

A bad year for journalists all over States need a free media

THE Committee to Protect Journalists' (CPJ) report that reveals that more journalists have been jailed this year by government all over the world in nearly three decades, is certainly ominous news for press freedom and what media represents, which is the voice of the people. A total of 259 journalists have been jailed globally, in 2016, compared with 199 at the same time last year. Turkey tops the list with at least 81 journalists imprisoned facing anti-state charges. China and Egypt follow, taking second and third place as countries incarcerating the most number of journalists. While Bangladesh is nowhere near these countries in terms of arresting and jailing journalists, there has been in recent times, a rise in attempts to choke voices of dissent, mainly those of the media.

Under the guise of sedition, defamation, and making statements that are offensive to certain groups, journalists have been repeatedly harassed, with cases filed against them and the fear of arrest constantly looming over their heads.

Even more worrying is the number of unsolved murders of journalists over the last decades by militant and other criminal groups which shows a kind of apathy in trying to carry out proper investigations that would lead to convictions. This gives the impression of impunity to attackers that can only embolden them further.

The disturbing trend of trying to throttle the voices of the press all over the world indicates the growing authoritarianism of governments that are intolerant of any kind of criticism of their rule. When voices of dissent are silenced through direct or indirect intimidation, democracy will suffer as will the ordinary citizen whose interests are prioritised by journalists. What governments across the world are forgetting is that freedom of the press is a fundamental prerequisite of a modern, civilised world because of the watchdog role the media plays. By trying to put fetters on the media's neck, states will ultimately be harming rather than protecting themselves.

Irregularities at BRTA Need for an overhaul

IT is baffling how, despite a longstanding demand for better service and transparency, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority continues to be defined by corruption and irregularities. At a recent public hearing held at its Mirpur office, service seekers complained that their vehicle documents had gone "missing", they were given the runaround by BRTA staff while receiving Digital Registration Certificates, driver's licences and fitness certificates and having ownership of vehicles transferred to their names. The obvious question that comes to mind is this: How on earth do the old, battered buses, CNG-run auto rickshaws, and improvised vehicles receive fitness certificates? How do several bus operators continue to charge passengers extra fares on different routes in the capital?

The complaints made at the hearing are not new. The BRTA, the sole government agency to regulate road transport, has been facing widespread allegation of corruption for many years. Earlier this year the Anti-Corruption Commission organised a hearing on the quality of services provided by the BRTA where people ventilated similar concerns. But the initiative apparently did not lead to any changes.

Bangladesh has become one of the deadliest places in the world on the roads with a fatality rate of 70, affirming the country's status as among the riskiest in the world for road users. With the number of motor vehicles growing at 8 percent per annum, there is a serious risk that road casualties will increase. Instead of causing needless suffering to its clients, the BRTA should concentrate on making the roads safer for everyone. A complete overhaul seems to be the only way out.

Will remittances remain low for long?

SHARJIL HAQUE

SO it looks like growth in remittances will be negative two years on the trot. This was inevitable. Our national strategy on remittances has long stood on two fault lines: excessive reliance on few oil-exporting economies and a thriving informal currency market (*Hundi*). Things may have worked while oil prices soared and exchange-rate differential between *Hundi* and the official currency market remained relatively low. But now this approach has run its course.

Even while the going was good, an acute observer would look at commodity-centric export models of these Middle East economies with a bit of trepidation. One protracted shock to oil prices would decimate the pillars of their towering fiscal surpluses and foreign reserves, leaving little option but to drastically cut back government spending. Lower subsidies in essential items like food and electricity, if combined with subdued public investment in sectors like construction would squeeze real income of migrant Bangladeshis (and others of course).

This is pretty much what happened. Data from the IMF shows that capital investment in the public sector declined by 16.5, 11.2 and 23.4 percent in Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE, respectively, in 2015 compared to the previous year, as these economies walked the path of fiscal consolidation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that firms in countries like Oman and Saudi Arabia have failed to pay migrants their due salaries for months on end (for details, see Migrant-rights.org).

And unless the tension-fraught geopolitics between major oil-producers

gives way to some sort of an agreement on production cuts, supply will continue to outstrip demand and keep prices depressed for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, we are also reminded that remittance is increasingly gushing in through the unofficial exchange market lured by more attractive rates, consequently knocking off a sizeable share of officially recorded inflows. This begs the question why is the differential between official exchange rate and its unofficial counterpart rising, which is denying us valuable dollar reserves?

Perhaps it's best to take a step back and recognise what gave rise to this market in the first place. If studies by Columbia University's Jagdish Bhagwati and IMF's Pierre-Richard Agénor are to be believed, restrictions on foreign trade and

transfer perhaps because of rising concerns over terrorist activities and (iii) rise in the number of residents travelling abroad, most likely driven by the recent increase in manpower export to Middle East countries.

So where does all this leave the Bangladesh economy that relied on stable inflow of remittances to alleviate the hardships of millions of low-income families, increase consumption, sustain small household businesses and, on a more macro level, hedge our not-so-small trade deficit?

As noted earlier, remittance has long skated on thin ice by relying heavily on a handful of undiversified economies. Over the medium-term, we need to lower country-risk by sending a share of our migrants to other, more stable, economies.



PHOTO: STAR

capital flows gave birth to generations of these illegal markets across the world.

For instance, imposing high tariffs creates an incentive to smuggle and fake invoices (in order to decrease tariff duties) by raising demand for goods at illegal prices. That effectively lays out the red carpet for an unofficial currency market if the central bank restricts access to foreign currency. So it's hardly surprising that *Hundi* has persisted for so many decades in Bangladesh. Trade, apart from RMG, has long been barricaded by high tariffs while the central bank lets foreign currency flow out with an eyedropper!

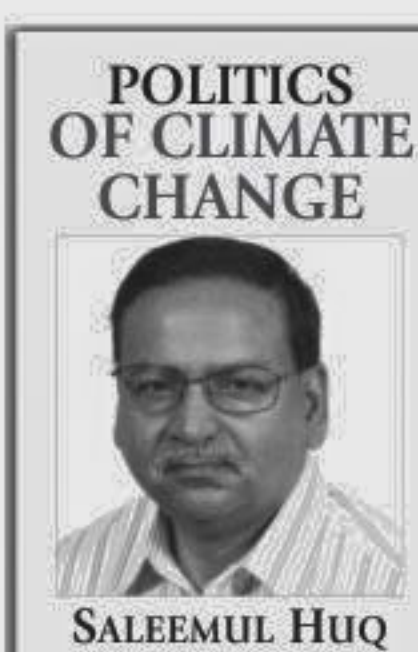
By extension, the recent spike in demand for foreign exchange in *Hundi* that pushed up its spread with official rates must have stemmed from: (i) a resurgence in legal or illegal imports, (ii) need for portfolio diversification and capital

Those of us tracking economic data felt great when Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on recruiting Bangladeshi workers. All we saw was double-digit growth in remittances. What we remained oblivious to was the possibility of labour shortage in the oil-exporting powerhouse, as other Asian nations pulled their own workers out in light of the horrendous working conditions that migrants have to endure. According to Reuters, several migrants sleep in one tiny room "with stray cats and cockroaches lingering on torn bedsheets". Words cannot do justice to this sort of hardship and we can only hope that something is done to change this.

To be sure, that's a lot easier said than done. But surely enhancing our national migration framework with policies that incorporate skill upgradation, streamline recruitment process, outline fair terms of

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION Making a solution out of a problem



SALEEMUL HUQ

While the focus of the Conference was mostly on the current problems related to international migration there was some discussion of the possible impacts of climate change on migration in the future.

There was also the launching of a report by the Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSA) and Action Aid called "Climate Change Knows No Borders", which predicted 15 million climate migrants by 2050 in Bangladesh alone. Hence the paradigm under which these discussions have been held so far has been to see migration as a problem and climate change as a cause of aggravating or exacerbating the problem.

However, there is in my view, another way of looking at the nexus between climate change and migration which is to see it as a potential solution rather than just a current problem.

Let me explain what I mean.

We first need to distinguish between today's migration, which may or may not be exacerbated by current climate impacts, from those of the next several decades, which almost certainly will be impacted by human induced climate change. Thus it is to this longer term future potential migration between now and 2030 or even 2050 that we need to start thinking, planning and investing.

If we take such a longer term perspective to the issue of linking climate change with future migration patterns then in my view there are three major pillars to be addressed simultaneously.

First of all, we need to address the issue of adaptation to climate change as distinct, at least for now, from adaptation to climate variability. What this means is that impacts of climatic events such as floods, droughts and cyclones which occur with or without climate change are already occurring but making the direct

attribution to human induced climate change is not possible. However, future impacts of climate change due to warming of the earth's atmosphere and oceans will certainly cause these events to be more frequent as well as more severe and will also cause the gradual salinisation and eventual inundation of the very low lying coastal areas of the country over many decades.

Hence the time scale involved for adapting to climate variability is now and the next few years while for climate change it is the next few decades. This

provided with the skills to get employment elsewhere and not have to follow their parents as farmers or fishers. This will enable the children of the people living in the vulnerable areas to find better paid employment in cities or even abroad if they are given quality skills.

This requires investment in quality education for children and youth with a focus on developing their skills to get better paid employment either within the country or abroad.

The third pillar of the strategy is to do with the pattern of urbanisation in

coming to Dhaka, they will need to be induced to go elsewhere by offering them better jobs, education and health opportunities in other cities. This means that future investments in urban infrastructure must be focused away from Dhaka to these secondary cities.

It may seem that what I am proposing above is unrealistic and will be unachievable but Bangladesh has overturned pessimistic predictions in the past and can certainly do so again. The essential prerequisite is for the leaders of the country to show genuine leadership



PHOTO: AFP

means we have to enable people living in the most vulnerable areas to cope with the climate hazards in the near term while preparing to enable their children to move when the adaptation strategies can no longer keep up. So the short term adaptation is to help them manage the climate risk where they are and the longer term adaptation is to prepare them to be able to move when necessary.

Based on the longer term aspect of adaptation the second pillar of the strategy is to focus on the next generation of girls and boys who need to be educated and

Bangladesh. Without making any conscious decisions to change the situation the vast majority of the future migrants from rural Bangladesh will head for Dhaka which is already the world's fastest growing mega-city and can hardly absorb another ten million people.

This means that we need to invest in other secondary cities, preferably those away from the coast, such as Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, etc to make them attractive for the next ten million migrants moving from rural to urban Bangladesh.

As migrants cannot be prevented from

and commitment and for all the other stakeholders from private sector, civil society, academia, media and international development partners to all play their respective supporting roles.

If we do that then Bangladesh in 2030 can indeed show the rest of the world how it turned the issue of climate change and migration from a problem into a solution.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Victory Day in my perspective

I moved to Japan about 3-4 months back and greatly miss Bangladesh. I am especially homesick now, on the occasion of our Victory Day, an event in which we still stand united after 45 years, remembering the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for our mother nation. My fellow Bangladeshis and I, living in Japan, will be celebrating the Victory Day here. We hope everyone back home will have a great time celebrating this day.

Addrita Latif

Japan

Give Santals their rights

A recent Al Jazeera video footage shows the police helping to set fire to a Santal shanty. It is horrifying to see how much brutality has befallen the Santal community. They have been made victims of eviction, firing, assault, and carnage because of the negligence of police and authorities. This is unacceptable.

We want a proper investigation of the incident and all responsible miscreants must be penalised immediately.

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