

# No end to women expatriate workers' plight

They deserve better

THAT Bangladeshi women migrant workers in the Gulf countries, mostly in Saudi Arabia, have to face various forms of harassment in the hands of their employers including physical torture, sexual abuse, and even rape is nothing new. Reportedly, many of these women are even forced into sex trade and are tortured if they refuse.

This daily published several reports in the past about the shoddy and inhuman treatment meted out to our women migrant workers by their employers. And we had called upon the authorities to take measures to mitigate their plight but nothing has changed. Instead, over the years, the situation has actually worsened. In the last year alone, according to a source of Expatriate Welfare Ministry, 2,906 female workers took shelter at the safe home run by Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh after facing violence at their workplace.

While Indonesia, the Philippines and India have stopped sending women workers to the Gulf countries altogether, Bangladesh has been sending more women workers to these countries. We wonder why.

If the government must send women workers to the Gulf, it must ensure safe workplace for them first. Also, the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh must play a more responsible role while dealing with the cases of abuse. Their responsibility does not simply end with giving the abused workers shelter or by sending them home. Instead, the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh should work in coordination with the Saudi authorities so that our workers' rights are not violated. Also, our embassy must help the workers in taking legal actions against their abusive employers.

# Most labour disputes in RMG

Industrial relations need improvement

A recent survey of disputes in the overall industrial sector during 2017 was unveiled on May Day by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS). The readymade garments (RMG) sector being the largest industrial sector employing 4.4 million people directly and 10 million indirectly recorded the largest number of disputes (91 out of a total 181). We find that nearly half the disputes (40 percent) have to do with unpaid wages and 25 percent is connected to rights and demands. Although the BGMEA has effective dispute resolution measures in place, they are in no way binding under law.

The problems arise primarily due to a lack of industrial relations between the owners and workers. Although trade unionisation is allowed in RMG sector, only an insignificant percentage of factories have trade unions. And those that exist do not function properly due to the fact that the leadership has not emerged from the grassroots RMG workers.

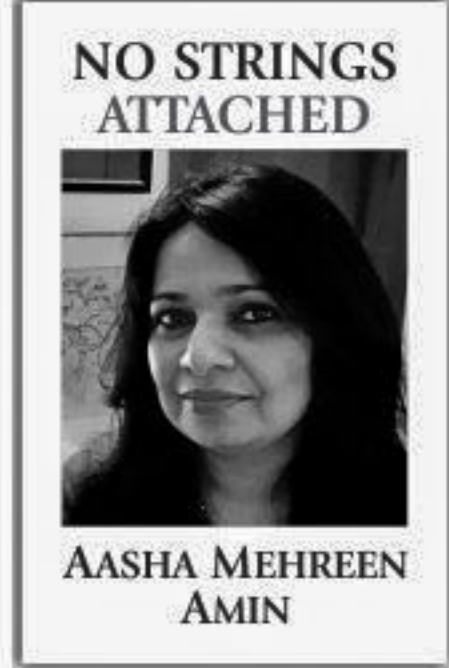
The government for its part can make the labour directorate more effective and implement labour law. Had the labour directorate been fully functional, it could serve as a platform for both owners and workers to resolve their problems peacefully, because as things stand now, any labour dispute inevitably spills on to the industrial estate resulting in property damage and closure of major highways that dents general economic activity in the country. We would like to see owners acting on their own and not under any external pressure to reduce some of the major anomalies that exist when it comes to settlement of wages on time.

The Daily Star would like to pay its respects to the 10 journalists who were killed while reporting in Afghanistan. Nine of them were killed in twin bombings in Kabul on Monday while the other was shot dead in a separate incident in the eastern province of Khost. The tragic deaths marked the deadliest day for journalists in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. These attacks are yet another reminder of the dangers that journalists face in the line of duty and the shrinking space for press freedom all around the world.

These are the names of the journalists who were killed: Shah Marai, Agence France-Press; Yar Mohammad Tokhi, Tolo News; Ahmad Shah, BBC Afghan service; Maharram Durrani, RFE/RL; Abadullah Hananzai, RFE/RL; Sabawoon Kakar, RFE/RL; Ghazi Rasuli, 1TV; Nawruz Ali Rajabi, 1TV; Salim Talash, Mashal TV; and Ali Salimi, Mashal TV.

## WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

# Surviving in a narrowing space



IT is hardly a new phenomenon to see how governments, especially in South Asia, claiming to be democratic to suit their convenience, become anything but that when it comes to dissenting views. Curbing press freedom, in particular, will always become the target for governments that have succumbed to insecurities of their own creation. Corruption of leaders or their cronies seems to be the topmost reason for state paranoia of the media which is seen as a thorn in the flesh rather than an essential component of democratic maturity.

Governments are often on the defensive and would rather hide the dirty laundry generated by wayward loyalists than have them let out to dry by pesky, persistent media. All kinds of tactics are used to intimidate and weaken the press. These include using draconian laws to arrest and incarcerate journalists for years on the grounds of defamation, sedition or hurting religious sentiments, maligning them in parliamentary sessions (where they are not present to defend themselves), threatening them through their state agencies or using more surreptitious means by withdrawing government advertisements, creating bureaucratic tangles that inevitably threaten to shut down a newspaper. Nationalistic rhetoric is also used to malign journalists to provoke public anger against them.

It begs the question: can independent journalism survive in this hostile environment? More importantly, how will such media gagging affect the democratic spirit?

One of the most cunning ways a state has tried to throttle press freedom is the way *Himal Southasian*, a 29-year-old publication from Nepal, known for its pioneering role in cross-border journalism, was forced to suspend its operation in 2016. Instead of directly censoring the magazine's content, the government of the time created impossible bureaucratic hurdles that drained *Himal*'s financial resources dry. The publication was dependent on external funding; it employed non-Nepali staff and had many contributors outside Nepal for its wide coverage of South Asian affairs. The state agencies concerned created inordinate delays for grants to be approved, refused to give work permits to non-Nepali staff and made it difficult for the magazine to pay its writers abroad. Finally, the arrest of Kanak Mani Dixit, *Himal*'s founding editor and Trust chairman, on dubious grounds of financial irregularities made the suspension inevitable. Fortunately, *Himal*, being one of the most popular

publications in South Asia, has made a dramatic comeback—albeit from Colombo where it will start publishing soon.

Despite having a long tradition of a free media—freer definitely compared to its neighbours—India, too, has experienced serious attacks on press freedom. There have been instances of the government trying to apply pressure on newspapers critical of the establishment by withdrawing advertisements for newspapers not falling in line. Sometimes owners of newspapers have been targeted by focusing on the other businesses they have and trying to dig up dirt on them.

India has, in fact, slipped down two ranks compared to last year in the Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières, RSF) World Press Freedom Index 2018. RSF is a global non-profit body that works on the freedom of the press. RSF, in its report states, “with Hindu nationalists trying to purge all manifestations of ‘anti-national’ thought



from the national debate, self-censorship is growing in the mainstream media and journalists are increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns by the most radical nationalists, who vilify them and even threaten physical reprisals.” RSF has also mentioned how the threat of prosecution with a serious enough crime as sedition (that carries a life term sentence) has led to increasing self-censorship. The killing of three journalists in India because of their work has added to the general unease amongst the journalist community.

Despite such drawbacks the Indian media has fought back and sometimes achieved small victories. The Modi government's attempt to blackmail journalists with removal of government accreditation if they wrote “fake” stories backfired because the media fraternity rose up in arms. The PM then pressed the Information and Broadcasting ministry to withdraw it which was a big boost for media freedom.

The recent virulent media criticism of the BJP government regarding the latter's initial role in handling the Kathua and Unnao rape cases in Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh also indicates that the media is more confident about expressing anti-establishment views than before.

Such confidence is on the wane in Pakistan where, despite the obvious solidarity among the journalist community, press freedom is constantly being muzzled by the state. On April 6, Geo TV, which has become increasingly critical of the military in the past few years, was taken off air and was not accessible in many parts of the country. In 2014, one of its anchors, Hamid Mir, was shot—an assassination attempt, he says, directly linked to the military security forces.

There have been instances, moreover, of media house managements dropping regular op-ed columns and removing online editions of published articles and anchors being asked not to do live shows.

The ongoing curbs on freedom of expression were protested through a statement circulated on April 19 signed by over a hundred Pakistani journalists, editors, columnists and media persons following another statement signed by prominent academics including Noam Chomsky.

In Bangladesh, press freedom has been heavily bashed by draconian laws. Section 57 of the ICT Act 2006, in particular, has been a journalist's most formidable opponent. Section 57 deals with defamation, hurting religious sentiments, causing deterioration of law and order and instigating against any person or organisation through publishing or transmitting any material in websites or in electronic form. It provides for punishment of a maximum of 14 years in prison. The ambiguous definition of what constitutes defamation can make anything published about an individual to be considered defamatory if that individual feels defamed by the

content. Already several journalists have been arrested and sent to jail while others have managed bail. The Digital Security Bill 2018, (waiting to be passed in parliament) apparently needed to fight cybercrime, has also very stringent provisions that can effectively make life hell for any journalist. It has incorporated the much criticised Section 57 (scrapped from the ICT Act 2006) which carries long jail sentences and heavy fines for offences that are vaguely defined. How does one determine, for instance, what “hurting religious sentiments” or “going against the spirit of the Liberation War” or “causing deterioration of law and order” is?

The journalist community has expressed their worry to the government and so far there is a sliver of hope. The Editors' Council has met with the law ministry expressing their concerns over section 21, 25, 28, 31, 32 and 43 of the proposed Act that would severely constrain freedom of speech and independent journalism; and the law minister has assured that the proposed law will be scrutinised to make sure that the act will not be used to target journalists.

The result of these restraints on press freedom, whether through laws or indirect pressures, has been increasing self-censorship all over South Asia which may get worse before it gets better. Election year is always a challenge for the media since this is the time when governments become especially edgy, slapping on laws to curb media freedoms, making it virtually impossible for journalists to freely report on things like corruption, politicisation of institutions, state intimidation of opposition—anything that is deemed to jeopardise a sure win in the polls.

For developing countries that have embraced democracy, at least in their constitutional framework, these shackles on the media are more than just embarrassing home truths exposed to the rest of the world. Without independent journalism being allowed to operate freely, development in the real sense will constantly be compromised. Without investigative reporting on corruption, for example, governments lose an important informant on ground realities regarding the millions spent on projects to alleviate poverty, to boost the education system and health sector, to make sure public institutions and infrastructure work. Without an efficient, effective watchdog, governments must work with dangerous blind spots and are therefore more vulnerable to national crises, inefficiency in development endeavours and failure to win public confidence. Choking the media amounts to taking away people's right to know the truth. It also silences their voice. Basically a death sentence for the democratic spirit.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

# Message to journalists and people



entertain, not to emphasise the trivial and the sentimental, not to simply 'give the public what it wants', but to inform, to arouse, to reflect, to state our dangers and our opportunities, to indicate our crises and our choices, to lead, mould, educate and sometimes even anger public opinion...so it is to the printing press—the recorder of man's deeds, the keeper of his conscience...that we look to for strength and assistance, confident that with your help, man will be what he was born to be: free and independent.”

— John F Kennedy

OVER the last two decades, if not more, the global press, if taken as a whole, has largely failed to live up to the lofty ideas and ideals talked about by former US President John F Kennedy and countless other visionaries who understood that “a critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy,” as Nelson Mandela said. That is why journalism and journalists around the world today face so much more danger, as it is through those failures that they have lost two of their most powerful allies—the truth, and a citizenry armed with the truth that understands that there can be no real freedom without truth, and no truth spoken, without a critical and independent press.

Take the case of the Iraq War for example. Wasn't it the press that told us the same lies about Iraq having Weapons of Mass Destruction as did the politicians? And while you could blame that on the western mainstream media, didn't most media outlets around the world also then

sing from the same song-sheet, without investigating?

Perhaps I am being a little too strong in my criticism. After all, except for a handful of western media houses, most media outlets in the world have huge resource constraints and therefore “have” to rely heavily on western news outlets and agencies (most owned by the same handful of corporations). But, then again, say that to the millions of dead Iraqis and the millions more in Iraq and other places who lost their homes and their loved ones, and see how they feel.

Despite that, investigative and independent journalism is not yet dead; far from it, in fact, as there are thousands

As the percentage of journalists who are courageous enough to be critical and not conform dwindle, the threat to silencing their voices is daily becoming more pressing.

of incredible and principled journalists who are challenging propaganda and lies around the world, as well as some of the most powerful individuals, governments and organisations in the world, whose interest it is in to keep people divided and in the dark. Although, as the percentage of journalists who are courageous enough to be critical and not conform dwindle, the threat to silencing their voices is daily becoming more pressing.

Take for example Julian Assange, who has been silenced for over a month now with no communications allowed with the outside world—whose voice is so powerful that even the great Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, said this of him: “He not only is one of the few authentic heroes of

our time, he also has shown to all of us how to be a hero today, that it is possible to be a hero today.” But regardless of how one feels about Assange, the fact remains that Wikileaks is the only news outlet in the world that has a 100 percent record for accuracy for over 10 years which is unheard of. And here is another major problem that we, as a global society, have today—our obsession with the messenger, all the while overlooking the more (if not only) important message.

But the reason I mentioned Assange is because he is one of the biggest names in the media industry in the world today. And the fact that he has been silenced shows the incredible censorship and pressure that is being exerted on journalists and publishers by powerful quarters across the board, any and every time they refuse to toe the line.

And that silencing is oftentimes done through more than just censorship and pressure alone—as the Committee to Protect Journalists recorded, 48 journalists were killed in 2017 and 530 were killed between 2012 and 2016, according to Unesco. In February, *The Washington Post* reported that, “Last year was the most dangerous year ever for journalists...a record number were imprisoned and threats against the press seemingly have become common, even in the West.”

Among those killed in 2017 was Daphne Caruana Galizia, a Maltese journalist who specialised in reporting on government corruption, nepotism, money laundering, links between Malta's online gambling industry and organised crime, etc. Suspecting that she was murdered (by car bomb) to suppress some serious wrongdoing she had discovered, an international consortium of 45 journalists from 18 news organisations, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde* and the *Times of Malta*, began working on the *Daphne Project* in an effort to complete her investigative work. The published findings of their investigation began with this message of defiance, “Even if you succeed in stopping a single messenger, you will not

stop the message.”

At a time when there is so much pressure on the press, the *Daphne Project* should give journalists a lesson of revolutionary proportions. That is, with the attempt to censor the press increasing internationally and the threat to journalists becoming a global phenomenon, it is time for journalists to stand together both domestically and internationally.

It is time for journalists to realise that those who wish to silence the messenger are actually much more concerned about suppressing the message. And if there is unity among journalists and media outlets, the threat of the “Streisand effect”—whereby an attempt to hide, remove, or censor a piece of information has the unintended consequence of publicising the information more widely—along with the possibility of more journalists investigating the information that powerful quarters wish to keep hidden, should they come after the messenger, would surely act as one of the strongest safety nets for all messengers and, more importantly, all messages.

People, on the other hand, need to realise that they too must support independent journalism and the right to free speech and expression for everyone. They need to realise that when they tolerate the suppression of one person's (or outlet's) right to free speech, that leaves one less voice to speak up for them, should their right ever come under attack. What people should also realise is that the attack on the press today is also an attack on free speech/expression itself—the only process by which we can ever hope to discover the truth that we, as individuals, and as a collective, are looking for.

That search must continue because true to what Assange said, “You can't build a skyscraper out of plasticine, and you can't build a just civilisation out of ignorance and lies.”

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is: @EreshOmarJamal