

UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY

# Improved children rights are urgently needed in South Asia

KARIN HULSHOF

ON November 20, 1989, the world agreed that rights of children needed to be protected. The resulting Convention on the Rights of the Child is ratified by a record 191 States. It is the world's promise to children everywhere. The year 2014 marks 25 years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention has inspired and guided national legislation, policies and programmes to respect, protect and fulfil child rights in South Asia. Yet, pervasive poverty and inequities prevent millions of children in South Asia from living in dignity and reaching their full potential.

On this 25th anniversary we ask ourselves, what else can we do to transform the lives of children in South Asia? The response is getting children and their mothers health services, good nutrition and proper toilets. We also need to provide quality schooling and create opportunities for their future. And the good news is that we have the knowhow and innovative approaches to make positive changes in the lives of children in South Asia.

In South Asia, Unicef's priorities for 2014-17 are ambitious and vitally important to the development of this region. We envisage that 10 million additional children, especially girls, will attend school at primary and

lower secondary level. The percentage of girls who are married before age 18 will be reduced. The neonatal mortality rate will be reduced from 32 to 25 per 1,000 live births. South Asia will have no new polio cases. In addition, 120 million individuals will no longer practice open defecation, and 12 million children will be saved from stunting and its consequences.

Achieving these results and improving children lives is urgently needed to transform the future of South Asia.

Our region is at the epicenter of the global stunting crisis. Over 63 million children under-five are stunted; we are talking about 38% of all the under-fives in the region. The most recent data indicate that over one-third of South Asian women 15-

49 years old are underweight or anemic, two conditions that play against women's health, leading to the high incidence of low birth weight in South Asia (28%), and perpetuate the inter-generational transmission of stunting.

South Asia is also the region with the highest numbers of people who defecate in the open: more than 680 million people don't use toilets. Sanitation has a strong connection not only with personal hygiene but also with human dignity, well-being, public health, nutrition, education. Children under five are the most vulnerable to the effects of poor sanitation.

Last week, Unicef convened a regional conference called Stop Stunting to call attention to the effect

that if South Asia is to make significant strides in reducing child stunting, greater investments will be needed to improve results in three key areas: child feeding, women's nutrition and household sanitation.

In South Asia, more than 2 million children die before their fifth birthday and these deaths are preventable. 38% of all the region's children have chronic malnutrition. And South Asia is one of the riskiest places in the world to become pregnant or give birth, with the second highest number of maternal deaths worldwide. Far too many children get married, and far too many girls are never born due to son preference.

Therefore, a large scale response is not only necessary, it is urgently needed to stop stunting, end open defecation, bring millions of children into the class rooms, reduce neonatal mortality and end child marriage.

On this special occasion, our appeal is a call to join forces so that no child -- boy or girl -- in South Asia sees his life or her opportunities undercut because of persistent deprivations.

Borrowing the words of children "we are not the sources of problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses; we are investments. We are not just young people; we are people and citizens of this world."

The writer is Regional Director, Unicef South Asia.



# Sakib's huge achievements

NABILA IDRIS

I think I left a tiny portion of my heart in Khulna city last week.

Before my husband reads that and has a minor cardiac event, I ought to explain the object of my affection is a child. This personable young boy, Sakib, 15, is nearly the same age as my brothers, which may be one reason I was immediately drawn to him. Also, I was interviewing beneficiaries of a NGO project, and he was the only one who replied to my diffident, "Would you mind if I ask you your salary?" with a cheerful, "You can ask because it's not like you'll take it away!"

I know when we in the NGO industry talk about project beneficiaries we tend to vacillate between the absolute positive -- "They got a cow... and now their lives have changed completely" -- to the absolute negative -- "The communities suffer from... they are crying out for our targeted support to achieve sustainable development".

Sakib's life is not like that. Yes, his family received support; yes, this has

significantly improved his living standards; but no, unlike many other beneficiaries, he has not returned to school. He explained, "I was about to sit for the class eight exam when, due to sudden financial difficulty in the family, I stopped studying. What's the point of studying if I can't use it to earn a living? We all have to eat."

Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child notes that every child has the right to be protected from economic exploitation, and not perform any hazardous or harmful work. Easier said than done. The reality is, in Bangladesh, there are 7.9m working children between 5-17 years of age, many of whom drop out of school to earn a living. One of them, Sakib, now works as a cleaner in a famous Khulna hotel.

At this point, I know we all want to feel pity for him. But 'pity' would be the wrong emotion because that is not at all how Sakib views himself. His enthusiasm was infectious. "We used to be deprived children, now we aren't. No work is too small. I used to feel this hotel is such an important

place, would I ever get to go there? And now I work there! It's a huge achievement!"

It is important to understand the lived reality of many of the child labourers working around us because this insight can change our behavior towards them. Any disrespect meted out to him as 'just another cleaner' not only hurts his feelings, it shoots down the very basis of his achievement and self-worth. Although never rude to them before, when I returned to the hotel after this conversation, I noticed myself being extra courteous to the support staff. I know who deserves credit for this.

I do not wish to idealise the plight of child labourers, nor look at poverty through a sentimental lens. Both are social ills that deserve our urgent attention. My reason for sharing Sakib's story on Universal Children's Day is to humanise the many faces of poverty we come across regularly. While many may revert to a default reaction of 'pity' for people in these situations, I believe it is possible to balance respect for their considerable

achievements with an active effort to eliminate child labour. There is no excuse to look down on people, sympathetically or otherwise, who fight adversity and conquer it to the best of their abilities.

In the course of the interview, Sakib told me he lives in a slum where forty families share two primitive toilets that have no running water. He grinned and added, "Queues form in front of them in the mornings!" I confess I did not immediately see the humour in the situation, so I offered to follow up on it soon.

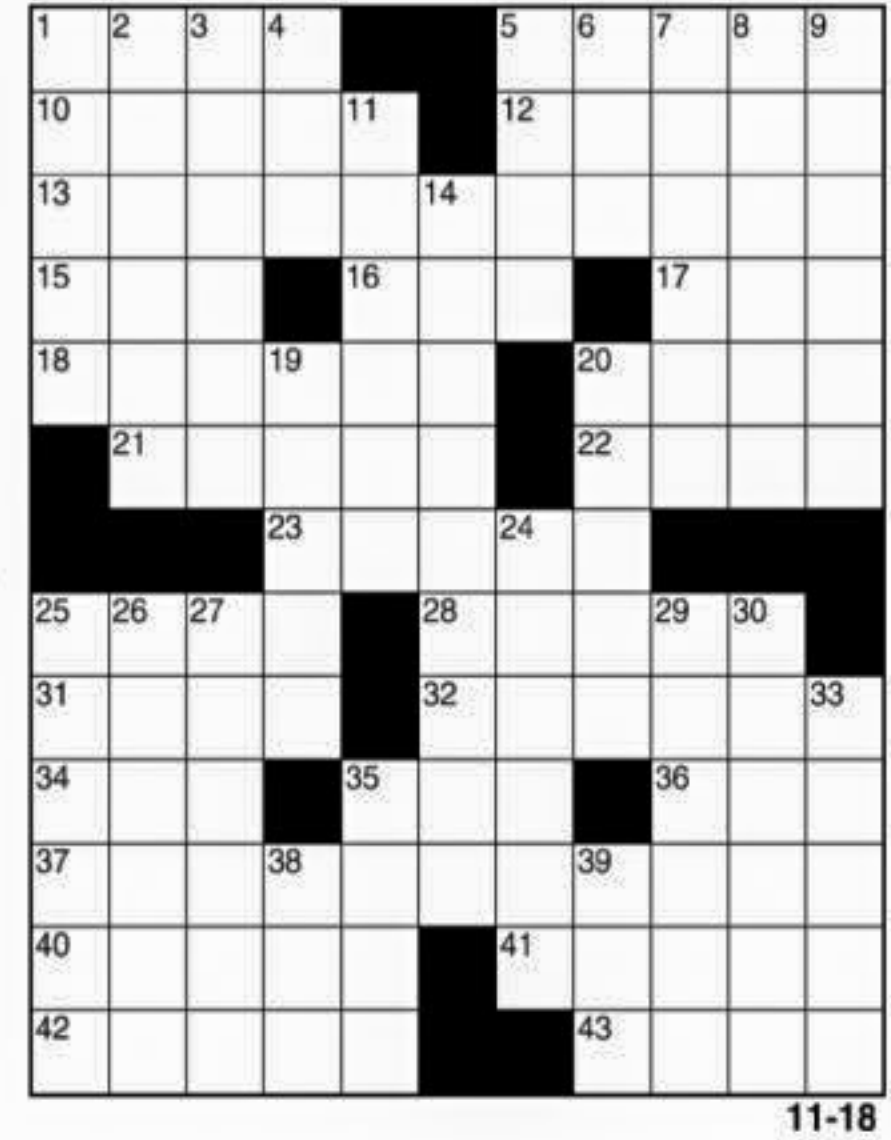
He shook his head, "Even if the toilet problem doesn't get solved, I don't have any regrets. The rent is low, there's a field nearby, the environment is good. I like it. Other people live in worse houses. They survive, don't they? So, I don't have regrets. Recently, they put two street lights there, and that is a huge achievement!" Sometimes even small victories can be very huge achievements.

The author is Senior Officer, Research, Policy & Practice (FSL), Save the Children in Bangladesh.

## CROSSWORD

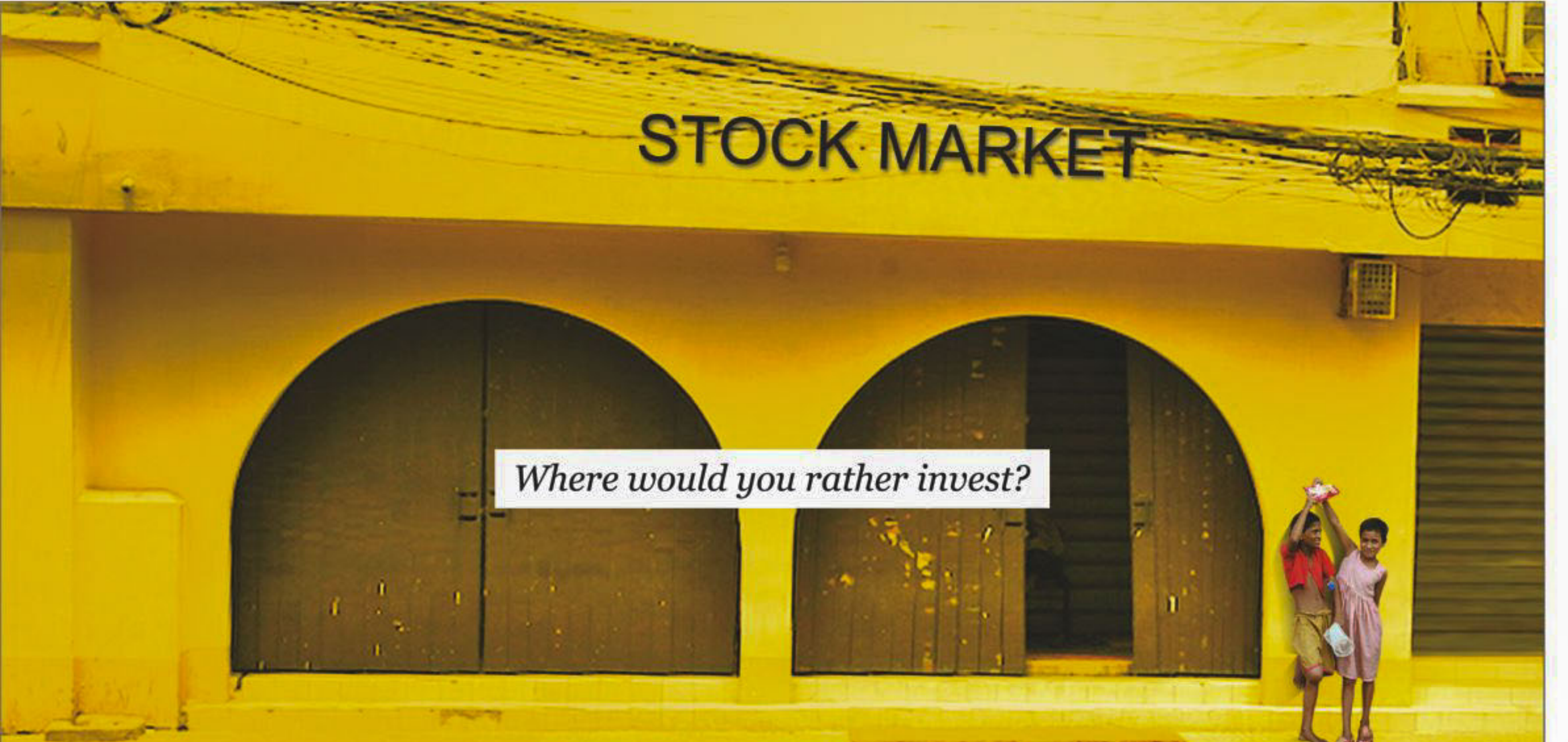
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Grizzily, for one
  - 5 Software test versions
  - 10 Carl's wife in "Up"
  - 12 Dublin natives
  - 13 Burlesque act with balloons
  - 15 Poem type
  - 16 Chopping tool
  - 17 Semi-circular shape
  - 18 Allow
  - 20 Crazy talk
  - 21 Boulder
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  - 23 Pound parts
  - 25 Book unit
  - 28 Sea dogs
  - 31 Antique autos
  - 32 Detail maps
  - 34 Mess up
  - 35 Gardner of movies
  - 36 At present
  - 37 Bee communication method
  - 40 Believed without question
  - 41 Similar
  - 42 Kicks back
  - 43 For fear that
  - DOWN**
  - 1 Jazz variety
  - 2 Dodges
  - 3 Physicist Einstein
  - 4 Chest bone
  - 5 Wait
  - 6 Memorable time
  - 7 Kid's make-believe phone
  - 8 Climb
  - 9 Some bedding
  - 11 Galahad's mother
  - 14 Far-reaching
  - 19 Is sullen
  - 20 Staggers
  - 24 40% of North America
  - 25 From the '30s, say
  - 26 Pump full of bubbles
  - 27 Ravines
  - 29 Canvas shoe
  - 30 Portfolio makeup
  - 33 Adorable
  - 35 Swiss peaks
  - 38 Stomach
  - 39 Everything



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SHAW CHESS  
CASH LATTES  
ONTO ARCADE  
WORKSUP TAD  
LIONESS UTA  
OWE WREN  
SLOWS SHEDS  
TONS REO  
AWL CHECKON  
GEE ROMANCE  
ERASED RATA  
DEVISE EVER  
DENTS SETS



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## GOLD SMUGGLING

### Will Bangladesh be a permanent transit point?

M. AMINUL ISLAM AKANDA

GOLD smuggling in Bangladesh has reached such an alarming stage that this year the total amount of gold haul is likely to cross the previous record of 520 kg in 2013. It was only 25 kg in 2012. Almost 300 kg gold is smuggled via our territory per day, which is about eight times our domestic demand. Gold seizure has become routine at our international airports in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet. This confiscation is a loss for smugglers, who smuggle more to recover it. How our country will compensate for the losses is a critical question.

Smuggled gold that enters our country is rarely used for domestic consumption. Our domestic demand is about 12 metric tons annually, which is mostly met from gold carried by our expatriates from Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai and other Middle Eastern countries. If 100 of 10,000 expatriate passengers bring the permitted amount of 300 grams each, under baggage rule, a daily inflow of 30 kg could sufficiently meet our local demand in addition to the recycled amount. It was reported that some 660 kg entered through declaration in April 2014. If the smuggled amount enters our small market, won't that lead to a market failure? Apparently, smuggled gold goes to the giant Indian markets which fulfill the 1,500 metric tons of annual demand there. Smuggling has increased farther after a gradual rise in import duty in India since mid-2012.

The government of India raised tariff on gold to 10% in August 2013 after a frequent step-up from 2% in July 2012, aiming to check rush in gold import during a severe current account deficit in 2012. Its gold import was over \$50 billion, which was equivalent to 3% of GDP. This tariff barrier cut its merchandise import sharply to 19 metric tons in November 2013 from 162 metric tons in May 2013. Accordingly, India became the world's second largest gold market in 2013 from its largest status earlier. Meanwhile, smuggling returned to India after 23 years, and increased at a high rate as reported in the Indian dailies. Moreover, the smugglers also managed our corrupt officials of customs, police and civil aviation for sending illegal consignments to India. We are recognised as a gold smuggling route in local and international media.

Meanwhile, our government has put restrictions on legal inflow of gold in the national budget for 2014-15. It has raised the duty to Tk. 3,000 per *bhori* from Tk. 150 per *bhori*. The ceiling of non-taxable ornaments was also cut from 200 to 100 grams. This policy change corresponded to the Indian policy to save our legal domestic inflow. However, it has almost blocked our legal channel, because of which smuggled gold is now sold in the local market, too. The smuggler to the Indian market gets a comparative margin of Tk. 325,000 per kg for non-taxed entry into Bangladesh. It was reported on April 2 that a kg of gold smuggled to India leads to a net margin of more than Tk. 200,000. If such a large profit margin intensifies it is likely to negatively impact our economy.

The Indian gold market is said to be becoming comparatively lucrative due to fall in gold's domestic price, despite a large fall in international price. The price of 10 grams of gold in the Indian market came down by only Rupees 4,000 -- from Rupees 30,000 in September 2011 to Rupees 26,000 in November 2014 -- whereas it fell from \$660 to \$400 in international market. The ornamental jewelry and religious festivals created demand for which smuggling increased over the past two years in the largest but currently protected market.

There are 14 syndicates involved in gold smuggling to India via Bangladesh, as per a report in a local newspaper a few months ago. The level of smuggling is expected to rise as India has so far not hinted at reducing import duty on gold, and a kg of gold today is reported to earn profits larger than that of five kg in the past.

The payment for gold entering our country is mostly made through *hundi* business, which also expands our black economy. If half of the \$5 billion for 100 metric tons smuggled gold is paid from our sources, it will add at least \$2 billion to capital flight a year. The smugglers find it easy in an economy with high inflow of remittances. Also, repayment against gold is often made with goods by Indian counterpart like cattle for bullion. In spite of the intricate route of domestic and international smugglers, our customs and police officials often seize gold consignments. Reportedly, many of our government officials are also arrested for their alleged involvement with the smuggling network.

Gold smugglers will lose incentives of using our territory if at least 5% of their consignments or 15 kg can be seized daily. No godfather has so far been arrested, and most of the arrested carrier persons were also freed on bail. Nevertheless, we expect to stop smuggling through our airports because they are protected zones. In this regard, some digital vigilance, strong police-custom alliance and participatory incentive would increase gold seizure. We expect a political pledge for extensive regulatory enforcement to put an end to gold smuggling.

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