

Ideal outcome of Doklam standoff

We congratulate both countries

WE welcome the end of the more than two-month long standoff following a disengagement understanding on Doklam between India and China. We are relieved to see that diplomacy has worked to ease tensions and thank both parties for reverting to the status quo ante. We congratulate both countries for displaying diplomatic maturity in resolving a situation that at one time looked like it was getting out of hand. We are sure we echo the sentiments of all the South Asian countries when we say that the final dénouement of the current impasse was what one expected of countries with tested diplomatic acumen.

Chinese Foreign Minister's remark, "We hope through the efforts from both sides we will maintain healthy and stable momentum of growth. This is in the interest of not only Indian and Chinese people, but also meets the aspirations of the international community" acknowledges the concern with which other countries viewed the development.

It was not just another dispute between two neighbours, since it involved a third country directly. For Bangladesh, along with all South Asian countries, this matter was of more than a passing interest because of the potential of a military flare-up inherent in the territorial dispute. Had it led to that, Bhutan and indeed most of the countries in the region could have been caught squarely in it. It was important for all the countries of the region that a lessening of tensions between India and China occurred because they are the two biggest regional nuclear powers and the last thing one wanted to see was a conflict taking place over land dispute.

The current example of defusing the tension is a pointer that whatever dispute two neighbours may have can be settled through negotiations. That is something all countries can take cue from.

Project for excavating water bodies

Success hinges on proper implementation

THE Executive Committee of National Economic Council (Ecne) on Tuesday approved 12 projects, costing Tk 10,331 crore. Among these, the nationwide project for the development of ponds and canals in order to preserve surface water through re-excavating ponds and canals, and at the same time, create jobs for locals youth, is one which deserves praise. If implemented in a transparent and accountable way, and in time, this would be a good step towards tackling two very important issues.

The Tk 1335 crore project, which is scheduled to conclude in 2023, aims to re-excavate 2,532 government (khas) ponds and canals. The loss of the country's water bodies, especially canals, has added to the chronic waterlogging that it faces now. As we have seen this year, the situation has been especially dire in Chittagong, and parts of Dhaka, where little rain resulted in flooded streets. Reportedly, a list of ponds and canals has already been made through a country-wide survey. All this is good news—and when we factor in the jobs that will be created for the local unemployed youth, it gives hope.

But, the success of this project will be largely dependent on how transparently it can be implemented—graft, nepotism and mismanagement have become endemic to our public welfare projects. Strict oversight and periodic evaluations are of crucial importance here to ensure accountability.

If successful, this could be the first of a series of projects to recover other waterbodies in the country, which over the years have been lost to encroachment or siltation. Preserving surface water would not only guard us against waterlogging and flooding, but also ease the burden on underground water sources for irrigation needs. We look forward to the results this project would yield, and hope that it is only the first of a long-term state project to recover these water bodies.

The ugly face in the mirror

Section 155(4) of the Evidence Act, 1872



SYEDA SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

TURN to page 5 of *The Daily Star* on August 28 and see two news reports: one carrying the headline "Finalise rules of children act to deal with violence," and another, placed just above it, headlined "Arbitration provokes girl to commit suicide." The irony is immediately apparent.

The second report is about a child in Satkhira who killed herself after being subjected to humiliation for an alleged affair earlier this week. Rima, a ninth grader, was accused of having an "illicit affair" with her tutor by her neighbours at a local arbitration meeting. The next morning, she killed herself.

Bangladesh Manabdhikar Bastabayan Sangstha has recently reported 32 cases of children raped in the month of July alone. Some 336 children were raped and 48 gang-raped between January and July, according to a report by Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum. Given the social context of Bangladesh, the numbers are probably an underestimation. Still, they illustrate just how pervasive rape has become in our society.

Maybe 15-year-old Rima will not be seen as a child by some, given the ambiguity that surrounds the legal age of consent. Maybe her suicide, after being accused of immoral behaviour, will not be seen as a crime perpetuated by society but rather something she did to herself.

Legal jargons are hard to follow, and drawing parallels between the legal system and our daily lives, for those who are not involved in activism or the legal system, may be difficult. I often think about the effectiveness of legal reforms—whether they are necessary, how they are necessary, etc. We tend to think of the law as separate from us. So I understand how it must be easy for most people, including myself, to miss any connection between moral policing, a social norm, and rising rape and sexual abuse, which has social dimensions but is also a criminal act. But how separate are legal and social dimensions, really?

In Bangladesh, we have a law in place that is a legacy of the colonial times—Section 155 (4) of the Evidence Act, 1872. This act enables evidence of the past sexual history of women and girls who are complainants in rape cases to be put in as evidence. At a recent consultation meeting organised by the

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, recommendations of a policy brief prepared on the impact of the continuing application of the law allowing use of character evidence of women and girls who are complainants in rape prosecutions, were shared. Among other things, what was reiterated was the horrific shaming and assault on character that a rape survivor must survive again in order to prove a crime that she not only did not commit, but was committed against her. I sat there and struggled to wrap my head around the fact that a law, so clearly sexist, still exists.

Exactly a week after I attended the meeting, I read the news about Rima. It is



interesting that while both Rima and the tutor were accused of illegal sexual relations, only one of them committed suicide following the arbitration process. The girl, who in this case is a minor, where the tutor, it is safe to assume, is an adult. If there must be a moral haggling, it is the adult who should be held accountable for engaging in immoral acts.

In hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised. My education, social class, and upbringing allow me the privilege of throwing around words like "victim blaming" without having to explain what it really means, why it happens or what

its consequences are. I hear the reason people blame a victim is to distance themselves from an unpleasant occurrence and thereby confirm their own invulnerability to the risk. By labelling or accusing the victim, others can see the victim as different from themselves. People reassure themselves by thinking, "Because I am not like her, because I do not do that, this would never happen to me." So I write it off as mostly a social problem. And of course, a form of moral policing, which we engage in to make ourselves feel better.

But moral policing, whether we realise it or not, has severe consequences. Sometimes it costs lives. And these

arbitration. However, given the existence of acts like the Evidence Act, one must wonder if that is the case at all? Are we enabling a judiciary system that perpetuates violence against women and girls in the same disproportionate manner that would be perpetuated in a local arbitration process? Why is there a necessity of exploring a rape survivor's sexual history in court?

In Rima's case, she was not raped. But we can only assume she must have been dehumanised and ill-treated to the point that she was forced to take her own life. Now, we must ask, had this not been a local arbitration process, had the case been brought to court, would she have

But moral policing, whether we realise it or not, has severe consequences. Sometimes it costs lives. And these consequences affect women and girls disproportionately because of the sense of entitlement society feels in regulating and policing a woman's body and sexuality.

been treated with any more respect?

The right of the defence to arraign the survivor's character and question her about her personal history is one of the most serious obstacles in achieving justice that should have no place in our legal system. But it does because there is a social system in place that justifies it.

There is a saying that "Law does not define society. It reflects society". The law serves as a mirror. So, how do we feel about the face that is staring back at us in the mirror?

Syeda Shagufta Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Floods in South Asia and US

Is climate change the link?

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

IN the past week, there have been devastating floods in Houston, Texas in the United States of America as well as in Nepal, India and Bangladesh, not to mention China as well.

Although these events occurred in very different parts of the planet and each had somewhat unique causes and circumstances, nevertheless, their severity can now credibly be linked to human induced climate change that has already raised global mean atmospheric temperatures above one degree Centigrade since pre-industrial times.

Let me start with Hurricane Harvey in the Gulf of Mexico. While the scientific models for hurricanes in the Atlantic, Typhoons in the Pacific and Cyclones in the Bay of Bengal do not forecast an increase in the number of these events, the higher sea surface temperatures due to human induced climate change will definitely cause some of the events to be more severe than they otherwise would have been.

An interesting contrast between the US and the countries of South Asia is the acceptance of the science of climate change and the willingness to take adaptation actions to tackle the problem.



Flood-hit Gobordhan village of Lalmonirhat on July 10, 2017.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Hence, the intensity of Hurricane Harvey which went very rapidly from a category 1 to a category 4 storm when it made landfall was due to the elevated sea surface temperature in the Gulf of Mexico. Secondly, after the Hurricane made landfall and wind speeds came down, it became a tropical storm, but it lingered over the coast of Texas picking up moisture from the sea and dropping it further inland on Houston which then suffered devastating flash floods days after the hurricane had passed.

This combination of Hurricane and floods was what made the event so devastating and is mostly due to the higher temperature of the sea in the Gulf of Mexico at that time, which can reasonably be attributed to human induced climate change.

In South Asia, the monsoon rains in the upper reaches of the Ganges in the Himalayan mountains started to cause significant flooding in Nepal some days ago and then the flood waters travelled

south into India where many millions of people were flooded and finally into Bangladesh where millions were affected in the last few days.

The scientific models of the South Asian monsoon are not all in agreement with regard to forecasts of what will happen with climate change, but the general consensus seems to be that while the overall precipitation across the entire year is not likely to go either up or down significantly due to climate change, the pattern of rainfall will change significantly with greater precipitation in the monsoon season and less in the dry season. Paradoxically, this will likely lead to more flooding in the wet season and more droughts in the dry season, even if the overall amount of rainfall across the year does not change very much.

This scenario is what we can see happening already with rainfall patterns becoming more erratic and unpredictable.

Hence, we can also reasonably attribute the severity of the recent floods in South Asia to human induced climate change.

An interesting contrast between the US and the countries of South Asia is the acceptance of the science of climate change and the willingness to take adaptation actions to tackle the problem—President Trump and his cabinet colleagues all deny the very science of climate change and are thus endangering the safety of their own citizens.

The bottom line seems to be that we have already entered the era of the anthropocene, in which, human activities have cumulatively resulted in changing global weather patterns as well as other global phenomenon such as forest fires and sea level rise.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save the Rohingyas

Thousands of Rohingyas are fleeing Myanmar as they are being systematically driven out of their homes by state and non-state actors. The social, electronic and print media are filled with photos and reports showing the brutality that they are being exposed to.

The ethnic majority in Myanmar, including those in power, consider the Rohingyas as outsiders—alien to the land of Myanmar. This is the justification that they are using to oppress the Rohingyas. In the meanwhile, one wonders why the international community has remained so silent in regards to this assault on the Rohingyas. We hope that the UN will play a key role in addressing the issue at hand and end the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. Zabed Wali, Chittagong



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN