

RIGHT TO INFORMATION Key to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Yet another attack on a Hindu home

Stop this for good

WE are saddened by the news that the two committees in charge of probing the Nasiragar arson think the tragedy was avoidable. The report reveals that had the administration acted promptly the looting of Hindu homes and temples could have been averted. The report puts the credibility of the administration under question. We understand that a shake up in the administration in the Upazila has already taken place. But a string of arson and vandalism of Hindu homes in the area in the last couple of days call for more punitive measures.

The latest in this long line of violence and intimidation was carried out the day before yesterday when property belonging to a member of the Hindu community was torched. We wonder what has emboldened the criminals to commit such a dastardly act, especially after the area is put under heavy patrol of the police and paramilitary Border Guards. There is no denying that the attacks have been purposefully perpetrated to disrupt communal harmony.

We believe that the authorities need to take more measures to prevent repetition of such acts of aggression. We understand that this has been perpetrated by a handful of trouble mongers and the best deterrent against such criminal elements of the society is to take the local people on board in the fight against bigotry and intolerance. In this regard we would like to highlight the role of alems and other Islamic scholars in the area. Also the law enforcers need to remain vigilant and should keep a tab on the criminal elements.

Roads have become daily killers

Nothing is being done

THE frightening image of the body of a demolished truck – the result of a head on collision with another truck- in yesterday's paper, invokes the horror of brutal, untimely deaths that we must witness every single day because of road accidents. Despite all the news reports, seminars, TV coverage and analysis of why these horrific accidents happen and how they can be prevented, the statistics continue to be devastating. According to WHO estimates, around 20,000 people are killed in road crashes in Bangladesh every year. One can only imagine the number of people who survive but have been maimed for life. Yesterday seven people died in the head on collision on the Dhaka-Bogra highway in Sherpur.

But this tragic story plays itself over and over again every single day. People of every age, background and gender; have lost their lives unnecessarily because of pure negligence.

We know the various factors behind such a huge casualty figure – reckless driving due to drinking, sleep deprivation because of too many trips made, helpers being behind the wheel instead of the drivers, bad roads, unfit, ramshackle buses, failing breaks, speeding, irresponsible pedestrians crossing the road, to name a few. What we don't know is why the Roads and Highways authorities have done precious little in the way of stopping such practices that lead to families being destroyed and individuals with bright futures who could have contributed to this country's progress, are eliminated. What do the highway patrol do to prevent accidents or even respond to them when they occur? Why do reckless drivers manage to escape? Why are bus owners not held legally accountable when their drivers kill? Why is there no comprehensive compensation system for the victims and their families? Unless these issues are addressed, we will continue to lose precious lives that have devastating socio-economic repercussions for Bangladesh.

DR. SHAMSUL BARI and RUHINAZ

“AS we surprised the world with our MDG achievements, we are committed to lead by example again in the case of SDGs,” said Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a gathering on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in October 2015. It was at that session that 193 member states of the UN and the global civil society adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to be achieved by 2030.

One of those goals includes: ensuring public access to all government-held information. In Bangladesh that has already been given a legal basis through adoption of the Right to Information Act 2009. In fact, both SDG and RTI are in sharp focus in contemporary development discourse.

RTI, also known as, Freedom of Information (FOI), has emerged as the fastest growing legislation globally in the last quarter of a century. Before 1990, only 13 countries had RTI/FOI Acts. The number has jumped to 113 now. The importance of RTI for human rights and good governance is now undisputed. Its inclusion, therefore, in SDGs was a logical culmination of that process.

Bangladesh's commitment to SDGs:

Following its remarkable success with MDGs, it was natural that Bangladesh will embrace the SDGs with great enthusiasm. It quickly set up an inter-ministerial committee on SDG implementation and monitoring to develop a unified approach. A citizens' platform for co-ordination of civil society efforts was also formed. A great deal of expectation has thus been created for Bangladesh to play a leading role in implementing SDGs.

SDG Goals: The 17 SDGs include:

ending poverty, ending hunger, ensuring health and well-being, ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all ages, achieving gender equity, ensuring clean water and sanitation, clean energy, decent work and economic growth, combating climate change and promoting peace, justice and strong institutions.

Right to information is embedded in the last set of goals above as Goal No. 16. Its inclusion reflects the growing recognition by the international community that peace and justice, as well as effective, accountable, inclusive institutions are at the core of sustainable development.

SDG Targets: To unpack the SDGs and

bring them under sharper focus, 169 associated targets were identified at the same time. The targets for Goal 16 range from reducing all forms of violence to reducing corruption and bribery and ensuring public access to all information. The last target relates to RTI.

SDG Indicators: Following adoption of the SDGs, the UN had set up an “Inter-Agency and Expert Group on the Development of a Global Indicator Framework.” Among hundreds of indicators identified by it, the one for Target 16.10, with Indicator No. 16.10.2 concerned: “Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.”

Unpacking Indicator 16.10.2: It will be the task of national and international monitors now to unpack and further clarify Indicator 16.10.2 and follow them up. At the international level, this has been done by UNESCO, which will serve as a custodian agency responsible for global reporting to the UN on this indicator. Bangladesh monitors will have to develop and follow national indicators, as necessary, guided by UNESCO perspective.

The UNESCO perspective identified three key variables to indicate the state of

indicators may have to be developed as we progress towards 2030. The emerging national experience and the increased knowledge of international practice will provide further guidance.

To begin with, we shall have to recognise that our ability to fulfill SDG Goal No. 16 will require far greater efforts from the three key players concerned, namely the government, Information Commission (IC) and citizens, than has been the case so far. We must critically assess the performance of each player and draw lessons from them.

Two points will require particular attention in this regard. First, while the other SDGs would depend primarily on the efforts of the government for their achievement, citizens must play the key role in attaining Goal 16 and Target 16.10. Unless they put the law to use, the government can do very little to take it forward.

Second, as a nation, we need to understand the basic objectives of RTI more fully. Based on what we understood

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socioeconomic change and the goals of poverty reduction or shared prosperity, third degree outcomes, is even more difficult to determine.”

Our 2030 goal should, therefore, be to strive towards achieving the second and third degree outcomes and ensure systemic change in governance. If we can do that, other SDG goals would fall in place more easily. It must be remembered, however, that attaining the all-embracing, overarching, foundational Goal No. 16, would require changes that are extremely difficult to achieve. Peace and justice, accountable and inclusive institutions are intangible and elusive.

It is heartening that the government has committed fully to fulfilling the ambitious vision of the SDGs, following its remarkable success in the MDGs. However, it will require all of us - government and citizens alike – to fulfill the Prime Minister's wish to surprise the world once again in this regard. As far as RTI is concerned, citizens and the IC will have to work closely together to identify the difficulties and challenges, and undertake corrective measures to move ahead.

In the days to come, it is the work of the IC that will be under particular focus of international scrutiny, as it is easier to assess its performance against the provisions of the RTI law and emerging international standards. If it does its job well, with the required support from the government, more citizens would exercise their rights under the law and more public officials made aware of their obligations under it. This, in turn, will contribute to transparent and accountable governance which will be key to achieving the SDGs.

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public access to information in a country. They are: 1) whether a country has constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information; 2) the extent to which such national guarantees reflect international human rights standards and/or agreements; and 3) the implementation mechanisms in place for such guarantees.

The latter variable includes the following: i) Government efforts to publicly promote the right to information; ii) citizens' awareness of their legal right to seek and receive information and their ability to utilise it effectively; iii) capacity of public institutions to provide information upon request by the public; and iv) independent redress mechanism.

The Task ahead: As Bangladesh already has an RTI Act and has gained significant experience under it for the last seven years, it is better-placed than many other countries to begin work on the above. But given our specificities, additional

initially, we have not done too badly. We have managed to establish the basic requirements of an RTI regime in the country. We have set up the IC; adopted rules and regulations; engaged in creating awareness about the law; got people to seek RTI-related information, though not very many; sensitised public officials to supply that information, however reluctantly; and got the IC to resolve disputes between the sides.

But these are only basics. There is a need to go beyond this preliminary phase to reach the higher objectives of the law. What we have achieved so far may be called first degree outcomes, as described in a World Bank study. The study further states: “First-degree outcomes, however, tell us nothing about whether the disclosure of information has led to improved governance or service delivery, or even whether it has supported individual goals. These accountability outcomes, second degree outcomes, are more difficult to trace. . . . In the context of development, whether RTI laws contribute to broad

Celebrating Global Entrepreneurship Week



MARCIA BERNICAT

IN November we celebrate Global Entrepreneurship Week, a celebration of all of the innovators and job creators who launch startups that bring ideas to life, drive economic growth, and expand human welfare. Since the first Global Entrepreneurship Week

in 2007, millions of people have participated in thousands of exciting events held in more than a hundred countries around the world. Last year alone, US embassies and consulates hosted or participated in more than 125 events in at least 75 countries, including here in Bangladesh where last year we launched the

one-of-a-kind Makerspace, a co-working space that convenes entrepreneurs, engineers, audio and visual artists, and computer scientists to innovate and problem solve, at the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts.

Entrepreneurs transformed the American economy into a global source of science, technology, advanced manufacturing and energy innovations - from the phone in your pocket, to private spacecraft delivering payloads to space, to sleek solar panel roof tiles. Entrepreneurship and innovation continue to play a vital role in the growth of the US economy that has translated into three million jobs created by new ventures in 2015.

Entrepreneurship is also thriving in Bangladesh - from small street vendors to social entrepreneurs reshaping the

microfinance and mobile payments industries. As Bangladesh's impressive economic growth continues to improve the livelihoods of millions of people, entrepreneurs are the key to unlocking even greater potential. Increasing access to startup capital, protecting intellectual property rights, refining a supportive business eco-system, tackling corruption, and reforming education to provide people with more relevant skills for the labour market, can assure more sustainable economic growth.

Inclusive economic policies benefitting youth and women also increase shared prosperity. What opportunities do you see to empower youth to find innovative solutions to the country's problems, or to tap the creative talents and earning power of the half of Bangladesh's population that is comprised of women? The United Nations is observing Women's Entrepreneurship Day on November 19. I invite you to join the efforts around the world to identify and break down barriers women face, such as low access to the formal banking system and familial expectations, that prevent them from starting or growing a business.

President Obama said the entrepreneurial spirit empowers people to come together to tackle our most pressing global problems, from climate change to poverty. He praised entrepreneurs who turn ideas into reality, creating good-paying jobs that put rising economies on the path to prosperity. Bangladeshi Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus said human beings are born entrepreneurs. Please join me this week in recognising the potential entrepreneur in each of us. Together let's explore new avenues to promote the entrepreneurial spirit and enrich Bangladesh as a startup nation.

The writer is US Ambassador to Bangladesh.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Unchecked extortion

I was deeply upset by the news report 'Nasiragar Hate Attacks: Blanket arrests net innocents, not kingpins' published on November 12. Perpetrators behind the incident are still not being apprehended for reasons unknown to us.

My relative recently faced something similar. About six months ago, my cousin was recruited in Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank as a cashier. Members of a law enforcement agency came to his house and took Tk 5,000 for a provisional police report, although there haven't been any cases against him till date. He was later visited by the same police officers demanding Tk 10,000, this time for a permanent police report. He resisted, but eventually had to give in to the intimidation of the policemen.

When will these practices stop?
 Md. Golam Azam
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Silver lining to US Election results

The US election result has created great furor worldwide. However, Trump has argued against the American policy of expanding NATO and arming the member states in the name of containing Russia. His victory may have prevented another Cold War. If Trump can work with other world leaders including Putin, the world will certainly be rid of many plaguing problems. Trump has also argued pragmatically that defeating ISIS is more important than ousting president Assad. Immediately after winning the election, Trump pledged to be the president of all Americans and called for national unity, implying that he may not follow his controversial campaign rhetoric.

We hope that his tenure can open a new chapter in American history.
 Ashek Sarker
 Comilla

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