

Passport and police verification

Use biometric information

A recent survey conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found that three out of four new passport seekers had to pay speed money to get clearances. These include police verification and attestation of documents. The survey conducted from September 2016 to May, 2017 concludes that more than half of passport seekers have fallen victim to various types of irregularities, harassment and corruption. Although the latest survey, the percentage of victims have fallen from 77.7 percent to 76.2 percent from one conducted in 2015, the fact is that things have not really improved all that much.

Although there have been demands to end police verification altogether, we need some sort of verification nonetheless. But it must be ensured also that ordinary citizens can avail this basic document without being forced to pay bribe to law enforcers or brokers for that matter. A possible way out of this persistent problem would be to introduce biometric data which is available with the national election commission. The linking of the various databases which would include criminal data banks and the smart ID card introduced recently would go a long way to verify the identity of persons applying for a new passport.

We should make use of the latest in technology to work for us against alleged graft which seems to have become the norm for issuing passports. Only talking about taking steps against the unholy nexus of corrupt officials and brokers has not got us anywhere but perhaps introduction of modern technology can deliver us from this entrenched form of graft that pervades the entire system.

Female workers abused abroad!

Govt needs to be choosy about type and place of their work

THIS is a dreadful and cautionary tale: a 30-year-old woman gets duped into bonded labour after she went abroad to work as a domestic help. She suffers both physical and mental abuse in the households where she is employed. The shocking incident, published by this paper on Tuesday, calls into question the integrity of not just the recruiting agencies but also the whole system responsible for helping women find employment overseas.

It is also a reminder of the dangers of overseas employment. Female domestic workers leaving home to work abroad often suffer serious abuse at the hands of their employers. They are forced to stay on because their families need the money they earn. Thus it is the responsibility of the government to make sure that no one takes advantage of their desperation and that the perpetrators of domestic abuse and their collaborators in the recruiting agencies are held accountable. This will be possible if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, and other related organisations collaborate in keeping a tight rein on the entire recruitment process, and coordinate with their counterparts in the destination countries to make employers respect labour rights.

That said, if our past experiences with overseas employment are any indication, not all jobs are for female workers. So the government needs to find suitable employment for them and ensure their safety before allowing them to proceed overseas.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Medical waste poses health risks

The Daily Star has recently published a photograph of dumped medical wastes in front of a hospital in Dhaka. In developed countries, technologies like autoclaving and incineration are used for the final disposal of medical wastes. However, in developing countries, medical waste has not received adequate attention, particularly when it is disposed of together with domestic waste. It has been reported that medical waste poses an increasingly high risk to doctors, nurses, technicians, sweepers, hospital visitors and patients if not managed carefully. An expansion in the number of clinics and hospitals in Bangladesh has resulted in increased amounts of waste generation.

Thus, proper waste management strategy should be devised to ensure health and environmental safety. Training programmes on safe handling of medical waste should also be organised for medical staff by hospitals so that these risks can be averted.

Zubair Huq, Via E-mail

Unhealthy fake cosmetics

Many fake cosmetics using the name of world-famous brands have flooded the markets of Bangladesh. These are very injurious to the human skin and can permanently damage other organs. Such fake products are openly sold in many markets. There is no one to verify whether these products are genuine. The public should be aware of this trend, whereas law enforcers should investigate and find out where such products are manufactured and sold.

Shafkat Rahman, BIAM Model School and College

Saving flood victims as we look for solutions



#ResearchMearch
NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

THE year was 1988. My uncle was going to the United States for his undergraduate degree. He was the first family member to do so. The trend in those days was England. And, not just England, but Oxford and Cambridge. So, with his decision to go to the US, the first seed of the American Dream was sown. Perhaps, we don't have to go to England, my twin and I looked at each other excitedly, wondering what a brand new country looks like. We were almost 8 years old and full of hope, sitting at the back of the Volkswagen that our father was driving. We were all going to the airport; back then such "seeing off" were family events.

On our drive from Dhanmondi to the airport—which was a long one, or so it seemed to an 8 year old—water started gushing into the car through the cracks in the doors, I assume, and soon our feet were submerged. We pulled our feet up but the water level kept rising. Yet, our father kept driving through the deluge. Till date, I have no idea how. Airport Road was under water, and that was the first and last time I had seen it that way. That is to say that that was the worst flood that I had ever witnessed.

I knew things were bad when some of our classmates started taking boats to school. The only television channel we had then, the state-run BTV, showed President Ershad on his visits to flood affected regions in his speed boat, singing emotive songs, which he had penned, about those trying times. We heard our parents and grandparents noting how little that did in terms of alleviating the problems of displacement, hunger, and disease. I remember relief efforts being organised by almost everyone I knew. Eventually our school had closed down. I also remember that President Ershad had made money off of boats that were being bought with aid money. My memory is vague, and Google isn't helping much (maybe I should ask my mother), but it was his corruption in aid disbursement during and after those floods, among other misdeeds, that had resulted in the building of a strong resistance that finally led to his downfall.

Those were the days when Bangladesh was known primarily for its floods and the destruction that it wreaked. Back then we were reliant on aid when such disasters struck.

Since then, but particularly in the last decade or so, Bangladesh has shown that



People wade through flood water on Jamalpur-Madarganj road.

PHOTO: ABM AMINUL ISLAM

people no longer need to die from floods. Dams and embankments created based on 20 year estimates of increments in sea-level have served the country well.

Until now. This year's flood is predicted to be the worst flood in 100 years.

Some are wondering how we got here.

One explanation is climate change. Incessant rains have a tendency to create floods, particularly in countries like Bangladesh that has compromised drainage systems. An important reason for that are the landfills that have replaced wetlands across the country. The more wetlands there are the less likelihood of flooding in valleys, research shows, quietly pointing fingers at those who sanctioned the landfills to begin with. So when we ascribe floods as "natural disaster" we must ask ourselves how "natural" the causes really are, particularly when the situation starts to resemble the infamous Bengal Famine during colonial rule.

Most of these natural disasters are in fact manmade, and we must consider wetland restoration as one of the possible solutions.

Another possible solution could be to relocate people, at least seasonally, from char areas by building up, rather than across, in vertical neighbourhoods that can provide short and long-term housing solutions. This will require substantial investment, the livelihoods of the people who will live there will need to be factored in—perhaps by skills training programmes, and the

political economy of construction and commission versus humanitarian aid will have to be assessed. In other words, those who make money from people's suffering will have to think about their source of income, and ask this difficult question: would it be more profitable to get a commission from home-builders who will get the contract to build these neighbourhoods, or will it be easier to simply continue to take money off of humanitarian aid?

Yet another solution could be to perhaps create bilateral ties with nations such as Portugal and Spain that are at risk of "population disasters" in light of decades of falling birth rates and negotiate a transfer of "climate change refugees" from Bangladesh. That Bangladesh will be among the first few countries to be majorly affected by climate change is well documented by scientists. While we don't know exactly when that will happen, recent research has shown that Bangladesh along with some other regions in South Asia will become uninhabitable in another 100 years. This means we will start to see changes fairly soon, which in turn means we just might be able to make a case for a migration programme of sorts that will be beneficial for all concerned. Knowing how geopolitics works, this seems a little untenable, but it's perhaps worth a try, because the point is this: we need to think out of the proverbial box. We need 101 brainstorming sessions and to come up

with as many solutions as we can think of.

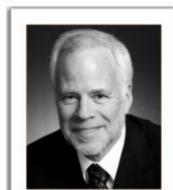
What we are seeing today is a repetition of what we saw in 1988. If predictions are to be believed things will get worse. We need solutions, even if we can't implement them overnight. We need solutions because gathering relief and aid from individuals is not a tenable long-term solution. As I keep saying, individuals cannot or are not in a position to take personal responsibility for structural problems, including floods. We have to rehabilitate all the families that have lost everything they had: their homes, their possessions, their livestock, their cattle, their produce. We have to find solutions that will not make such losses a regular occurrence.

While we brainstorm, though, let us all contribute to relief efforts by donating to organisations and people we trust. Let us do it out of love, as Firoz Ahmed of Bangladesh Chhatra Federation implored, not out of pity, because right now these farmers need us, the people in the char areas need us, the people in the north who are facing the brunt of this year's calamity need us, not because they are poor or because they didn't work hard enough as some people would like to think, but because they lost everything to the floods, while many of us haven't.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Revenge of the experts



BARRY EICHENGREEN

THE Brexit debate is an endless source of mirth for anyone with a dark sense of humour. My own favourite quote is from Michael Gove, currently Britain's environment secretary. Just prior to the June 2016 Brexit referendum, Gove, who was justice secretary in David Cameron's government at the time, dismissed the all-but-unanimous view of economists and others that a decision to leave the European Union would deeply damage the British economy. "People in this country have had enough of experts," Gove testily explained, referring to "experts from organisations with acronyms, saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong."



The early post-referendum evidence suggested, to the surprise of many—or at least to many of the experts—that Gove was right and they were wrong. There was in fact no immediate recession in the United Kingdom following the Brexit vote; indeed, there was not even a slowdown in growth.

To explain this, observers pointed to the nimble response of the Bank of England (BoE), which cut interest rates to prevent any softening of demand. They pointed to the big post-referendum depreciation of the pound, which promised to make British exports more competitive and offset any problems with the transition to a new trade regime. They suggested that a UK freed of burdensome EU regulations could offer a more

business-friendly environment and lower corporate tax rates, and thus become a magnet for foreign investment.

Most provocatively, they questioned predictions that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit would have a profoundly adverse impact on economic performance. Economists can't measure uncertainty directly, they reminded us, while proxies, like the frequency with which the term appears in the financial press, do a poor job of capturing its effects.

Indeed, we economists have had little success at reliably predicting when and why uncertainty spikes. And there is little agreement on the severity of its impact. Maybe we would be better off placing less weight on the effects of uncertainty when making forecasts in general, and in the case of Brexit in particular.

But this view looks rather less compelling with the

unprepared.

But the inconclusive election reflects the schizophrenia of both the Conservative and Labour parties on the Brexit issue. Prime Minister Theresa May opposed Brexit prior to the referendum, but now embraces it as the occupant of 10 Downing Street. The Labour opposition under Jeremy Corbyn officially opposes Brexit but seems to derive peculiar satisfaction from the fact that it is proceeding.

Some argue that if the government adopted a more coherent negotiating strategy the damage would be less. But the fact is that there is no coherent negotiating strategy. May's objectives—restriction of immigration from the EU while maintaining full access to the European single market—are fundamentally incompatible.

The only surprise is that it took so long for the consequences to materialise. It evidently took more time than expected for the implications to sink in—to understand that "Brexit means Brexit," as May's pithy tautology put it. It took time to realise that there would be no smooth break with the EU and that negotiations would not be wrapped up in two years. There might be no free-trade agreement, no passporting rights for British banks seeking to do business in the EU, and not even an agreement on landing rights for British aircraft on the European continent.

And now the chickens are coming home to roost with a vengeance (if chickens could be vengeful). Consumers, seeing the pound depreciate, front-loaded their spending in the second half of last year, because they understood that import prices would rise. Having incurred additional debt, they are now in no position to continue spending at that earlier pace.

Sterling's substantial depreciation, moreover, augurs a significant rise in inflation, which means that the BoE will have to start raising interest rates sooner rather than later. The consequences for growth will not be pretty. The Bank will no longer be the Brexiters' friend.

What the late, great MIT economist Rudi Dornbusch—that most expert of experts—said about Mexico's peso crisis in the 1990s applies to the damage from Brexit as well. A crisis, Dornbusch noted, "takes a much longer time coming than you think, and then it happens much faster than you would have thought."

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passage of a couple of additional quarters. British consumer confidence is down, with spending in the second quarter of this year falling to its lowest level in four years. New car sales have been down for four consecutive months. The BoE forecasts a whopping 20 percent decline in business investment in the coming years, whereas Brexit's champions predicted the opposite.

The drop in confidence, some might object, reflects an inconclusive general election and a hung parliament, not the Brexit vote. Or worsening conditions can be blamed on the government's less-than-stellar negotiating strategy and the appearance that it is entering discussions with its EU partners