

# Premature death: Uncalculated cost of migration

TASNEEM SIDDIQUI

RECENTLY, Shariful Islam, a journalist of *Prothom Alo* wrote an insightful piece on death of Bangladeshi migrants in the countries of destination. The figures are baffling and certainly require to be factored in the cost-benefit analysis of labour migration. Unnatural or premature death of migrant workers is definitely an important social cost of migration borne by the migrant, his/her family, the community and the nation. The article noted that in the last six years 13,827 bodies of deceased migrants were sent to Bangladesh, averaging around 2,300 per year. 84.28% came from labour receiving countries. Saudi Arabia was the largest source country with 30.44% of the total dead bodies sent, followed by Malaysia (16.83%) and UAE (14.46%). Of course, the total figure of deceased Bangladeshi nationals in these countries should be higher than the above figures. A section of the deceased, particularly those who had irregular status, may get buried in the countries of destination for lack of identification and if there is no one to claim the bodies. On the other hand, some of the deceased may not be migrants. It is not known if the writer had adjusted the figure of deceased pilgrims with the total numbers cited in case of Saudi Arabia.

There were newspaper reports on deceased migrants in the past as well. Such reports never resulted in thorough investigation of the reasons for their death. Rather, policy makers and government functionaries tried to underplay the importance of such news by saying "these are natural deaths" and "the death rate of migrants is not more than national average." Such response hardly took into consideration the ages of the migrants. The report mentioned 38 years as the average age of the deceased whereas life expectancy of the average Bangladeshi is 70.36 years. Besides, migrants are able bodied persons who go through all kinds of health tests before they are accepted in those countries. Such quick explanation by the authorities and lack of interest in finding the real cause of deaths undermines the scope for improving work, health and living conditions of

## NUMBER OF DEAD BODIES RECEIVED AND CAUSES OF THEIR DEATH in percentage

Causes of Death	2012(%)	2013(%)
Stroke	31.22	29.46
Heart related	14.37	18.49
Accident in workplace and road	32.16	24.63
Sickness	10.78	11.72
Cancer	2.40	2.44
Burn	0.34	1.02
Suicide	0.38	0.75
Murder	0.56	0.35
Not written	4.11	0.79
Missing data	3.68	10.35
Total bodies	2338	2542

SOURCE: PREPARED FROM PROTHOM ALO, FEBRUARY 10, 20

migrants in the countries of destination. The table presents the reasons stated in the death certificates of the deceased persons. A small percentage of them could be termed as natural death. Last year, 29.46% and 18.49% were due to stroke and cardiac failure, respectively. Why would such large number of migrants suffer from stroke and cardiac failure? There may be several explanations for this. Over the last 10-15 years more and more migrants are going abroad on free visas. A significant number of them also go on Hajj or tourist visa and stay back as irregular migrants. Those who migrate on free visa do not have a particular kafeel or employer to work under. It is the influential persons of receiving countries who sell free visas, and individuals who are entitled to bring in workers under domestic work visa also sell the permits to local outsourcing or cleaning companies. These companies or individuals house the migrants in unhygienic camps, in many cases under lock and key. Those workers do not have regular jobs. Rather they are picked from the camps early in the morning and taken to

different worksites for doing irregular jobs, such as cleaning date trees and toilets of schools and other institutions. At the end of the day, they are collected together and taken to their camps late in the evening. They eat whatever is available at their work sites. Access to safe drinking water is an issue of concern. The migrants suffer the most from waterborne diseases, jaundice being the most important, along with skin disease and respiratory problems. Many migrants are affected by dehydration and sunstroke as they are not informed about the need to drink plenty of water. Should we term deaths in such situations as "natural death" or do they merit to be termed as "murder"?

The table shows that as many as 32.16% in 2012, and 24.63% in 2013, of the deaths were due to accidents in workplaces and roads. An awareness campaign on traffic rules of receiving countries may reduce the accident related death toll manifold. Civil society bodies try to provide such information before departure. However, national media, particularly electronic, do not run any public service announcement on dos and don'ts in the countries of destination. Private TV channels make huge profits by organising real time viewing and cultural programmes in many destination cities, including Doha, Sharjah, Kuala Lumpur and Dubai. Migrant workers are their principal audience. However, they do not have even ten second slots for giving information to these poor migrants.

One has to accept that unnatural death is a major social cost of migration. We cannot remain indifferent to it. Thorough research needs to be conducted to identify the causes of such deaths. The government and the civil society should try to place this issue before the UN High Level Dialogue on migration or during the discussions of Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). Business ethics demands that print and electronic media initiate social dialogue and invest real air time for providing basic safety information to the migrants.

The writer is Professor of Political Science and Founding Chair, RMMRU, University of Dhaka.

# Remapping our political order

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

OUR nation appears to be undergoing a phase of transition of unknown duration. The general direction is more implicit than uttered -- and fluctuates to certain degree. The perpetuity of the political order in Bangladesh, since its emergence as an independent entity through a revolutionary event, has undergone a number of hiccups. There are very few nations in the world which have experienced so many paradigmatic shifts in their political history.

Great socio-political changes and subsequent reverses have rendered our political comprehension complex and incoherent. Most modern nations have some founding ethos that broadly informs their national socio-political ideology and state character. Domestic stake holders, be those in the US, France or UK, operate within that paradigm. We, the Bangladeshis, could not perhaps be sure that we have those well-defined and widely agreed.

By now, we know that the Awami League and its left wing allies have undertaken a colossal task of refining the politics of Bangladesh. The polity would be free from the toxic elements that opposed the emergence of Bangladesh, and not only that, they also cooperated and participated in crime against humanity in 1971. They were reinstated in the later years. Sounds fair enough till this point -- in certain ways. But when the future of democracy is under a question mark, public discourse would demand greater clarity.

The AL general secretary recently announced in presence of the prime minister that the next election would take place in early 2019 -- not any earlier -- and that too under the present constitution. The present form of the constitution came to being through a unilateral amendment by the AL which scrapped the election time caretaker government system and allowed the incumbent to continue during election period. This was the chief bone of contention in the recent political pandemonium and resultant violence.

Now, in the post-election and post-violence calm it's time to sit down and chalk out broad political mapping which could be helpful for the future of a supposedly ideal, under the new circumstances, political trajectory of ours. Firstly, the AL needs to realise that only the stated or implied limited objective of political clean-up, i.e. removing the anti-liberation forces that were involved in atrocities in 1971 from the political landscape of Bangladesh, holds some merit and that too with some considerable risk. Any, politically convenient expansion of the scope of such actions could be disastrous

for the stability of the nation and also for future of democracy.

Second, there must be some agreeable and logical timeline. War crime trial of individuals and political entities ought not take an eternity, and they must not be prolonged and deliberately and conveniently coincide with another election. Two to three years is reckoned to be good enough time for all these to come to a logical end.

Third, a formidable centre-right force is normal and natural in Bangladesh -- going by the grain of the society. BNP occupies that space. While there is pressure from the liberal intelligentsia to moderate and recalibrate on certain issues, any engineered split in BNP would be detrimental for democratic propriety and our political balance. No such bad precedence should be created by the AL. A two-party/alliance, one centrist/ centre-left and one centre-right, is right for our political system at present although substantiation with at least a decent political culture is required.

Fourth, the new generation of Jamaat leaders and activist should be allowed some political space if they move towards a metamorphosis under fresh rubric and altered doctrine. Because even after anticipated eradication of the top leadership from the political spectrum the cadre and the support base may largely remain in some form, and it's better to allow them some political expression within the system. Forcing them to go underground won't be right or a good idea.

Fifth, the incumbent should start gradually building a general understanding about the political future of the country with the much humbled opposition. Too much boasting of a temporal and partial victory in the political game could have a devastating effect in future for the ruling class. The spirit of the Liberation War and related activities has an appeal to the Bangladeshi people, especially the youth. Yet its overuse on one hand, and failure in other important facets of public life like governance, development, institution building, etc. on the other, will not work for long. The canny strategists and their like-minded disciples of the incumbent better understand that well in time.

The people of the country are still largely neutral, observant and tolerant in the chaotic political argumentations and didn't really come out en masse to the streets against the government. That demeanor should not be taken for granted forever by the ruling regime and unnecessarily tested again and again; for, popular upheavals in the past have blown away despotic regimes in this land. And, we all must remember the most striking feature of history; that is, it repeats itself.

# Regaining US GSP benefit?

MUHAMMAD ALI BUKHARI

AFTER 1,129 garment factory workers were killed in the Rana Plaza collapse on April 24 last year, a group of mostly European-based retailers announced an accord in which member companies were legally bound to make factories safer. It is now a significant outcry around the world, in which the Netherlands based Cleans Clothes Campaign (CCC) has been playing a significant role.

US trade representative Michael Froman issued a statement on President Barack Obama's decision set out in a proclamation released in June, 2013 to suspend the eligibility of Bangladesh for tariff benefits under the GSP programme, which says: "Our GSP statute requires certain basic standards for worker rights and worker safety as a condition of eligibility. Over the past few years, the US government has worked closely with the government of Bangladesh to encourage the reforms needed to meet those basic standards. Despite our close engagement and our clear, repeated expressions of concern, the US government has not seen sufficient progress towards those reforms. The recent tragedies that needlessly took the lives of over 1,200 Bangladeshi garment factory workers have served to highlight some of the serious shortcomings in worker rights and workplace safety standards in Bangladesh." Ambassador Froman said: "While taking this action today, the administration is also initiating new discussions with the government of Bangladesh regarding steps to improve the worker rights environment in Bangladesh so that GSP benefits can be restored and tragedies like the Rana Plaza building collapse and Tazreen Fashion factory fire can be prevented. The Obama administration is committed to reflecting American values in our trade policy, including regard to the rights of workers worldwide."

The US Congress created the GSP programme in the Trade Act of 1974 for devel-

oping countries to expand their economies by allowing certain goods to be imported to the US duty-free. Under the programme, 127 beneficiary countries are eligible to export up to 5,000 types of products to the United States duty-free. In 2012, the total value of imports that entered the US duty-free under GSP was \$19.9 billion, including \$34.7 million from Bangladesh. Top GSP imports from Bangladesh in 2012 included tobacco, sports equipment, porcelain china, and plastic products. The US will continue to accept imports from Bangladesh following this decision and none will be eligible for duty-free treatment under GSP while Bangladesh's benefits remain suspended.

The suspension of Bangladesh's GSP benefits, which became effective 60 days after the publication of the proclamation in the Federal Register, follows a multi-year interagency US government review of Bangladesh's compliance with statutory GSP eligibility criteria related to worker rights. The review began in 2007, based on a petition submitted by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and has involved intensive US government engagement with the government of Bangladesh and various stakeholders in Bangladesh and US. The United States Trade Relations (USTR) has also held several public hearings on the GSP review of Bangladesh—the latest on March 28, 2013.

The US government has provided assistance through the US Agency for International Development and the Department of Labour (DOL) for programmes that support the strengthening of worker rights in Bangladesh. DOL is providing technical assistance to improve the labour law framework and the ability of labour and management to consult and cooperate. Another effort recently announced would help the government to better enforce fire and building safety standards, as well as train workers' groups to effectively monitor abatement efforts.

A commitment to protect labour rights is critical to the Obama administration's trade

policy. The USTR has increased monitoring of labour laws and conditions in trade partner countries, as well as engagement through formal mechanisms established by the trade agreements. The GSP benefit suspension is not for Bangladesh only. The US government took into account Colombia, Bahrain, Guatemala, Dominican Republic and Central American countries in the past. Its Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) seeks to include stronger labour obligations that will further strengthen labour laws in conformity with international standards, enhance mechanisms to address differences when they arise, and broaden bilateral and regional cooperation. The administration ensured that Colombia effectively implemented its commitments under the Labour Action Plan by improving labour law enforcement and addressing violence against union leaders before the US-Colombia trade agreement entered into force in May 2012.

In Canadian outlook, if a company exports less than \$1 million worth of clothing from Bangladesh to Canada, it is obliged to pay \$1,000 a year for five years for an accord membership of the European-based retailers. That company would also be required to cover some of the cost of factory safety improvements. Basically, Canadian companies want to make sure they are doing everything they can so as not to be blamed for exploitation of workers in unsafe conditions. Just one Canadian company, Loblaw, has signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, compared to 18 major UK companies and 11 Australian retailers. There are now 152 accord members and another 10 companies have written in recent days to the Accord's international operations executive director, Alan Roberts, asking about joining.

After all, garment workers safety and human rights are serious matters, and that has to be realised by the Bangladesh government.

The writer is a Bangladesh-Canadian journalist based in Toronto, Canada. E-mail: bukhari.toronto@gmail.com

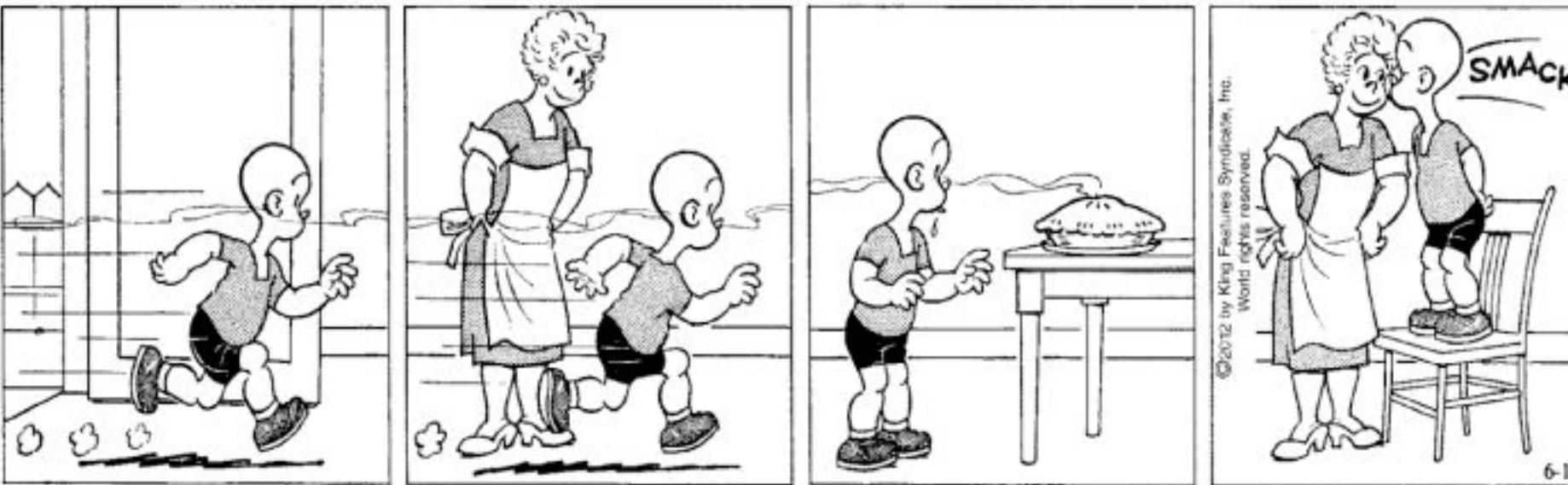
## BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



## HENRY

by Don Trachte



## CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

QUOTABLE Quote

There is no one busy in this world, its always about priorities.. You will always find time for the things you feel important.

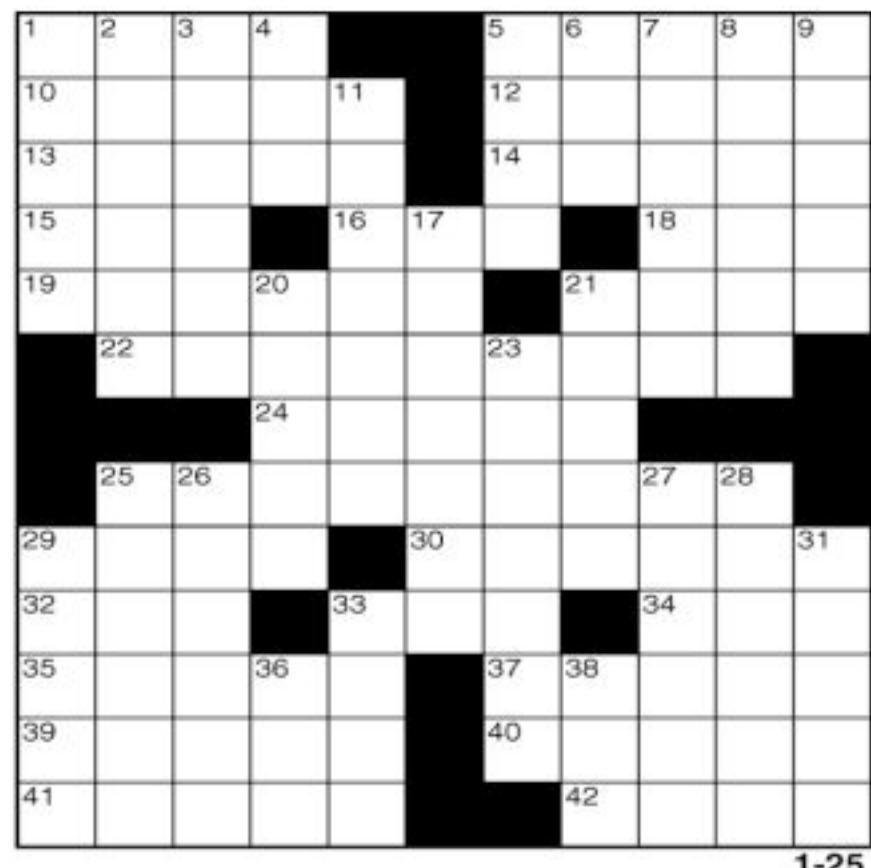
Unknown

ACROSS

- Mapline
- Laughable
- Archipelago makeup
- Puzzle subject
- TV tryout
- Funeral heaps
- Coffee dispenser
- Cart puller
- Daiquiri need
- Dakota city
- High pair
- Climbing flowers
- Noggins
- Grapefruit cocktails
- Turn down
- \_ mache
- Complete
- Private room
- \_alai
- "Ninotchka" star
- Show gratitude to

DOWN

- Tatter
- Brother of Isis
- Completely redone
- \_gratias
- Little rascals
- Dissenter's vote
- Serengeti setting
- Reunion group
- Moves cautiously
- Eye rudely
- Do an old newspaper job
- Answer
- Man of morals
- Literalists
- Capitol group
- Tenor Bocelli
- Demi Moore movie
- Spooky gathering
- "The Rehearsal" painter
- Picard's first officer



## Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUOTE

EALLQD NAD CKBD NAGN KQ OLQN ZQDBZC, GPT AGYKN FKCC OGH D KN NAD OLQN GRXDDGYCD.

-- BXGPEKQ YGELP

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: ALWAYS BEHAVE LIKE A DUCK -- KEEP CALM AND UNRUFFLED ON THE SURFACE, BUT PADDLE LIKE THE DEVIL UNDERNEATH.

-- JACOB BRAUDE

Classic COLLECTION Live in Style

Proudly announcing the completion of our 216<sup>th</sup> project.

Expected handover date: 31 January, 2014

Actual handover date: 31 December, 2013

1 months ahead of schedule

ALWAYS AHEAD IN EVERY WAY ... SINCE 1984

Please contact 01755 66 24 24

REHAB MEMBERSHIP # 001 ISO 9001 : 2008 CERTIFIED www.btibd.com

building technology & ideas ltd. in pursuit of excellence...