

Ensuring cyber safety crucial

Teens more vulnerable than others

WHILE the Internet has become an indispensable part of our lives as a communications medium, an online survey carried out by UNICEF has unearthed some disturbing news. We now know that about 13 percent of teens face harassment on social media and this is happening largely because people getting online are not particularly aware of the pitfalls of using the Internet and social media. Indeed, some 3.3 percent of social media users have closed down their accounts to avoid harassment altogether, but does that really solve the problem? From what we know about the Facebook revelations and the massive information leak of millions of users to third parties, our users, particularly children, are at a greater risk than ever before!

Some 11,821 children between the ages of 13 and 18 who took part in the survey called for stronger safety. That safety will come from raising awareness among not only children but also parents, teachers and Facebook. It is not just online bullying. We have faced the horror of terrorist attacks perpetrated by young adults barely out of their teens, and they were radicalised through the Internet. Hence, it is high time we educated children and their guardians to keep themselves out of harm's way.

We feel that UNICEF's year-long programme that aims to reach 25 million teenagers, their parents and teachers to create awareness of cyber safety is a step in the right direction, but any measure adopted shouldn't infringe on fundamental freedoms as we saw in the case of the draft Digital Security Act, some of whose provisions we oppose.

Clearing illegal dockyards on Buriganga

How were these built in the first place?

WE are happy that Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has finally started destroying dockyards that were set up illegally on the bank of Buriganga River. On March 30, two illegally built dockyards were destroyed by a team of BIWTA. As reported by this newspaper, about 70 dockyards around Dhaka and Narayanganj have encroached on the river for decades, substantially narrowing the river channel. These dockyards managed to operate for so long because their owners tend to be politically influential people.

In the aforementioned case, the two destroyed dockyards were owned by two former lawmakers from BNP and JP. This also begs the question whether the authorities chose them because their owners are not currently in power. The dockyards were set up only one and a half years ago, whereas there are others that have operated with impunity for years. We hope that the joint director of BIWTA who led Friday's drive will live up to his promise and evict all illegally built dockyards irrespective of the political affiliation of their owners.

While the authorities deserve praise for their late yet necessary response, BIWTA should not have allowed these dockyards to be built in the first place. In fact, the BIWTA used to give conditional permission to set up dockyards until the High Court intervened in 2009. Therefore, BIWTA shares the blame for this current situation. We hope that once all these dockyards are destroyed, the BIWTA will be vigilant so that no such dockyards can ever be built by occupying riverbed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Identify and arrest question paper leakers

Recently, the government has decided that public exam papers would be finalised 25 minutes before the exam takes place. In the past, the government took numerous measures to check the question leak epidemic.

Whether this new decision will prove effective is yet to be seen. However, given the government's poor track record in tackling this issue, we fear that those involved in it might find a way to get around the new policy as well.

The government should revamp its efforts to arrest those who leak question papers. Otherwise, this new decision might also turn futile.

Jumana Haque Mim, By e-mail

Limon, a symbol of struggle

The Daily Star on March 23 published a front-page story titled "His fight takes new turn." The story depicts the struggle of Limon Hossain, a RAB shootout victim, who is now a lawyer.

Limon has not only fought back false cases against him but also worked hard to become a lawyer despite having lost a leg in the shootout.

The credit also goes to the media and human rights organisations that helped him enormously. Limon's is the best example of how resilience and determination can make men defy all odds. As a human rights lawyer, his fight for helpless people would be a befitting response to those who violate human rights by misusing power.

Md. Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

The rich get richer, the poor get poorer

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

THE title of this piece is not just a cliché, but also a fact. Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has been experiencing an impressive economic growth. Technically, we had already achieved the lower-middle-income status in 2015 by increasing our Gross National Income (GNI), and on March 16, 2018, the country fulfilled the eligibility requirements to graduate from "Least Developed Country" to "Developing Country". But unfortunately, the benefits of all these achievements and the economic growth that we boast of bypassed the major portion of the population while the higher-income groups have been the main beneficiaries.

A report titled "Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016," published by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), shows that the rich-poor inequality in terms of wealth accumulation has been widening in the country. The poorest 5 percent had 0.78 percent of the national income in their possession back in 2010, and now their share is only 0.23 percent. By contrast, the richest 5 percent, who had 24.61 percent of the national income in 2010, now has a higher share—27.89 percent to be precise. The report also shows that the income share of the bottom half of the population used to be 20.33 percent of the national income in 2010 but it has now fallen to 19.24 percent. In other words, the income of people higher on the economic scale has increased since the last HIES was conducted in 2010. Particularly, the top 10 percent of the population now has a greater income share (38.16 percent) compared to what they had (35.84 percent) in 2010. On the contrary, the bottom 10 percent now has half (just 1.01 percent) the income share (2 percent) of what it had in 2010. (The Daily Star, Oct 18, 2017)

Although Bangladesh's development in recent decades has been incredibly rapid, these statistics on widening inequality come as a rude reality check. The causes and factors behind this are multifaceted and complex. However, according to various studies, primary factors that deprive poor and vulnerable people of their most elementary rights and may lead to income inequality in Bangladesh include unequal access to education and employment opportunities, exploitation at workplace, low-wage jobs with scant benefits, high rates of youth unemployment, poor healthcare, corruption and lack of access to formal financial services such as credit, savings and insurance that higher income groups may take for granted.

Poverty and education are inextricably linked—quality education opens the

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gateway to better paying jobs. But owing to extreme poverty, many poor parents can't afford to send their children to school because everyone has to earn something—even the children. Even if they are going to school regularly, they have to constantly struggle for their livelihoods, making it difficult for them to concentrate in the classroom. Moreover, due to financial and emotional pressures of food insecurity, unstable home environment, lack of healthcare and other factors, they face high levels of stress, which put them at a serious disadvantage in gaining the skills necessary to compete in the job market, eventually preventing them from rising on the social ladder. On the other hand, children born in rich families have an economic advantage, in terms of better education and access to opportunities, which in turn increases their chances of earning a higher income than their disadvantaged peers.

The reasons for inequality also include wage exploitations by big companies—keeping the wage of employees at the lower rungs of the hierarchy as low as possible is an inherent part of running a business and making a profit to maximise salaries and dividends for the executives and shareholders. For example, garment workers in Bangladesh are among the most exploited, as western buyers keep the prices of garments down. Industry experts are claiming that buyers do come back to place orders repeatedly, but every year they lower the price further. Oxfam also confirms in a report titled "Reward Work, Not Wealth" that it takes a CEO of the world's top five

fashion brands just four days to earn the same amount a Bangladeshi garment worker will earn over their lifetime.

In Bangladesh, there is another pervasive factor that also contributes to income inequality—lack of access to credit. While banks are funnelling loans worth billions of taka by violating banking rules and procedures to influential businessmen backed by the political leadership, many small businessmen and poor farmers/sharecroppers usually have no access to credit because of collateral requirements like land, building, etc. Even if they manage to get small loans, they live under the constant pressure of repayment. There have been many sad incidents like farmers selling off their cattle and other belongings just to repay instalment loans. Statistics show that access to credit for farmers is significantly low relative to their contribution to the GDP. In the 2013-14 FY, the share of agriculture in the GDP was around 16 percent, while agriculture's share of advances in total stood at about 6 percent.

There is no denying the fact that rich people have an advantage in life. Income inequality is largely due to a lack of economic opportunity, especially for the people on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. Therefore, our leaders should start serving all people instead of excessively rewarding those at the top. If a government is sincere, honest and efficient, it can reduce income inequality through the tax and benefit system (i.e. by taxing the upper-income groups at higher rates) and

spending the revenue in those sectors and areas such as free/subsidised healthcare and education/skill development scheme for lower-income groups, so that they can get access to jobs that are more productive and rewarding. Since agriculture is the lifeline of over 47 percent of the labour force, the government can help small and poor farmers by providing quality seeds, fertilisers and water at a discounted rate, introducing crop insurance scheme, improving infrastructure facilities (roads, highways, port, etc.) so that their cost of doing business decreases and income increases. Of course, the government has taken some initiatives in this regard, but those are not enough to improve the livelihood of the rural poor.

We must control inequality, not because the rich have much more than the poor but because it is destroying our moral conscience, fracturing the social fabric, and poisoning our politics. Research shows that when some people possess a great amount of wealth compared to others, some of them feel a sense of superiority and believe that their money can shield them from the consequences of their action. Therefore, for each and every citizen of Bangladesh to live in peace and security, we need to have policies in place that promote fairness and equity, because a happy, equal and just society will always achieve peace and prosperity.

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Where is Putin leading Russia?



SELINA MOHSIN

with an economy left in disorder by President Yeltsin. State assets had been seized by a new class of oligarchs while ordinary Russians found pensions unpaid.

Using a tight circle of former KGB and St Petersburg colleagues, Putin worked successfully to restore order and control, including the jailing of oil tycoon Khodorkovsky in 2003. The big rise in global oil prices boosted revenues, and in March 2004, he won a second term. But Ukraine's 2004-5 Orange Revolution came as a great shock. Putin viewed it as a western plot to extend EU and NATO's hold on eastern European countries formerly part of the USSR. The hugely expensive 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi, which was selected as the host city in 2007, was a defiant demonstration of Russia's restored prestige under Putin's strong leadership.

From 2008, debarred constitutionally from a third consecutive term in presidency, Putin became prime minister, with Medvedev as president. However, Putin retained real power with an emerging middle class and newly-found confidence in relation to with the West.

But a darker era emerged in Russia's relations with the West when a short war by Russia with Georgia in August 2008 ended, when the USA threatened military intervention, but still left Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Russian control.

When Putin again ran for president, he was faced with a new youthful and city-centred opposition, and the 2011 election was marred by fraud and violence. The global financial crisis and subsequently drastic fall in prices for oil exports collapsed Russian government

revenues. From 2014, the economy entered years of recession, posing a threat to Putin's authority and image.

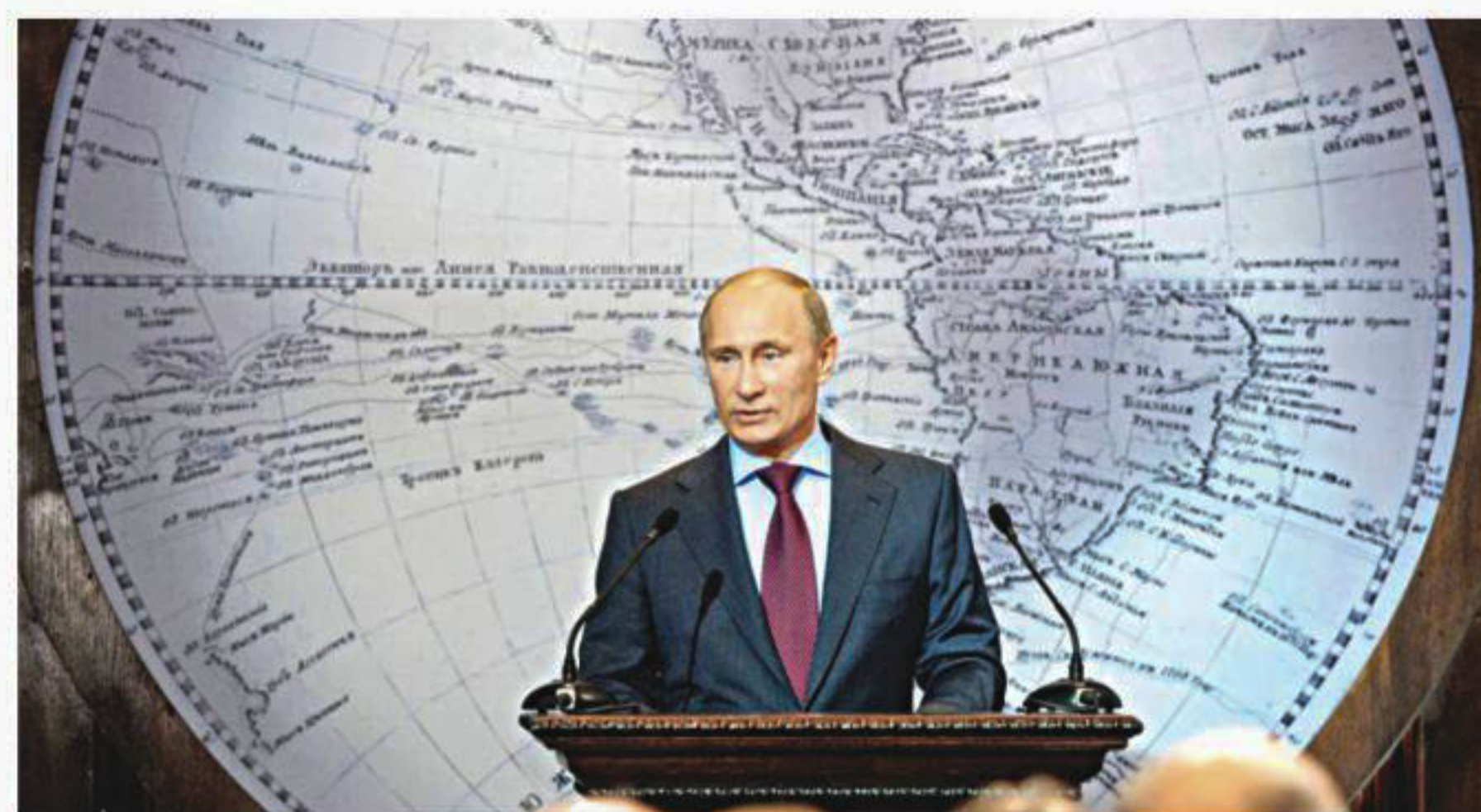
His response was putting greater stress on nationalism and orthodoxy to defend Russia. The March 2014 annexation of Crimea was domestically popular. Western sanctions and support for Ukraine against the covert Russian take-over of the Donbas region were portrayed as further evidence of hostility from the West which was blamed for fall in Russian living standards.

The year 2015 was notable for the Moscow assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and military intervention in Syria "to destroy terrorist

trolling and soft crypto warfare. Western hostility has become real and the EU is working to reduce its degree of reliance on Russian gas.

Still, Russia remains formidable with its nuclear power and a permanent membership of the UN Security Council. After years of recession, it is now in a good financial shape, with low debt. Its armed forces have been re-strengthened and it has a satisfactory scientific base. The government maintains strong central control and a new, younger generation is beginning to take over as regional governors and top officials.

On the other hand, it has become only a regional power, unlike the former



Vladimir Putin

PHOTO: AFP

groups" and save the brutal Assad regime.

Now in 2018, after the barring of Alexei Navalny from running, we saw Putin being elected virtually unopposed as president (until 2024) and boasting of Russia's nuclear power. Oil prices have recovered. By 2017 the Russian economy had moved back into 1.2 percent growth. What can now be expected of this huge state stretching over 11 time-zones? Where will Putin lead Russia?

There are many issues. The recent mass expulsion of Russian intelligence officers by over 24 countries is a reaction to years of Russian state assassinations,

USSR, and is increasingly overshadowed by China. Russia's population is only 140 million and is ageing. Health and social services are poor and the economy is not only subject to cronyism and massive corruption but is still far too dependent on oil and gas exports.

This overdependence on oil and gas is a key factor. The EU still takes 35 percent of its gas from Russia and in the short term that could even increase. From 2019, new pipelines will enable Russia to supply up to 10 percent of China's gas imports. But global LNG and LPG markets are growing fast, and in any case, how important will fossil fuels be in 30

years' time?

Russia needs to diversify its economy but Putin and the powerful elite around him show little sign of urgency and vision. In any case, corruption and western sanctions will continue to deter foreign investments and technology. There is no sign of anything comparable with Saudi Arabia where Crown Prince Salman is undertaking a series of social and economic revolutionary reforms for a modern, diversified economy. Some critics are beginning to compare Putin with Brezhnev, under whom the USSR economy stagnated.

Nor, as already noted in relation to the intelligence expulsions, are things less problematic in the sphere of foreign affairs, on which Putin has progressively tended to focus. The low-level war with Ukraine continues with no sign of an end. In Crimea, the Tartar minority is unhappy, and reworking the economy and utilities, including a long bridge to provide a direct link, is proving expensive. Countries of Central Asia, once within the USSR and some still with Russian minorities, are increasingly under Chinese influence as the massive BRI loans and infrastructural projects develop.

In Syria, Russia's heavy air force intervention has maintained the Assad regime and avoided any loss of the only Russian military base on the Mediterranean, but has been expensive and has also seen Russian casualties. An announced withdrawal has not so far proved possible and it is difficult to see any lasting Russian advantage gained. In the reconstruction of Syria, when it at last takes place, well-financed Chinese firms will gain far more contracts than the Russians will.

A new Russian generation is emerging which does not wish for isolation and relative stagnation. But the expulsion of Russian intelligence personnel, expensive war efforts in Syria, and China's rising influence make the youth population feel cornered.

Selina Mohsin is a former ambassador.