

Another UN report shelved

Why?

ONLY a few weeks after it was revealed that the UN had suppressed a report highly critical of the conditions in Rakhine State, we find out that a UN World Food Programme report on hunger and starvation of the Rohingyas had also been shelved. According to the assessment conducted in July, over 80,000 children under the age of five in Rohingya-majority areas in Rakhine were “wasting”, reported *The Guardian*. What is most shocking, however, is that the report was shelved upon the request of the Myanmar government and a statement was issued saying Myanmar and WFP were working on a “revised version”.

Some of the alleged motives behind the suppression of the WFP report have left us at a loss for words. Apparently, by this, the UN sought to cover up cuts of WFP food aid for internally displaced Rohingyas and prevent damaging relations with the Myanmar government because millions of dollars in funding were at stake.

The WFP survey was conducted only a month prior to the beginning of an unprecedented influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh. The report, if published, could perhaps have helped alleviate the situation in Rakhine State and attract international attention before the influx even began. By preventing its release, the UN essentially emboldened the Myanmar government to continue violating the rights of the minority.

When a respected institution like the UN—which has a singular role in maintaining world peace—resorts to such means, it is nothing short of a moral failure on its part. Given that the UN is at the forefront of the Rohingya crisis, it raises many questions about its intentions and resolve to bring the conflict to an end. A thorough inquiry and calling those responsible for such unwarranted action is necessary.

Income disparity on the rise

Economic growth not reaching the poor

THE Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics unveiled the report “Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016” on October 17. It is the most exhaustive nationwide survey carried out and is usually brought out every five years or so. What it tells us is that the income inequality between the rich and poor has widened with the top 10 percent of the population now having an income share of 38.16 percent, which is 2.32 percent higher than what it was in 2010. Whereas, the bottom 10 percent of the population has half (1.01 percent) of the income share it had in the year 2010 (2 percent). Indeed, poverty reduction has also slowed down a full 0.5 percent over this period.

Experts have been calling for pro-poor policies that would involve the government making investments to boost growth in the farm sector and to cater to sectors that would generate jobs, which in turn would help growth in all segments of the population. This is important because the manufacturing sector is both capital-intensive and technology-centric; the growth in jobs in the rural sector can only happen if there is growth in agriculture. We simply cannot discount agriculture as it employs 42 percent of the labour force and hence any slowdown here will have ramifications for income disparity.

What HIES 2016 tells us is that there has not been enough research and development in agriculture to bring about more crop diversity. The mere expansion of safety net programmes is not going to be enough, especially where there is confusion about who ought to be the beneficiaries. In other areas, the report has highlighted quality over quantity, particularly education. While health and living conditions of people have generally improved, we require a rethink at policy level about where our growth will come from and how the benefits of that growth can reach the vast multitude of the poor and ultra-poor.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Tougher measures needed against Myanmar

Military officers ruled Myanmar since 1962 when General Ne Win took control of then Burma through a coup d'état. The country has remained under the control of the military even though some form of democracy was established in recent years under the pressure of international sanctions and embargoes.

The punitive measures taken against the army in recent weeks—including suspension of monetary aid and military training by Britain, and loans by the IMF—have been welcomed by human rights activists. I think the EU's decision to put a travel ban on the country's top military brass should also be extended to its so-called democratic leaders whose role in the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Rohingya cannot be overlooked.

I also think the international community should undertake tougher measures to end the conflict through the UN.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka



ALI RIAZ

THE statement by the Bangladesh Supreme Court, issued a day after Chief Justice SK Sinha left Dhaka for Australia on “leave”, raises questions one can hardly avoid. The statement alleges that the CJ faces “11 charges” which include money laundering, graft, moral turpitude, and informs that details of these “charges” were handed over by President Abdul Hamid to the judges.

We are aware of the background of the tensions between the CJ and the government since release of the full copy of the 16th Amendment annulment appeal verdict on August 1; they require no repeating. However, we shouldn't forget the unkind reactions of the ruling party leaders inside and outside the parliament. The visits of Awami League leaders to the CJ's official residence immediately after the verdict were reported in the press. The vitriol against an incumbent CJ was unprecedented in the history of the country. Those who followed the event closely before this episode begun to unfold would be remiss if they didn't recall the statement of a disgruntled retired Supreme Court justice who prophesied that Sinha will not only “have to resign, but also leave” the country.

The discrepancies between the government's statements, communicated by the law minister and the attorney general and repeated *ad nauseum* for at least a week by ruling party supporters, that the Chief Justice Sinha was sick and that he sought leave for the said reason, were debunked by the CJ's statement on his way to the airport for his flight to Australia. “I am well,” he said in a written statement; he didn't contest the news that he sought the leave but he said he would return to the court. The opposition political parties and others said that he was “forced” to seek a leave.

While the ruling party loyalists were talking on social media of “graft” and other allegations in the past months, there were no official words. Instead there were repeated assertions that the CJ had cancer. Equally interesting is that the ruling party supporters began stating that “five justices declined to sit in the same bench of the SC” even before the CJ left Dhaka and before an official statement to this effect was made—until the day after the CJ issued a statement and left the country. The timeline suggests a leak, if not a construction. The “allegations” of his misdeeds were never featured in public conversation or in the official narrative until August 1, 2017, the day

the full SC verdict with observations about the state of governance, was released. Instead, previously Sinha was praised, among other things for being the first non-Muslim CJ in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country.

The series of events that followed the verdict clearly demonstrated that the ruling party was angry, to say the least. The anxiety of the ruling party was quite palpable. Nevertheless, now the CJ is “away”, and—if we are to believe the AG—Sinha's rejoining after returning home from abroad is “a far cry”. His tenure was to end on January 31, 2018 but it seems to have ended prematurely and ungraciously.

There were questions surrounding the talk of “leave”, “sickness” and “vacation travel” by the government; the responses to them are not forthcoming. Now the “allegations” and the processes to deal with them engender further questions. These questions are far more



Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha hands over a statement to journalists before getting into a car in front of his residence on October 13. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

important than those which preceded them. They are procedural and political.

We have been told of “11 allegations” but it is left to our imagination as to what these specific allegations are. Who lodged these allegations? Who has the list? If these are allegations, which agency was entrusted to investigate? Was such investigation following the law of the land? How did these allegations, with “documentary evidence”, land on the desk of the President? Were any cases filed against the accused? Has Sinha been indicted on these charges? Why was he allowed to leave the country, in a well-publicised manner, when such serious allegations were known to the President (and understandably the PM's Office)? Why was the smokescreen of sickness created, if the AG and others were aware of these “allegations”? These questions are

premised on the universal dictum: “innocent until proven guilty”.

The refusal of the Justices to sit with him on the bench raises questions too. The statement claims that the CJ was confronted by his peers and failed to provide “satisfactory” answers. If one was unaware of the impeachment procedure of judges, s/he would get the impression that there is an informal process of disciplining Justices. Alternatively, it could be assumed that the Justices had no recourse at their hand, therefore they took the informal route. The irony that lies here is that it was the Justices who unanimously agreed, not too long ago, that the disciplinary procedure should be at their hands instead of at the hands of the Parliament members, that it should be a formal process and it should be through the Supreme Judicial Council. Why was such a process not contemplated? To whom was the decision communicated? Was such

effort to save it from encroachment was the essence of the verdict. The fundamental issue, however, is the separation of power and whether the executive will have supremacy.

Such contestation is neither new nor limited to any geographical region, but we witnessed at least three incidents where the executive branch blatantly used its power to tame the judiciary; in March 2007 Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Chowdhury making him a “non-functional CJ”; President Pervez Musharraf also asked the Supreme Judicial Council to investigate allegations of misconduct against him. After a prolonged legal process the Chief Justice was exonerated and reinstated. But in November, the CJ was replaced and forcibly removed from the court.

While Pervez Musharraf used presidential power, in Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapaksa used the parliamentary process in 2013 to impeach Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake and removed her from office. Financial impropriety was one of the charges.

Both these justices were reinstated after a new government came to power; Chowdhury in 2009 and Bandaranayake in 2015.

All these actions, in some ways, are reminiscent of the constitutional debate in India under Indira Gandhi, especially her party's efforts to amend the constitution through parliament to strengthen her authoritarian government.

These instances are indicative of an incessant battle between the executive and judiciary, particularly when the executive branch becomes authoritarian and considers the judiciary a roadblock to its desire for unrestrained power. The “Sinha saga” comes at a time when very little accountability of the incumbent government is left in the country. The parliament without any opposition, and the docility of the media and the society are the most obvious markers. Although the history of the nation tells us that the judiciary cannot claim that it had served to protect the disenfranchised all the time, it had remained the last hope at times of despair.

Whether Justice Sinha intended or not, the unanimous verdict of the Supreme Court on the annulment of the 16th Amendment has become his legacy. The politics of the separation of power has reared its head one more time and the desire for power of the executive branch prompted actions.

The question is, what lies in the future?

Ali Riaz is Professor of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publication is entitled *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* (IB Tauris, 2016).

What is the antidote for toxic masculinity?



ZAHRAH HAIDER

FEMINISM has always challenged gender roles, and for a long time it was assumed that issues regarding gender only related to women, and weren't men's issues. The concept of toxic masculinity might seem like a new one but it was actually put forward in the 90s by men's movements, namely the mythopoetic men's movement, to denounce problematic male behaviour. Their aim was to recover “deep masculinity”, which comprises feminine traits that men are shamed for and discouraged from, like being nurturing and expressing emotions. Toxic masculinity was recognised back then as a problem, although the concept has evolved since then in order to distance itself from the notion that it exists as feminist propaganda in order to vilify men.

There are people who believe that toxic masculinity is a myth, and that claiming it exists is a direct attack on men. These people will decry feminism for not being about men but fail to see how upholding a patriarchal society is what is damaging our boys. It's a common knee-jerk reaction to (incorrectly) assume that protesting toxic masculinity is the same as condemning men, when it's the opposite: destroying toxic masculinity will protect them.

We assign gender roles to our children before they're even born. During infancy, our boys are dressed in blue lest they look effeminate in any way. We admonish them for displaying emotions and exhibiting traits we deem as being feminine (“don't cry like a girl”). Boys are encouraged to play outside, explore, and be adventurous and sporty, and destructiveness is almost expected of male children. Even the toys they play with ooze hypermasculinity (Action Man/GI Joe, anyone?) There's nothing inherently wrong with those things until they're imposed on a child because of social expectations. We're caught in this seemingly never-ending spiral of toxicity. We keep telling ourselves “boys will be boys,” and when they're well into adulthood, “men will be men”, but it doesn't have to be this way.

Sociologists use the term “toxic masculinity” to refer to the negative attitudes associated with the male gender role, and let's be honest, there are a lot. It represents behaviours that are seen as natural, but are in fact physically, socially, and psychologically damaging. The notion that men must be stoic and mustn't show emotion is reinforced all throughout childhood, yet figures from the Mental Health Foundation show that around 4 in 5 suicides are by men, even though there are less men actually diagnosed with mental health problems than women. This tells us men are suffering, but can't and won't talk about it.

hypermasculinity, a psychiatry article from the 80s, where it is argued that although hypermasculinity can be split into two basic categories (the “man's man” and the “ladies' man”)—“healthy men” are absent from both.

If the patriarchy is a river—and a polluted one at that—toxic masculinity and rape culture are its tributaries. They go hand in hand and feed off each other. Men aren't innately rapists, but rape culture thrives when society tells men that strength and power are the most important things, and that power is measured by dominance over women. That's not to say that men are never victims

many other issues—things like homophobia and misogyny. We need to start holding men to a different, better standard—one that allows them to be themselves instead of what society expects them to be.

Our fathers and grandfathers may come from a time where everything was either masculine or feminine, with no fluidity, but we can make things different for our sons and grandsons. We shouldn't be teaching them to conform to these age-old monolithic gender roles that are quite frankly redundant now. Let them be empathetic, vulnerable, and gentle. Let's stop shaming boys for displaying typically



ILLUSTRATION: PHIL PUBLIUS

We're caught in this seemingly never-ending spiral of toxicity. We keep telling ourselves “boys will be boys,” and when they're well into adulthood, “men will be men” ...

Granted, more and more men are opening up about everything from mental health to domestic and sexual abuse, breaking down the idea that these things only happen to women. The damaging effects of patriarchal gender roles are backed up by statistics that show that men are far less likely to seek help for their problems—because we haven't taught them how. Society's paradigm of manhood has always revolved around physical strength and dominance and thus the cognitive dissonance is born. Men are shamed for being vulnerable, yet there aren't many things as fragile as the male ego, because they are expected to live up to a certain stereotype and will do anything to conform. This is evident in one of the earliest attempts to theorise the idea of

of sexual assault or that women are never abusers. This is not about rape itself, but about rape culture, and how unhealthy ideals of manliness perpetuate it.

A lot of people are of the misguided opinion that feminists hate men. I don't hate men. I hate what the patriarchy has done to men. All those repressed emotions manifest in unhealthy ways, either externally through aggression and violence, or internally through depression and other mental health problems. It's frustrating watching the men in our lives exhibit misogynistic behaviour in a myriad of ways, because that's just what's expected of them. It's even more frustrating watching women excuse this behaviour, because of the very same reason. The standards currently imposed on men are unfair, and breed so

feminine traits. In order for us to be able to dismantle these social constructs, we need to realise that people should be able to express themselves in any way they want. If a boy wants to pursue typically masculine hobbies then that should be a choice, not an expectation. These aren't Western concepts that only affect men in the Western world. Our men are suffering too. These ideals are both directly and indirectly killing them. The onus is no longer on us women to undo decades of damage; it should be a shared responsibility for people to unlearn these behaviours and create a safer, more progressive society for future generations.

Zahrah Haider is a journalism graduate and freelance writer currently living in the UK.