

Victims of slum fire left helpless

Provide immediate financial support

It is disheartening to note that Pallabi slum dwellers, who had their houses and nearly all other belongings burnt by a fire that broke out in the slum on March 12, have received little to no financial help from the authorities to get back on their feet. Though slum fires in our country seem to have become a common occurrence, and there have been at least two other incidents of fire breaking out in slums this year already, the fire that broke out in Pallabi slum was one of the biggest in the last 20 years, affecting 4,844 families and many more people.

They have so far only received about 30kg of rice per family from the district administration—with the elderly receiving a little more—and some emergency utensils and books from other sources. But the urgent financial support that they need to be able to rebuild their homes or make alternative living arrangements has been badly missing. Under the circumstances, some are having to borrow money at a monthly 10 percent interest rate, while those who cannot borrow at such a high rate are simply having to live under the open sky.

Most of the victims are people from low-income groups. Thus, it is difficult to imagine how they can afford to borrow at such high rates or be able to build houses using their own means, especially when most of their belongings were lost in the fire as it is.

The authorities should take heed of their sufferings at this difficult hour, and by so doing, provide the victim families with the financial support they so desperately need to start anew.

AL intra-party feud killing

Rein in the factions

THAT a Jubo League activist can be hacked to death in broad daylight, and that too inside a school, makes us squirm about how fickle life is for the rest of us. From what has been reported in this paper, we understand that the victim belonged to a faction of the Jubo League and was holding a meeting at the head teacher's room when members of a rival faction attacked with deadly intent. Apparently, the deceased once belonged to the faction that attacked and killed him. Why are the ruling party activists killing one another over party positions, that too on the premises of a school? And this is not the first incident of intra-party feuds of Awami League that has cost lives.

These so-called party activists are least bothered about law enforcers because they believe themselves to be above the law. We find it abominable that such incidents have now become routine in our society. The utter disregard for the safety of others comes from the belief that such conduct will go unpunished. We have iterated this in the past and must do so again. Unless the ruling party can put an end to intra-party rivalries, there will be no end to these killings which ultimately reflect badly on the government's image and threaten public safety.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Death in police custody

In our country, law enforcement agencies often enjoy impunity. In the name of disciplinary actions, law enforcers who violate rules of engagement or commit corruption, escape from justice. A few days ago, an opposition activist died while in police custody. His family members alleged that there were signs of torture on his body, while the police denied any wrongdoing. Except for verbal statements, the police did not launch a thorough investigation to determine what actually happened. There is a law that prohibits any torture of detainees in custody. However, the law is hardly being applied.

Those who violate the very law and order they are supposed to uphold must be brought to justice.

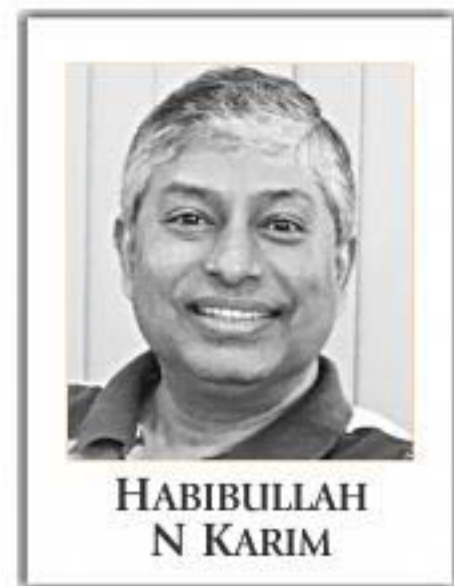
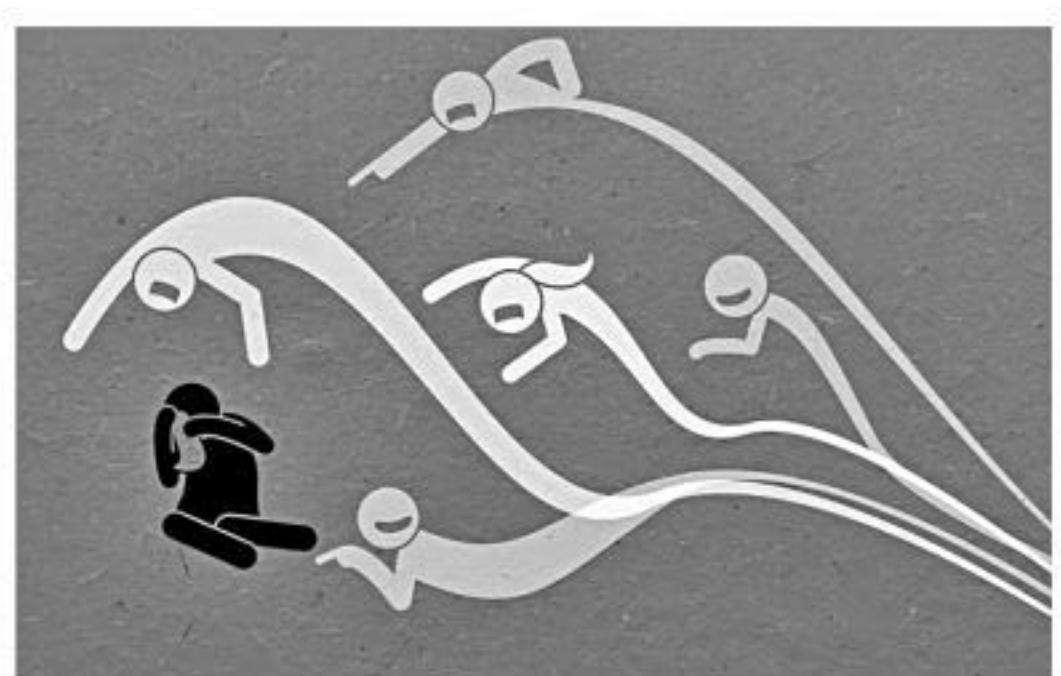
Neyamul Karim, *By e-mail*

Ragging must stop

The issue of ragging in universities in Bangladesh has really come to the limelight over the last one month. I was horrified at the news of a Dhaka University student committing suicide after being subjected to ragging. According to his friends, the individual who ended up committing suicide was often humiliated for the way he looked.

Educational institutions and teachers should raise awareness about how ragging and other forms of bullying can adversely affect students. Ragging has already claimed numerous lives. University authorities and law enforcers must deal with this issue with serious urgency.

Ikra Shams Chowdhury, *By e-mail*



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

A budding computer scientist pursuing a PhD at the McMaster University, Canada recently wrote a blog post on the increasing human capacity for self-destruction

enabled by science. First, it was the atomic bomb created by physicists, then it was the nerve gas created by chemists, and now the neural networks created by cyber nerds that pump enormous power into artificial intelligence bots—bots that can take over our lives, manipulate our behaviour, and pretty much get us to do anything they please.

The atomic bombs have captured our imagination for almost 70 years since the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 due to their massive destructive power (a single hydrogen bomb has the power to level a mega city of several million people). Nerve gas and other chemical weapons only came to light after the horrific results of such weapons used by the US on innocent civilians during the Vietnam War. Chemical weapons don't create a bang as big as atomic weapons but their impact on human lives is just as deadly or may be even worse.

Because of their deadly and inhuman effects on people, the UN has placed a universal ban on such weapons but people in general are still not as fascinated by chemical weapons as they are by atomic weapons.

Now rogue cyber systems leveraging the computational prowess of computer processors that are growing geometrically from year to year and self-learning artificial intelligence programmes known as machine learning systems are weaponising a threat of a previously unseen kind—threats that most people associate with science fiction movies like the *Terminator* sequels. Notwithstanding the common perception to the contrary, such threats are real although most of us don't realise that a Terminator-movie-like Skynet is a distinct possibility in the near future.

What is more alarming is that criminal minds combining forces with cyber techies can swoop down on any computer system anywhere in the world stealing and/or mutating personal, financial, medical, property, government and utility databases and leave billions of dollars' worth of damage in its wake. Such cybercrimes are happening all the time, and what's disconcerting is that these crimes are most often perpetrated from outside our borders.

The hacking of sensitive government



PHOTO: REUTERS/DADO RUVIC

sites happens almost every other month and most of the time the damage is not assessed or made public. The 2016 cyber heist of Bangladesh Bank funds from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York came to light many months later only after a hue and cry at the Philippines parliament got reported in the press. Aside from the central bank, a recent assessment of the commercial banks, as reported in this paper, found them woefully unprepared to fend off a cyber attack. Our utilities are also not safe nor are the law enforcement and civil defence systems.

However, keeping our heads buried in the sand will not save us from cyber storms that are imperceptibly brewing as we speak. According to UN estimates, the world economy loses more than a trillion dollars to cybercrimes every year—that's more than 1 percent of the global GDP. Just because we can't see it does not mean cyber threats are not real. In fact, persistent cyber threats are the most common danger to our well-being as a citizen and as a nation.

While the government has lately paid heed to cyber threats and prepared a draft Cyber Security Act, the effort met with serious criticisms from civil liberties and human rights advocates as the proposed act purportedly contains provisions of discretionary authority to detain citizens and confiscate property without showing a probable cause. The criticisms are very serious in nature and deserve appropriate review by the cabinet and the parliament. However, we must also realise that a modern cyber security act along with its enforcement paraphernalia is a crying

need of the hour and we must do everything possible to make that happen. We certainly must uphold human rights and protect citizens from unlawful detentions but at the same time we must not throw away the baby with the bathwater when dealing with cyber threats.

The draft Cyber Security Act is known to have proposed a cyber security council headed by the prime minister and a cyber security directorate headed by a civil servant. It is time the policymakers came to their senses and revised the proposal in line with modern constructs to effectively fend off cyber threats—threats that can literally wipe out 2-4 billion dollars' worth or 1-2 percent of GDP every year. First of all, civil or military services simply cannot produce an officer capable of addressing and managing the highly technical cyber security affairs, and that is true not just in Bangladesh but anywhere in the world. Secondly, with the kind of magisterial authority envisaged for the position, the head of the cyber security organ must be sanctioned by the constitution, or in other words, it must be a constitutional post like the C&AG.

Thirdly, in order to afford truly capable citizens engaged in such a service, the post needs to have compensations in line with the market demand for such positions. This constitutional post may be given an appropriate name signifying its authority and the rank and status of a State Minister. The position should be made answerable to the parliament and given appropriate legal mandates to exercise enforcement of the law with due process

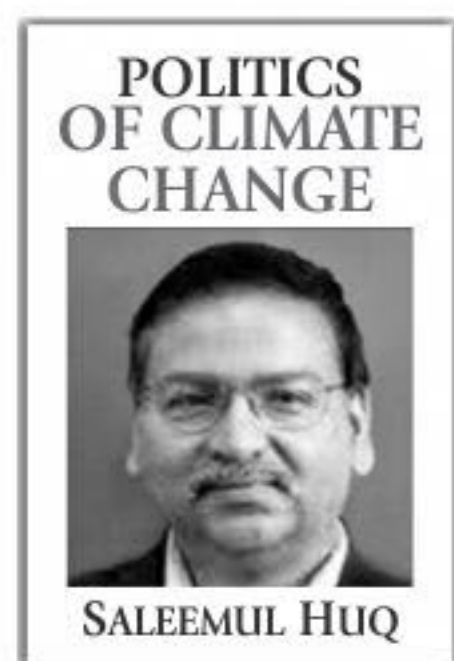
under the law of the land.

One of the routine functions of this new Office of the Cyber Security should be to make periodic cyber security sweeps of all key cyber installations such as the national data centre, Bangladesh Bank data centre, election commission data centre, passports and immigration data centre, submarine cable landing station, Bangabandhu satellite earth station and other such installations. The cyber security boss's office should also carry out cyber vulnerability checks under simulated cyber attacks and promulgate specific business continuity procedures in case of multi-source combined cyber attacks, or even state-sponsored cyber warfare. These kinds of threats are emerging all the time, and state-sponsored cyber bots like Stuxnet crippling nuclear installations in foreign countries are not the exception, but increasingly, the norm.

If a swarm of remotely piloted, weaponised drones attack us, then no conventional air force and missile defence can protect us. Only an appropriate cyber security response can ward off such an evil onslaught. Is this conceivable in the near future? Ask the thousands of children in Afghanistan, Syria and Palestine that have succumbed to such drone attacks in the last decade. Can we afford to equip ourselves and build intrinsic capacity to fend off such attacks? The real question is, can we afford not to?

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Building climate resilient, migrant-friendly cities



SALEEMUL HUQ

A recent report from the World Bank has looked at the potential number of people who will be displaced and become climate migrants due to the adverse impacts of climate

change around the world by 2050. The report estimated the number to be around 140 million across Asia and Africa, with 40 million in South Asia.

Of them, a significant portion, around 10 million or more, are likely to be in Bangladesh and these people would most likely be moving inland from the low-lying coastal districts. Most of them are likely to end up in Dhaka.

However climate migrants do not necessarily need to be considered as a problem to be coped with but can also be transformed into a solution with the right kind of planning and investments. I will describe below how that can be done in the context of Bangladesh.

There are three important dimensions of the phenomenon that need to be taken into account and each needs different solutions.

The first dimension is dealing with the climate change impacts that are already being felt in the low-lying coastal districts of the country such as Khulna, Satkhira, Barisal, Patuakhali, Noakhali, Barguna and others where the effects of saline intrusion in surface and groundwater are already being felt. The government, NGOs and the research community are already developing adaptation strategies, such as rain water harvesting for drinking and saline tolerant varieties of rice and other crops, to help the people. The Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), for example, has already developed a number of saline tolerant rice varieties which have been widely adopted already all along the coast.

However, we also need to recognise

that the problem of sea level rise causing salinity intrusion will be faster than our ability to adapt, and hence, more and more people will eventually have to relocate inland from the coast.

This brings us to the second dimension of the issue: time. The problem of sea level rise and salinity intrusion leading to inevitable migration from coastal Bangladesh will not happen overnight but quite gradually over several decades. This allows us to have a two-track adaptation strategy with the first (short-term) track being helping people

“adaptation in situ” where we help the people adapt where they are, while the second track is called “transformative adaptation” through which the youth are able to transform their lives altogether.

One point to make about investment in education and skills development is that it will need to focus on quality rather than quantity. Investing in girls is a higher priority than boys since the social returns on such investments are much better.

This brings us to the third dimension of the issue, which is that if nothing is



PHOTO: AFP

World Bank estimates put the number of climate migrants in South Asia to be 40 million by 2050. Of that, around 10 million or more are likely to be in Bangladesh and these people would most likely be moving inland from the low-lying coastal districts.

in the coastal areas to cope with the salinity issue. The second (long-term) track is to educate and empower the young girls and boys in those areas to enable them not to become farmers and fishers like their parents but to be able to move to towns (and even go abroad) and get better paying jobs there. Once these boys and girls get jobs they can then take their parents to join them and the entire family will be better off than they were before.

In the jargon of climate change science these two tracks are called

done to divert the migrants, they will almost all end up in Dhaka, which is already the fastest growing mega-city in the world. Dhaka would have great difficulty absorbing another ten million climate migrants.

Hence the solution to Dhaka's growing population problem is to invest in other towns and attract migrants to those towns (as they cannot be forced to do so).

This brings us to the strategy of identifying about a dozen secondary towns away from the coast such as

Pabna, Bogra, Jessore, Natore, Mymensingh, Comilla, Faridpur, Sylhet, Noapara, Dinajpur and others which could attract and absorb about a million migrants each.

These towns would be made into “climate resilient and migrant-friendly” towns through investing in both their physical and human infrastructure. The “climate resilient” part is already underway in many of them, with the initial climate vulnerability assessments done. Now climate resilient physical infrastructure is being designed by the government.

However the “migrant-friendly” part still needs to overcome prejudice against migrants by the host population. This requires much more social investment in people's education and behavioural change in order to get them to welcome migrants to these towns.

The most important factor in attracting migrants is the provision of jobs, followed by housing, schooling and healthcare. Hence each of these towns needs to build on their comparative economic advantage to invest in manufacturing or services that will generate employment to attract migrants. As most of these jobs will have to be generated by the private sector, the government will need to work closely with private entrepreneurs to enable them to expand their businesses.

In conclusion, I would like to say that while Bangladesh needs to think about how to cope with the millions of climate migrants that it will inevitably have, we can indeed turn the problem into a solution to show the world that facilitated and planned migration can be a successful, and indeed a transformative, adaptation for millions of climate migrants.

This will however require all sectors of society to contribute in a holistic approach as the government cannot be expected to do it alone.

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