

Children in hazardous work

A reality that must be changed

It is a harsh truth that despite the government amending laws and signing the ILO Convention on worst forms of child labour, thousands of children are engaged in work that are hazardous to their physical and mental well-being and that deprive them of the basic right to education. A government survey has found almost 13 lakh out of a total of 17 lakh child labourers to be doing hazardous work. They are paid a pittance and often end up working in non compliant factories and workshops and as domestic workers placing them at risk of injury, illness, physical and verbal abuse and even death. Moreover, children in city slums are more likely to drop out of primary school and enter into such jobs.

A report in this paper on occasion of Universal Children's Day yesterday has highlighted these facts and pointed out that child labour, if not addressed, can be the number one factor in holding the nation back from achieving a number of SDG Goals for 2030. This includes universal secondary education, poverty elimination, inclusive growth and human development and decent work for all. Child labour also promotes intergenerational poverty so that the vicious cycle of deprivation perpetuates.

Experts on child labour have suggested several steps to tackle child labour. The national education policy 2010 for example, that makes education compulsory upto grade eight, should be immediately implemented. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015, should be made effective as it aims to provide better coverage of the safety net to families in need who are forced to send their children to work in order to survive. In addition international conventions and laws governing child labour, must be enforced so that no child is engaged in work that is hazardous and so that every child has access to education, even those who must work to survive.

A shining example

School for underprivileged children in Ctg

We are delighted to see that six youths who themselves were studying at different educational institutions in Chittagong, had the drive and determination to set up a school for underprivileged children, that has now grown into an incredible success. Their willingness and passion to help others is truly remarkable, and the fruits of their hard work can be seen quite clearly through the wonderful service that their school is providing to children whose parents couldn't have, otherwise, afforded to send them to school.

Today, the school provides free education to 120 children enrolled from nursery till class five where classes are conducted by students studying at renowned universities and colleges in Chittagong. The school provides students with study materials free of cost as well as quality food on special occasions. Students also get new clothes and shoes during Eid and Durga Puja from the school which also bears, on occasions, medical treatment costs of students and their parents.

While we are amazed by what this school, set up by the six young philanthropists, has managed to provide to its students with minimal resources, one must wonder, why government schools then, at times, are dilapidated and in miserable condition? Although the government deserves credit for its Underprivileged Children's Educational Programmes and others like it, we hope, in future, it will ensure that no government school is in substandard condition.

The example set by these six individuals is remarkable and should be emulated by others in our nation, especially those in the private sector. The government too can take much inspiration from it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Robot in Dhaka restaurant

Recently, an online report by *The Daily Star* caused a bit of a stir on social media. The report was about a restaurant in Mirpur that has recently employed robots as waiters. This is perhaps the first restaurant in Bangladesh to have introduced robots as servicemen.

Robots are widely used in manufacturing and restaurants in many countries. Although robots reduce the time and increase efficiency, their maintenance is still costly. Moreover, the widespread use of robots in the service sector will inevitably exacerbate our unemployment problem. Therefore, we need to greet innovations and technology with not only excitement but also caution.

Kowsar Rahman Sadit, Uttara, Dhaka

Hold student union elections

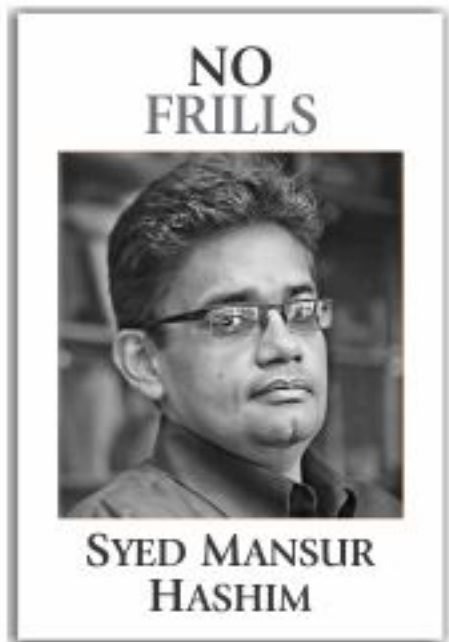
Our universities used to be breeding grounds for brilliant leaders. Student politics was very relevant and powerful. Many emerged as leaders through electoral, political and democratic means. Now, it takes only money and muscle to do well in politics.

The Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) elections, which gave rise to a number of political leaders, took place even throughout the most adverse of times, such as during President Ershad's military regime. But, now, in a supposedly democratic environment, student union elections are not allowed to take place.

I urge the authorities to hold DUCSU and other student union elections so that the most meritorious students of today can again emerge as leaders tomorrow through democratic means.

Mawduda Hasnin, By email

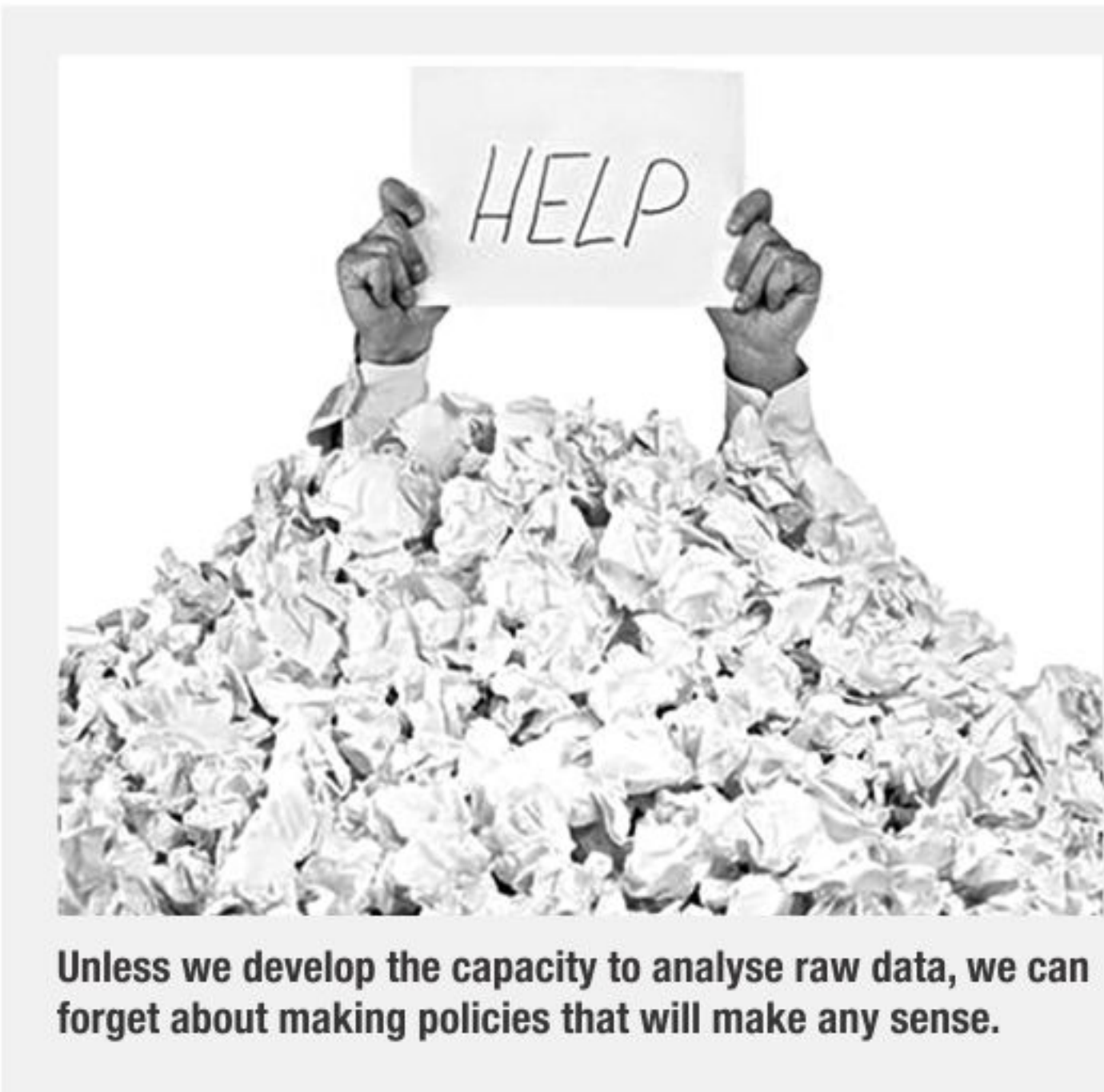
BBS under fire, again



THE Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) is the body the government depends on for data on the various sectors of the economy to make policy decisions. Hence when that body fails to come up with sound data, it is the government, more than any other stakeholder that pays the price. Questions have been raised about its competence and this has been going on throughout the tenure of this government and not during just the current term in office. Indeed, a report in this paper going back as far back as June 2, 2010 states that the ministry of agriculture and its minister minced no words when she pointed out that the BBS had provided wrong data on Boro (a rice crop) production that led to problems for the ministry to effectively plan and execute crop planting in the country.

The minister had pointed out that the government had set the target of producing 1.90 crore tonnes from 48.50 hectares. That target was revised to 1.87 crore tonnes as there had been flooding that submerged some 50,000 acres of farmlands in the country's *haor* areas. The BBS was thrashed in a meeting in May since the body projected a production target of 1.74 crore tonnes with less than 50 percent of the Boro paddy harvested! Precisely how BBS came up with the magic number 1.74 crore is of course not known. Indeed, the problems didn't end there. BBS data showed low harvest figures for Aman (another rice crop), wheat and potato. With regards to potato production, the data showed 74 lakh (which turned out to be 85 lakh tonnes); Aman was shown as 1.22 crore tonnes as opposed to the real amount of 1.31 tonnes.

As we fast forward to 2012, we find that according to another report in this paper (published on December 20, 2012), the minister of finance was calling upon BBS to produce data that could be presented in a fashion which would make it understandable. The confusion in data presented was creating problems between the ministry of agriculture and ministry of food with regards to how much food the population would be consuming. One ministry was claiming self-sufficiency in food, whilst the other claiming otherwise, and the entire ruckus due to confusing data coming out of BBS. Indeed, the BBS stated in July, 2012 that the country had a population in excess of 15.25 crore, but that number was revised downward to 14.80 crore four months down the line. We would be very interested to



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know what happened to the suggestions that the finance minister had for BBS, i.e. the body work with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to improve its calculation methods. Because apparently, the manner in which BBS was calculating the purchasing power parity (PPP) did not make much sense.

As per newspaper reports by national dailies on November 19, economists were clamouring for economic policies to be formulated on "credible" data. Now why is it that the BBS is continuously being hammered about the credibility of its data? At the launching ceremony of a new book authored by Policy Research Institute titled "Evidence-based Policy Making in Bangladesh", we are informed about the importance of research and evidence-based policymaking. What transpired from this meet is that the government has been found sorely lacking in developing in-house evidence-based policymaking capacity. Indeed, we are informed by Dr Mashiur Rahman, the prime minister's Economic Adviser, that policy making should not be based on populist notions. According to a report in a leading English daily on November 19, greater synthesising of various data sources and capacity building of relevant government agencies, including the BBS, was the need of the hour. The advisor minced no words on his take on the matter: "So, they may have

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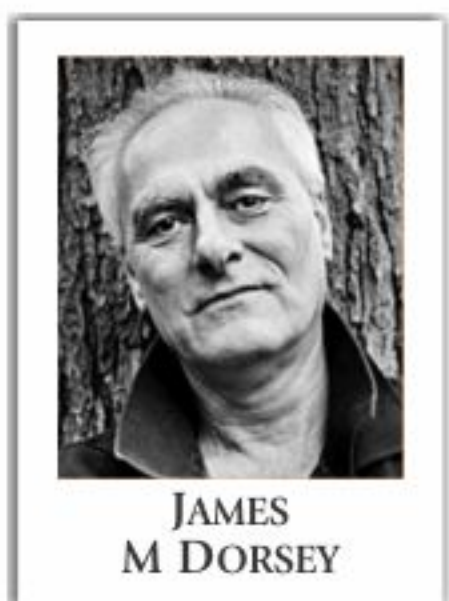
studied anthropology, or Islamic history or Indian history or ancient European history. Same is the story with Bureau of Statistics."

Planning cadres can come from different fields of study since the service is deemed a generalist cadre, but we simply cannot have archaeologists, zoologists, linguists, etc. being recruited to serve in the BBS. This job is for statisticians, period. Yet, what we learn from our economic adviser is that one would be very lucky to find one in the BBS. When presented with such a scenario, one begins to comprehend how wrongly staffed the body is. The economic adviser has merely stated what has been uttered by many other former advisers and ministers and the message (no matter how caustic it may sound) remains the same—neither are we formulating evidence-based policies nor are we undertaking requisite steps to improve the capacities of the agencies implementing them. Unless we develop the capacity to analyse raw data, we can forget about making policies (in any field) that will make any sense. But for that to happen, we seriously need to recognise that we have a major problem with BBS on our hands and the body requires a major overhaul by recruiting the right person for the right job.

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Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Transition in the Middle East: Transition to what?



TRANSITION is the name of the game in the Middle East and North Africa. The question is, transition to what?

Dominating the answer is an Arab autocratic push for a Saudi-led regional order that would be based on an upgraded 21st-century version of autocracy designed to fortify absolute rule. To achieve that autocrats have embraced economic reform accompanied by necessary social change that would allow them to efficiently deliver public goods and services. It is an approach that rejects recognition of basic freedoms and political rights and is likely to produce more open and inclusive political systems that ensure that all segments of society have a stake.

At the core of the volatile and often brutal and bloody battle that could take up to a quarter of a century to play out is the determination of Arab autocrats to

and progressively undermined regional stability; fuelled the rise of extremism and jihadism; encouraged supremacism, intolerant and anti-pluralistic tendencies far beyond its borders in countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia; and turned it into the most volatile, repressive, and bloody part of the world.

Littered with the bodies of the dead and the dying, countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen have been scarred for generations to come and are struggling to ensure territorial integrity against potential secessionist ethnic, regional and religious challenges. Possible US-backed Saudi efforts to destabilise Iran with attempts to stir ethnic unrest risk the Islamic republic and Pakistan becoming the next victims. Countries such as Lebanon teeter on the brink.

Restive populations meanwhile hang in the balance, hoping that their continued surrender of political rights in new social contracts unilaterally drafted by autocratic leaders will bring them greater economic opportunity. In some countries like Egypt expectations have been dashed; in others such as Saudi Arabia expectations are unrealistic and

popular sentiment remains ignored or unrecognised by officials, scholars and pundits, who, if it explodes, are likely to be caught by surprise. No one knows whether it will explode and, if so, in what form and what might spark an explosion.

It was the self-immolation of a fruit vendor in Tunisia in late 2010 that set the Middle East and North Africa alight. While history may not repeat itself literally, events six years later in the Rif, a rebellious region of northern Morocco, sparked by the death of Mouhcine Fikri, an unemployed street merchant, suggest the writing may be on the wall.

Fikri was crushed to death in a trash compactor while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by the authorities. A year of protests since Fikri's death suggests that the effectiveness of King Mohammed VI's constitutional reforms in an initially successful bid to co-opt the demonstrators as well as his support for the Rif's indigenous Berber culture and promises of state investment that would turn the region into a manufacturing hub have either run their course or fallen short.

popular protests with increasing brutality. The governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and, to some extent, Morocco, epitomise Arab regimes' seeming inability to escape the autocracy trap—even as current circumstances suggest that another popular awakening is imminent," said Moroccan-born former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami.

Ben-Ami's timeline may be optimistic, but the underlying message remains valid. Regime survival-driven, government-controlled economic reform that seeks to ensure that private enterprise remains dependent on the public sector; limited social reforms; exclusionary rather than inclusionary policies; and rejection of political change may buy time, but ultimately will not do the trick.

Autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa are, for now, riding high buffeted by the ability to divert public attention with promises of economic change, the spectre of Iran as a foreign threat, US support for regional autocrats and containment of Iran, and the fuelling of ethnic and sectarian tension.

At best, that buys Arab autocrats time. The risk is festering and new wounds are likely to come to haunt them. Four decades of global Saudi propagation of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism to counter what initially was Iranian revolutionary zeal but later transformed into Iranian strategy in a long-standing covert war have turned Arab Shiites and their militias into potent political and military forces. The spectre of the Houthis organising themselves on the border of Saudi Arabia on the model of Lebanon's Hezbollah is but the latest example.

Autocratic self-preservation and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, coupled with disastrous US policies, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, have wracked countries across the region and fostered a generation of Syrians and Yemenis that is likely to be consumed by anger and frustration with their human suffering and what is likely to be a slow rebuilding of their shattered countries, whose existence in their current form and borders is at best uncertain.

In short, transition in the Middle East and North Africa has deteriorated into a battle for retention of political control. It constitutes a struggle for the future of a region that with near certainty will produce more conflict as well as black swans that could create even more havoc long before it yields sustainable solutions that ensure equitable economic development and transparent and accountable rule of law.

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Protesters march on May 31, 2017 in Al-Hoceima, Morocco during a demonstration demanding the release of activist Nasser Zefzafi.

guarantee their survival at whatever cost. Geopolitics plays a major role in Arabic autocratic ambition. To compensate for their inherent weakness and lack of the building blocks needed for sustainable regional dominance, Arab autocrats except for Egypt, the one Arab state with the potential of being a dominant, long-term regional player, need to contain first and foremost Iran, and to a lesser degree Turkey.

It is a geopolitical struggle, dominated by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, that has enveloped the Middle East and North Africa for almost four decades

poorly, if at all, managed.

The successful and brutal Saudi and UAE-led counterrevolution has killed hopes and popular energy that exploded onto the streets of the Arab cities during the revolts of 2011 and produced tyrants and mayhem. For now, it has all but erased popular will to risk challenging autocratic rule that has failed to deliver or that has created expectations that may prove difficult to meet.

That is not to say that like in the period prior to the 2011 revolts, popular anger and frustration is not simmering. Like in the walk-up to the uprisings,

Nasser Zefzafi, a 39-year-old unemployed man with an understanding of the power of social media, has, despite the government's use of security forces, succeeded with online videos and fiery speeches denouncing corruption and dictatorship, to not only keep the protests alive but also encourage their intermittent spread to other parts of the country. The Moroccan capital of Rabat witnessed in June its largest anti-government protest since the 2011 revolts.

"Regimes have closed off channels for political expression, and responded to

PHOTO: AFP