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LATE S. M. ALI
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Abused female migrant workers

Stop putting them in jeopardy

THE report that more than a hundred female migrant workers are returning from Saudi Arabia after having endured physical and sexual assault by their employers is hardly surprising. This newspaper has repeatedly written about the plight of our women workers abroad, calling on the government to ensure their safety, dignity and rights. Our calls, unfortunately, have fallen on deaf ears.

Over the last few years, an increasing number of Bangladeshi female workers have gone to Saudi Arabia only to see their dream of a rosy life being shattered. They have been subjected to inhumane torture, sexual assault and denied salaries by their employers in Saudi Arabia, while the local authorities have done little to stop their citizens' criminal behaviours and protect the workers' rights.

While negotiating the overseas employment of the female workers, the government should be strict in ensuring that the women workers would receive fair wages and humane treatment and that their employers would be brought to book if they violated their employee's rights. Unfortunately, that did not happen in this case, and many of these women have undergone slavery-like situations in Saudi Arabia.

According to a recent study by International Organization for Migration, many women workers in the Middle East signed employment contracts, which they do not even understand and that do not protect them from discrimination and abuse. The terrible stories from the returning women workers should be taken seriously. That means that the government should reconsider sending female workers to places where their dignity, safety and livelihood are not guaranteed.

Brick kilns destroying the environment

Authorities turn a blind eye

THE dangerous proliferation of illegal brick kilns in rural areas of Bangladesh is having a two-fold damaging effect. First, the fertility of farmlands around such brickfields is being affected adversely, and second, the plumes of black smoke are making the air heavy with toxins leading to various respiratory diseases. These are not unknown to authorities. Yet, we find in almost all cases where there are such brick kilns, the owners are well connected politically and generally have no problems skirting the law because unfortunately, many of our laws are treated as mere pieces of legislation that are seldom enforced.

Indeed, as per a report published in this paper on January 13, the Chittagong Hill Tracts is now suffering the ill effects of brick kilns, most of which are illegal. The sad reality is that people's protest is met with indifference at the local administration level most of the time. The other interesting development is that many of these kilns are being set up in remote areas of the hills, particularly around reserve forests which open up a new dimension to environmental degradation of the few forests that are supposed to be "protected."

With about 55 kilns in operation in Lama, Alikadom, Ruma, Naikonchhari and Sadar upzilas, we wonder what excuse authorities are going to come up with in the defence of brick kiln owners. People's health, it would seem, is viewed with utter disregard by those who are supposed to guard the populace from law-breaking industries. We can only hope that there are still some in authority who care about people's wellbeing and will take steps to rein in these illegal kilns in the interest of preserving public health as well as the environment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Groundwater problem of Dhaka city

Dhaka city and its adjacent metropolitan areas have a population of over 16 million. The increasing population of this city is exerting immense pressure on groundwater resources. If the trend continues, it will be very difficult to keep the water table within the extraction limit. Groundwater and surface water contribute about 85.82 percent and 14.18 percent respectively of our total water use.

The water table was 18-22 metres below the ground before the mid-20th century in Dhaka city and its adjacent areas. However, due to hasty urbanisation, the water table started diminishing from the 80s. Currently, in most areas of this city, the average groundwater depletion rate has been recorded around 2-3 metre per year.

Rainwater harvesting could be one of the effective solutions to lessen the water crisis. Recycling and reusing of waste water is another option to mitigate this problem. On the other hand, the planning bodies and policymakers of our country should commence necessary steps as early as possible for an uninterrupted supply of pure and pollution-free groundwater for the residents of this mega city.

SM Saify Iqbal, *Dhaka*

Taking banks further away from the public

There are serious consequences of the new law in Bangladesh that permits four members of the same family to be bank directors

OPEN SKY

BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

SOURCE: **BUSINESS FIRST**

WHEN I, along with another colleague of mine, went to Philadelphia to interview jobseekers, the findings of one interviewee's dissertation reminded me of something: the recent news on bank directors in Bangladesh. The candidate found that the more the diversity in the board of directors, the better the performance of the company. Following the new law in Bangladesh that allows four members of a family to be directors of a bank with extended term (virtually their whole life), its ripple effects have begun to rattle the banking industry.

Some bank owners took advantage of this new law and made sudden changes in the directorship positions, triggering a state of panic among depositors and other stakeholders. Some top bankers were courageous enough to voice their apprehensions to the central bank. These bank professionals find the erratic behaviour of bank directors to not only be a threat to financial stability but also unfavourable for corporate governance.

What was the urgency of making this family-dominant directorship law at a time when the banking sector is at one of its worst states in Bangladesh's history? We have done enough damage to the capital market already. Now the only hope relies on the banking sector which must transition from a feudal form to a modern capitalistic structure. Turning banks into family-dominant businesses is actually a reversal of our progress—going back towards feudalism.

The ever-growing dominance of companies, particularly in the paradise of world capitalism, the US, ought to be mentioned. American companies became stronger over time by becoming more "public" in character. It involved two methods: (i) making the board of directors as diverse as possible—of course by reducing the number of members from the same family, and (ii) increasing the composition of common stocks which reach the public.

When Walt Disney went public, it made its board greatly diverse by combining both wealth and expertise from different walks of life—although people expected Walt Disney's board members to be only from the media world. That didn't happen simply because the owners had the foresight—they knew that diversity of knowledge is warranted in the board to add vigour and longevity to the company's life. And as history proves, Walt Disney's founders were right.

Not long ago Microsoft hired a board member who had no connection to the software business. The person actually owned a chain of hotels and also sat on the board of Walmart, the largest retailer of the world. The reason Microsoft included him as a board member is to enrich the company with diversified knowledge and expertise.

When you look at the way in which banking companies in Bangladesh have been formed, you'll notice that this outlook has entirely been reversed. We seem to stick to homogeneity even though we know that countries like the US, UK, and Australia have resilient economies mainly because of diversity in knowledge. The revival of the US economy after 9/11, for example, amazed the world. The British government honoured the then Fed Chair Alan Greenspan with Knighthood. Greenspan cited the word "diversity" as the main saviour of the US economy.

Our mindset is sadly the opposite. In the Bangladesh Investment Summit in Singapore, for instance, I came across one of our native speakers who was repeatedly describing Bangladesh as a homogeneous country in terms of race, religion, and culture, without understanding its negative impact on prospective foreign investors.

Homogeneity gives us a false sense of security and compromises a better outcome. Bureaucrats with the authority to form a project committee usually go for people from their own field because of the fear that experts brought in from outside may create disagreements—despite the fact that they may add some value. The super rich suffer from the same syndrome—preference of homogeneity over diversity. And they prefer a closed familial cluster over homogeneity—where the latter is akin to democracy and the former to monarchy.

The government's recent law is nothing short of an endorsement of familial greed and control. As a result, top bank professionals are scared of their future. They seem to have one place of shelter—the central bank—which they had hoped would intervene in the situation of directorship changes that may destabilise an already beleaguered market. While the central bank understands their worries, it can do little if the ministry doesn't want to displease the financial coterie.

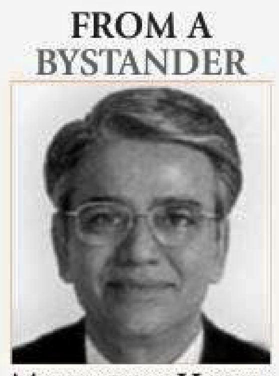
Let's assume that Bangladesh Bank prevents the sudden changes in directorship from materialising, but that wouldn't be enough to oppose corporate greed. The business tycoons have their own survival tactics. And now the owners have the opportunity to make changes slowly until they can convert the board into a family dynasty which will invariably put more pressure on CEOs to cater to the former's greed—by maximising profit at any cost without paying attention to increasing employment. And this is the main damage for the economy, and this is also why economists and bank professionals oppose this feudal culture of increasing family members in the managing board—opposite to what companies like Walmart, Microsoft, Walt Disney, and Bank of America do.

The recent trend of immense profit accumulation in all private banks is a testament to the fact that more familial clusters will force bank professionals to ensure more profit maximisation and proportionately less employment generation. Have we ever collected statistics on how many jobseekers are employed per one million taka of profit? This, I believe, is what the central bank should ask the banks to report publicly every year, because the central bank can make rules for greater public interest. And employment generation is the prime objective of the dual mandate of any central bank—regardless of whether it is the US or Bangladesh.

Biru Paksha Paul is associate professor of economics at SUNY Cortland.
Email: birupakshapaul@gmail.com

Donald Trump's broadside on Pakistan

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

WASHINGTON'S relations with Islamabad started going downhill even before Donald Trump stepped into the Oval Office. The US-Pakistan anti-terror collaboration since the Twin Tower attacks on September 11, 2001 has frayed over the years, particularly since 2011 when US troops raided Osama bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, without Pakistan's knowledge. In August 2017, Trump laid out his Afghanistan-cum-South Asia policy, which unnerved Pakistan and heartened India. The central issue of Trump's policy was that Pakistan was not doing enough to curb terrorism—Delhi's persistent allegation against Pakistan. America is bleeding, both in terms of blood and money, in the Afghan pothole for the past 16 years and there is no sign that it can extricate itself with honour from this long-running unwinnable war.

Referring to the USD 33 billion American assistance provided since the start of Afghan war in 2001, Trump on January 1, 2018 tweeted that Pakistan had rewarded past US aid with "nothing but lies and deceit." Trump's broadside vents Washington's anger over Islamabad's anti-terror activities. Later, Washington announced suspension of USD 1.15 billion (USD 255 million for 2016 and USD 900 million for 2017) security assistance to Pakistan.

India is tremendously pleased with Trump's assault on Pakistan as reflected in Indian media reports, though the Indian External Affairs Ministry did not issue any statement. China, however, reacted by saying that Pakistan "has made great efforts and sacrifices for combatting terrorism and made prominent contributions to the cause of international counterterrorism…"

On January 5, reacting to the suspension of aid, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif said, "We do not have any alliance…. This is not how allies behave." Asif accused America of turning Pakistan into a "whipping boy" and described the US as a "friend who always betrays."

It is well established that Pakistan's ISI created Taliban with two clear strategic objectives: to install a friendly compliant government in Kabul, and to thwart any Indian sway over Afghanistan. Delhi has always tried to establish a pro-India government in Pakistan's backyard, i.e. Afghanistan—to reduce threats from Pakistan. Pakistan's antagonism with India is related to the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, where militancy is on the rise, albeit with Pakistan's support.

Pakistani activists with the Jamaat-ud-Dawa group at a protest in Lahore, Pakistan. PHOTO: **AFP**

Several questions beg answers. Is there a real shift in US policy towards Pakistan? Will Washington scrap Pakistan's status of non-NATO ally, and can it really dissuade nuclear-armed Pakistan from giving up its strategic security interest related to Afghanistan?

Washington knows it cannot win the Afghan war without Pakistan's assistance. Primarily because US army logistic lines to Afghanistan pass through Pakistan. Here, India can do very little to help America. The alternative Northern Distribution Network through Tajikistan is not only more expensive but also more cumbersome requiring Russian concurrence.

Afghanistan today has become the battlefield for big powers. All the regional powers—China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan and even America—have raised geo-strategic stakes in war-ravaged Afghanistan. A new alignment of powers is underway over Afghanistan, which is the New Great Game. Donald Trump's hobnobbing with India over Pakistan's head is more to do with containing China rather than to solve the Afghan imbroglio. Trump's threats will only propel Islamabad to be cosier with Beijing and expand relations with Moscow. The suspension of US aid will no doubt affect Pakistan's economy, but Chinese assistance coming through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects will help offset some of those difficulties.

Russia and Iran have also thrown spanners in this complex crisis by opening communication lines with the Taliban, evidently to have a say in the post-conflict government in which the Taliban is likely to be a partner. China to protect its USD 60 billion investment in Afghanistan has set up trilateral foreign ministers' dialogue involving Pakistan and Afghanistan. The purpose of the dialogue is to improve relations between Kabul and Islamabad and equivocally stymie Indian influence on Kabul. The first trilateral meeting was held in Beijing on December 26, 2017.

Trump's salvo comes at a time when Pakistan is beset with economic turmoil and political dysfunction. Political instability arose when the Supreme Court ejected PM Nawaz Sharif over corruption charges related to Panama Papers. Nawaz apparently lost his job because he asked the top generals to withdraw their support from the militants operating in Pakistan, specifically Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Nawaz's fall has given wind to opposition leader Tehreek-e-Insaf Chief Imran Khan's sails, who is touted to become the next PM (with Army's blessings?) when Pakistan goes for general elections in July 2018. The polity in Pakistan is deeply anti-American, and on aid suspension, Imran Khan said it was time for Pakistan to "delink" from the United States.

Washington conveniently ignores America's deeply flawed policy in Afghanistan, where it has set up a totally incompetent government, overseeing a largely anti-American polity. Piling blame on Pakistan will not win the war for America. The problem is that security interests of America and Pakistan are not coterminous—they are diametrically opposed. There is no military solution to the Afghan civil war and Washington would do good to itself by opening dialogue with the Taliban.

Donald Trump has been crying hoarse from the top of a chaotic White House, as depicted in the book *Fire and Fury*, while Defence Secretary James Mattis has been blowing soft, allaying fears that Pakistan will not strangulate the logistic route through Pakistan, the trump card for Pakistan. Apart from imposing some economic sanctions on Pakistan, Washington actually does not have any potent tool to discipline the nuclear-armed country. Nevertheless, Pakistani generals, who actually run the government, find themselves between a rock (America) and a hard place (India). It is unlikely that Pakistan army will step back from its duplicitous anti-terrorism policy as long as the threat perception from India exists.

Mahmood Hasan is a former ambassador and secretary of the Bangladesh government.