

Crisis of opportunities feeds Bangladesh's human trafficking problem

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

WE all aspire to "a better future". While the idea of a better future and what it entails varies from people to people, dreamer to dreamer, what remains constant is the aspiration. It is in search of this future that hundreds and

various factors. For the affluent, the prospect of better education, better standards of living, and better facilities are the determinant factors. For those living on the fringes of society, the causes are much more diverse and desperate. Even if we narrow down the causes to the socio-economic triggers, four key areas come to the fore.

"If we look at the profile of the people who are migrating, we'll see that they are basically the youth," said noted economist

education or training or employment. Which means, there is a lack of opportunity both in terms of employment and skills development. So there is a big void there, a crisis of opportunities facing the youth. And this crisis presents a big existential threat for them, leading them to migrate out of desperation."

The second bundle of factors, according to Rahman, relates to the overall governance environment and governance or political norms in the country. "The party-affiliation-

but they are helpless against the reality that, here, merit is not appropriately rewarded nor are rules followed."

And the third factor is the deteriorating employment elasticity of growth. Dr Rahman referred to the statistics of Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)—a nationally representative survey used to measure monetary poverty that is conducted every five years—which suggests that between 2010 and 2016, the overall employment elasticity of growth has gone down. It means that one percent growth in 2016 could not generate as many employment opportunities as it did in 2010. And this has also exacerbated the desperation of the jobless. With Covid-19 taking a toll on the nation's economy and pushing people out of jobs, people now have become even more vulnerable to the lures of clandestine trafficking rackets.

In addition to these, women's lack of access to education and skills development opportunities is another factor that leads to their migration abroad. Most of the women who are forced to go abroad take up menial jobs, for example as domestic help. In a report published last year, a local newspaper citing the data of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) suggested that more than 8.4 lakh female workers went abroad since 1992; of them, 98 percent migrated to Middle Eastern countries as domestic help. And a good number of them fell victim to physical torture and abuse. Dead bodies of 473 women returned to Bangladesh between 2016 and September this year. Many of them had committed suicide.

Despite the increasing cases of abuse of our female migrant workers abroad and the risks of human trafficking, women and girls still take the risks out of desperation to support themselves and their families. The ones that are lucky find decent employment. The ones that are not fall prey to the traps set by traffickers, and are often sold into prostitution and servitude.

While talking to a local newspaper, Sumaiya Islam, executive director of Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra, suggested that education for migrant workers should be improved and the standard of their training should be enhanced to international standards to make work abroad safer for them.

Apart from this, child marriage (I wrote a column last year detailing how early marriage is making our girls more vulnerable to trafficking), social stigma, and lack of empowerment are added factors which make women and girls more prone to trafficking.

These social and economic factors must be rooted out, and only then can we eliminate the causes that enable human trafficking. While the academic and skills development curricula need to be made more comprehensive to empower the youth with knowledge and skills to earn a better living, the country's economic planners need to work on creating more sustainable employment opportunities at home to accommodate the job needs of people—boys and girls, men and women. Such job opportunities must be available to everyone, not just those who are associated with the politically influential. The ministries of women and children affairs, education and social welfare can work together to promote education for girls, eliminate child marriage and remove the social barriers women face in their search for livelihood opportunities.

It is through these initiatives that some of the key economic and social triggers of human trafficking can be eliminated. We also need to ensure that individuals seeking employment abroad go through formal channels to avoid being exploited by trafficking rings. Addressing these will not end the problem of human trafficking in its entirety—human trafficking is, after all, made up of a much more complex set of factors. But it is certainly a good place to start.

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Many migrants seeking better employment opportunities abroad fall victim to human trafficking.

PHOTO: IOM/FRANCESCO MALVOLTA

thousands of people seek jobs abroad every year from Bangladesh. And it is this dream that human traffickers exploit to entrap people in the guise of labour migration to profitable work destinations.

According to a report published on the website of Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), an average of around 590,000 people migrate out of Bangladesh every year seeking better employment opportunities abroad. And many of them fall victim to human trafficking. These individuals are often forced into bonded labour, sex slavery, domestic servitude, or are exploited for organ trafficking. In an extreme and alarmingly increasing trend, the victims of trafficking are also often held hostage in foreign lands while their families are forced to pay for their release. Mass graves of Bangladeshi and Rohingya nationals found in Malaysia and Thailand are a tragic reminder of the grim fate our people encounter at the hands of ruthless traffickers.

While the government has taken various measures to curb human trafficking—such as enacting the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012, setting up seven special tribunals to fast-track trial of human trafficking cases, and cracking down on individuals and agencies involved in smuggling and trafficking—these measures are mostly focused on addressing the symptoms rather than the causes that are forcing people to migrate for a better life.

People's decision to migrate is aided by

and chairperson of Brac, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, while discussing this issue at length with this writer. "It's not the older group. It's the youth who are going abroad in search of livelihood. It's a youth desperation issue," he said. And why is that? "There might be particular family-specific reasons. But as a group, there are two bundles of factors at work for them. One is the prospect of finding productive employment within the country. According to official statistics, within the age group of 15-29—which we call the youth segment—nearly 30 percent is not in

based local government elections that we now see have served to destroy the social fabric of villages. Earlier, despite the political competition, there used to be a kind of a social environment that was maintained, which is not there now. Before, political conflict was confined to the higher level. Now a kind of an oppressive political environment has trickled down to the very base of the society, including in the villages. In this kind of environment, most of the youth who are desperate feel powerless while trying to find opportunities. These young people are willing to work hard

UAE and Israeli settlers find common ground in Jerusalem



JAMES M DORSEY

WEAKENED by Joe Biden's electoral defeat of US President Donald J. Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu risks being caught between a rock and a hard place as Jordan, the Palestine Authority and the

Jordanian-Palestinian control of the Haram ash-Sharif and counter Turkish efforts to stoke Palestinian nationalist and religious sentiment. The settlers and the far-right are calling for internationalisation of the administration of the Haram ash-Sharif, which plays into the UAE's hands.

"Ironically, it may be the case that calls for just such an arrangement may come from Muslim citizens of countries that have normalised their ties with Israel and find it offensive that a small group of Palestinians are attempting to ban them from visiting one of their holiest sites," said Josiah Rotenberg, a member of the Board of Governors of the Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based right-wing think tank.

The UAE's recognition of Israel and willingness to engage not only with businesses located in Israel's pre-1967 borders but also those headquartered in Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank and invest in a technology park in East Jerusalem have fuelled a war of words with the Palestinians and sparked incidents with Emirati visitors to the Haram ash-Sharif.

"Most of the citizens of Israel, myself included, continue to... demand that Prime Minister Netanyahu apply full sovereignty to Judea and Samaria," said settlement leader Yossi Dagan after heading a settlers' delegation on a visit to Dubai to discuss business opportunities. Mr Dagan was using the biblical name of the West Bank.

The visit reinforced Palestinian assertions that the creation of diplomatic ties between Israel and Arab states prior to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would reinforce Israeli occupation rather than open the door to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The "Israeli-Emirati deal raises the concern and fear within the Jordanian Awqaf and among Palestinians, because it aims to give the UAE a new role inside Al-Aqsa," said former Palestinian minister of Jerusalem affairs Khaled



Jordan, the Palestine Authority and the UAE manoeuvre for control of what is to Jews the Temple Mount and to Muslims the Haram ash-Sharif, the third most holy site in Islam.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/AMMAR AWAD

Abu Arafah, referring to the Supreme Muslim Council.

Muhammad Hussein, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, didn't need Mr Dagan's statement to come to that conclusion. Resigning in protest from an Emirati clerical group established to project the UAE as a beacon of moderate Islam immediately after the announcement of UAE-Israel relations, Mr Hussein banned Muslims from the Emirates from visiting and praying at the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

An Emirati business delegation visiting Israel last month was verbally assaulted and told to go home by Palestinian worshippers when they went to pray at the mosque. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh scolded the Emiratis, saying that "one ought to enter the gates of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque by way of its owners, rather than

through the gates of the occupation."

Responding on Twitter, Laith al-Awadhi, an Emirati national, retorted: "We will visit Al-Aqsa because it does not belong to you, it belongs to all Muslims." Saudi lawyer and writer Abdel Rahman al-Lahim chipped in arguing that "it is very important for the Emiratis and Bahrainis to discuss with Israel ways of liberating Al-Aqsa Mosque from Palestinian thugs in order to protect visitors from Palestinian thuggery."

Mr Abbas, the Palestinian president, has slowed down a reconciliation between his Fatah movement and Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, in anticipation of a more empathetic policy by an incoming Biden administration. He broke off relations with the United States after Mr Trump produced an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan that

endorsed annexation, recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and cut off funding for the Palestinians.

Palestinian officials suspect the UAE, backed by Israel, of positioning Mohammed Dahlan, an Abu Dhabi-based former Palestinian security chief with close ties to Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed as well as US officials, as a potential successor to Mr Abbas.

Mr Abbas could be disappointed by the degree to which a Biden administration may reverse Mr Trump's policy and find that it may not oppose broadening the administration of the Haram ash-Sharif.

In an interview with *The Times of Israel*, Antony "Tony" Blinken, Mr Biden's top foreign policy advisor and a former senior official under President Barack Obama, signalled that Mr Biden would, in contrast to Mr Trump, oppose Israeli efforts to annex parts of the West Bank and could adopt a more critical attitude towards expansion of existing Israeli settlements. It would likely be a position endorsed by the UAE despite the Emirates' engagement with the settlers.

Mr Blinken insisted that a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the "only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state and also to fulfil the Palestinian right to a state of their own." With both Israel and the Palestinians "far from a place where they're ready to engage on negotiations or final status talks", he said that a Biden administration would seek to ensure that "neither side takes additional unilateral steps that make the prospect of two states even more distant or closing it entirely."

The Biden administration could well see broadening of the governance of Haram ash-Sharif as one way of achieving that goal.

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QUOTABLE Quote

JEAN RACINE
(1639-1699)
French dramatic poet and historiographer.

There are no secrets that time does not reveal.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Musical Horn
- 5 Kids
- 11 Eye part
- 12 Maintenance
- 13 Sty group
- 14 To the core
- 15 "Die Winterreise" composer
- 17 Uno plus due
- 18 Took steps
- 22 "Ghosts" playwright
- 24 English county
- 25 Catch some z's
- 26 Collins base
- 27 Weather map line
- 30 Sore spots
- 32 Mink's cousin

DOWN

- 1 Gloss targets
- 2 Idle on film
- 3 Cabaret
- 4 Quell concerns
- 5 Law of the movies
- 6 Verdi works
- 7 Quick drawing
- 8 Cool, to jazzmen
- 9 Twisty fish
- 10 Mole, e.g.
- 16 Writer Jonson
- 19 Predicament
- 20 Niagara's source
- 21 Retreats
- 22 Scoop
- 23 Homer's boy
- 28 Make void
- 29 Secret meetings
- 30 Writer Beattie
- 31 Port settings
- 35 Irrelevant
- 36 Bike part
- 37 Cease
- 38 Swelled head
- 39 Pot part
- 40 Okra unit

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	A	M	P	S	Q	U	A	L	L
A	R	A	B	A	U	S	S	I	E
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BEETLE BAILEY, THE LAZIEST CHARACTER IN THE COMICS...

...WAS CREATED BY ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC CARTOONISTS OF ALL TIME

915 MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

VEGETABLES, LIVER, AND SOME WEIRD, SLIMY STUFF I BOUGHT ON SALE LAST MONTH.

THIS WAY THEY'LL BE THRILLED WHEN THEY SEE WE'RE REALLY JUST HAVING LEFTOVERS.