

## AL campaign rolls out

*So should the others'*

ALTHOUGH the election schedule has not been officially announced by the EC as yet, the ruling party campaign for the next general election has rolled out, literally on the rolling stock, with the first of its forays to the north of the country. This is a good sign since it shows that even after nearly 10 years of rule, and so much good that it claims it has delivered, the AL does not take the voters for granted.

We hope that the BNP would follow suit since it has so much to pick up after 10 years in near political wilderness and in somewhat organisational disarray, aggravated by the absence of its two senior leaders.

But for all the political parties to be able to conduct their campaigns, the government must ensure a healthy and safe environment for all with equal facilities. We cannot stress on this matter enough since various media reports show that the BNP party cadres and activists are on the run all over the country trying to escape the police, particularly from the time indication for the next election was made by the CEC in August. A level playing field is an indispensable precondition for a fair election, which the government is obligated to ensure. Election means freedom of choice, a form of freedom of expression, which the voters must be able to exercise without let or hindrance.

The next two months leading up to the election will see lots of political activities, and our wish is that they should not be a cause of public inconvenience like the train campaign of the AL was. While this mode of campaigning is nothing new, the AL plans ignored the matter of public convenience altogether.

## Stop spilling more Syrian blood

*Time to politically de-escalate the conflict*

SEVEN years into the devastating Syrian war, the international community remains still divided as experts fear a possible bloodbath in Idlib, the last stronghold of the Syrian armed opposition. The northwestern province bordering Turkey was one of the four "de-escalation zones" agreed to by Russia, Turkey and Iran in May 2017 during the fourth round of the Astana talks launched to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict. On September 7, another summit between the three countries disappointingly failed to produce a clear agreement, and a full-fledged offensive against the armed opposition now seems imminent.

According to international media reports, Syria and Russia have already carried out their most intensive air raids on rebel positions in Idlib. Meanwhile, the Russian government has for weeks now been warning of having received information which suggests that rebels are planning to launch a chemical weapons attack in Syria to escalate and draw other countries into the conflict. The US, on the other hand, has threatened unilateral action, including military, should the Syrian government continue attacking the rebels.

From what we have seen during the recent UN Security Council meetings, it seems obvious that all countries involved in the conflict are, in one way or another, looking to pursue their own geostrategic interests, ignoring completely the cost for Syria. In this deadly conflict, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have already lost their lives or their loved ones, while countless more have been displaced.

It is time for individual countries to recognise the sufferings that Syrians have had to endure, and to stop pursuing their own selfish geopolitical interest by spilling even more Syrian blood. Also important to remember is the risk of a larger conflict breaking out, should such aggressive posturing continue from different sides. The international community should, thus, urgently look for a political solution to the conflict, instead of escalating things further.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Prompt action needed to stop river erosion

River erosion in Bangladesh, a country both riparian and densely populous, often has devastating consequences. It makes people homeless overnight. Many lives are lost as well. At the Naria upazila in Shariatpur, the mighty Padma is currently swallowing village after village in a pattern that has started five-six years ago.

According to a report by *The Daily Star*, more than 4,000 families have lost their lands, homes and belongings over a period of just a few months, while many others remain vulnerable. Local officials say that an embankment will be built, but the work will commence in November. If the erosion continues in the current pace, the entire upazila may be consumed by the river by then.

We urge the authorities concerned to take some instant measures to prevent this erosion from spreading any further. Otherwise, this may adversely affect the entire southern economy.  
M. Soman, Dhaka University



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN RMG

# What's in store for Bangladesh?



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

AS I began to write down my thoughts on the topic of Artificial Intelligence (AI), I instinctively turned to the biggest AI engine: Google! Its powerful, AI-enabled search engine led me to the Deloitte Insights website. Interestingly, on the website itself, a neat little chatbot in the bottom corner of my screen (called Ask Scout)

prompted me to ask questions. It even listed a few suggested questions for me. I instinctively chose the first option it had suggested: What is Artificial Intelligence? And I got a prompt reply as well: "Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems that are able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. There is a distinction between artificial intelligence, a field with hazy conceptual boundaries, and the technologies that employ it, the cognitive technologies. These include machine learning, computer vision, speech recognition, natural language processing and robotics."

I turned to Amazon Alexa sitting near my study table and asked Alexa the same question through a voice command. Again, promptly came the reply.

It is this pervasive ability of AI that makes it a technology that is "real" and not just some "science fiction" stuff. Artificial Intelligence is already a big part of how we live and how we work.

There are concerns that as AI technology advances, it will make most human-filled jobs obsolete and make millions jobless. These fears are not completely baseless. In the past, several reports from ILO and such organisations as well as top media outlets made headlines like, "Robots are coming for our jobs", or "Automation will destroy jobs and we are not ready for it" etc.—which created alarm in the minds of most people.

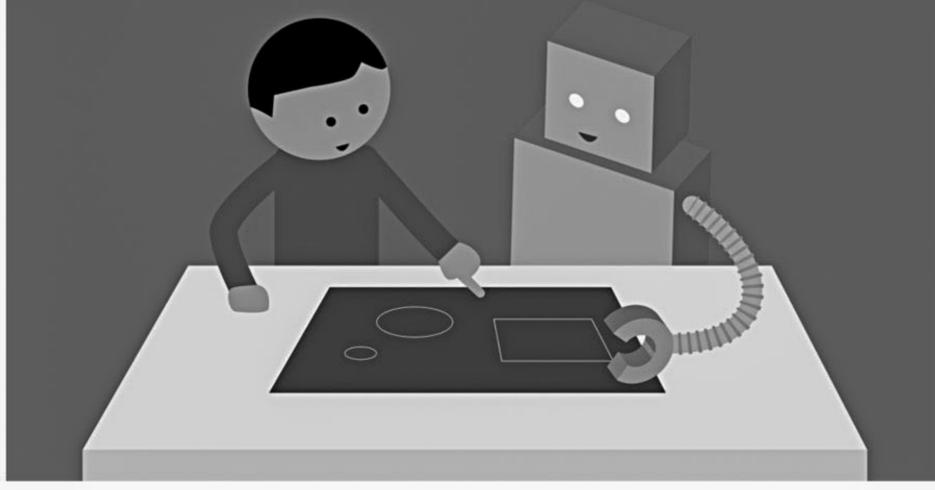
While these are valid concerns, one needs to take a well-rounded view of the entire picture. There may be another side to the story which has yet to make headlines. A deeper understanding and analysis are needed before we jump to any "scary" conclusions. Any new technological advancement, while it renders some jobs redundant, also brings in its wake new jobs that did not exist before. The question is whether the creation of new jobs will match the vanishing of old jobs and at what rate the new jobs will be filled up by "newly acquired skill sets" or "talent"—or if we will be able to keep pace with the "skill gap" and "training" required to acquire new skills.

Before we go into that discussion, let's first look at how AI is finding application in the apparel manufacturing world. Several functions and processes in textile and apparel industry make a strong case for AI application. AI's powerful vision and image recognition system can easily help in identifying and grading textile fibres. Identification of fabric defects can be done much faster and more accurately using AI. In terms of the most important element of design "colour", AI can enable an accurate prediction of dye recipe, process control during dyeing, automated dispensing of dyes and even in final colour evaluation. When it comes to garment manufacturing, AI can enable accurate performance during cutting, spreading and sewing. CAD and patternmaking, production planning and

control, shop floor control systems—all these can be performed at a much higher level of productivity and accuracy with AI technology.

On the buying side, AI can help predict trends and customer preferences. Many such applications are already in use by major online retailers. As you make a purchase on Amazon, it predicts and suggests products that you may be interested in buying based on data from your previous buying patterns, thus creating a personalised shopping experience. For merchandisers and product designers, AI helps to predict what is trending and what customer preferences are in terms of colour, design, size, price points, etc.

There is undeniably a case for AI and its application in the apparel industry. There is also evidence that AI application and automation will make a lot of jobs done by humans redundant. Will the transformation to new technologies only take away jobs, and not create new ones?



Let's take a closer look at what the data sources tell us. Recent reports from reputed consulting firms like Deloitte and Cognizant suggest that AI and automation will create many more new jobs that did not exist before. Cognizant goes on to predict 21 new job types that the new technology will bring forth. A Gartner report says that AI will generate 2.3 million jobs, exceeding the 1.8 million that it will remove.

AI needs humans to train it. Cobots and Robots will require humans to make sure that they work smoothly. Some of the new job titles that will emerge are likely to be "bot trainer", "bot farmer", "bot curator". The low-level repetitive tasks will be done far more productively and accurately by AI and machines. Higher-order skill jobs will continue to be performed by humans.

Technology like AI and automation will augment human capability. It will not replace them. It will not compete with them. Rather, it will complement them. Jobs that machines will take over are those that are better performed by machines—precision, coordination, rate control, strength, repetitive tasks, scalable data processing, etc. Humans will still be needed to support the machines to do their jobs by performing the higher-

order skilled tasks—problem solving, selective attention, critical thinking, handling ambiguity, judgment, empathy, etc.

In the context of apparel manufacturing, for example, the need to run the control software of the automation equipment and robotics can create more high-wage jobs compared with the existing low-wage manufacturing jobs. Hence, the workers can acquire these skills and earn high wages.

Newer skill-sets would need to be acquired to fulfil the roles in the new way of working in which AI and machines will be assisted by humans. There will be an increasing need for technicians, machinists, digital patternmakers, digital product simulation experts and machine and robot programmers, while the workforce will need to be equipped with new skills such as preventive maintenance of machines, technical troubleshooting and supervision of machines.

The need of the hour, therefore, is to relook at how

we as an industry approach AI and automation. One view is to approach it from the negative side in terms of job loss, costs of automation vs low-skilled labour cost advantage. The other view is to look at the positive side of embracing technology in terms of total value added to the end customer, redesigning the job roles and upskilling the existing workforce to take up higher-level roles and hence get high-paid jobs.

The world is moving towards further technological advancement and we need to keep in step with it. We should not approach digital technology as a threat but rather as an opportunity for progress and growth. The entire apparel industry of Bangladesh and the nation can move to the next level of prosperity if we rise to the occasion. Let's not get stuck in the vicious cycle of being a nation known for "low-paid, low-skilled" work, but rather move up the value chain and provide higher value to the end customers and demand a high pay for a higher level of skills. Let's work towards re-training our existing workforce for the future skills.

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# In Asia, the future is female

SRI MULYANI INDRAMATI and ANNE-BIRGITTE ALBRECHTSEN

ASIA is a powerhouse of growth in the global economy. From the 1980s onwards, economic development across the region has lifted millions out of poverty and doubled Asia's share of the world economy. However, signs are there that things are moderating.

Growth in China and India is no longer in double digits, many countries have to face the challenge of the middle-income trap, and those at the highest levels of income have tried hard to further boost their annual GDP growth. Add this to the challenge of climate change, ageing populations and increasing inequalities across the region.

Politicians, policymakers and pundits have debated what's driving this trend in detail. Yet to us, pinpointing

2025. That's the output of an economy the size of Japan being lost every single year.

For Asia, now is the time to invest in women and girls, to break down the barriers that stand in the way of their—and the region's—economic success. There are so many things we need to do, but we want to call out just three of the biggest issues that business, governments and civil society must get behind.

The first is challenging and changing everything in Asian societies that keeps women and girls from reaching their full potential in the workforce.

We need to upend the gender norms that mean women take on the bulk of unpaid labour and care work. This can limit their options for career progression or see them stuck in low-paid sectors of the economy that are also vulnerable to replacement by automation and advances in machinery.

(STEM) are only for boys and men. Families also fear the Internet will expose their daughters to harassment and exploitation online. This is the second thing that needs to change. We must make smart investments in the future generation of workers by equipping girls with the skills, means and capacities they need not only to succeed in, but also to drive, these growth sectors of the future economy.

**Skills and role models**  
Governments must invest more in ensuring that digital skills as well as information and communications technology (ICT) courses are integrated throughout all stages of education and are equally accessible to both girls and boys. Educational resources should focus on e-learning so that young people actively use technologies as they learn and improve ICT skills across the board. All education and training resources should be gender-sensitive to ensure they don't perpetuate discriminatory norms by, for instance, using all-male examples.

The private sector should offer apprenticeships and vocational skills training to nurture the talents of young women, including those who might not have had access to a more traditional educational background. This will allow girls and young women to have greater exposure to the opportunities available in digital and STEM industries and facilitate their transition into work.

More female teachers need to be trained and employed in digital learning centres to create a more equitable and safe learning environment for girls. Governments and Internet companies should also commit to protecting and enhancing women's online rights and privacy, and to combating the harassment of women and girls online.

The final thing we need to do is ensure girls have the right role models and mentors so they can really be the ones leading the way.

If girls see more women in positions of leadership either in the boardroom, in senior management or in elected offices, this starts to challenge the preconceptions of the types of jobs that girls should aspire to. The private sector can do a lot more to address this issue by expanding opportunities for women to succeed in their companies.

This should not be limited to gender quotas in the boardroom, but also create mentoring schemes to nurture future talent, to support and influence personal development and career aspirations and break down some of the occupational stereotypes that dictate the career choices of girls and boys.

Female mentors in particular will help to drive this change. We don't just want girls to get good jobs, we want them to be the ones creating new jobs—inventing new ideas, building new tech start-ups into big business, becoming the upcoming leaders of the future Asian economy.

This month in Hanoi, we are co-chairing the World Economic Forum on ASEAN. Our message for public officials, business leaders, civil society and educational institutions is clear. In Asia, the future is female.

Sri Mulyani Indrawati is the finance minister of Indonesia. Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen is the CEO of Plan International. Copyright: The Straits Times/Asia News Network



PHOTO: LONDON GRACE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL (LGIS)

**Governments must invest more in ensuring that digital skills as well as ICT courses are integrated throughout all stages of education and are equally accessible to both girls and boys.**

the source of the issue is simple. Asia has a vast, powerful and dynamic driver of growth that is largely untapped: the extraordinary potential of its women and girls.

According to the Asian Development Bank, currently less than half of women in Asia are in the workforce compared with 80 percent of men. Furthermore, for the women who do work, they are paid almost 25 percent less than their male counterparts. The International Labour Organization found that positions of leadership in the economy, the top management jobs, are occupied by women in only one in three cases.

**Cost of gender disparity**  
It is the deep, unjust gender disparity that is holding Asia back. The risk is so great that McKinsey had estimated that if nothing is done, the global economy stands to lose about USD 4.5 trillion in annual GDP by

**Culture of fear**  
We must also end the culture of fear for girls in Asia's cities. Part of this is changing attitudes, but it's also about building more safety infrastructure. In an era of increased urbanisation, with girls and young women in cities having more opportunities for work and education than ever before, it is intolerable that they cannot leave their homes without fear of harassment, abuse or exploitation.

Asia's high-value potential growth sectors are in digital, technology and electronics. It is, therefore, imperative that digitisation of the economy becomes truly transformative and inclusive for all.

Not only are digital and technological industries male-dominated, but there is also an entrenched bias throughout a child's education that subjects related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics