

Digital underground

The strange phenomenon of our tax money going to bureaucrats enforcing regulation that deprives us of a cheaper way of calling our loved ones in distant lands perfectly encapsulates the dysfunction of present-day Bangladesh.

SHAHEEN AHMED

NEW technologies require new laws and regulations. But these regulations must be sensible and they have to be enforced uniformly. The tragedy in Bangladesh is that we make senseless regulations and do not enforce the sensible ones. As a result, businesses get destroyed, our workers migrate and then we highlight "record remittances" to console ourselves.

To illustrate, let us focus on recent events in the telecommunications and internet sector.

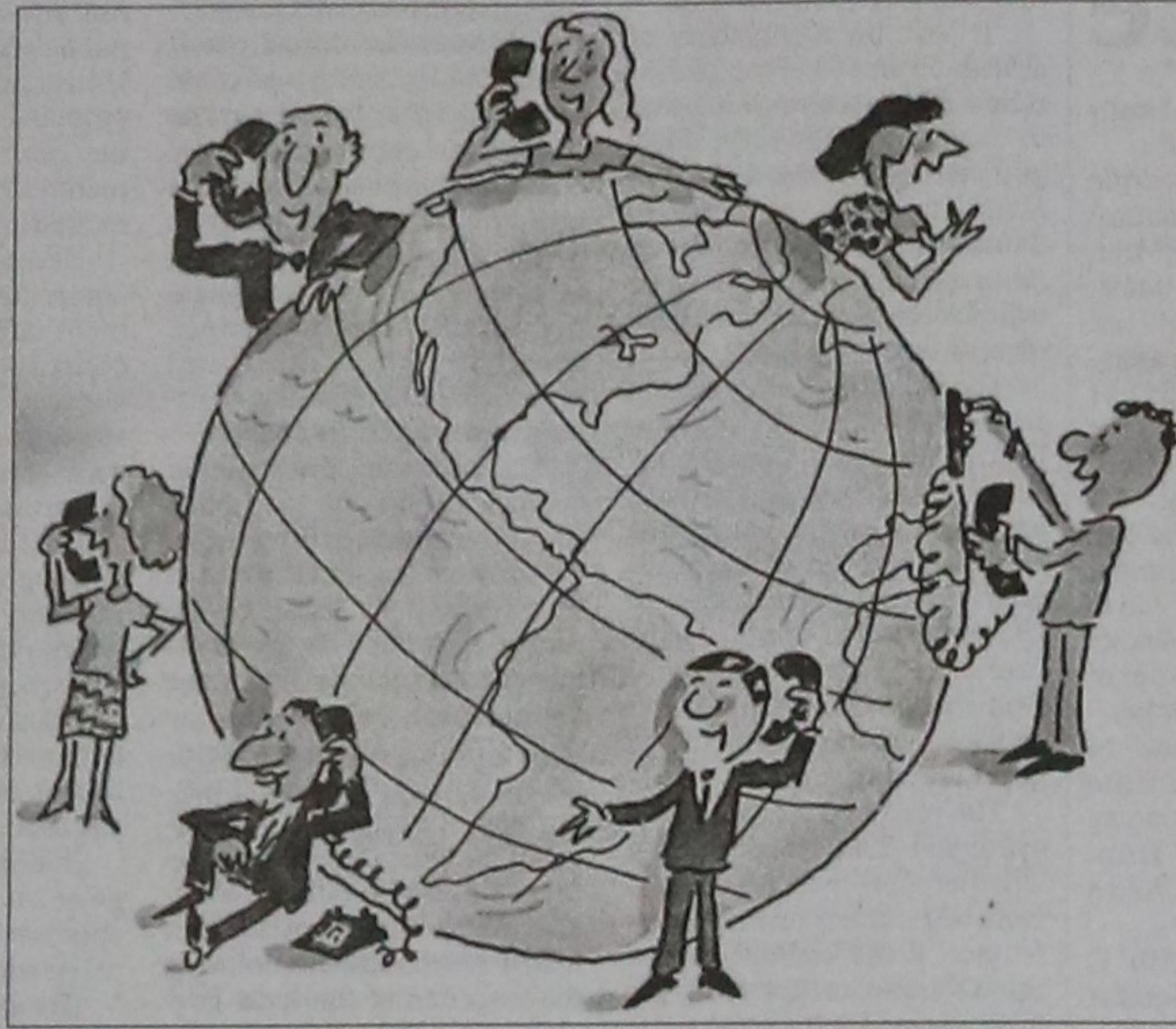
It is hard to find a better example of senseless regulation than Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). VoIP is much maligned by the Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and the media because it is "illegal." But nobody explains the rationale behind making VoIP illegal. Unlike cars, firearms or alcohol, all of which require licenses in Bangladesh, VoIP does not carry with it the possibility of harming another individual. Why should VoIP operators need a license?

VoIP hurts the companies that have

invested heavily in traditional telephony systems by providing the same services to customers more cost-effectively. In Bangladesh, the state-owned Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Ltd (BTCL, formerly BTTB), is the only company that has invested heavily in the traditional system and therefore is the only one who stands to lose if VoIP technology is widely adopted.

Naturally the question arises: if this were not a government monopoly, would it be given such protection from cheaper technologies through regulations? After all, the government is not moving to protect handloom weavers from machine-looms or the ayurvedic medicine industry from big pharmaceuticals, both instances where a new technology undercut an established one.

We keep hearing the refrain that BTRC's strict enforcement of this senseless regulation brought more money into the government coffers. Yes, it did, by ensuring that a government monopoly could charge the consumer (you and me) more than their more efficient competitors. The strange phenomenon of our tax money going to bureaucrats



Why don't we allow freedom of communication?

enforcing regulation that deprives us of a cheaper way of calling our loved ones in distant lands perfectly encapsulates the dysfunction of present-day Bangladesh.

Of course making VoIP illegal has not stopped it from spreading. Rather, it has enabled political patronage, which thrives when governments hold too much power over the citizens' ability to earn a living. Ironically, the very media

that was instrumental in bringing to light the corruption under the last elected government seems to have taken hold of the wrong end of the stick on this issue. Instead of asking for greater liberalisation of VoIP to prevent further government corruption in this sector, they have decided to stigmatise this technology altogether.

And the mainstream media's silence - for whatever reasons - over the last

minute changes of a very sensible rule, regarding eligibility of bidding for Wimax licenses, that might have long-term consequences, is very puzzling.

No major print media outlet has reported the irregularities surrounding the post-auction complications of the Wimax licenses. There linger questions as to whether one of the companies set to get a Wimax license, Mango Teleservices, was eligible to enter the bidding in the first place. Mango Teleservices won the license after 4 other companies were unable or unwilling to acquire them.

First a little background: under the caretaker government, tenders were requested for setting up three international voice gateways (IGW), two domestic voice gateways (ICX) and one international internet gateway (IIG). Why there was a single IIG license for the private sector (the other was for BTCL) is still unclear since setting them up is relatively inexpensive. That should have been an early warning signal.

Mango Teleservices won the right to become Bangladesh's sole private sector IIG-operator. According to regulations in other parts of the telecom sector, "last-mile" service providers - i.e. those who bring phone and internet services to the customer - were deemed ineligible to bid for these licenses to operate exchanges. That is why the big mobile phone operators were ineligible to bid for the licenses to the IGW or ICX. The rationale behind such regulation is pretty obvious: to prevent one company

from becoming the monopoly service provider. Yet here was Mango Teleservices, an exchange/gateway operator, bidding for the license to become a "last-mile" service provider using Wimax, a move that potentially hurt consumer interest, thanks to BTRC changing the rules of the game at the last moment.

Despite many within the industry expressing their unhappiness, this glaring irregularity has been ignored by the mainstream media. Such was the level of silence that reports on the exit of the ex-chairman of BTRC failed to mention this controversy. This was the same person under whose stewardship the BTRC gave out licenses to set up the exchanges, most likely adding their numbers to the "expatriate labour force" of Bangladesh.

At least the chattering classes can crow on about "record remittances" while blissfully unaware of the potential for employment generation at home.

Shaheen Ahmed is a blogger (<http://unheardvoice.net/blog/>). The author is grateful to technologist Zakaria Swapan for sharing his detailed knowledge of this sector, without which this piece would not have been possible.

Rehabilitating migrant workers

Over the years such remittances have been the backbone of the economy, and still are. If the chain is broken it will have a devastating impact -- this is another area, which will need to be considered.

M. AFZAL

THE economic meltdown that started with the US economy is causing repercussions all over the world and pulling nearly all developed and non-developed economies into a recession, which experts believe will continue for at least a few years.

As a consequence, these economies/countries will face difficulties in carrying out their budgetary goals, and will either cancel or postpone projects -- signs of which are already visible in the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain, where the majority of our migrant workers are employed.

Dubai's real estate boom has collapsed due to financial inability of the project owners. Newspapers are reporting that many professionals are leaving

the Emirate. However, low paid workers, like our migrant workers, are prohibited from leaving. There are reports also that their wages and food and other allowances have been curtailed and they are living a life of despair and great uncertainty.

While business leaders in Bangladesh are already looking into the consequences of this meltdown through the formal trade bodies and interacting with their members -- one area which I feel is not being looked at is the prospect of a flood of returnees from the Middle East/Far East who will start pouring in when the host countries start laying them off.

It is about time that the government starts formulating plans/strategies to face such a situation.

The Migrant Forum in Asia states: "Any massive retrenchment would

worsen poverty in the migrant's home country. Families dependent on (overseas) remittances will find now that nothing is coming in and it might further aggravate the poverty situation."

William Gois, the regional coordinator of the Migrant Forum of Asia based in Manila also stated that: "The Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which are key exporters of human labour, would be most affected." Gois said that there were more than 53 million migrant workers from Asia employed worldwide, mostly in the Gulf countries and the Middle East.

While there have been no reports so far of large lay-offs, workers interviewed by AFP said that they were worried. "Of course, I am afraid," a Bangladeshi worker. "I don't understand much about the reason of the crisis, but I am just concerned that my company will be affected." Any slowdown in the construction sector would affect thousands of migrant labourers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Thailand and China.

Another problem is the presence of large numbers of migrant workers without proper documents in the host coun-

tries. Quite naturally, in times of economic slump, the first thing that governments would do is to crack down on undocumented workers because they are seen as a burden on the economy and a problem for the society.

The government should take this matter seriously and immediately form a task force to look at all the ramifications and formulate strategies so that, in case of any eventuality, the country will be ready to face any situation.

Recognising that the funds remitted by the expatriate workers account for the highest income in foreign currency, when the tide turns the other way it is expected that the government will face the situation with courage and fortitude and come to the rescue of these returning migrant workers.

Over the years such remittances have been the backbone of the economy, and still are. If the chain is broken it will have a devastating impact -- this is another area, which will need to be considered.

The returning workers will have to be rehabilitated and assimilated in the changed situation, hence a lot of effort by the concerned agencies of the govern-



Do we have jobs for them?

ment will have to be made to make it conducive for this transition -- otherwise not only social unrest but also the family fabric will breakdown, with consequential impact in all fields.

I am sure the government, being a pro-

people government, will rise to the occasion and address this serious issue boldly and methodically before it explodes out of proportion.

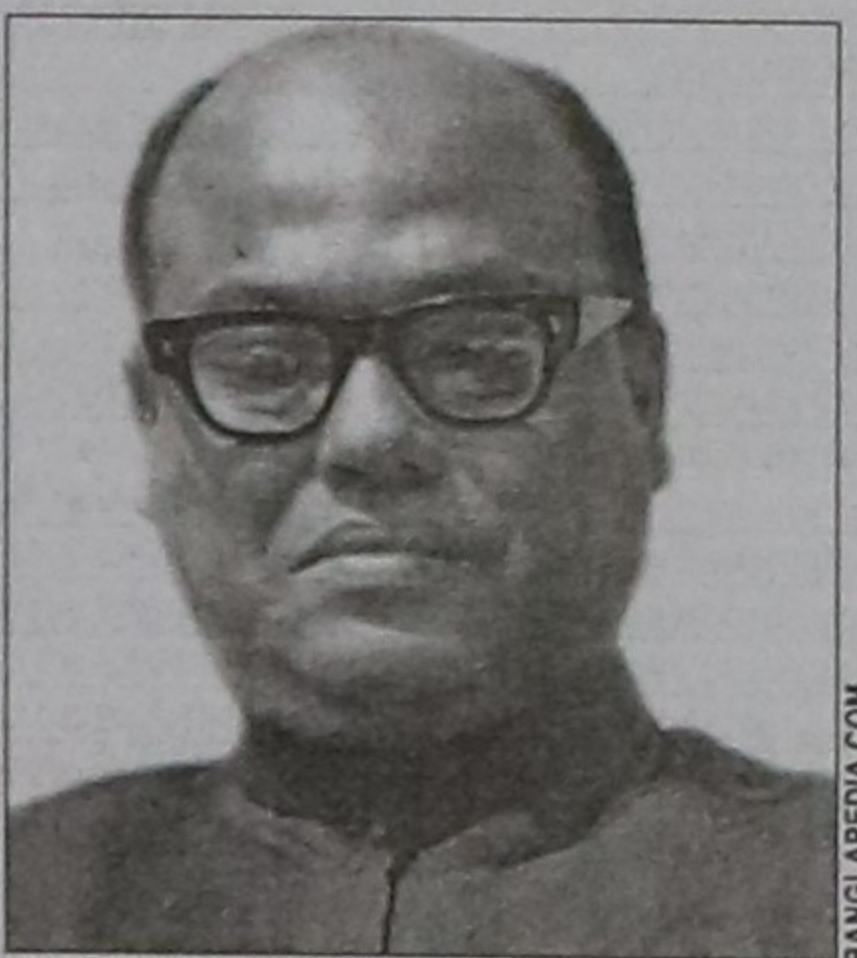
M. Afzal, FCA, writes from Jeddah.

Syed Nazrul Islam: A tribute

NILOO SHARIFA

SYED Nazrul Islam was one of the closest and most faithful aides of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Loyalty to the leader and dedication to his country and people were his supreme ideals. He gave proof of this at different critical stages of the country's political history, especially as acting president of the nine-month-long government-in-exile at Mujibnagar. He was one of the moving spirits of the struggle for freedom, which culminated in the liberation war.

His firmness of purpose, foresight and political sagacity were demonstrated when the country's political future was at stake and pro-people politics was confronted with a mortal challenge. The time has come to



Syed Nazrul Islam

reevaluate the different aspects of his political career objectively and in the historical perspective. He was born on February 18, 1926, in the village

Beerdampara in Kishorganj.

After he completed his MA in history from Dhaka University, his father wanted him to take part in the highly competitive examination for the central superior service of Pakistan and begin his career as an officer. In deference to parental wishes he sat for the CSS exam and did a brief stint in government service.

But he soon freed himself from the lure of high office and joined Anandamohan College of Mymensingh as lecturer of history and also Mymensingh bar as a lawyer. He had taken an active part in student politics, and felt impelled to involve himself in different political programs.

He joined the Awami League and, in the course of time, became one of the party's senior leaders. During the liberation war, in the absence of

Bangabandhu, he assumed the office of acting president. That was a time of glorious sacrifices and triumph, but sinister conspiracies were also at work to undermine the historical struggle of the Bangalees and shackle them again.

Syed Nazrul Islam was noted for his poise and level-headedness -- qualities which helped him to steer clear of storms and whirlwinds and remain steadfast in pursuit of his goal. He charted out the right course in the light of his own wisdom and in consultation with his distinguished colleagues.

After the barbarous killing in the Dhaka Central Jail of the four great leaders of the liberation war, Begum Syed Nazrul Islam revealed some facts to me. She said: "After the killing of Bangabandhu he was restlessly pacing up and down the room and burning cigarettes one after another.

He was by nature somewhat taciturn, and after the great tragedy he was talking still less. But one afternoon he told me: "Now it is my turn. If they kill any other man, that will be I. Despite ushering in freedom we have fallen under domination, the whole nation has come under domination."

One evening he received a telephone call, after which he became very excited and sprang to his feet. He was hurling abuses in English in a loud voice. I heard words like killer Moshta. Finally he said: "I am Syed Nazrul Islam. I cannot take oath of office over the blood of Bangabandhu. Don't tempt me."

He hung up the phone with a bang. The phone rang again but he didn't receive it. I went and lifted the receiver. It was Khandakar Moshta at the other end. I said why are you bothering him this way. You ought to know my husband better. I

hung up. Two days later he was arrested.

"When in the jail he asked for paper for writing, which I duly kept supplying. At one stage he said: 'I have almost finished the writing. Keep it carefully in your custody.' Now I feel he had a prescience that he would not come out from jail alive, and wanted to leave a testament for the country. But he could not, unfortunately. After the assassination I ran from pillar to post to recover the papers but failed."

The killers did not stop at killing the leaders but also destroyed the facts and documents. Possibly the papers contained something that would help unmask them.

Written on the occasion of the 83rd birth anniversary of Syed Nazrul Islam, which falls on February 18. Niloo Sharifa is a short story writer and principal of a nursery school in Mymensingh.

The ten silliest real-life phone transcripts



IN Asia, we mostly try to do business in English. But we all speak our own versions of the language. And for some unknown reason, the most ridiculous conversations always seem to happen when one phones a business in Hong Kong.

Here are ten real-life phone conversations that took place in the city on the south coast of China.

1. I phoned an oil company executive late one afternoon. "Is Mr. Wong there please?" "Get out." "?!?" "Get out." "Do you mean 'gone home'?" "Yes." Receptionist training has a long way to go in Hong Kong.
2. Brian Parker phoned the Arts Festival hotline to get seats at his favourite opera. "Hello. Can I book two tickets for Tosca please?" "Sorry, Oscar he on holiday." [Click.]
3. Jimmy Cheung phoned a company hotline. "Is that the 24-hour hotline?"

- "Yes." "Is there someone there who can help me?" "No. We're closed." "When should I call back?" "Try next week."
4. Alan Skyrme phoned an export firm in Kowloon. A receptionist answered: "Mr. Chan's office." "Is he available?" "He is out of town. He is due back from his trip yesterday." "If he was due back yesterday, can I get hold of him?" "Please call back yesterday."
5. Ram Sajjani phoned Pizza Hut in Tsim Sha Tsui. "How much does it cost to host a party

- for children and adults?" "Same price, 33 dollars, for both children and humans."
6. Paul Frankland phoned Café de Paris in Lan Kwai Fong. "My name is Frankland. I wish to cancel my reservation for tonight." "You have a reservation for two people at 8 pm." "Yes. I wish to cancel it." "May I have your telephone number?" "Why do you need my number if am canceling my reservation?" "Okay. Thanks. See you tonight."
7. Enzo Pesci made a long distance call from Italy to his office in Hong Kong. "Good morning. I am Mr. Pesci. Can I speak with" "I am sorry. Mr. Pesci is in Italy. But if

- you leave your name and phone number."
- "I know Mr. Pesci is in Italy because I am Mr. Pesci."
- "In that case, you do not need to leave your name and number."
8. Patrick Tuohy phoned KPS Video Express when he saw a customer reach the counter. "I've left my membership card in the office." "Can you remember your name?" [Sarcastically] "Sorry, but it's on the card in my office." [Unruffled] Okay. Well, how about your phone number?"
9. Craig Sanderson's house was suffering a power cut on Cheung Chau Island. He decided to phone Park 'n'

- Shop supermarket to see if it was open, or whether it had also had a blackout. "Is that Park 'n' Shop?" "Yes." "Do you have any electricity?" "No, sir. We don't sell electricity."
10. Chris Hunter called a business contact. "Can I speak to the managing director?" "How to spell?" "Can I speak to the managing director?" "What's your name?" "Mr. Hunter." "Mr. Hunter is out." [click]

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