

Crack down on kilns near farmlands and habitation

Authorities cannot continue to turn a blind eye

IN a report published in this newspaper on Wednesday, we reported how toxic gas emitted from a brick kiln in Faridpur Sadar upazila is damaging ripe paddy on nearly 10 acres of land. The emissions from the kiln, which started operation in 2017, have burned paddy fields and reduced the yield of paddy according to locals. Yet, despite complaints from farmers to the DC and the environment department, little has been done, and the owner of the kiln has been able to continue with its operation.

Furthermore, according to the Faridpur environment department's own admission, no environment certificate has been given to the kiln. Why is the kiln in operation despite the DC's assurances to the farmers that steps would be taken, and the environment department saying that the district administration is free to do so? On what grounds is the general manager of the kiln claiming that no toxicity has been found in the area? We have in the past reported how the proliferation of illegal kilns in rural areas of Bangladesh is damaging the fertility of farmlands and polluting the environment. In most cases, owners are politically influential, and therefore free to continue. A common pattern that can be seen is the indifference of the authorities despite complaints from locals.

In this particular case, we cannot say for certain if the inaction on the part of the administration has been one of negligence or of willingly turning a blind eye. In either case, the farmers whose crops are being damaged deserve reparation for their loss. The ill-effects on health and crops of these kilns set up near farmlands or villages are a serious concern and the authorities need to start treating them as such.

Is Bangladesh lagging behind in competitiveness?

Nagging problems have not been addressed

IN the latest edition of Geneva-based World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Competitive Index (GCI), Bangladesh has slipped a notch and has been ranked 103rd out of 140 economies covered. This year the GCI was prepared using a new methodology and applied globally. Last year, the country ranked 99 out of 137 countries (using the old method). This year three new countries have been added to the Index. We have scored badly in nine out of the 12 indicators and the two poorest scores were in business dynamism and product market development.

As the study points out, we are lagging behind South Asian countries in these two areas. Indeed, Bangladesh is trailing other South Asian countries in institutions, skills, labour market, financial system and business dynamism (India ranked highest at 58, Sri Lanka came 86th and Pakistan 107th). Though we have taken steps to ensure better macroeconomic stability, health and ICT adoption, corruption remains one of the biggest hindrances to doing business in Bangladesh, which is followed by inadequate infrastructure and inefficient bureaucracy.

Although corruption has always loomed large in our ranking, we are now experiencing other problems, i.e. access to finance and policy instability. Weak institutions and poor regulatory implementation have resulted in poor performance of the financial sector. These are but some of the more pressing issues that require attention if we want to improve our score in the GCI. We need to get a move on with our economic zones, which, if commissioned on time, could prove to be game-changers for us. Furthermore, Bangladesh needs to prioritise skills development as a means to upgrading its vast, but largely unskilled labour force to become more productive. There is no alternative to overhauling public institutions to make them more efficient and accountable. In this competitive world, Bangladesh cannot be left behind and must move to overcome these nagging problems.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Skilled workforce will pay off

For a country like Bangladesh, human capital can be the main driving force for economic development and prosperity. According to the UNDP, the working age population constitutes 66 percent of the entire population of Bangladesh. By 2030, the share of working age population will increase to 70 percent. After that, it will gradually begin to decline.

Given this, now is clearly the time for us to properly utilise this immense potential before the window of opportunity begins to close. In order to do so, we must address the unemployment issues we currently have.

To utilise the vast number of people in our workforce, the government must help create more jobs along with the private sector. In addition, the government also needs to ensure high efficiency among the labour force by providing technical and vocational training to people.

Oadud Rahman, By e-mail

Deportation of Rohingya migrants from India

Possible ramifications for Bangladesh

**TASLIMA YASMIN**

ALMOST a year ago, the Indian government announced its plan to deport "all illegal immigrants" including approximately 40,000 Rohingya refugees estimated to be living across India. In August 2017 in a letter sent to each of the state governments, India's Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order to "identify and deport all illegal immigrants", including Rohingya refugees. The home ministry as well as leaders of the ruling BJP insisted that there were links between illegal migrants and threat to national security as they were perceived to be more vulnerable to potential recruitment by terrorist organisations.

Official statements were also made indicating clearly that for Rohingya refugees this plan would be executed even against those who were registered with the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). Thus for plans of deportation, all of the Rohingya refugees were predetermined to be "illegal migrants" despite facing heavy criticism both within and outside the country for blatantly ignoring the plight of those who had fled from fear of persecution and who as such were "refugees" and not illegal migrants.

A petition filed in 2017 challenging such deportation plan is still pending in the Indian Supreme Court. However, in October last year, hearing on the same petition in the Supreme Court Bench

Meanwhile, India's Supreme Court had rejected a petition seeking to stop the government from deporting the seven Rohingya men to Myanmar. This is notably one of the very first decisions of the newly appointed Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi.

headed by the former Chief Justice Dipak Misra said that although the problem of Rohingya refugees is of a "great magnitude", there is a need to strike a balance between human rights of the refugees and national security concerns. Despite such observation and strong criticism from rights groups, the Indian government had recently deported seven Rohingya refugees who were detained in Silchar Central Jail in Assam since 2012 for illegally entering India without

These are people who had fled from serious violations of human rights and persecution. Without any proper repatriation arrangement between the two countries the seven Rohingya men had been deported and that too without assessing how far the current political and human rights situation in Myanmar had been improved. Even the UNHCR had been denied access to assess these men's claim to international refugee protection. In an official statement

Myanmar government which could possibly indicate that the threat to persecution against the Rohingya community no longer exists in Myanmar. This can particularly be an area of serious concern for Bangladesh. Given that the threat of persecution against Rohingya community in Myanmar had not been removed this forcible return of 40,000 people to Myanmar would probably mean that they would again escape from Myanmar and seek refuge across borders in Bangladesh. In that case the pertinent question would be is Bangladesh prepared to host additional 40,000 Rohingyas within its territories?

This deportation in fact coincides with the latest publication of the NRC (National Register of Citizens) in Assam. Preparing this enormous task of draft NRC which had primarily delisted almost 4 million people from Indian citizenship was actually done under the order and supervision of the Indian Supreme Court. On a 2014 petition seeking to challenge section 6A of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1955, the Supreme Court had given such a direction. The 2014 petition challenges the special cut-off date of March 25, 1971 prescribed in section 6A for entry into Assam (after which an entry by any person will be considered illegal) and seeks a uniform cut-off date for the entirety of India. Since the petition challenging section 6A is still pending for hearing, if the Constitutional bench declares Section 6A to be unconstitutional, the entire process of NRC may become superfluous as then people who had entered Assam even before March 1971 can be considered illegal migrants.

Interestingly, the Supreme Court Bench which had in 2014 ordered for the updating of NRC was headed by Justice Ronjon Gogoi hailing from Assam who is currently the newly appointed Chief Justice. Justice Gogoi also happens to be heading the Bench which had dismissed the recent petition challenging the order of deportation of the seven Rohingya men. Appointment of Justice Gogoi as the new Chief Justice may or may not have had any role to play in changing the approach of the Indian judiciary towards illegal migrants and asylum issues. Nevertheless, the recent dismissal of the petition against deportation may be looked at as an early sign of how the petitions of asylum seekers may be viewed by the Indian Supreme Court in future.

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The shredding of Banksy's painting

ASM SHAHIDUL HAQUE

ON October 5, during an auction in London, a painting called "Girl With Balloon" by a famous yet mysterious British "graffiti" artist called "Banksy" was purchased by an unknown woman for USD 1.4 million which shredded itself (the shredder was hidden inside the frame) into pieces right after the sale, surprising the world. All spotlights are now on Banksy and his shredded piece of art. Everybody is trying to grasp the message behind this act. What was the reason for this arrogant show of disrespect towards a USD 1.4 million sale which was a record for Banksy's art?

One key feature of our global market economy is that the market needs to continuously provide new products and services to a wide range of consumers. There has to be continuous transactions, exchange of goods and services as money must change hands for the economy to stay vibrant. People have to work, produce, sell, earn, spend, purchase, consume, borrow and repay. The US used to be, and still is, the greatest example of free market economy, being one of the largest exporters, importers and economy in the world with the largest deficit.

People and organisations with massive wealth need exclusive products to invest in that have the potential to give unthinkable returns compared to ordinary financial instruments. One of these very highly priced products are paintings. There is a nexus of artists whose works are branded as "exceptional" by a well-controlled circle of "critics", some of their works are promoted as high quality "works of art" by these "critics" and their host organisations. People and organisations (e.g. international banks) with huge idle money usually purchase these during highly publicised auctions.

The shredding of "Girl With Balloon" by Banksy just at the precise moment of being sold forced people around the world to rethink the state of the artworld—whether positively or negatively.



Banksy's "Girl With Balloon".

One expert commented that "Banksy didn't destroy an artwork in the auction, he created one." Even Banksy himself wrote in the caption: "Going, going, gone..." when he posted an Instagram picture of shocked attendees watching the painting disintegrate. The Sotheby auction house was very innovative in naming the shredded piece left in the bin as "Love is in the Bin", and offered an authenticated certificate with the new title. Even the buyer wished to honour the purchase and collect the shredded piece saying it is "my own piece of art history". It was a business success despite the extraordinary act of destruction. All was managed well and there is potential for the price of the shredded piece to increase further in future.

Banksy has become somewhat of a mystery figure in the last 20 years as a global graffiti artist. He has travelled to many countries and left the graffiti world with philosophical and political messages. His nine graffiti arts on the Bethlehem Walls in Israel left some very strong messages. His graffiti of a young protester "throwing a flower bouquet" is mesmerising. His graffiti of "Dove in the bullet proof vest and olive branch in its beak" speaks louder than a thousand words.

People couldn't stop nodding when Banksy's graffiti showed Trump thinking "I am going to build you a brother" touching the "Bethlehem wall" in a

Jewish cap. Banksy is a contemporary artist. His graffiti of "Mobile Lovers" depicts lovers looking at their phones while hugging each other. His New York graffiti attracted the entire world's attention. Banksy wrote, "Keep your coins I WANT CHANGE" on a signboard held by a street beggar. He had shown a physician checking the heart of NY where the graffiti read "I Love NY"—the word "love" is not written but drawn. Blood coming out of a distorted red telephone booth on a footpath in London definitely reflects the romantic feeling of many of his countrymen. In one important work, Banksy wrote, "Sorry! The lifestyle you ordered is currently out of stock."

Because his graffiti highlights important global issues, they are well respected by many around the world. As a result, the "Banksy effect" seems to have gone global, touching even Dhaka's graffiti scene it seems. Banksy used his "Girl With Balloon" on at least two other graffiti. In one, he wrote, "No Future" where the letter "O" with a balloon was tied to a string that was held by a girl. In another, he showed a girl trying to cross a wall using a few gas balloons. It is possible that he was using the girl and the balloon to symbolically represent the constant aspirations of humans to achieve freedom from physical boundaries or mental oppression and especially from the suppression of speech. Thus his effort to shred the "Girl With Balloon" could be regarded as his attempt to free the piece of art from the custody of the collector.

In Dhaka we have an unknown graffiti artist named "Hobeki". His graffiti can be found in a few places where he expresses his pain of oppression and the suppression of ordinary people's freedom of expression. He has a series on "Shubodh" where he depicts a caged "Sun". The question is, why has it attracted the attention of so many people. Is it because "Shubodh" represents the struggle that they themselves now face?

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