

No coordination, urgency or foresight in govt's migration initiatives

Our migrant workers don't deserve such callousness

THE insensitive way in which the migrant workers' crisis has been handled since the onset of Covid-19 seems to indicate that the government only cares about migrant workers when it is time to count their contribution to the GDP but not when it is time to take care of their pressing concerns. Despite repeated pleas to the government from the workers themselves, as well as from migration experts, to prepare for the severe repercussions of an impending fallout due to the pandemic, the authorities deployed their usual rhetoric of "all is well", wasting precious time that should have been spent in formulating and implementing a comprehensive plan to ensure timely and hassle-free return of workers to their workplaces.

The government only started negotiations with Saudi Arabia once the migrants' permits and iqama had already expired and they took to the streets in hundreds to protest the potential loss of employment. Flights are limited and costly, and there's still great uncertainty over whether all of them will be able to return on time. Desperate migrants are paying huge sums of money—at a time when they are already strapped for cash and burdened with debts—for flights, while potential migrants who secured visas before the pandemic but could not travel are being made to go through bureaucratic and costly loopholes again, compelled to provide medical reports and "police clearance" certificates along with fresh papers. Charging an additional fee of Tk 3,500 for mandatory Covid-19 test for all out-going passengers has only added to their burdens. There does not seem to be any coordination among the ministries of civil aviation, expatriates' welfare and overseas employment and foreign affairs, nor any real concern on the authorities' part about how to reduce the migrants' ever-increasing woes.

Meanwhile, the initiative to disburse loans at a 4 percent interest rate to affected migrant workers, through the Probashi Kallyan Bank, is yet to gain any traction as a result of bureaucratic delays and complex requirements which act as hindrances to accessing the loans.

The question is, has the government learnt anything from all this? Is it in a better position to ensure that similar fates do not await those who will be returning to their host countries soon? Are they conducting negotiations with those countries to renew their visas and reduce bureaucratic hurdles for the migrants? Will they ensure timely flights? Will the process of procuring loans be simplified? What other steps will be taken to rehabilitate those who may fail to return to work?

We want to have faith that the government will finally start fulfilling its duty to the migrants, but unless the concerned ministries shape themselves up and treat the issue with the urgency it deserves, we are afraid we will see more of the same in the coming months. Our migrant workers certainly don't deserve such callousness.

Call drops becoming more frequent

What steps are being taken to improve service?

FREQUENT call drops and disruptions became a major problem for more than 16 crore mobile subscribers in the first eight months of this year. There were 112.95 crore call drops between January and August, according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), translating to an average of about 47 lakh call drops per day. During the Covid-19 period, this has become an even bigger problem as a large number of people have been working from home and needing better quality service. People in rural areas have been hit the worst, as poor connectivity and call drops have been more frequent there.

Despite the number of mobile and internet subscribers increasing by 1 crore and nearly 2 crores in the last two years, no new cell phone towers have been set up in the country during that time, leading to a gradual decline in the quality of services. In 2018, the government had approved four applications for tower operation licences, but due to a lack of agreement between tower-sharing operator licensees and telecom operators, as well as regulatory issues, there have not been any new towers built yet. In the meanwhile, it is the consumers who are suffering.

This is unacceptable. It is imperative that people should get reliable and quality cell phone service, especially during times of emergency such as the Covid-19 outbreak. It is time for the regulators to toughen their regulatory measures and to ensure customers' rights are protected. This should include customers getting compensation for dropped calls. However, as this paper has previously reported, mobile operators have been reluctant in the past and had cut back on providing compensation for dropped calls between August 2018 and July 2019. The regulators must monitor this, get the operators to provide fair compensation to their subscribers and also ensure that better quality service is provided.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Help jute workers

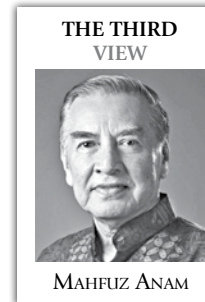
According to a report, export of goods made from jute rose by 40 percent. The Ministry of Textiles and Jute stated that the influence of jute on the national economy has grown substantially. This is indeed good news as the jute plant is one of the most promising ones to grow on our soil.

However, we have noticed how desperately workers have been protesting against the closure of state jute mills. The government's decision to shut all the mills and lay off thousands of workers was truly heart-wrenching. It should not turn a blind eye to the plight of the workers and must do everything possible to help the industry flourish.

Costa D'Souza, by email

US ELECTIONS

Understanding its hidden message



THE THIRD VIEW
MAHFUZ ANAM

BY the time this article goes to print, Joe Biden, the Democratic Party candidate, may have scraped through the race for the White House. However, for those of us watching the US elections from the outside, who eventually wins is, of course, crucial but the message that the election process has revealed is equally, if not more, important. The election has revealed, far more intensely than ever before, that the US is an ideologically divided country, and dangerously so. The danger is that the division is not on policies but on principles and ideals that this country should stand for. A division that sees the world so differently that it is bound to impact, and in fact dismantle, the world order that has sustained so far.

Millions of votes that Trump got point towards a vision of the US that is radically different from what its constitution proclaims, especially as regards racial equality. There is a rising and vicious racist and white supremacist streak that appears to be endorsed by about 48 percent of Americans. These voters believe that democracy—the US's trademark selling point in the world—is not for all. It also revealed an inexplicable refusal to accept science and fact-based reasoning; it brought out a corruption of politics where partisanship overrides public welfare and where open demonisation of the "other" has become the norm, regardless of how much it harms the country. Republicans crossed no legal line in appointing the latest supreme court judge but it was not lost to anyone that partisan political consideration superseded every other factor. It revealed the dangerous risks that the US is willing to take by destroying the global order that has ensured, in however flawed a manner, a relative peace in the post-World War II period. It has also revealed that the US cannot be counted on as a reliable partner for global collaboration unless American interest is given the highest consideration.

In 2016, Donald Trump was the new kid on the block, the Washington outsider, the non-politician promising to "clean the swamp". His candidacy could easily be considered a "fresh start". Of course, those who really knew him and were familiar with his ways greatly doubted that anything good could come from such a man.

But in this election, he was the incumbent with four years of performance record, of leadership, of policies, of

supporting causes, of taking position and of handling crises to judge him by—not to mention, the four years of outrageous tweeting. He was a one-man demolition squad for many American institutions and did everything to create doubt in the vaunted US election process by presenting it as full of fraud.

Yet so many American voters chose him. They chose him in spite of the fact that nearly 240,000 people have already died of Covid-19—which is twice the total US casualties in WW I, half of those who died in WW II, and four and a half times the number of those who died in the Vietnam war. Health experts have repeatedly said that more than half of them could have been saved through better management of the crisis.

One of the maddening things about the US elections is that it draws us all in, citizens and outsiders alike, with the latter

the Watergate affair in the late sixties and early seventies. The more I saw how the US system held its elected officials, especially its president, accountable—through the myriad committees at state and federal levels, special prosecutor, endless hearings, etc.—and the role of the media, especially the newspapers (those days were far different from today's digital and social media), the more my admiration for the American system grew. It was a welcome antidote to my rising disillusionment due to the US's role in Vietnam. I stood astounded by what one single newspaper—*The Washington Post*, and its editor and two reporters with the firm backing of its illustrious publisher, Catherine Graham—could do when their head of state violated the law. Ultimately, Nixon had to quit office not so much for the break-in at the Democratic Party's office in the Watergate Apartment



US President Donald Trump at a campaign rally held before the November 3, 2020 presidential election.

PHOTO: REUTERS

sometimes being more involved because we understand the implications of the outcome more acutely than perhaps many others. We follow the trends, try to fathom the issues, learn all about the swing states, and attempt to understand how the citizens of the biggest military power, the biggest economy, and the country that has the capacity to do a lot of good and harm to the world, will vote. What was a curiosity became a worldwide concern after the reckless invasions of countries in the Middle East, destroying whatever state structure they had to govern themselves. Now we observe the US elections deeply perturbed about whether or not one of the architects of the present-day international order will resume to play a constructive role or be hell-bent on dismantling it.

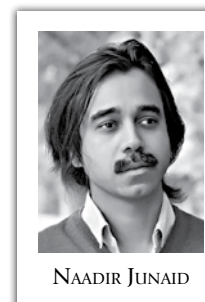
My own fascination with the US elections started with Richard Nixon and

complex (from which the incident acquires its name) but for the cover-up that he initiated.

Nixon's case was a severe jolt for the US system where its highest office bearer was caught breaking the law. From this low in its history, the US emerged, in my view, stronger by showing that it could cleanse itself, even at the very top, and move on because institutions were stronger than individuals.

While Nixon jolted the system, George W. Bush, as the 43rd president, practically destroyed it. He made lying—about the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), to justify invading Iraq—patriotic. While Nixon had to suffer the indignity of being forced to resign—with impending impeachment hanging over his head—for abusing the power of the presidency, perverting institutions of governance and lying to the American people,

How respectful are we of the ideals of Liberation War?



NAADIR JUNAID

IN 1971, the Pakistani military junta wanted to prevent Bengalis of then East Pakistan from pursuing their just demands by using brute force. When the Pakistani army unleashed a genocidal attack on unarmed civilians on March 25, the people rose up against them, and after a nine-month war that resulted in a great deal of bloodshed and suffering, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation. The ideals of our Liberation War thus entail, among other things, resistance to unjust display of power, tyrannical and exploitative rule, sexual violence, religious intolerance, and racial hatred. Those who fought for freedom in 1971 hoped that the oppression and prejudices they had experienced before would cease to exist in the independent nation. Our freedom fighters also deeply valued our shared identity as Bengalis that bound people of all religions in the country.

The importance of "upholding the ideals of Liberation War" is often stressed in speeches and remarks by politicians and intellectuals and even ordinary people. But as we near the 50 years of our independence, one may wonder how many people today really understand what constitutes the ideals of Liberation War or what it means to respect them. If people really understood and believed in those ideals, how could there still be such prevalence of problems such as corruption, brazen display of power, repression of women, religious intolerance, etc.—which are totally antithetical to the values of the Liberation War?

Hatred of non-Muslims was one of the common attributes of the Pakistani army. The Pakistani rulers did not like Bengalis' fondness for songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore because he was not a Muslim. It is extremely frustrating to see that religious bigotry still plagues our society. In 2016, some young men occupied the Holy Artisan restaurant in Gulshan and mercilessly killed a number of innocent and unarmed persons in the name of religion. Although those extremists were Bangladeshis, it seems

they were not at all aware of the history of the emergence of Bangladesh. Did they know about the Pakistani atrocities against Bengali civilians in 1971? Did they know how the members of Al-Badr abducted Bengali intellectuals and murdered them in order to debilitate the diffusion of progressive ideas in post-independence Bangladesh?

Instead of being inspired by Rumi, Bodi, Jewel, Azad and numerous other young freedom fighters who fought

still do not despise or protest it as strongly as they should.

Our politicians often declare their adherence to the values of 1971. At the same time, we witness brazen abuse of power by politically influential people in our society. It is disconcerting to see the "ideals of Liberation War" being reduced to a buzz phrase used for political advantage. In different decades after independence, individuals known for their anti-liberation role were made

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the oppressive Pakistani army for the independence of their motherland, these young men embraced religious zealotry. Their blind belief and intolerance turned them into cruel, cold-blooded zealots and, like the Pakistani occupying army and their local collaborators, they murdered innocent civilians. Al-Badr and Al-Shams were formed with Bengali religious fanatics who, like the Pakistanis, used to loathe ideas concerning Bengali nationalism, religious harmony, and a secularist society.

Freedom fighter Ziauddin Tariq Ali once said that he felt very sad that the Bengalis had all but forgotten the genocide committed in 1971. It seems many Bangladeshis have also forgotten that in 1971, the Pakistani army raped thousands of Bengali women. When we hear that between January and September this year, more than three rape incidents on average took place every day, we see in them a grotesque display of the same immorality shown by Pakistani perpetrators all those years back. It is a shame that despite there being such a well-documented history of sexual violence being perpetrated in 1971, many

ministers. Even in those days, parties in power did talk about upholding the ideals of Liberation War. But when a party turns a blind eye to the increasing influence of anti-liberation forces, its professed devotion to the spirit of Liberation War becomes questionable.

Perhaps inspired by the problematic notion that politics makes strange bedfellows, pro-liberation parties of our country sometimes liaised with the anti-liberation forces. May be such decisions were deemed practical by some politicians. But in their blind pursuit of political mileage, those pro-liberation forces ignored the fact that such alliances helped anti-liberation forces gain a firm footing in the realm of politics. It is also necessary to remember that any attempt to appease the forces that have no interest in espousing liberal and progressive ideas would contribute to the strengthening of extremist elements in society. Providing reactionary forces with concessions would make them stronger and eventually their influence would serve to weaken the spirit of the Liberation War.

The ideals of Liberation War started to lose ground as a discourse because of the

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President Bush was hailed as a hero for upholding "American values" for his ill-conceived war on terror. Trump picked up from where Bush Jr. left off and made misrepresenting facts and distorting information a regular practice, thereby destroying the system that runs on facts rather than fiction.

The reason I delve into the past is to bring out the contrast between the political values of the past US administrations and that of the present. It is not to say that past US administrations did not lie—the Pentagon Papers prove it convincingly—but only to differentiate that what was rare then is regular now.

What triggered rejection 50 years ago now generates embrace, what made voters stand up in disgust now provokes amusement, what was a no-no in US politics—like white supremacy and racialism—is now a common yes-yes, what would have once caused total outrage—the failure of leadership in the health sector—is now a fact that appears easily acceptable. Whatever sobriety there was in US politics is now replaced by breast-thumping, unabashed and self-defeating ultra-nationalism. The US appears to now live in a world of alternative facts and post-truth.

The biggest lesson from this election for those of us looking in from the outside is the fact that millions of Americans voted for President Trump and wanted four more years of his rule in spite of what he did, stood for and proposed to do. It is now clear that we don't know and understand this new US that may be emerging, a US that does not want to know and understand the world but is totally enwrapped in its own vainglory.

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gradual decline in power of the freedom fighters. After independence, freedom fighters could not remain united, whether in political parties or in the armed forces. Many eminent freedom fighters were killed due to factional divisions and sometimes executed by controversial and unfair military trials. For many years now, articles, documentaries, and discussions concerning Liberation War have appeared in the mass media only on specific days such as March 26 and December 16. How can we expect the current generation to develop a broader understanding of the ideals of Liberation War if their knowledge about the sufferings, sacrifices, and struggles of the Bengalis in 1971 remains scant? Our Liberation War needs to be discussed in the media and in academic institutions in such a way that would help people gain valuable insights about the brutal genocide and sexual violence committed by the Pakistanis in 1971, the systematic liquidation of our leading intellectuals, intense suffering of common people, and the valour and supreme sacrifices of our freedom fighters.

Would it be too difficult to create libraries in rural areas and small towns and inspire young people to read books on Liberation War? The MPs and local politicians can easily lead these initiatives. Television channels should screen Zahir Raihan's *Stop Genocide*, Vanya Kewley's *Major Khaled's War*, Alamgir Kabir's *Liberation Fighters*, Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud's *Muktir Gaan*, Tanvir Mokammel's *1971*, Sukhdev's *Nine Months to Freedom* and such Liberation War-based documentaries more regularly. I think footage used in these documentaries would lead to a deeper engagement of the spectators with the realities of 1971.

The ideals of Liberation War would be revered highly when people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and students studying in Bangla and English medium institutions and madrasas understand why the freedom fighters deserve our utmost respect—and why those Pakistani perpetrators and their collaborators, and those who carry their legacy today, deserve severe condemnation. If we can't convince our people to reject reactionary ideology and resist all forms of oppression, we will be guilty of betraying the ideals of our Liberation War.

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