

Appalling treatment of migrant worker in Malaysia

Our Foreign Ministry and High Commission must act

THE treatment meted out by the Malaysian immigration police to a Bangladeshi worker who has been working legally in the country is simply unacceptable. The 25-year-old worker was beaten up by the immigration police in Malaysia after being detained with several other migrant workers at a shopping mall on January 3, as per a report in this daily yesterday.

The migrant worker's account of what happened is horrifying. He alleged that he was repeatedly punched and hit with sticks by the Malaysian police and that two policemen even made him massage their legs while he was bleeding. We are appalled by the fact that members of a law enforcing agency of a country would treat a migrant worker in such an inhumane manner.

The migrant worker in question, who has been living and working in Malaysia for five years, had valid documents. So why was he detained? And even a migrant worker who fails to produce valid legal documents cannot be treated in such a barbaric way, that too by a law enforcing agency. As if such brutal treatment wasn't enough, the migrant worker had to wait for 20 hours before an officer found the worker's documents online after which he was released the next morning. We wonder why it took so long for the immigration officer to find the worker's documents, especially since the worker in question was staying in Malaysia legally and as such the police didn't have any legal grounds to detain him.

This particular incident reflects the lack of respect accorded to our workers in Malaysia as well as the total disregard for migrants' rights of some members of that country's immigration police. Bangladesh's foreign ministry needs to take notice of this incident and act accordingly to drive home the message that our workers' rights must be respected. The Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia must also demand justice for the Bangladeshi migrant worker and ensure that the Malaysian government takes action against the police officials involved.

Crack down on illegal dredging

The culture of impunity cannot continue

HOW is it that despite there being a law making extraction of sand from riverbeds a punishable offense, influential and politically connected individuals continue to do so, with complete immunity? The latest case, as reported by this newspaper yesterday, concerns the Dhaleshwari, Tangail, where a group of sand traders have been dredging the river putting a market, a crematorium, and homesteads at risk. Locals fear croplands and a bridge will go under if this continues. Yet one trader, also a former UP chairman, went as far as to say that he owned the land!

We do not think that the traders are actually unaware that rivers and the surrounding land cannot be private property. Neither should they be unaware of the law or the dangers of soil erosion. And even if they were unaware, the few mobile court raids should have been enough to set things straight. Given that the extraction begins within a few days of the occasional raids, there can be no doubt that this is wilful flouting of the law through using political connections.

The impact of dredging on the environment and local population cannot be overstated. Yet, in rivers around the country, this continues. And always, impunity enables the practice. The law cannot be selective, and raids cannot be one-offs where things go back to business as usual the minute those are over. This is a failure of the local administration, and ordinary citizens are suffering because of that. We urge the local administration to take this matter more seriously than it has till now, and not only conduct raids to destroy the equipment but also arrest the traders who continue to dredge the Dhaleshwari. The existing culture of impunity for the politically connected must be cracked down on, not only in this case, but in every sphere of administration all over the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Trump: the emblem of illiberalism

US President Donald Trump is particularly obsessed about the wall that he vowed to build along the country's border with Mexico. He proposes that establishing a wall will keep illegal immigrants away. He is so desperate to secure funding for the wall that he wilfully shut down the government. In order to secure funding for the wall, he virtually manufactured a crisis at the border, which he presented before the people as a foreign invasion.

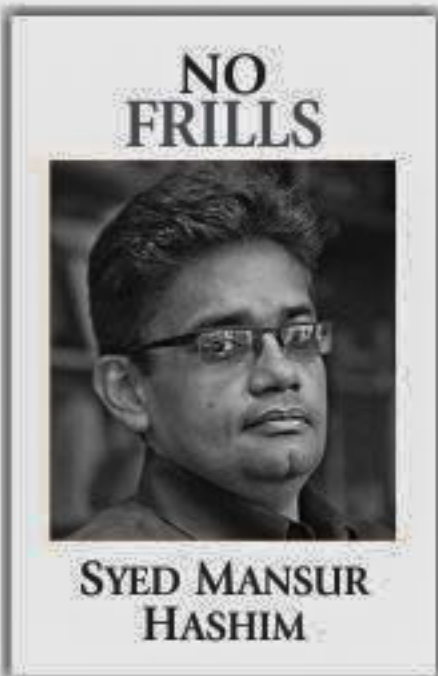
Donald Trump ran for presidency as a conservative. It's normal that conservatives would want to limit immigration. However, the way Trump chose to advance the agenda should be denounced. Politicians like Trump thrive on hate and division. Inciting division in society is a way for them to win the election.

That such a man now leads the world's most powerful country has a ramification for the entire world. The rise of such men points towards the decline of liberal values. And the decline of liberal and democratic values emboldens other illiberal, authoritarian, autocratic and divisive leaders across the globe.

Javed Mashroor, By e-mail

Twenty-fourth largest economy in 15 years

Can we live up to that ranking?



ACCORDING to a new analysis published by the Centre for Economic and Business Research (CEBR), a UK-based Research firm, the country is set to become the 24th largest economy over the next 15 years.

In 2018, the Bangladeshi economy was ranked as the 43rd largest economy in the globe due to its consistent and high rates of economic growth. Indeed, we jumped two points ahead from 2017 and CEBR expects the "annual rates of GDP growth to average 7.0 percent between 2018 and 2033."

The World Economic League Table (WELT) 2019 is a forecast of the size of 193 economies in the world. The research study predicts that the Bangladesh economy (GDP) will reach USD 1.05 trillion (at current prices) in 2033 from the year 2018. The economy is being propelled forward thanks primarily to robust exports, and the duty-free access to the Indian market has helped. When we take into account the fact that global retailers are increasingly opening up shop in India, the Bangladeshi readymade garments (RMG) industry is well positioned to take full advantage of the situation as stated in the report: "the duty-free access to the Indian market, pushing exports to USD 375 million in the three months to September."

The economy has benefitted from a range of policy

The billions of taka siphoned off by powerful business interest groups over the past decade has come at the cost of public money that should have gone as low-interest rate loans to millions of small proprietors and medium-sized businesses.

initiatives that has driven up domestic consumption expenditure, government spending, remittances and exports. The sustained efforts of the government in upgrading physical infrastructure and increasing power generation cannot be overstated, although questions remain about quality of megaprojects and reliability of power. As per a report published in this paper on January 8, the country has become the second biggest economy in South Asia (India ranked 5th, Pakistan 44th, Sri Lanka 66th, Nepal 101st, Afghanistan 115th, the Maldives 156th, and Bhutan 166th, in the WELT 2019).

While we have discussed primarily the good news, it is necessary to see what major policy decisions the government will have to take to lift Bangladesh from its current ranking of 41st to the 24th biggest economy in 2033. One of the biggest challenges of the new



PHOTO: ASABER91/FLICROR

government is how to increase revenues to finance the multi-billion dollar investments that will have to go into upgrading our infrastructure (on a year-to-year basis), while at the same time, maintaining the social safety nets that help the poor. The new finance minister has been talking about expanding the tax net beyond the major urban centres and that is a right policy decision, if it can be implemented. And there is no reason why it can't be should the political will exist.

The bleeding in the banking sector also has to be stemmed and that will require iron will. The billions of taka siphoned off by powerful business interest groups over the past decade has come at the cost of public money that should have gone as low-interest rate loans to millions of small proprietors and medium-sized businesses. Today, Bangladesh has emerged as the second largest RMG exporter (after China), but it is not without limitations. Low productivity, recurring labour unrest, poor infrastructure—in terms of slow movement of products on ports of exit (both air and sea)—are areas that have to be tackled head on.

For us to maintain our position in the global order of apparels, policy interventions will have to be implemented within set timelines and not be allowed to drag on year after year, which has become the case for many of our reforms. As the country gears up for major infrastructure projects, the sea ports (particularly Chittagong) must be upgraded to handle greater imports of capital machinery. We should not forget the fact that Bangladesh has also granted India the use of its ports—an essential component of regional connectivity, but which will nonetheless make greater demands on our port and other ancillary infrastructure.

The prediction for the Bangladesh economy reaching the 24th rank is of course dependent on a

number of external factors too. The biggest of which, of course, is that emerging markets across the world are struggling "partly because of the monetary tightening in the US and the knock-on effect of the surging US dollar." For us, that means imports are going to become more expensive, particularly in terms of tricky consumables like oil. With about 40 percent of our power coming from oil-fired power plants, it doesn't require much imagination as to what a resurgent USD means for us because the advantage we've enjoyed thanks to a fall in price of international crude is being slowly eroded by a rising dollar. Is it not time for policymakers to revisit our production sharing contract model so that we can attract global energy companies to start exploring in earnest both our potential onshore and offshore hydrocarbon reserves? Or will we continue to stick our collective heads in the sand and ignore the reality of a dwindling proven gas reserve?

At the end of the day, the CEBR study gives us a glimpse of what is possible in terms of economic growth and what could potentially be major stumbling blocks for growth. Uncertainties will always exist when it comes to external factors, i.e. factors beyond our ability to influence or control, but we do have our work cut out when it comes to tackling domestic economic bottlenecks. As stated before, one of the greatest challenges will be to increase domestic revenue and that is where we should give a lot of focus. Without substantially expanding our domestic revenue channels (in particular tax revenue), it will become increasingly difficult to keep up the momentum of change that has made a 7 percent (per annum) annual growth a reality for Bangladesh.

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Why the BJP badly needs allies

If Narendra Modi is to save the day, the BJP needs a new narrative besides new allies

KALYANI SHANKAR

IS the BJP searching for new allies ahead of the 2019 polls? Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent remarks in Chennai to his party workers give an indication that the saffron party is serious about alliances. The ruling party, which looked invincible until a few months ago, seems to be attempting to keep its political alliances intact ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. While a few months ago, Modi's re-election was certain, now it is no more a cakewalk. If Modi is to save the day, the BJP needs a new narrative besides new allies. But there are not many on the horizon.

elections. While some allies have already left others are making their concerns public. That is why the need for new allies. So, any successful new coalition would require a powerful narrative, and sharper strategising than that of the Congress-anchored coalition.

Secondly, the BJP had 40 odd partners till recently but some of them have quit. Just months ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has lost three key allies—Telugu Desam in March and the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and Assam Gana Parishad this month. The first two have shifted loyalties to the proposed Mahagadhbhandan.

The NDA allies have been deeply concerned about

Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) are also increasing. In June, the BJP walked out of an alliance with the PDP in Jammu and Kashmir. Most northeastern regional parties including the allies of BJP are opposed to the recently passed controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016.

The BJP has about 20 odd allies. In Bihar it is in alliance with the JD (U) and Lok Jan Shakti party and in UP the party has two minor partners, Apna Dal and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj party. In Maharashtra, the BJP is continuing with Shiv Sena, Republican Party of India (Athawale), Swabhimana Paksha, Rashtriya Samaj Paksha, and Shiv Sangram. In Jharkhand, the All Jharkhand Students Union, and JVM (P) are allies of the BJP. In the North-east the party is in alliance with regional partners. The BJP is eyeing Gorkha League in West Bengal. In Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP has no allies.

Thirdly, in 2014 BJP came with 31 percent of the vote share and formed the government. In 2019, the situation has changed. Then the regional block won about fifty percent of votes and the regional satraps are not ready to align with the BJP. There are many parties like the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi and the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and Punjab which are not ready for a BJP alliance. Post poll is another story.

Fourthly, the Congress has tied up with more allies in most of the States including Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Bihar, Kerala, Karnataka, and is hoping for an alliance with the SP and BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

The states which could determine the majority of a party in the Lok Sabha are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. So the BJP could also look at state-specific alliances as the Congress has done. For this it has to negotiate with individual parties in different states.

The BJP has traditionally allied with parties that bring in voters from social groups that do not support it. Whoever ties up with a significant share of parties that are expected to do well in their states in 2019—Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi in Telangana, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu or the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal could hope to form the government. After all, arithmetic in elections is more important than chemistry.

Kalyani Shankar is a senior journalist.

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, the BJP chief.

PHOTO: PTI

The prime minister said, "We cherish our old friends and our doors are always open for parties." He also recalled the successful coalition politics ushered in by Vajpayee in the 1990s. Vajpayee's government had alliance first with the AIADMK and then the DMK. Interestingly, the BJP had fought the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu leading a six-party alliance comprising smaller parties, including the DMKD, the PMK and Vaiko-led MDMK, and won two of the 39 seats—one each by the saffron party and PMK. However, all five parties snapped ties with the BJP later.

The coalition with which the BJP came to power in 2014 seems to be cracking ahead of the 2019 general

protecting their turfs in their respective states. The party has four major allies—the Shiv Sena, Akali Dal, JD (U) and Lok Jan Shakti party. Of these, the JD (U) has firmed up the alliance through a seat sharing arrangement. Shiv Sena is on the warpath and threatens to quit the NDA. While the Akalis have not crossed swords with the BJP, the party has decided to contest all the Lok Sabha and Assembly seats in Haryana. This could have a negative impact, even though the Akalis are claiming it is an anti-Chautala move. Paswan, who is known as the weathercock, has bargained for his Rajya Sabha berth and also firmed up seat sharing with the BJP. Even minor partners like Apna Dal (S) and