

## Extortion on highways out of control

### Who will look after public interest?

It is not every day we find a state minister lay bare what has been public knowledge for long—that there is rampant and uncontrolled extortion on the highways. It is not only the police that are to blame. Rather, the finger has been pointed at a federation of transport workers that is headed by a powerful minister.

What is interesting to note is that there has even been talk about legalising extortion in the transport sector in a bid to control how much each transport may pay nationwide. Besides such activity being totally illegal, this is hardly any way to combat the ad-hoc toll collection by various parties including alleged involvement of law enforcers who are supposed to maintain the law on the highways instead of being party to the unlawful activity.

With rampant extortion by various bodies comes the problem of overcharging both commuters on buses and driving up transport costs for parties that need to move goods between districts. At the end of the day, it is the general public who are forced to bear the costs of these “extra” fees that are levied on transports. As these illicit transactions are being enforced through organisations of owners and workers, headed by powerful lawmakers and their cronies on the one hand and a section of law enforcers on the other, what hope is there for reprieve from extortion?

We have been highlighting these issues for years. Now that we have the blunt admission by a policymaker, who also happens to run a transport business, of the magnitude of the problem, only a political decision at the highest level can rectify the problem. The question is: does the political will exist?

## CNG-driven vehicles a veritable deathtrap

### Authorities must exercise strict supervision

It is unfortunate that three members of a family were killed and four others were injured in a microbus CNG cylinder blast in Tangail last Tuesday. According to our report, when the microbus was passing a speed breaker without lowering the speed, one of its two gas cylinders exploded and the vehicle caught fire, resulting in the deaths.

Now, the questions that naturally arise are: Did the vehicle have the necessary fitness certificate to be on the road in the first place? Why were there two cylinders in the microbus instead of one? Were the cylinders in the vehicle being used past their expiry dates? Also, who is the authority to check if these gas cylinders are in serviceable condition?

It is common knowledge that when it comes to using CNG cylinders in vehicles, the users must take some precautions. Special care needs to be taken for proper maintenance, replacement and disposal of these pressurised cylinders. So it is important to know the useful life of a CNG cylinder and strictly follow the recommended replacement times. But these things are hardly checked by the authorities. Many vehicle owners install low-quality cylinders in the cars only for cutting the cost. These vehicles are like mobile bombs that can explode anytime, if strict oversight is not ensured on the use of the CNG in transport. In this particular case, the owner of the vehicle and the driver must be held accountable for not taking the needed precautions and also for installing two gas cylinders instead of one.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Attack on quota protesters

The right to protest is enshrined in our Constitution. Yet, when university students took to the streets to demand reform of the quota system, they have been slandered, and then beaten and pushed out by activists belonging to ruling party affiliated organisations. Many of the protesters were brutally beaten, one even with hammer, while the university administration remained silent or hostile. Finally, the ruling party activists even harassed university teachers who expressed solidarity with protesters. It was disappointing to see many had to suffer so much for exercising their rights protected by the Constitution.

Mohammad Mehedi Hasan  
East West University

### Protect native fish species

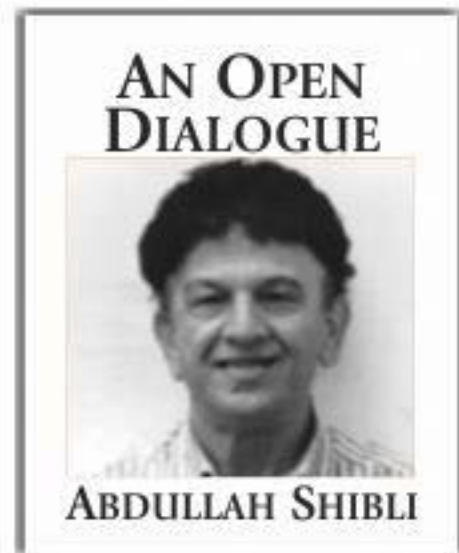
The availability of native fish like *koi*, *puti*, *mola-dhela*, *shol*, *magur*, *shing*, *chitol*, *gozar*, etc. in natural water bodies is decreasing day by day. These fish are not usually seen in the market.

With the rise of population, the demand for fish has increased. Therefore, farmers focus on exotic fish species. Similarly, the number of rivers, canals, haors, ponds, floodplains and bils is gradually decreasing, while climate change is causing an increase in salinity in water in some areas. Other factors include increasing water pollution, and the lack of research to preserve and protect native fish.

Native fish is richer in nutrition, quality and taste. We should take steps to save these species. We need to sanction extensive studies to explore their commercial viability and rescue water bodies to save native fish from extinction.

Md. Mehefuzul Islam, By e-mail

# The Trump and Putin Show



**AN OPEN DIALOGUE**  
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

PRESIDENT Donald Trump of the USA and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin met in Helsinki, the capital of Finland on July 16. This was the first summit between the heads of state of the two superpowers since July 2010 when President Obama met Russia's Medvedev in Washington. As soon as the White House announced the Trump-Putin summit on June 27, the American President had been endlessly cautioned by all sorts of political pundits, both on the left as well as the right, to take a cautious approach to President Putin, or even cancel the meeting. And the chorus against the summit got stronger after July 13 when the US Department of Justice announced that 12 Russian intelligence officials were indicted for their role in interfering with the US presidential elections in 2016.

But this only made Trump even more determined to keep his promise to get together with Putin. Whether the outcome of this historic meeting was worth the risk for Donald Trump will be debated in the coming months, but for disinterested onlookers like myself, two major issues were clarified: Donald Trump does not believe that Russian intelligence officers played any role in his election victory, and President Putin does not trust Donald Trump even though he publicly admitted at the press conference after the summit that he had favoured Trump over Clinton. When asked if he wanted Trump to win, Putin said without any hesitation, “Yes, I wanted him to win because he talked about normalising Russian-American relations.” One could speculate whether future historians might be tempted to say, to paraphrase Charles Dickens, it was the “best of times” for US-Russian relationship, or the worst of times!

The anti-Putin camp in the US and EU had some serious misgivings about President Trump meeting with the Russian strongman for many reasons which stretch from Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's interference in eastern Ukraine and Syria, and all the misdeeds during the US presidential elections that have been attributed to Russian intelligence. Russia is still considered a pariah in the international community and some very strong economic sanctions against it are still in place. But, Trump apparently saw no harm in reaching out to Putin with whom he shares many common traits. Most importantly they had common election slogans of making their respective countries great again.

However, Putin's “Make Russia Great Again” movement has sputtered and stalled in recent years, thanks to some misguided policies in Ukraine and the Middle East, but with the election of Trump in 2016, the tide is turning in Russia's favour. In recent months, the rise in the price of crude oil (Russia's principal export), Trump's open support for Russia at the G7 conference in Charlevoix, Canada in June, and most recently the call by Italy (an EU member) to end the sanctions against Russia, have signalled to Putin that better times are yet to come.

In the aftermath of the Helsinki summit, the Western press has almost unanimously declared Putin as the victor even though more reasoned elements in diplomatic circles have lauded the two leaders for reducing tensions between



US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin prepare to speak at a joint press conference in Helsinki, Finland.

PHOTO: GRIGORY DUKOR/REUTERS

these superpowers which could only benefit the rest of the world. As expected, some of the harshest criticisms of Trump and his performance at the summit have come from members of his own party including Sen John McCain, who pulled no punches when he said, “The damage inflicted by President Trump's naiveté, egotism, false equivalence, and sympathy for autocrats is difficult to calculate. But it is clear that the summit in Helsinki was a tragic mistake.” Others have accused him of committing treason after he publicly disavowed special counsel Mueller's findings regarding the role of Russia in US elections.

I will concede though that President Trump, ironically might be sowing the seeds of his own downfall by his whimsical style, inconsistencies, and disregard for norms of presidential

behaviour. During this trip, which started with the NATO summit in Brussels, he criticised the US allies for not sharing the burden of the NATO defence budget. He then criticised Germany for not spending enough on defence and building the Nord Stream II pipeline to Russia. According to him, Germany is “totally controlled by Russia because it gets 60 to 70 percent of their energy from Russia.” These figures have been contested by many, but this rebuke sounded hollow in view of the camaraderie displayed by the two leaders only a few days later in Helsinki.

The press conference after the summit provided some hilarious moments too. Trump was asked by an American journalist who he believed—US intelligence or Putin—regarding the Russian interference in US elections. “I

disarray. Three of the major hypotheses leading up to the summit still remain just speculations. These are:

Hypothesis 1: Putin is very wily and Trump is naïve. Putin will extract some concessions from Trump, possibly withdrawal of sanctions or complete control over Syria, without any quid pro quo.

Hypothesis 2: No records are kept. Some media commentators had expressed their belief that Putin does understand English, and will make a fool of Trump.

Hypothesis 3: Putin has more than a decade of experience in statecraft, and will be able to draw on his experience and knowledge to outmanoeuvre Trump who has only business experience but no understanding of world politics.

In defence of President Trump, I will

# 'JOBLESS GROWTH' IN BANGLADESH

## A myth or reality?

MUSTAFA K MUJERI

ALTHOUGH a large population is traditionally seen as a bottleneck for rapid growth in a country like Bangladesh, recent development literature highlights two-way positive interactions between population and economic growth, especially in terms of its changing age structure. Changes in age structure lead to decline in dependency ratio which favours higher economic growth if supportive policies enhance employability prospects of the labour force.

The initial decline in dependency ratio starts with a demographic transition from high to low birth and death rates which results in demographic dividend for the economy that continues until the share of working-age population reaches its peak.

Afterwards, the dependency ratio starts rising due to aging that is, increasing proportion of people who are 65-plus which raises the old-age dependency ratio. During this phase of population dynamics, a country can reap a second demographic dividend over an infinite time horizon if high income levels can be maintained and people accumulate adequate savings and assets for their retirement. However, the benefits of these demographic dynamics can only be realised if human capital can play its due role in economic growth and development.

How has the dependency ratio changed over time in Bangladesh? Between 1950 and 2010, the country's total dependency ratio fell by 24 percentage points from 82.3 to 58.3 percent which is entirely due to fall in child dependency ratio (which fell by 24.4 percent). On the other hand, the period experienced a minor increase in old-age dependency ratio. This shows that Bangladesh is currently passing through a period of demographic dividend.

The projections show that Bangladesh will continue to experience a continuously falling, albeit gradual, child dependency ratio to reach 25.6 percent in 2050 from 50.8 percent in 2010 while old-age dependency ratio will face a

rising trend to move to 23.1 percent in 2050 from 7.4 percent in 2010. As a result, total dependency ratio will decline to 48.7 percent in 2050 from 58.3 percent in 2010.

In the case of working-age population, the number rose from 17.9 million (54.8 percent of total population) in 1950 to 83.5 million (63.2 percent of total population) in 2010 and is projected to reach its peak of 137 million (69.5 percent of total population) in 2040.

The above shows that the size of the country's labour force will increase by nearly 53 million between 2010 and 2050 which gives a wide window of opportunities for Bangladesh to raise economic growth by developing the human capital of the young children of today who would join the labour force over the next two decades.

The policy choice is clear: Bangladesh must implement required measures to create a workforce with highly skilled labour before its population starts to age mid-21st century, when a different set of problems would emerge for the Bangladesh economy.

No doubt, job creation is one of the main concerns of the policymakers in Bangladesh today. According to a recent World Bank study, working-age population will increase by 170,000 every month in Bangladesh; and to keep employment rates constant, 1.1 million additional jobs would be needed every year. The 2016-17 LFS shows that the total number of labour force increased from 56.7 million in 2010 to 63.5 million in 2017—an increase by 6.8 million in seven years or nearly by one million each year. According to LFS, the number of employed persons rose by 6.7 million between 2010 and 2017 or by about 0.96 million on average every year.

Informality is a key feature of employment in the labour market. Overall, informal employment dominates; with the incidence of informal employment slightly declining from 87.5 percent in 2010 to 85.1 percent in 2017.

From the policy perspective, one needs to distinguish between shorter and

longer term effects of economic growth in the labour market. In the short-term, growth can raise employment rate with greater labour demand. On the other hand, growth can reduce employment rate in the longer term, as with rising incomes and living standards, households acquire the ability to keep their children longer in education prior to entering the labour force. The labour market characteristics and available information point out that the relationship between employment and economic growth is somewhat weak in Bangladesh as in most developing countries.

Evidence on longer term relationship between economic growth and employment rates across countries with different levels of per capita income suggests a U-shaped curve. In low-income countries, very high employment rates persist where people, both women and men, start working at younger age, and cannot afford to remain unemployed or retired at a later stage.

According to available research, employment rate in terms of income per capita is much below the predicted level in Bangladesh. And this is entirely due to women working less than in other countries. The labour force participation rates for males and females differ widely in Bangladesh: 82.5 percent and 36 percent respectively in 2010 which changed slightly to 80.5 percent and 36.3 percent respectively in 2017.

The policy focus has to highlight the issues of 85 percent of the workforce who are employed in the informal sector. The priority issues are: how to ensure decent employment to this great majority of the labour force and how to raise their earnings within their present job statuses if they have no choice but to remain there.

The analysis shows that employment does respond to economic growth in the short-term, implying that growth is not jobless in Bangladesh. It also shows that Bangladesh has created a significant number of jobs over the years. However, the nature of the jobs created is not fully satisfactory as most jobs are low skill-

intensive, low-paid, and belong mostly to the informal economy. This shows that rapid growth alone will not be sufficient to create more and better jobs; there has to be a focus on policies that can boost quality job creation. Further, a continuous decline in employment elasticity of growth seems to be happening in Bangladesh which needs greater policy attention.

At present, major challenges of Bangladesh's labour market relate to two aspects—employability and inequity—that significantly undermine the development potential of the economy and its transition to a higher growth trajectory. While the short-term responses to these challenges require adoption of both formal and non-formal vocational, technical and skill-based education and training for wage employment and/or self-employment of the labour force, the medium- or long-term strategy involves appropriate adjustments in the country's education and health systems with emphasis on early childhood education and healthcare. For graduating to a knowledge-based economy in the medium- to long-term, what is important for Bangladesh is to effect major changes in its education and healthcare systems to effectively reap its demographic dividends.

While the government has put emphasis on expanding pre-primary education along with primary education for all, the approach should also enhance the quality and equity aspects of education and incorporate the comprehensive elements of a successful skills development strategy covering the entire lifecycle of the future labour force. The central role in the approach should be the development of soft skills, which needs to start at the pre-primary level. This requires close coordination between pre-primary schooling and child health initiatives, the two central pillars of early childhood development.

Mustafa K Mujeri is the executive director of Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development (InFM), an independent non-profit research and training institute, Bangladesh. Email: mujeri48@gmail.com