

# BGMEA building – Carry out the court order immediately

## Migrant workers still victims of 'visa trade'

*The ACC should investigate*

IT is shocking to know that despite the government's efforts to fix the cost of getting a migrant worker visa, brokers are still exploiting workers, extracting huge sums. A TIB study has found that as much as 90 percent of five lakh male migrant workers have had to pay two to three times the usual migration cost last year. This was for work visas in seven countries that included five in the Middle East. For instance, workers had to pay between five and 12 lakh taka each for getting a Saudi visa. The government's fixed rate is 1.65 lakh taka.

While recruiting agents take extra sums from workers in the name of health tests and immigration clearance there is graft at many other stages of the application process including at the expatriate welfare ministry. Applicants in fact have to go through 24 to 27 stages to get visas, immigration clearance and smart cards. A one stop service centre, the report recommends, could simplify the process.

We cannot emphasise enough the urgency of good governance of the entire migration sector. As a country, we benefit hugely from the remittances sent by our migrant workers who tirelessly toil at their jobs to send money home. But often the unnecessarily high cost of getting a work visa means that many migrant workers have to carry a huge burden of debt and which has to be paid back, leaving very little for them to save or send back home.

The brokers, officials concerned and recruiting agents must be held accountable through a legal framework. The Anti Corruption Commission should take up this case and investigate this illegal visa trade that goes against national interest.

## Obstructing medical services at hospitals

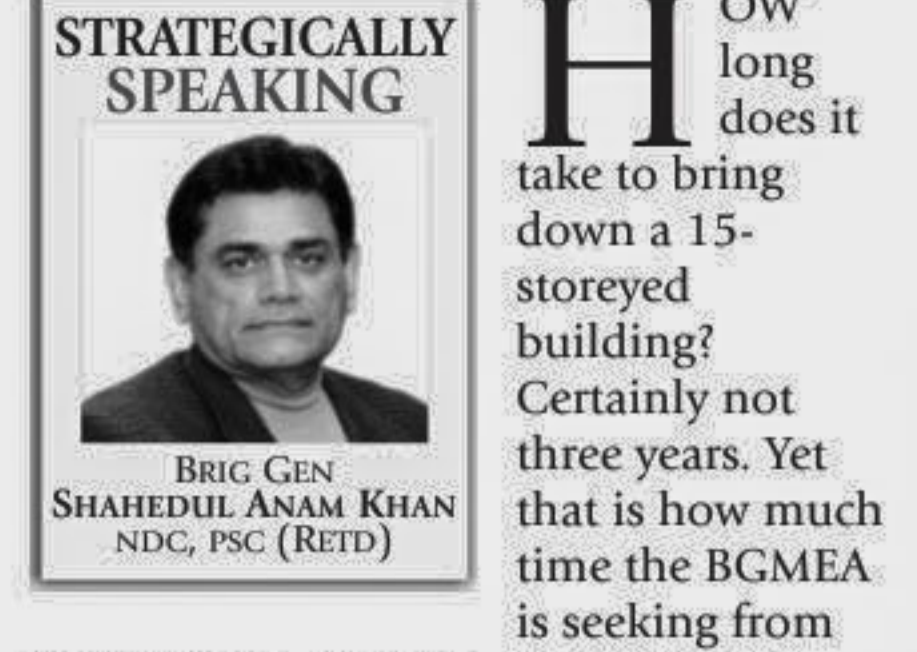
*This must not happen again*

FOR days we witnessed medical services being hampered as intern doctors at some hospitals in Bogra, Sylhet and Barisal abstained from work to protest the penalising of four interns at Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College and Hospital for assaulting a patient's relative. The incident which led to the interns being penalised itself was a shocker, and had brought to the fore once again a growing culture of violence at hospitals, followed by hospital closures or disruptions in delivering medical services to patients.

This tendency of declaring strikes at hospitals, out of the blue, is both dangerous and disruptive. Doctors' strike is unacceptable. And even more unacceptable are sympathetic strikes. Wild cat strikes by doctors lead to increased sufferings for ordinary people, who have no other option but the public hospitals to turn to for treatment.

Clearly, this endangers people's lives, something that the doctors are oath-bound to save. Yet, we have seen hospital services being suspended for a whole host of reasons over the recent past. And in all cases, it is the innocent patients who are, unfortunately, made to suffer. When this becomes a regular feature, what does it say about our medical sector in general?

To reverse this notable decline in medical services, hospital authorities across the country must ensure this does not happen again. It is essential that all professionals working in the sector understand the importance of delivering timely treatment to patients, and the serious consequences that its obstruction may give rise to.



**STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING**  
 BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

HOW long does it take to bring down a 15-storeyed building? Certainly not three years. Yet that is how much time the BGMEA is seeking from the Supreme Court to dismantle the illegal building. The whole process of transfer of government land to a private body, and the construction of a high-rise building thereon, has been obtained, according to the verdict of the court, by deceit, duplicity, fraud and lack of transparency. And those who were involved in the process, according to the opinion of the court also, were fully cognisant of the fact that they were indulging in a blatant act of fraudulence. The BGMEA building displays dishonesty of a few perched at the apex of our social pyramid.

There was collusion at every stage in the process—from the sale of the land to registration and construction. We are told that the building plan was not even approved by Rajuk. And although it is known as BGMEA Building, most of the space of the structure that dominates the skyline has been sold out. Not only was the building constructed without approval, several other laws related to building construction were brazenly violated. And this brazenness stems from a feeling of power that money induces.

Going back to the original question of implementing the court's order of demolishing the building, why does it need three years to demolish the structure like that of the BGMEA building? The excuse offered by the BGMEA is puerile and one feels that the time of three months originally fixed by the High Court is very realistic. The attorney general has volunteered a suggestion, of one year, for the BGMEA to implement the court order. We wonder what the basis of his suggestion is. One cannot occupy something illegally and justify retention of the property because the owner is supposed to be "dealing with many important issues". The BGMEA had got plenty of time since the verdict was announced by the High Court in 2011. It should have made preliminary plans for all eventualities. It did not, hoping that the



The BGMEA building in the capital's Hatirjheel awaits demolition

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

verdict would go its way. Alas! The Association leadership are all respectable men. And many of them were perhaps not involved in the purchase of the land and construction of the building. It is a sore thumb, and none other than the Prime Minister of the country had described it as such, that stands mocking the society. And the only decent act on their part would be to see that the structure goes. And the sooner it goes the sooner would their image be retrieved. We have examples of high-rise buildings being decimated in no time. The Rangs Bhaban is an example. It was 22-storeyed and not the entire building was declared illegal. In fact the process of breaking it started the very day the final appeal was disposed of by the court. Although the demolition was done in a very primitive way, it was completed in much less than the one year's time that the attorney general has suggested for a party that he does not represent. I think we have now in this country much improved and better methods of going about demolition jobs.

The building should be an example to us for many things. It is an example of how money and connection can be misused to derive undue benefits to

national detriment. And does having the foundation stone laid and the building inaugurated after construction by the heads of the government of the time consecrate a wrong?

There are two sides of the saga, one side of which the highest court has taken care of. Its decision only reinforces our faith and confidence in our higher judiciary. The other side of the story must also be taken into consideration and addressed in an equally objective manner by the government.

Shouldn't the various parties involved in the unholy alliance at all levels be called to account? Firstly, how was railway land sold by a body that did not own the land? And how was the sale registered by the Land Office in the first place?

Secondly, how did the construction firm involve itself in the construction of a building without an approved plan? Wasn't it the duty and responsibility of the company to double check whether the land records were valid and whether the plan had valid approval of the appropriate authorities, and that all the conditions related to building construction were fulfilled before the first spade dug into the ground?

Thirdly, the building was not

constructed overnight. It took long eight years, from 1998 when the foundation was laid by one prime minister to 2006 when it was inaugurated by another. And did it not come to the notice of any government agency, not even Rajuk, that a brazenly illegal construction was going on? It was only after the building had been completed that Rajuk asked explanation from the BGMEA. Obviously, the temporary blindness of Rajuk, in respect of BGMEA that lasted eight years, was with a dubious motive.

Fourthly, how come other public service providers, like gas, electricity and water, and telephone, provide connections without verifying the legality of the building? Obviously all the indispensable conditions were thrown out of the window in this instance.

Not one or two or three but an entire horde of people was party to the flagrant violation of the law of the land. And not only must the BGMEA building be brought down without delay, all those who connived in the scheme must be brought to justice. It is time to establish the power of the rule of law over the power of money and unholy alliances.

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### PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

## A blueprint for ending child marriage

SAJEDA AMIN, M NIAZ ASADULLAH, SARA HOSSAIN, and ZAKI WAHHAJ

WHEN a young girl is pushed into marriage, the damage can last long after her wedding day. Research shows that girls who marry before the age of 18 receive less schooling than those who marry later, face a higher risk of domestic abuse, and suffer a lifetime of adverse effects on their physical and mental wellbeing.

Yet child marriage continues to be a common practice in the developing world. According to UNICEF, there are more than 700 million women alive today who

quently ignored and rarely enforced. In the last three years, various drafts of a bill to give the law more teeth have been proposed. But the proposals focused on criminalising facilitation or participation; none would invalidate child marriage itself. Individuals who officiate at child marriages or adults who take a child bride may violate the law, but the marriage itself would remain legal. Each version of the bill has kept open this legal route for child marriage. Moreover, while the drafts have introduced stiffer penalties for perpetrators — and imposed greater responsibility on officials to take action — they have also created more space for exceptions. Marriage

cal consensus on the value of female education, gender parity has largely been achieved in both primary and secondary schooling.

Even on the issue of child marriage, political developments have been encouraging. As two of us have noted elsewhere, at the July 2014 Girl Summit in London, the Bangladeshi government said it would aim to eradicate marriage by girls below the age of 15 by 2021. Targeting marriages with such young girls may be the right approach. Much work remains, and pressure to make good on these commitments is mounting. But there seems to be at least some will to act.

When it comes to persuading some of the Bangladesh public, however, progress has stalled. Communities in South Asia often value girls less than boys because of limited opportunities to acquire skills and access salaried jobs. Early marriage is often considered the best option to secure a girl's future. But the constraints placed on young women originate from the patriarchal norms that dominate the community and the household.

Conservative values that oppose giving adolescent girls and young women full control over their life choices are pervasive, because family "honour," for them, is closely tied to the perceived "purity" of their daughters and brides. An unmarried adolescent girl's reputation must be carefully protected, because its loss could damage her family's social standing considerably. The government has often alluded to this line of reasoning to justify proposed reforms to the child marriage law. The "special cases" clause in CMRA 2017 could be an attempt to pre-empt "patriarchal resistance" or a backlash from religious extremists.

But the social cost of allowing exceptions may be too high. Bangladesh's success in empowering girls and ending child marriage will hinge on strengthening the rule of law by closing existing loopholes. Crucially, such actions must be accompanied by sustained social campaigns and targeted educational programmes that convince the public to support the goal, while empowering girls themselves.

As the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Angelique Kidjo has said, "long-lasting, fundamental changes come from within communities, and they depend on engaging both mothers and fathers in finding solutions that make a difference in their daughters' lives." Some recent successful efforts to address child marriage do precisely that.

It is still possible for Bangladesh to meet the Sustainable Development Goal of eliminating child marriage by 2030. If the government leads, we are confident that the people of Bangladesh will eagerly follow.

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were married before they turned 18. One in three women aged 20-24 were married or in a union while still a child. What can be done to end this harmful practice? Bangladesh offers both a possible blueprint and a cautionary tale. Today, Bangladesh has the world's highest rate of marriage among girls under 15, and violence against Bangladeshi women is on the rise. Unfortunately, legal efforts to protect women and girls by criminalising aspects of child marriage face significant obstacles, due to the prevailing political culture, the accommodation of religious extremists, and the persistence of gender bias. The existing law penalising aspects of child marriage — the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) of 1929 — dates to the British colonial period. The law stipulates terms of imprisonment or a fine for anyone who "contracts," "solemnises," or arranges a marriage with a girl under 18. But, with some recent exceptions, it is fre-

below the age of 18 is already permitted in Bangladesh by personal laws based on religion. The newly passed replacement of the CMRA — the CMRA 2017 — allows for exceptions in "special cases," which remain entirely undefined. That "special cases" clause was earlier interpreted by an official to mean in "for the sake of honour" — which presumably could include pregnancy following a rape — as long as the marriage has a court's approval and the parents' consent. Such a framework could ultimately erode legal protections — such as the right to consent — that girls have had for almost a century. Despite these legal challenges, Bangladesh's experience may offer hope. Notwithstanding the current child marriage concerns, Bangladesh has made important strides in improving the lives of girls and women during the last three decades. A generation ago, it was unusual for girls to attend primary school. Today, thanks to a broad politi-

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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#### Empowering our women

I extend my greetings of the International Women's Day to all women of the world. While Bangladeshi women have progressed a lot in the past few years, unfortunately the attitude of the society towards women still remains less than desirable. We need to work tirelessly to eliminate violence against women in our country. Are our women aware of their rights? We need massive campaigns to make both men and women aware about women's rights in Bangladesh. While our Honourable Prime Minister is trying to ensure equal opportunities for women, we have to ensure that women can get access to justice, have legal service at every door step, and receive minimum respect and care. A large percentage of both men and women still believe that violence against women is justifiable. Meanwhile, their access to justice is made difficult by uncooperative judicial systems. In celebrating Women's Day, we must stand up for and spread awareness about the rights and roles of women in our society.

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