond our control. Who could predict that the world economy would struggle to survive in 2020? Who could foresee the deadly coronavirus pandemic coming? Haven't all projections made last year been revised?

Fourth, feeling competitive with neighbours is politically unhealthy.

in India. As a big neighbour India's responsibility also lies in working towards removing tariff and non-tariff trade barriers for Bangladeshi products. Water sharing is a long-standing agenda to be resolved between the two neighbouring countries.

For Bangladesh, higher per capita GDP than India is a noteworthy achievement indeed. India is a developing country while Bangladesh is still a least developed country (LDC). Bangladesh has been experiencing steady and high growth over the last decade. At the same time, Bangladesh has been successful in reducing population growth since its independence through active interventions. This has helped increase its per capita income.

Even during the pandemic Bangladesh has been able to maintain positive growth. This has been possible due to bumper agricultural harvest, good exports and high remittances. Bangladesh's success in social indicators is also well known to the world. The country has been an impressive performer in achieving several Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In continuation to the MDG achievements, Bangladesh is committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By achieving

complacent about the projections of per capita GDP. Despite high growth, various weaknesses within the economy are obvious. Low revenue generation and investment are major challenges. The IMF report also mentions that Bangladesh's revenue-GDP ratio will be only 8.17 which is the lowest among South Asian countries. Due to low revenue generation the government has limited expenditure capacity. Total government expenditure is also lowest in South Asia and stands at only 14.97 percent of GDP. Investment-GDP ratio is 27.73 percent, much lower than Nepal and Bhutan and close to India (27.77 percent). As a result, the economy is constrained when it comes to creating adequate employment. High growth has not been able to reduce inequality. Strong measures are needed to improve governance and establish rule of law. Institutional reform to improve transparency and efficiency is still an unfinished agenda.

Therefore, the next step for Bangladesh is to work on its weaknesses to enhance and sustain its growth momentum and make growth inclusive and equitable.

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Putting consumers at the centre of green buying

RMG NOTES



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

IN the discussions around climate impacts and business, a missing link is often the consumer. Yet if we really want to push the needle in these issues, we need to bring the end consumer into the conversation.

It is no good if we keep doing surveys which tell us that consumers will pay more for environmentally produced products, for the fact is that consumers often say one thing while doing something else entirely.

Instead, we need to find a way to "lock-in" carbon impacts for products, providing a direct link between the environmental impact of a product and prices consumers pay for it.

How could this work? This is a question many have grappled with in the apparel and textile industry, with little success. But in Sweden, a food business might potentially offer a solution.

In a global first, a Swedish food brand Felix recently launched its own grocery store where products are priced on their climate impact: the more the carbon dioxide emissions, the higher the price.

In the store, customers pay with carbon dioxide equivalents (CO₂e) and all products are priced based on their climate impact. By using a climate-based currency, Felix highlights what the true cost of food really is, and that the change in our pocket is equal to the change needed for a sustainable world.

Why can't we do the same with clothing? In terms of climate impact, apparel production is responsible for a significant amount of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Some estimates say it is the second most polluting industry in the world.

Yet despite consumers' growing awareness about these negative environmental impacts and a desire to make better choices, it can be difficult to know which clothing purchases are best for the environment.

Consumers need clearer guidance here and I am not just talking about labels on clothing. As an industry we need to bring more transparency to these issues, clarifying the connection between the clothing products we produce and purchase and their climate impact.

was the other way round: the cheapest jeans are also the ones that are better for the environment. The option of which to purchase would be obvious: this is how pricing could be used to directly impact green purchasing decisions.

I know what you are thinking: surely it costs more to make more sustainable jeans because, for instance, they might be made of organic cotton or use finishing techniques that are less environmentally damaging? Therefore, it would usually be the sustainable pair that is more



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Imagine, then, walking into a fashion outlet and being told a pair of jeans would cost USD 50 while an alternative pair would cost USD 30. Which pair would you buy? The sad reality is that consumers tend to still go for the cheaper one, even if it can be shown that the more expensive option has an eco-friendly label of some sort.

But now imagine that the situation

expensive?

While this may be the case, the idea with this kind of pricing is that it is structured in such a way that any surcharge on the expensive jeans is actually used to pay for the environmental impact associated with what would be the less green option. In effect, consumers would be paying a pollution levy or something similar.

This may sound like a far-fetched idea and it would certainly take a huge amount of coordination as well as requiring a quite different mindset among end consumers.

I sincerely believe, however, that these are the types of hard conversations which our industry needs to start having if we are to move towards where we need to be. If the option that is the worse for the environment continues to be the cheapest one, how are things ever going to change? Seriously? People will simply vote with their feet and our industry challenges will never be met. At some point, the society has to start paying for the choices we make.

Imagine on the other hand a society where the costs associated with unsustainable production were passed along down the supply chain and eventually found their way into the prices paid by end consumers. All of a sudden, we have a situation where consumers are being empowered to make the right decision for themselves and the planet at the same time.

The food store in Sweden is the first I know of to trial an initiative such as this. Other industries may follow but, more generally, more and more sectors are considering how they can "price in" environmental costs to positively influence buying habits.

The long-term ideal, of course, is that consumers learn and become educated and shift purchasing practices accordingly. But they cannot do that alone. We as manufacturers, as well as our retail partners have to lead them along that journey, gently guiding them towards purchasing options which make sense for them as individuals financially, while also ticking all the right boxes when it comes to the planet.

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