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All promises, and no action by BSF

High time we establish accountability mechanisms

We would be reassured by the BSF’s chief promise of zero killings on the borders during the five-day general-level talks between India’s Border Security Force and Border Guard Bangladesh, which ended yesterday, if we had not heard such pledges before. Unfortunately, the same promise has been made on multiple occasions over the years; yet, BSF personnel continue to routinely violate bilateral agreements not to resort to lethal weapons in dealing with cases of border crossing with total impunity. At least 48 Bangladeshi citizens have been killed—mostly poor, unarmed villagers, cattle-rearers and fisherfolk—this year alone, according to rights body Ain O Salish Kendra. Many were tortured to death—one victim died after BSF men allegedly forced petrol into his mouth and rectum, while all fingernails of another victim were pulled out with pliers after he was detained for illegal entry into Indian territories. In fact, on the first day of the conference, a cattle trader of Gubrakura village in Haluaghat, Mymensingh was shot in the abdomen and died due to excessive bleeding.

For how long will our neighbouring country, with whom we are proud to maintain friendly relations, continue to assuage us with empty promises? If and when promises are broken by their personnel, what steps are taken to ensure that impunity for such gross human rights violations end? How many BSF personnel have been investigated over the years and how many have been found guilty? Actions speak louder than words, and the failure of the BSF to hold their personnel to account tell us more about their commitments to “zero” killings than the statements issued at high-level talks.

It is high time we move past promises and talk about establishing accountability mechanisms on both sides of the border. Human lives and dignity must mean more to states which are committed to basic principles of human rights and international laws. These high-level talks between the two sides must abide by these principles and come to a solution that will put a complete stop to these killings and incidents of torture that will always come in the way of further strengthening the ties the two countries have.

Stop importing adulterated pesticides

Immediately prepare a guideline on permissible limit of heavy metals

It is frustrating to learn from a *Daily Star* report that the government is yet to enforce mandatory tests to prevent imports of adulterated pesticides that have been widely used in the country’s agriculture sector. As harmful heavy metals like cadmium, chromium and lead were found in dozens of pesticides in tests done by Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) at the beginning of this year, it mandated tests at two designated government laboratories—either the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Centre (BAEC) or the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR)—before the release of any imported pesticides from ports. Unfortunately, almost a year has gone by with no progress made in testing these imported pesticides.

Reportedly, the importers requested the BFSA to suspend the embargo on harmful pesticides considering the adverse effect on agricultural production and also requested for further research before taking any decision. Bangladesh Crop Protection Association (BCPA), a body of business enterprises involved in import, formulation and marketing of plant protection chemicals, also requested the ministry to allow continuing imports until a guideline is adopted on the permissible limit for heavy metals in pesticides. Although the BFSA has extended the deadline twice for mandatory testing of imported pesticides at their request, no progress was made so far in formulating the guideline on the permissible limit for heavy metals in pesticides. In the last few months, the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the apex pesticide regulatory body, has only formed a committee which is yet to submit its report. We request the committee to do the necessary research and submit its report as early as possible. And the government should adopt a guideline on the permissible limit of heavy metals in pesticides as soon as they submit the report. No heavy metals beyond the permissible limit should be present in pesticides as they contaminate the entire food chain, and long-term exposure to these elements may lead to serious public health hazards.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Air pollution in winter

Air pollution has increased at an alarming rate in the country as winter set in. According to a 2018 report by the US environmental protection agency (EP), Bangladesh ranked 2nd among 180 countries in terms of air pollution, whereas in 2016 Bangladesh’s position was 25th.

It is a matter of some relief that this report is based primarily on air pollution in Dhaka city. The condition of the areas outside the capital is comparatively better. As humidity decreases in winter, the amount of dust and sand increases a lot. Both children and adults suffer from various diseases due to air pollution.

We have to try our best to reduce the level of air pollution. Construction materials should be covered with polythene so that dust and dirt don’t scatter around during work. Water should be sprinkled around the construction sites. And we should all wear masks to protect us from the dust and sand.

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END of the year op-eds, or the thought of it, bring for me anxiety as well as joy. I feel anxious because I can’t decide what to write about, or find issues to vent about, as the year draws to a close. Should I pen an essay based on the economic forecasts for the coming year; a reflection on the year that went by; or another wish-list, or something else? I also experience a sense of joy because I am eager to share with my readers my feelings and anticipation at the end of the year, as you might do with your family or close friends. Different ideas start floating in my head: how about a chronicle of the victories I notched up, describing in details the mountains I climbed; or should it be about my dreams and what I am looking forward to next year, e.g., the Summer Olympics, trips I hope to take to China to teach the class that was cancelled last summer because of the pandemic, or an outline of the post-Covid world that I foresee?

I could also write a summary of the major events of the previous year. My friend, Geoff Lantos, professor of marketing, every year, sends along with his New Year’s card a typed page or two providing details of the vacations he took or the major events that happened in his life in the previous 12 months and the highlights of the courses he taught. I could do the same and talk about the economic ups and downs, the US presidential elections and the post-election uncertainties, and the high points and low points in the bygone year for the world community. Like Geoff, I could throw in a few interesting and comic moments that happened too: a comparison of the 1918-19 Spanish Flu and the 2020 Covid-19 pandemics; the shouting match between Modi and Rahul Gandhi; the lockdown in India, and other titbits. Incidentally, it is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world’s population became infected with H1N1 virus, and nearly 50 million died in comparison with 2.7 million deaths projected for Covid-19.

But, as you can guess I am again dilly-dallying, and I finally looked at my shortlist and picked two topics. i) Why I think the worst of the economic woes brought about by the pandemic are over; and ii) What we can do as a community to do better next year. There are three reasons why economic recovery is on its way: the availability of the Covid-19 vaccines, an uptick in commerce, and an abundance of pent-up consumer demand which is likely to push the world economic engine forward. The second topic, i.e. “What can we do to make 2021 a better year?” begets some easy answers. Some of the well-known measures are: i) The world leaders and all governments

need to make vaccines available to everybody; ii) There is an urgent need to support and help the recovery of badly affected sections of our population; and iii) Everyone needs to proceed with caution since economic recovery is but a goal and is not inevitable. We need to work hard, and as they say, “noblesse oblige”.

There is much evidence and talk



The pandemic and the lockdown has caused a partial collapse of the informal sector, and harmed the rural areas in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

nowadays about each aspect of the above-mentioned topics I selected. For example, let us consider the uptick in commerce. There is ample data from the last three quarters to point to a gradual but sustained growth in commerce and global trade since the early days of the outbreak of the pandemic. And, some soothsayers are even saying that the next few years could see a re-enactment of the “Roaring Twenties”, a reference to the booming economy of the 1920s that followed the end of the Spanish Flu.

Let us take the case to “Support the Needy”. The pandemic and the lockdown has caused a partial collapse of the informal sector, and harmed the rural areas in Bangladesh. Urban dwellers with a steady job may be doing well but everywhere I look there is a feeling of despondency and penury. It is hard to estimate what percentage of our people have been adversely affected and to what extent. But let me take the case of tea garden workers. Price of tea leaves is down, along with the consumption in the bazaars. Stores close early and gone

the economics discipline as a “dismal science”, we also look at the brighter side of any economic disaster, and like to hedge our bets. After I wrote the previous paragraphs predicting a turnaround, a number of not-so-sanguine news items also came to my attention. Even though, by and large, the next year appears to be a promising one, there are some dark spots lurking in the background too. Some fellow economists have mentioned the prospect of a “K-Shaped Recovery” which implies that some sectors, particularly some segments of the population will suffer even after the economy gets back on its feet. The chief economist of the IMF predicts that highly paid, well-skilled workers will do much better than people who are lower paid and lower-skilled. Social services advocates and policy experts fear that whether we are talking about developed or developing countries, the free-market and competitive environment will favour the wealthier companies with the strongest lobbying teams, as I discuss

to address the issue of equal access to vaccines for the poor. To compound matters, we are faced with the prospects of a deadlier variant of the virus that has emerged in the UK, Nigeria and South Africa.

Having said all that, Christmas is finally here, and the New Year is just around the corner. I can’t resist the temptation of ending this message with a word from Haruki Murakami, the Japanese author and philosopher. “And once the storm is over you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm’s all about.”

My wishes are that we all come out of the storm that came in 2020 as better human beings.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Brussels Effect comes for Big Tech



ANU BRADFORD

The European Union is expected to designate these companies as the “gatekeepers” of the Internet, justifying a targeted regulatory push to rein in their outside market power.

The new regulations will complement the EU’s antitrust authority, which has repeatedly been used to extract billions of dollars in fines from US tech giants and to mandate changes to their business practices. Under the DMA, for example, practices such as self-preferencing will be “blacklisted”—presumed illegal without the need for the EU to bring an antitrust challenge to demonstrate harm to competition.

The DSA, for its part, will impose more onerous obligations on Big Tech companies to disclose their algorithms or remove illegal or harmful online content, including hate speech and disinformation. Together, these measures will assert significant new regulatory control over the digital economy both in Europe and beyond.

The stakes for the Big Tech giants are particularly high because EU regulations often have a global impact—a phenomenon known as the “Brussels effect.” Because the EU is one of the world’s largest consumer markets, most multinational corporations accept its terms of business as the price of admission. To avoid the cost of complying with multiple regulatory regimes around the world, these companies often extend EU rules to their operations globally. That is why so many large non-EU companies follow the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) across all of their operations.

Unsurprisingly, Big Tech leaders and other critics of EU regulation are pushing back, accusing the EU of regulatory overreach and protectionist motives. But the EU is not unfairly infringing on successful US tech companies’ commercial freedom, nor is it undermining US regulators’ autonomy. Even if EU regulations do prove costly for big US companies, many smaller US firms will benefit from them. For years, these smaller

US players have had to rely on the EU—rather than on their own government—to challenge the giants in their industry.

Likewise, thanks to their global reach, EU regulations have brought significant benefits to American Internet users, many of whom welcome enhanced privacy protections and less rampant online hate speech.

The United States’ own inaction has paved the way for the EU’s rise as a regulatory superpower. Embracing deregulation and techno-libertarianism as its approach to governing the digital economy, the US has long



watched from the sidelines as the EU sets regulations for the global marketplace. By abandoning international engagement and regulatory cooperation, the Trump administration reinforced this regulatory isolationism—effectively, albeit inadvertently, trading globalisation for Europeanisation.

But the winds in the US may finally be changing. Legislators and enforcement agencies are starting to wake up to Big Tech’s excesses. Earlier this year, the House Judiciary Committee’s report on competition in digital markets issued a powerful call to action and outlined a new vision for revitalising US antitrust laws.

Moreover, the US Department of Justice is now challenging Google’s monopolistic practices (after tolerating them for the past decade), and the Federal Trade Commission—along with 46 of the 50 states, Washington, DC, and Guam—is suing Facebook as an

illegal monopoly. It is unclear whether these steps mark the beginning of a progressive antitrust revolution in the US, or whether they will stall in a divided Congress or before conservative-leaning courts that are accustomed to a more limited role for antitrust law.

In any case, the US would do well to abandon its hands-off approach to technology companies. It needs to stop being a rule-taker and start shoring up its own regulations. A federal privacy law would be an ideal place to start, considering that the idea already has support from leading US companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, and Apple.

A more robust privacy law would help the US reinstate data flows with the EU, which were halted by the European Court of Justice, owing to the lack of privacy protections in the US. It would also allow the US to address its concerns about Chinese government surveillance of American citizens. The Trump administration’s haphazard effort to ban the Chinese-owned social-media platform TikTok from the US market is not a substitute for regulations to protect Americans’ personal data.

The case for renewed US regulatory leadership is even more compelling in view of China’s increasing global influence over tech-governance standards. Chinese companies, all with varying ties to the ruling Communist Party, have supplied critical technological infrastructure to countries around the world. China has also supplied artificial intelligence-driven surveillance technology to numerous governments that are eager to pursue illiberal ends.

Given China’s authoritarian vision of the Internet, the US would gain much from working closely with the EU on regulating Big Tech and the digital economy. Their disagreements when it comes to antitrust, privacy, and taxation, are manageable, and should be addressed as part of a broader effort to reset transatlantic relations.

Instead of fighting the EU’s legitimate attempts to defend its vision of the digital economy, President-elect Joe Biden’s administration should explore how it can work with the EU to advance a shared vision. After all, citizens on both sides of the Atlantic want a human-centric Internet that is grounded in the values of liberal democracy and individual autonomy.

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