

International Anti-Corruption Day

Ending corruption is an obligation

AS we observe the International Anti-Corruption Day, it is a good time to reflect on the current state of corruption in our country. From a factual perspective, corruption, at present, is running rampant at every level and every sector. What is even more deeply worrying is that the authorities seem not to be taking this as seriously as they should.

Every year, according to the United Nations, USD 1 trillion is paid in bribes globally, while an estimated USD 2.6 trillion, amounting to more than 5 percent of the global GDP, are stolen annually through corruption. In developing countries, funds lost to corruption are estimated at 10 times the amount of official development assistance.

What this further shows is that any country going through the process of rapid development, from an underdeveloped position, is more prone to fall victim to the plague of corruption. And at a time when Bangladesh is going through the same process, it is imperative to strengthen the anti-corruption mechanism so that corruption can be effectively prevented and eventually rooted out. If the government does not put greater emphasis on stopping corruption, particularly within its own ranks, then who will?

For development to be meaningful, long-lasting and beneficial to all across the board, corruption must be purged from all sectors of society and particularly from within the government. Otherwise, massive amounts of resources meant for development will continue to seep out of the overall economy, harming the country as a whole. Furthermore, as corruption adversely affects the poor and the vulnerable the most, it is as much a moral obligation as an economic one to ensure an end to corruption.

Migrants pay more, get less

Better regulations needed

ACCORDING to a recent survey presented in the 16th ILO Asia and the Pacific regional meeting in Bali, Indonesia, Bangladesh scored poorly in terms of high migration costs and low earnings per month. It costs the average Bangladeshi expatriate worker USD 3,136 as recruitment fees while they earn an average of USD 347 per month. Seventy-five percent of the respondents claimed that they did not get paid on time and in many instances, they did not receive a contract before departure. Upon arrival, a large percentage of Bangladeshi workers found they had to work longer hours on a lower wage than promised. Indeed, the list of complaints is a long one and it has everything to do with the fact that neither the recruiters in Bangladesh nor the employers abroad were following ILO Convention 181, which outlines how the recruitment process should be.

Given that most of our labourers fall in the semi-skilled category and the long list of abuses local recruiters are known for, we need an elaborate national policy and regulations that will oversee the whole process of international recruitment. Had there been legally binding guidelines in place, workers could be saved from being charged excessive fees, commissions and so-called administrative costs that are the norm of recruiters presently.

We can take lessons from ASEAN countries which signed the Cebu Declaration providing the grounds for workers' protection from member countries by making it obligatory for each nation to live up to legal commitments for both receiving and sending countries. We need to work on policies that will ensure the rights of our workers both at home and the country they are going to. Otherwise, migrant workers will continue to be cheated and human rights violations will not be mitigated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Correct way to address persons with disability

We thank *The Daily Star* for their wonderful coverage on Employment of Persons with Disabilities on 7 December. However, I would like to point out that its reference to persons with disabilities as "differently abled" is unfortunately not appropriate.

Initiated in recognition of the taboo around the word "disability", countries started using the terms "differently abled" or "specially challenged" instead, considering them to be more civil or dignified. This was corrected following the formulation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) at the United Nations. The CRPD and disability rights advocates have emphasised the need for addressing the person, not their disabilities. So the terms being promoted are "persons/ women/ children with disability".

It is therefore expected that a newspaper as prolific as *The Daily Star* will also use these terms promoted by international organisations working with disabilities, such as the UN.

Dr Nafeesur Rahman
Director, NFOWD

Corruption control—is it feasible or a fantasy?

ITEKHARUZZAMAN

DECEMBER 9 is observed throughout the world as International Anti-corruption Day (IACD). On this day in 2003, the United Nations (UN) called upon governments and peoples of the world to mark the adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).

Corruption is a crime that undermines economic development, social cohesion, political stability and democratic progress of all countries and societies without exception. It is inter alia a multi-trillion dollar global scandal geared by the global financial and banking infrastructure that remains conducive to illicit transfers of corrupt money mainly from the developing to the developed world. At national levels, corruption is a menace that causes plunder of resources; destroys a level playing field in public contracting; distorts competitive business and investment environment; and above all, erodes trust in government and politics.

Corruption causes suffering to everyone except the corrupt who may benefit from it thanks to impunity, collusion and lack of political will. Corruption hurts the poor and disadvantaged the

UNCAC, which says, "each State Party shall ... promote active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption ..."

Bangladesh became a state party to UNCAC in 2007, and hence committed to create the space for citizens' participation in anti-corruption movement. Political call for social

question though, as does the quality of performance of the Anti-Corruption Commission and other institutions of accountability like the parliament, the justice system and law-enforcement agencies.

The Government's Vision 2021 recognises good governance and corruption control as indispensable elements of state policy. The Perspective Plan 2010-21 asserts that "the Government is determined to confront and root out the scourge of corruption

under obligation to "substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms"; under target 16.4 to "significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organised crime"; and under 16.10 to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms".

To what extent are all these likely to bear fruit or will continue to be no more than lip service, is anyone's guess. The moot question, therefore, is whether corruption control is feasible in Bangladesh or a fantasy? Bangladesh is happily no longer at the very bottom of global ranking as per corruption perceptions index (CPI) as it used to be during 2001-2005. But with a score of 25 out of 100 in 2015 it remains far from being able to effectively control corruption. Bangladesh remains the second worst performer in South Asia after Afghanistan. In terms of people's daily experiences, according to the national household survey 2015 conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh, 67.8 percent of the people were victims of corruption in the surveyed service sectors. Further details can only be more frustrating.

The point to note in the context of IACD is the ever-growing importance of multi-stakeholder involvement in fighting this menace together. This is however easier said than done in an environment where the shrinkage of space for voice and accountability has been institutionalised by legal provisions that specifically restrict freedom of speech and opinion of individuals and institutions in the non-government sector.

Will corruption control be mired by dissent control? Much would depend on whether and to what extent people at large and civil society in particular will have the passion and capacity to resist this institutionalisation of restricted civic space and prevent it from becoming the 'new normal'. It will also depend on how civil society succeeds in navigating through the barriers. An equal and indeed more important question is if and when would the government realise that all the lofty commitments without fundamental freedoms will only increase frustration among people.

As attractive as it may appear in the short term, no government can afford to alienate people by restricting critique and dissent for too long except at its own peril. Governments that restrict freedom of speech and opinion not only protect the corrupt but also create Frankensteins for themselves.

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CARTOON BY: SADAT

Under SDG target 16.5, Bangladesh is under obligation to "substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms"

hardest; it also kills innocent lives as we have seen in case of Rana Plaza and many more such tragedies in Bangladesh.

The purpose of observing this day is to bring such ill effects of corruption to the attention of the governments, politicians, businesses and all other stakeholders including the citizens at large, and to stress the importance of standing up together against corruption.

The importance of people's participation against corruption has been underscored by Article 13 of the

movement against corruption in Bangladesh indeed precedes UNCAC. In a speech on the Independence Day way back in 1975, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called upon the people: "... the number one priority is to root out corruption ... I need your help ... I will enforce the law, I will not spare anybody ... it has to be a people's movement ... It has to be a movement to socially boycott the bribe-taker and the corrupt. ... who can do it? Students can do it, the youth can, intellectuals can, the people can, each house should be turned into a fortress against corruption". It is not known though if this vision ever caught the imagination of subsequent political leaders.

Nevertheless, the list of Government commitments to control corruption and promote better governance is pretty long. A plan of implementation of UNCAC pledges was adopted by the Government in 2009; it underwent a self-assessment and peer review of implementation; the Right to Information Act was adopted in 2009, the Whistleblower Protection Act was adopted in 2011, so was the National Integrity Strategy in 2012.

These can be viewed as efforts to strengthen legal, institutional and policy capacity of the state to control corruption. The extent to which these are implemented and enforced remains a big

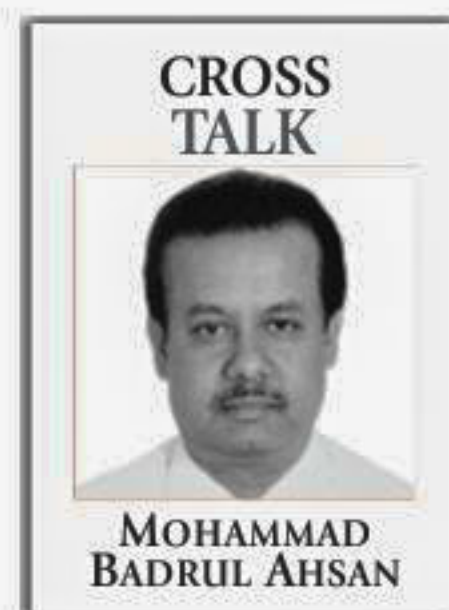
from the body politic of Bangladesh ... The Government intends to strengthen transparency and accountability of all government institutions as integral part of a programme of social change to curb corruption".

The 7th Five Year Plan (7FYP) emphasises that progress towards the desired milestones of Vision 2021 critically depends on meeting the governance challenges. Prominent among 12 broad development goals identified by the 7FYP is "promoting good governance and curbing corruption". The plan reiterates the pledge to further strengthen the democratic governance process to ensure participation of all citizens and the sound functioning of all democratic institutions. Good governance and corruption control were at the core of election manifesto in successive national elections.

To cap it all, Bangladesh is among 193 countries that have subscribed in September 2015 to the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, central to which is goal 16 that makes our Government pledge-bound to "promote a peaceful and inclusive society ... provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels".

Under SDG target 16.5, Bangladesh is

Why child marriage is good for neither



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"THERE is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact," writes Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*. When the Cabinet approved the draft Child Marriage Prevention Act 2016 in this country on November 24, the deception looked more obvious than the fact. The draft proposes to keep the marriageable age of girls at

18, but allows "exceptions" under special circumstances such as accidental or unlawful pregnancy. Not sure what the framers of this law have in mind. Is this law going to promote healthy marriages or protect unhealthy relationships?

The intent of this proposed legislation is downright perplexing. It's like saying that murder is a crime, but not so if the victim has died already. Young girls can become pregnant during a consensual relationship if they engage in unprotected sex. But in many cases they become pregnant after being raped. We read news of such despicable instances when lustful men from influential families or political parties force themselves on helpless girls.

If traffic laws are made with accidents in mind, accidents aren't made with traffic laws in mind. Imagine making exceptions at red lights or on one-way roads. Violations will multiply since there's no dearth of drivers eager to break traffic rules. The proposed child marriage law is flawed for the same compelling reason. Underage girls from insolvent families will be at the mercy of predators, who will see it to their advantage to marry girls impregnated by them to avoid punishment. These atrocities are being committed in this country for centuries!

Rape remains perhaps the only crime in the world for which the innocent has to feel guiltier than the guilty. In faraway Canada, a certain judge recently asked an alleged rape victim why she couldn't keep her knees together at the time of her molestation. It's the double standard of men that they reduce women to a life-support system for their carnal desire, and then also blame women for succumbing to it.

The underlying assumptions of the proposed child marriage law are the thresholds of physical and mental growths when a man or a woman is mature enough to enter conjugal life. A house needs to be finished before people can move in to live there. A painting needs to dry out before being put up for an exhibition.

Likewise, the scientific recipe for marriage is that a girl must be at least 18 and a boy 21 before they're

ready for nuptial vows. While the proposed child marriage law recognises that fact, the twist comes from exceptions. This is where this law accommodates the instincts of men and grossly neglects the wellbeing of girls. Deeply defective, it undermines prevention of child marriage like a weep hole gives away an airtight room.

The irony is that exceptions make the proposed law more a diversion than a deterrent. Anybody, who knows the way of things in this country, knows that the 18-and-above requirement is regularly tampered

bundle of cash or a parcel of land.

What will change if the proposed child marriage act becomes law? Probably nothing, if not further encouraging lewd men through its consequent loopholes. Minor girls will be forced into marriage. Deprived of their chances to get education, seek independence, and prepare for challenges, they, wounded in body and soul, will drag themselves through what should be one of the most fulfilling experiences of life.

Fruits are artificially ripened when gassed with ethylene. But young girls cannot be forced to be adults until they have come of age. For economic or other



A still from *Afia Nathaniel's Daughter*.

by arbitrarily increasing the age of girls. But adding the exceptions brings an additional firepower to the arsenal of mischievous minds, who will exploit the words not the spirit of the law, and bend it to their advantage.

Which is happening in Bangladesh all the time, particularly in the villages. Rapists are often forced to marry their victims in a second round of cruelty as justice is compared to the mercantile wisdom of having a customer pay for the merchandise he breaks while shopping. A more repulsive practice is to compensate a molested girl by giving her family a

reasons, pitiable parents are compelled to marry off their daughters at a tender age. Now that education is free and jobs are available, girls should be given the chance to grow up in the natural process.

Most parents these days think of early marriage out of safety concerns for their adolescent daughters. But many of them know child marriage is good neither for the child nor the marriage. If the draft law is passed in the parliament, we shall miss yet another opportunity to make that connection.

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