

Where is the MPO protest going?

Govt must find a judicious solution

THE fiasco over the ongoing fast-unto-death of teachers demanding inclusion in the government's Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme and how it came about despite there being a policy to execute the scheme, bespeaks a noble effort that's gone haywire thanks to neglect and systemic failure. It has also posed a challenge: the education ministry now must find a way to persuade the teachers to end their strike, which rolled into its fifth day on Thursday, while making sure the conditions set by the MPO policy are properly met, which is a time-consuming process.

According to a report by *The Daily Star*, many participants in the strike have already fallen sick, some of them even hospitalised. The demonstrators have asked for a specific timeframe for inclusion, unconvinced that the minister's assurance to that effect will have the desired results. True, the minister's assurance constitutes a vague response to a very specific demand. But given the nature of the demand, it is important that all parties show the best judgment on their part so that order is restored in the 5,242 educational institutions that are still out of MPO coverage. If there is any merit to the demand being raised, it should be addressed in the proper way.

However, what worries us more is the disruptive pattern that has developed in the public sector lately, in which grievances by professionals are not solved until there is a crisis point when solutions are sought on an ad-hoc basis. This pattern must be broken.

Illegal stone extraction must be stopped

Workers' lives and environment on the line

ON December 3, we reported that four workers were killed in a landslide in Jaflong while they were extracting stones from a quarry illegally. But, further developments on the story, reported on December 4, reveal far worse. It is now confirmed that not four, but five workers were killed in the landslide. The traders who appointed the workers tried to cover up the incident, and had managed to recover and send one of the bodies to the village home of the deceased.

Illegal extraction of stone from quarries in Syhet are not new: only in 2017, at least 30 workers have died during these extractions. There are regulations on paper, and in this particular incident, manual extraction was permitted. But the workers had gone beyond the limit of 10 metres while digging.

In October last year, we reported how the use of illegal excavators in Jaflong is endangering the environment of the ecologically critical area. We reported how these stone traders had the backing of influential people and ruling party leaders. That despite the presence of task forces to stop illegal extraction, it has continued unabated should tell us the extent of the problem.

The new developments, however, pose another serious issue: that of complete disregard for workers' safety and attempt to cover up deaths. Of course, this has been possible because of the illicit nature of the business where, much less the environment, even workers' lives are of secondary concern.

The law and regulations exist. It is imperative that this incident acts as a wake-up call to the authorities. Besides ensuring those responsible for the death of the five workers and trying to cover it up are arrested and punished, it is time that the overall situation is tackled—for the safety of the workers and for protecting the ecologically critical Jaflong.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Jar water, a public health concern

An editorial titled *Poison in the water that we drink* appeared in *The Daily Star* on December 27, 2017. In my opinion, the editorial is timely and needs to be heeded. The study that 98 percent of jar water contains E-Coli should be taken very seriously. In cities, a large number of people use jar water. Hence, it poses a serious threat to public health.

BSTI should collect the samples of the jar water as well as bottled water and take necessary steps to ensure that drinkable water meets standard requirements. The government should realise that it is obligated to tackle such a dangerous health hazard as soon as possible.
Shafkat Rahman, By e-mail

Kudos to BPSC

I would like to thank Bangladesh Public Service Commission for the preliminary test of 38th BCS exams held on December 29 last year in a fair and disciplined manner. It was indeed a challenging task since the number of applicants was more than three lakh. It is significant in light of the fact that recently there have been outcries over question paper leaks in public examinations. Other public institutions should take lessons as well as advice from the BPSC on how to hold public examinations in a fair and disciplined way and thus avoid the menace of question paper leaks.
Ashkek Sarker, Feni

Biggest underreported stories of 2017

And the story behind the international media's failure to cover them

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE American media is owned by six corporations [now five]...it is not difficult to understand how what the majority of the 'public sees and doesn't see' depends and is controlled by...a small number of corporations and ultimately, by those who control them. This is especially the case as it is also the 'age of the repeater journalists'. Where you have the majority of mainstream journalists worldwide simply 'repeating the narrative' portrayed in the powerful quarters of the world media...and the information they receive from the biggest news agencies (Western mostly)".

Given that not much has changed over the past 12 months—apart from a more concerted effort to stifle any other narratives that are out there by the corporate media—let's look at some of the biggest stories of 2017 that the media either underreported, or had ignored completely. The first, ironically, involves a story that the media had obsessed over now known as Russiagate—referring to the alleged collusion between President Trump's presidential campaign team and Russian authorities.

Despite the fanatical media coverage, this is one of those stories which, if you look closely, falls apart at the seams instantaneously. In the words of journalist Glenn Greenwald in *The Intercept*, "no matter how much you hate Trump or regard Russia as a grave villain...it has to be acknowledged that when the US media is spewing constant false news about all of this, that, too, is a grave threat...So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all"—neither can I.

But here is the gist of it. In spite of all talks of collusion between Trump's campaign team and the Russian government, the US authorities are yet to present one shred of evidence to back up their allegation. That too, over one whole year. Which simply means that there is none.

As the NSA's former Technical Leader for intelligence, William Binney, former CIA analyst for 27 years and the President's Daily Briefer (for Reagan and GW Bush) Ray McGovern, and countless other top intelligence officials have explained, the hacking of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) was an inside job. The download speed of the files leaked by Wikileaks shows

that—as there is no internet in the world fast enough to have downloaded those files at the speed that they were downloaded. Which also means that someone from inside the DNC had to have copied those files onto an external device (possibly a pen-drive) and given it to Wikileaks—and so were not hacked and leaked to Wikileaks by the Russians.

The only evidence provided thus far to continue this witch-hunt is a "dossier" which has thoroughly been proven to be fake and paid for by the DNC, and initially by the top brass of the Republican Party itself. However, there seems to be some evidence to suggest that there may have indeed been collusion between the Trump campaign team and a foreign country—not Russia, and is a whole can of worm in and of itself. So why has the media been trying so hard to tie Trump to Russia?

This brings us to the second story, which

world. But as the Syrian war nears its end, another war continues to rage on and is yet ignored by the media—the war in Yemen. As journalist Dan Glazebrook wrote, "Two-and-a-half years of a lethal blockade and bombardment have produced almost nothing regarding territorial gains in the...war against the Yemeni nation...This siege against a country dependent on imports for over 80 percent of its food, fuel, and medicine is nothing less than genocidal."

According to Save the Children, 130 Yemeni children are now dying every day from extreme hunger or disease, with 50,000 dead (at least) in 2017 alone. Almost 900,000 people were infected by a cholera epidemic—the biggest ever recorded. Seven million people were in immediate risk of famine and, according to the heads of three UN agencies, "Untold thousands of innocent people

last story—net neutrality. In December last year, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the US dismantled net neutrality, the popular Obama-era regulations that prevented internet service providers from controlling the speeds at which content travels across their networks. According to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a US media watch group, net neutrality in effect "means the government prohibits cable companies and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) from blocking, slowing or otherwise discriminating against the web traffic of their users." Which, in short, means that it ensured "internet freedom".

So why did the FCC remove net-neutrality? To assist the corporate media that is losing consumers on a daily basis to alternative and unbiased sources of information, fight back and regain its monopoly on the narrative behind each



Protesters led by Aaron Swartz demanding net neutrality in 2012.

is Syria. By now plenty of evidence has come out to suggest that the Syrian war, rather than being a civil war, was a proxy war all along—funded and fuelled from abroad. Given that Trump, when he was a presidential candidate, had expressed his wish (whether he meant it or not) to normalise relations with Russia and "allow" (although it is not for him to decide) President Assad to remain in power, there is speculation that the US Deep State had wanted to use Russiagate to prevent that from happening.

Despite that, the war in Syria is now almost over (amidst total media silence) while thousands of Syrian refugees are now returning to their homeland after years of exile. ISIS has nearly been defeated, with thousands of fighters leaving for other countries which, at this point, should be a concern for the whole

will die...unless the Saudi-led military coalition unconditionally lifts it blockade of the country's ports."

This war has, moreover, been a complete embarrassment for the "coalition of the killing," which includes the major western powers. So much so that a group of US Congressmen from both the major political parties has been attempting, through a resolution invoking the War Powers Act, to force the US to stop aiding the Saudi-led coalition in its bombing campaign which would collapse without support from western countries.

The only reason, however, why it has been so embarrassing is because despite the mainstream media blackout, with the advent of alternative media organisations such as Wikileaks as I wrote last year, these stories "can no longer be blacked out completely." Which brings us to the


and every story. A year ago, I had written that the biggest story of 2016 is that people are losing faith in the corporate media and are looking at other sources of information. Today, however, the biggest story should be that the corporations behind the corporate media have used all their weight to fight back in 2017, to ensure that people like you and me can no longer share our stories with the rest of the world in our own words and from our own perspectives, and to force us to allow the corporate media to define and explain our stories and who we are as they see fit.

If you find that unacceptable, dear reader, perhaps 2018 is your year to fight back.

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Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

What has gone wrong in Iran?

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

HUNDREDS of Iranians came onto the streets on December 28, 2017, in an impromptu demonstration in the city of Mashhad protesting high prices of daily necessities and rampant corruption. They denounced President Hassan Rouhani and chanted slogans against the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The protests have now spread all over Iran including Tehran, and so far 22 people have been killed, including a policeman. Several hundred agitators have been arrested.

Surprisingly, the protests started in Mashhad and then spread to Qom, religious strongholds of the clerics. What is worrisome for the ruling clergy is that the demonstrators chanted slogans in favour of the late Reza Shah, the founder of the ousted Pahlavi dynasty. However, hard-line pro-government supporters came in large numbers onto the streets to counter the anti-corruption activists.

Is it really the high prices of food or are there some other reasons for this uprising? The current economic situation of Iran does not seem to be the main narrative behind this sudden unrest. It is true that some food and fuel prices have gone up but this outburst looks like an amalgamation of frustration and disillusionment over corruption, repression of political dissidents, freedom of expression and impatience over the slow progress in economic improvement.

Since the signing of the Nuclear Deal with the West (JCPOA, June 2015), which removed four decades of sanctions, Iran's economy, dominated by the oil and gas sectors, received a boost mainly due to unhindered exports. The economy grew by 13.4 percent registering a GDP of USD 412 billion (2016, WB). Inflation came down from 11.9 percent in 2015 to nine percent (2016, WB). But the unemployment figures crept up to 12.6 percent (2016, WB) meaning that over 3.3 million educated young people

were looking for jobs. New jobs could not be created because of slow progress of investments. People had supported Rouhani's nuclear deal with the expectation that economic conditions would improve dramatically within a short time. The economic situation has indeed improved compared to what it was before signing JCPOA—but not fast enough for the working and middle-income segments of the people.

The current unrest in Iran has come as a welcome development for Iran baiter President Donald Trump. Though Trump's tweets do not reflect US foreign

Iran. The House of Saud and Trump are in sync as far as the riots in Iran are concerned. Riyadh is also happy and watching the developments closely. One wonders whether these two have been fanning the unrest in Iran, as Tehran has accused.

Supreme Leader Khamenei on January 2, 2018 in a statement has accused Iran's enemies (Washington?) for providing "cash and arms" for regime change. Interestingly, hard-line Khamenei and Rouhani do not necessarily agree on all issues. Iran's democracy has several centres of powers but two centres are



Iranians walk on a street in the capital Tehran on January 2, 2018.

policy, some of his latest tweets reveal that he is happy anti-clergy protests have flared-up in Iran. From Trump's writings it is clear that he wants regime change in Iran—"The world is watching"; "Failing at every level. Time for change". Tehran reacted strongly and trashed Trump's tweets saying, "Iranian people give no credit to the deceitful and opportunist remarks of Mr Trump."

What is significant here is that Trump has to certify that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear deal every 90 days to Congress. Around mid-January 2018 the certification issue will come up again and one wonders whether Trump will scrap the deal and impose fresh sanctions on

prominent—the hard-line clergy and the moderates. Hassan Rouhani is a moderate who has gained acceptability with the West. The hard-line clergy accuses Rouhani of failing to deliver on economic promises even though there are no sanctions. If the hardliners succeed in undermining Rouhani it will mean the end of JCPOA. And without the JCPOA Iran will find it daunting to reform the economy.

What is happening in Iran is neither a political movement nor a revolution. However, it will certainly produce ramifications internally within Iran and externally in the Middle East region. Internally, Rouhani will be compelled to

push economic reforms faster, stamp out corruption and ensure more democratic rights to the people. Rouhani said demonstrators were "absolutely free" and had the right to protest against the government and acknowledged that some of the protestors' grievances were legitimate, but warned demonstrators not to be violent. Rouhani promised to redress the grievances of the agitators. Externally, Tehran will have to step back from supporting proxy wars in the Middle East and re-establish diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. Sanctions may be staring Tehran in the face once again, if JCPOA is terminated.

Looking back, the 2009 Green Movement was triggered by Mir Hossein Mousavi to oust the newly elected president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad on allegations of vote rigging. But it was firmly crushed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. On the current unrest Khamenei and Rouhani will definitely act together to bring the situation under control, if necessary with harsh means. As social media is seen as the culprit in fomenting the unrest, authorities have cracked down on access to social media tools such as Instagram and Telegram. The powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose mandate is to safeguard the Islamic Revolution, vowed to crush the anti-government protests.

The current uprising brings Iran's demography in focus. The Iranian society with a population of 81.59 million has a well-established educated middle class. The median age in Iran is 30.1 years. Normally young people around the age of 25 drive anti-government agitations. This time the numbers are far less than in 2009.

Rouhani has steered Iran's nuclear deal with the West quite skilfully and was elected for the second term in May 2017 with a huge mandate. He took office in August 2017 and it is unlikely his government will collapse because of the unrest.

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Mahmood Hasan is former Ambassador and Secretary.