

Baffling case against road safety campaigner

Fighting for public interest can't be a crime

A person rooting for public interest was arrested, ostensibly on charges of "extortion" on Thursday. The extraordinary circumstances surrounding the case against Mozammel Hoque, the road safety campaigner and general secretary of a passenger welfare organisation, raise lots of questions.

Firstly, it is highly unusual for police to arrest a person at 3am regarding a case of extortion. According to Hoque's colleagues, police officers who arrested him admitted to acting upon instructions of the high-ups. Secondly, and most astonishingly, reports in this newspaper and a few others revealed that the "accuser" did not have any knowledge of filing the case. He is a mere lineman at a local bus stop, not a leader of a labour organisation, as the case referred him to be. He told reporters that he couldn't read or write and that he had signed on the dotted line as asked by local labour leaders without knowing its contents. Thus the merit of the case is seriously questioned.

The Jatri Kalyan Samity, Hoque's organisation, may have earned the wrath of powerful quarters by releasing periodical basic data on road accidents, that too based on media reports. Given the public mood about the ever-deteriorating road safety in the country, the Samity's accident compilation report may have embarrassed a few. But to trump up a case and snub a person, whose work may not go down well with some, is a gross violation of the law. What the Samity is doing is a public good, and rather than seeing it as an adversary, it should be utilised to make the roads safer. Isn't that the government's objective?

ICC's landmark ruling on Myanmar

Time to deliver justice to Rohingyas

THE International Criminal Court has asserted its jurisdiction to take cognisance of the crimes committed under its statute by the Myanmar military against the Rohingyas. This must be welcomed by all those who want to see the end of persecution of minorities in the world. In the case of the Rohingyas, they were brutalised to a degree that has come to be acknowledged as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" and the cruel security campaign against an ethnic minority was in clear violation of international law, which forced nearly a million of them to leave their country and their ancestral homes in northern Rakhine and seek refuge in Bangladesh.

The ruling is also an acknowledgment of the reality on the ground. The facts have been unearthed by several international agencies and there is little doubt that the atrocities by the Myanmar forces meet the description of genocide. The truth cannot be swept under the carpet and neither can international norms be disregarded through misrepresentation and obliquity, as Myanmar continues to do.

The ruling opens the avenue for initiating further investigation into the atrocities carried out by the Myanmar military and for calling them to account for the persecution of Rohingyas. The ICC should proceed from here, and all that is necessary must be done by other international agencies to put up an incontrovertible case against the Myanmar military junta to bring them, as well as the political leadership, for its complicity in the persecution of Rohingyas, to justice.

The Security Council must fulfil its duty towards the persecuted minority by referring Myanmar to the ICC. We implore all the members to rise above their petty national interests and realise that if a human tragedy such as that of the Rohingyas, perpetrated by human beings, goes unpunished, it will encourage similar treatment of minorities in other parts of the world in the future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The anonymous anti-Trump official isn't a hero

The world was taken aback by an anonymous op-ed penned by "a senior official" in the American administration published in *The New York Times* that describes how a bunch of administration officials, including the author him or herself, are actively working to derail President Donald Trump's divisive agendas.

This is quite a unique precedent.

However, it's also dangerous. No matter how unstable the president seems to be, he's the highest executive official of the country who has been elected directly by voters. The rogue officials inside the White House, on the other hand, were not.

If they genuinely believe that the president is unfit to lead, they should resign and denounce him openly, and even challenge him electorally. In trying to counteract his divisive agendas and dangerous impulses from within, they are in effect empowering conspiracy theorists who blame the "deep state" for all mishaps and misdeeds of the administration. The belief that unelected officials are actively disrupting an elected president will result in more division in society and mistrust towards democratic systems and institutions.

Naima Sadique, New York, USA

Welcome Higher Education Commission!

A step towards making Bangladeshi universities internationally competitive and conducive to research

AHMED ABDULLAH AZAD

RECENTLY the government took a significant step to transform the existing University Grants Commission (UGC) into an autonomous Higher Education Commission (HEC). This mostly went unnoticed by the print and electronic media. The Ministry of Education submitted a draft of the Higher Education Commission Law 2018 for approval to a joint committee of Secretaries which met on August 26 under the Chairmanship of the Cabinet Secretary. Article 4(1) of the proposed law states that as soon as the law is passed UGC will cease to exist and HEC will come into existence. Articles 4 to 10 provide clear details of the organisational setup, the composition of HEC and the role of the HEC Secretariat.

The stated overall intention of creating the new HEC is to improve the quality and scope of higher education and make it internationally competitive through appropriate curriculum development, support for Science and Technology (S&T), encouragement of research, and using high level training to prepare and equip the next generation to successfully meet the challenges of globalisation and contribute to Bangladesh's socioeconomic development. Article 11 outlines some measures that would be adopted to accomplish those objectives.

It is no secret that the international ranking of Bangladeshi universities, carried out by different global and regional ranking agencies, is dismal with only one Bangladeshi university making it into the 1001-1103 bracket of the latest Times Higher Education Ranking of world universities. To improve the international ranking and teaching standards, Article 11 asks the HEC to bring about congruity with the curriculum of high-ranking international universities and develop collaborations with reputed foreign universities. While we can always learn from the best, the need of the hour is to devise need-based curricula that help to remove the disconnect between "skilled" manpower currently being produced and what is required in the workplace now and over the long-term.

How we perform against the indicators used by different ranking organisations could indicate why our university rankings are so low. In the Times Higher Education ranking system, Teaching, Research and Citations (research influence) each constitutes 30 percent of the ranking points, while International Outlook accounts for 7.5 percent and Industry Income for 2.5 percent. While the top universities in Bangladesh have

an acceptable rating in terms of teaching environment, and international recognition is not too bad, the rating for research and research influence is very poor. Research capacity and productivity, and its relevance and impact together constitute about 65 percent of the ranking points. This very area is unfortunately the glaring weak point of Bangladeshi academia.

To address the need for strengthening postgraduate research and innovation in Bangladesh, a daylong roundtable meeting was held on April 22, 2017 at Dhaka University where practising scientists from academia, research organisations and industry had the opportunity to interact directly with senior policy makers including the minister of S&T, the VC and Deans of DU, and senior representatives of UGC, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC), Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), Department of Drug

Administration (DGDA) and industries. Some of the recommendations emanating from that meeting are summarised here.

The first recommendation was to upgrade the UGC to HEC which would have two separate operational sections: A Tertiary Teaching and Training Section and a Postgraduate Research and Innovation Section. The Tertiary Teaching and Training Section would carry out many of the activities of the existing UGC and other enhanced teaching and training activities of the new HEC, with a mandate to produce competent and skilled manpower, such as well-trained teachers for all levels of education; science-related technology, health and agriculture professionals; and management and administrative personnel for the public and private sectors.

The Postgraduate Research and Innovation Section would support postgraduate and postdoctoral research ini-

tially in selected advanced postgraduate research centres within established universities; create a large pool of doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships to provide a critical mass of fulltime researchers within Bangladesh; establish a well-funded merit-based research grant scheme to support high quality research in academia; encourage the rich pool of Non-Resident Bangladeshi (NRB) academics and researchers to help develop and support research capacity in Bangladesh, and mentor young Bangladeshi researchers; and institute an incentive scheme to encourage research excellence and reward scientists for outstanding research productivity.

The participants at the roundtable strongly felt that in consideration of the limited human, financial and technological resources, research in Bangladesh should focus initially on areas of highest national priority but should be funded at international levels. Such an initiative

would greatly benefit from a partnership between HEC and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), as the pooling of complementary human and technological resources would greatly enhance the quality and magnitude of priority research. It was recommended that the HEC, ideally in partnership with MOST, would establish a National Research and Innovation Council (NRIC) to coordinate, support and adequately fund research in areas of highest national priority.

It was recommended that the NRIC would have several responsibilities. Adequate funds for highest national priority research would be provided through a National Collaborative Research Program to multidisciplinary collaborations between academia and industry. A Platform for Contemporary and Cutting-Edge Technologies would be established as a National Core Facility to support world class research in

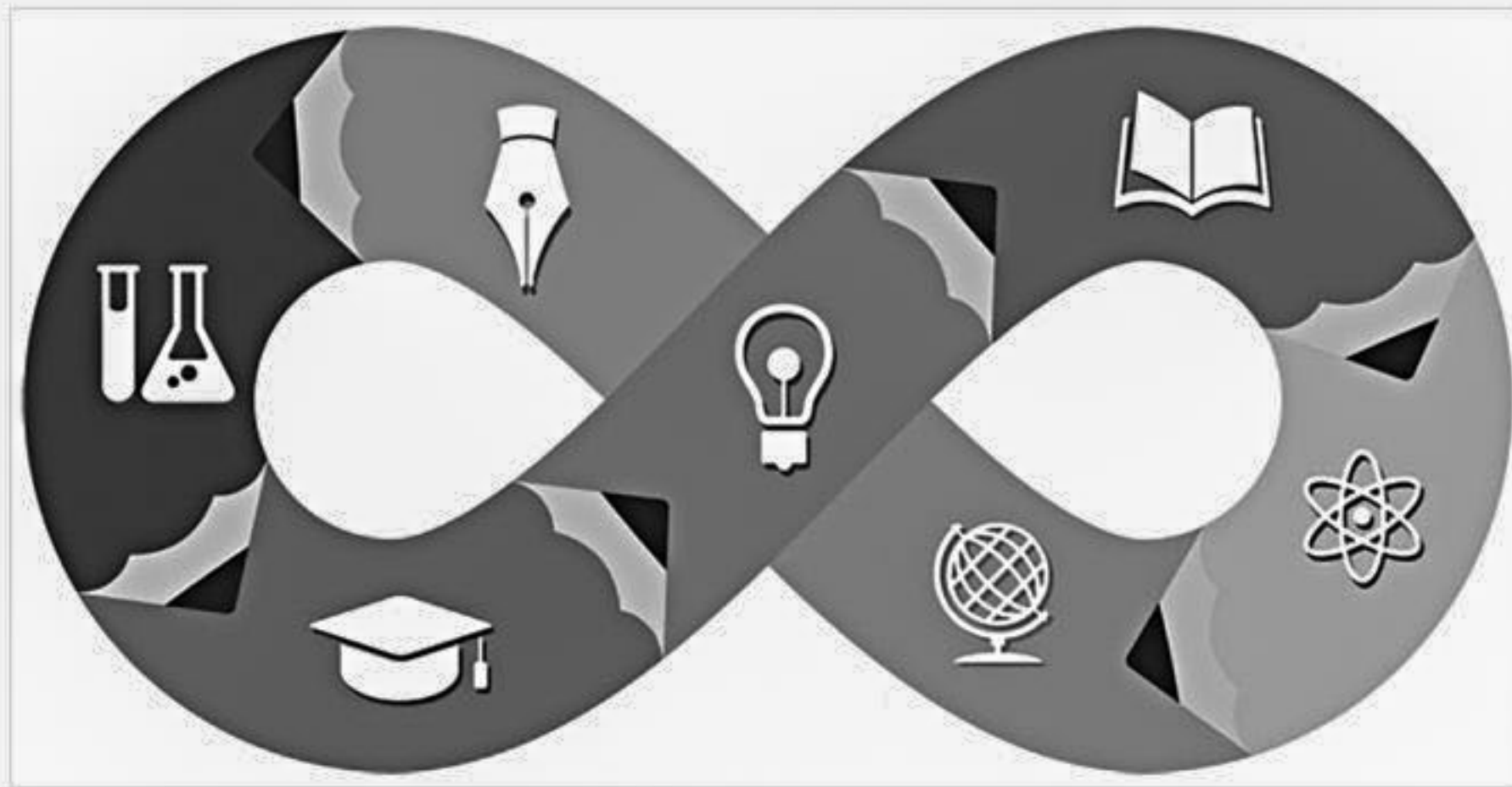
Bangladesh. A one-stop national Technology Transfer Office would be set up to support partnerships with industry and provide advice on matters related to IP (patents), regulatory guidelines and commercial contracts. Finally, an International Scientific Advisory Committee, consisting of resident and NRB experts of international standing from different scientific disciplines, would be constituted to assess and monitor all research-related and funding activities of NRIC and the Postgraduate Research and Innovation Section of HEC.

Internationally competitive higher education, innovative research and technological proficiency do not come cheap, but are indispensable for Bangladesh to meet its SDG and socioeconomic goals. Excellence in higher education is not possible without a strong foundation in primary and secondary education, and to become internationally competitive it needs to be underpinned by contemporary S&T. These objectives require that the current allocation of less than 13 percent of the annual budget to education be increased to the recommended 20 percent, and the allocation and about 0.4 percent of GDP to Research and Development (R&D) be increased to two percent or higher. Industries should be encouraged, through tax breaks and financial incentives, to fund a portion of the national R&D.

The upgrading of the UGC to HEC will be meaningless unless the current allocation for higher education (about one percent of annual budget) is substantially increased (to at least five percent) and allocated directly to the HEC to fund its enhanced activities. Coordinated support from relevant ministries would be very helpful. It bodes well that the secretaries of the Ministries of Education and Finance, and a Member of the Planning Division have been included as Members of HEC. But if S&T is needed to power the research engine that drives socioeconomic development, then why is there no representation from the Ministry of Science and Technology?

The academic and scientific communities welcome the new development and are appreciative of the Education Ministry and UGC for their initiative. They would be grateful to the HEC, and relevant policymakers, if they gave serious consideration to the above recommendations regarding the HEC and postgraduate research and innovation.

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Thinking outside the box

It's time to think about setting up a global fund to pay for loss and damage from climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE issue of loss and damage from climate change has been a politically sensitive topic in the negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as developed countries see it as opening the way for claiming compensation from them based on their liability.

However, there have been several breakthroughs on the issue including the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage set up at the 19th Conference of Parties (COP19) in Warsaw in 2009 and Article 8 on Loss and Damage in the Paris Agreement concluded at COP21 in Paris in 2015. Both these breakthroughs have allowed the discussion to move forward but the sticking point still remains: the inability of scientists to give clear positive attribution of climatic events to human-induced causes as well as the refusal of rich countries to consider financing loss and damage beyond providing insurance.

However, in the last few days, a scientific study on the actual death toll attributable to Hurricane Maria that hit Puerto Rico last year gave the number of people who died at nearly 3,000 instead of 64 as claimed by President Trump. These deaths as well as the massive damage from flooding associated with Hurricane Harvey that hit Houston have now been clearly attributed to elevated temperatures in the Caribbean which meant that both hurricanes were much more severe due to human-induced interference in the global atmosphere.

Subsequently, this year the heatwave that hit Japan and killed dozens of people followed by wildfires in Greece, Sweden and California have all been reliably attributed to human-induced climate change having already elevated the global atmospheric temperature by over one degree Centigrade.

Finally, the Special Report on 1.5 degrees by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which has been finalised and will be released in October has made it clear that our attempts to prevent loss and damage by mitigation and adaptation have not been successful and that loss and damage from climate change is now a present reality and not just something we need to prepare for in the future.

In preparation for COP24 to be held in Katowice, Poland in December this year, the UNFCCC has convened a special session in Bangkok, Thailand this week where this topic will be discussed.

Until now the only aspect of innovative finance for loss and damage that has been discussed under the UNFCCC has been insurance, particularly index-based insurance of which a number of pilot schemes have



PHOTO: DILIP ROY

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been set up in different regions.

However, despite the potential role of insurance in dealing with loss and damage from climate change, it has severe limitations, particularly when it comes to insuring the poorest in the most vulnerable countries, including Bangladesh.

Not only are the poorest not able to pay the premiums needed to get insurance but it is morally questionable to even ask them to do so when the problem is caused by the emissions of the rich.

Hence the time has now come to go well beyond insurance or even humanitarian assistance and think about setting up a global fund for loss and damage to enable rapid support to the victims of climate change that also goes beyond adaptation funding.

At the same time, it is also appropriate to think about innovative ways to apply the "polluter pays" principle to raise the funds for such a global fund for loss and damage.

There are already a number of existing models as well as new ideas that have been floated which should be examined carefully.

One existing model of applying the polluter pays principle is the scheme for oil spill damage compensation which is funded by all the oil tanker companies and which makes compensation payment for damage from oil spill regardless of who caused the oil spill.

Another way is to apply a levy such as the "French Solidarity" levy on air passengers which is used to fund

development assistance by France.

The Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group has also proposed an International Air Passenger Levy (IAPL) which could be used for the global fund for loss and damage.

There is a civil society proposal for a Carbon Levy on fossil fuel companies' profits which could easily raise a hundred billion dollars a year with only a small levy on the profits only of those companies.

Finally, there are opportunities to raise national-level funds to support loss and damage at the local and national level. The government of Bangladesh is contemplating setting up a National Mechanism on Loss and Damage which would include using the reserve funds of the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF). This would be set up as a two-year pilot to test different ways of funding compensation for loss and damage from climate change. Such a national loss and damage fund could then link with a global fund going forward.

I would argue that the time has now come to give serious consideration to setting up a global fund for loss and damage from climate change that goes beyond insurance, disaster preparedness and adaptation and raises funds by taxing polluters.

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