

Centralising decision-making is unhelpful

Will make banking a pain for customers

THE rationale being used by a number of privately-owned banks to bring back an archaic management practice, i.e. centralising all decisions and stripping branches of that crucial role that made banking easy for customers is that it will stop the flood of nonperforming loans (NPLs) that has engulfed the banking sector. Nowadays, an individual hoping to open an account in one of these banks will have to wait two to three days for verification of all information from the Head Office, a practice which used to take about 30 minutes previously. It is understandable that bank managements are alarmed by rising NPLs. The fact is that given the size of the banking sector today, centralising the loan sanctioning process will backfire in terms of ease of banking for the hundreds of thousands of customers each bank serves. Though NPLs exploded primarily because branch officials in various banks have been found complicit in unlawful practices that have led to the culture of NPLs nationwide, it is difficult to disagree with a recent survey by Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management (BIBM) titled "Centralised and Decentralised Banking System."

The move by bankers is aimed at reducing corruption, embezzlement, fraud and malpractices at branch level. But we learn from the BIBM survey is that loan recovery and amount of bad loans are almost equal in both centralised and decentralised banking systems, whereas the drawbacks are manifold. Customer satisfaction will nosedive and business expansion for customers will become more cumbersome if bank branches are prohibited from approving loans. The only way to stop malpractices is to set in place checks and balances that normal banking practices dictate. Instead of adopting the numerous recommendations that have been put forth in successive probe reports like, depoliticising board managements, checking the malpractice of banks taking out loans from one another, etc. The bottom line is that halting NPLs is purely a governance issue that needs to be addressed, not by adopting measures that have no guarantee of working but one that will certainly increase customers' suffering.

Ensure equal pay for equal work

Why do women get less pay than men?

WHILE more and more women have been entering the job market every year—both formal and informal—they are still facing serious wage discrimination. A Daily Star report published on January 16, 2019 revealed that women workers at the brick kilns in Lalmonirhat district have been getting half the wage their male counterparts get despite doing the same hard work. The situation is the same for all women workers in the 47 brick kilns of the district. This is fairly representative of the situation countrywide.

What has been known from the report is that the women are getting lower wages (while a male worker gets Tk 800 per day, a woman worker gets Tk 350 to Tk 400 per day) than men because the owners of the brick kilns know very well that these women have no alternative means of earning a livelihood. This is outrageous.

However, not only in the brick kilns, women workers in the construction and agriculture sectors across the country are also paid less than men. According to one study, gender pay gap was 57 percent in 2017 and 54 percent in 2016 in Bangladesh, for the same work. And this gap is far worse in the informal sector. As nearly 90 percent of jobs in Bangladesh are in the informal sectors, according to an ILO report, the extent of exploitation of women workers is easily understood.

The government should come up with some strict policies and enforce the minimum wage laws to eliminate this wide wage discrimination. Besides, there is no alternative to educating the women workers about their rights. The bottom line is, wage discrimination must be eliminated if we are serious about women empowerment and eradicating gender inequality.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What role should universities play?

The Daily Star had published an op-ed titled "Why are university graduates failing to meet market needs?" written by Khalid Hasan on January 14.

I could not agree with some of the arguments made in the article. Firstly, the role of universities cannot be limited in producing workers for corporate and business sectors. In many western countries, seemingly mundane subjects such as philosophy and psychology are among the top-ranked subjects, not any typical engineering subject.

The sole purpose of education is not about getting a job. Education has a much wider role to play in society, and, therefore, our universities should focus on that wider goal.

That isn't to say that our universities do not have any problems. In my view, universities are failing to make students curious. Students aren't taught in a way that induces further curiosity or interest. The ultimate goal of universities should be to make students curious enough to learn more, seek more knowledge. That way, skills that are demanded by the market from students will automatically be met.

SM Waliuzzaman, From Facebook Page



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

To date, much has been written and said about the Rohingya crisis. The regime in Naypyidaw has literally flouted all international laws and evaded pressures from the international community. Myanmar is now accusing Bangladesh for the delay in repatriation and at the same time plotting more atrocities against Rohingyas in Rakhine state. Last week, the Rakhine state government issued notice further blocking the United Nations and other aid agencies from travelling to five townships affected by the conflict. Sadly, many believed that the agreement for repatriation signed back in November 2017 will take care of this human tragedy.

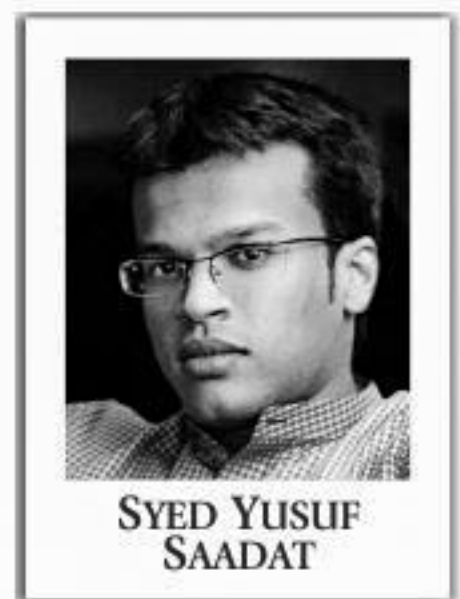
We must not forget that the Rohingya crisis is trapped into many strands of regional and international politics. The new foreign minister AK Abdul Momen, in his debut statement on the Rohingya crisis, said that the "much-talked-about Rohingya issue will not be solved easily." The foreign minister referred to this international tangle, and remarked that "interest of everybody including India and China will be hampered," if the Rohingya crisis continues. The foreign minister further urged the international community "to step forward for a logical solution to this crisis." The foreign minister also directed to conduct a study to understand the impacts of Rohingyas on Bangladesh economy, society and security systems.

The Rohingya crisis as it is unfolding gradually has many faces that should be of concern to the Bangladeshi people and the government. In July 2017, prior to influx of the Rohingya refugees, the combined estimated population of Teknaf and Ukhiya was slightly over four lakh. The sudden gush of an additional eight lakh Myanmar refugees by December 2017 was overwhelming. The numbers keep rising even today. The presence of this massive number of refugees has impacted on everyday carrying capacity of the region; today, this is felt on all aspects of life and cultures—both for the hosts and refugees themselves.

An immediate impact was on land and local resources—for instance, the massive loss of forests and changes in land use from forest/agriculture to housing and camp sites for resettlement of the refugees. In addition, many reported on the growing social, economic, environmental and health impacts of Rohingya refugee resettlement. The unplanned and makeshift settlements at the early stage of the surge on hill slopes and forestlands led to vulnerabilities for landslides and other forms of risks and disasters for all.

By July 2018, when I made a short visit to the camp sites, a more orderly system of settlement and camp administration was already established jointly by the Bangladesh government and United Nations High Commission for Refugees through registration, re-grouping and relocation in formally constituted 34 camps, with internal roads, markets, mosques, relief distribution centres, and clinics. Close to 100 national and international NGOs—for instance, *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, *World Vision*, *BRAC*, *Gono Shahthaya Kendro*, and others—work as service providers in various fields. In addition, there are literally thousands of aid workers assisting the operations.

The Rohingya crisis, without any doubt, has put a huge pressure on Bangladesh's economy and society. Thanks to the government and international aid agencies supporting the operations, the initial stage of crisis



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

THE lift-operator is a peculiar person. He sits on a stool inside a small, claustrophobic space. In the olden days his job required quite a few skills. Back then, lifts were manually operated with a large lever, and it was the responsibility of the lift-operator to regulate the speed of the lift. His task also involved synchronising his timing in order to make sure that the lift always stopped parallel to the floor. It was almost as exciting as landing an aeroplane. However, nowadays most lifts can be operated by the user with the mere push of a button. Today the lift-operator is understandably miserable in demeanour. His once engaging occupation has been transformed into a humdrum reality. Only a handful of lift-operators will be able to work at the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the CN Tower in Toronto. He knows that his days are numbered.

The lift-operator is not alone. The fourth industrial revolution set off a wave of technical progress that has since been going forward at a remarkable pace. With the advent of modern technology, automation of production processes has led to loss of jobs for workers, even in industries where it was previously thought to be impossible. As it becomes increasingly obvious that automation is unavoidable and unrelenting, should human beings prepare to become obsolete?

Nowadays machines are taking over work from humans in every field. Industrial robots are becoming more common than before in almost every country. Today there are cars, buses, and trains capable of driving themselves. Supercomputers are now able to defeat grandmasters in a game of chess. Thanks to facial recognition technology, computers can now recognise humans

ROHINGYA CRISIS

Issues and challenges that have emerged

management—for instance, provision for shelter, food, medicine, etc.—helped to cope with the immediate needs. During a meeting in Cox's Bazar, an international refugee resettlement expert—who previously worked in South Sudan, Syria and Jordan—told me that unlike other refugee camps in countries with unstable or weak governments, the Cox's Bazar refugee camps provide "good practice" examples for refugee support and administration" due to a stable system of government and administration in Bangladesh.

Having said this, the flip side of the Rohingya refugee issue is that the repatriation remains elusive at this point, because the environment is not right for repatriation. The Rakhine State has been rocked by successive rounds of violence and extensive military crackdown, following the attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the group demanding greater autonomy for Rakhine State. Instead of implementing the repatriation agreement

port forgery cases by some Rohingyas, who were deported by Saudi Arabia. In Cox's Bazar, it is almost common knowledge that many Rohingyas left for Malaysia in the 1990s with Bangladesh passports availed to them through the network of local *dalals* or agents in collusion with passport officials. Finally, there are also reported cases of Myanmar agents in Cox's Bazar camps and in the country for collecting intelligence data.

Aside from the security issues, there are social dimensions of the emerging issues—for instance, tension between the host communities and the refugee population regarding benefits and livelihood issues due to loss of land and access to forests. The government has taken some measures to quell this, but those may not be enough, because the Rohingya refugees are going to stay longer than initially anticipated. Given zero progress with repatriation and the current attitude of the Myanmar government,



A partial view of camp settlements where Rohingya refugees have sought shelter.

PHOTO: FOOD SECURITY CLUSTER

and addressing the root causes of the crisis (e.g., citizenship, freedom of movement, livelihoods), the Myanmar Army has once more escalated their genocidal activities in recent months. On top of this, the Myanmar army now claims presence of ARSA training base inside Bangladesh, which was strongly refuted by the Bangladesh government. The activities of the Myanmar Army, including mobilisation of troops to Rakhine border with Bangladesh, raises a host of security issues and concerns. It appears from reports in Myanmar that the regime will force out the last Rohingya in their fight against terrorism.

Thus, the Rohingya issue has raised many external stakes. The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) reportedly deployed additional force to patrol the country's 54 km border with Myanmar fearing intrusion through the Naf River and other border areas. The situation seems tense. Amid this, there are also internal security issues such as recent pass-

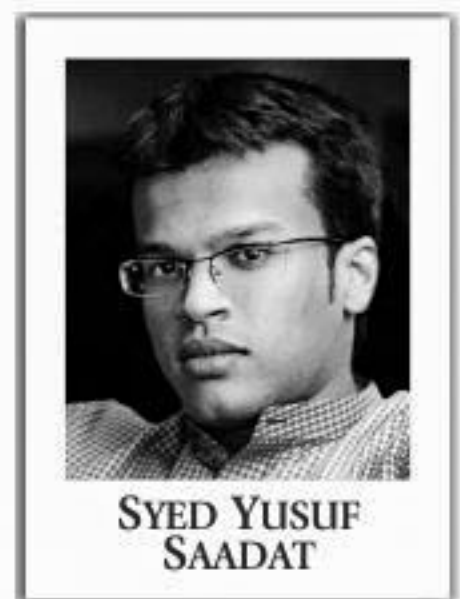
Bangladesh should work with the international community to find viable and just solutions to this crisis.

Since an acceptable solution may take many more years, the government in the meantime should undertake a long-term plan for support and sustenance of the refugees and host communities through economic and social development programmes using the resources received from the various development partners and agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and other bilateral organisations. The impact study commissioned by the foreign minister should look into all of the socio-economic and security aspects holistically and help make a long-term plan for refugee resettlement and repatriation options as well.

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Employment in the age of automation

What policymakers should consider



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

THE lift-operator is a peculiar person. He sits on a stool inside a small, claustrophobic space. In the olden days his job required quite a few skills. Back then, lifts were manually operated with a large lever, and it was the responsibility of the lift-operator to regulate the speed of the lift. His task also involved synchronising his timing in order to make sure that the lift always stopped parallel to the floor. It was almost as exciting as landing an aeroplane. However, nowadays most lifts can be operated by the user with the mere push of a button. Today the lift-operator is understandably miserable in demeanour. His once engaging occupation has been transformed into a humdrum reality. Only a handful of lift-operators will be able to work at the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the CN Tower in Toronto. He knows that his days are numbered.

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Nowadays machines are taking over work from humans in every field. Industrial robots are becoming more common than before in almost every country. Today there are cars, buses, and trains capable of driving themselves. Supercomputers are now able to defeat grandmasters in a game of chess. Thanks to facial recognition technology, computers can now recognise humans

better than humans can recognise computers. Even creative tasks like painting and music could soon be done with computers, once they are pre-programmed with the algorithms for picturesque scenes and pleasant tunes. According to a recent article published in *The Economist* magazine, China's installations of industrial robots rose by 59 percent in 2017. In some Chinese ready-made garment (RMG) factories, workers are being outnumbered by machines. Cameras, originally made for

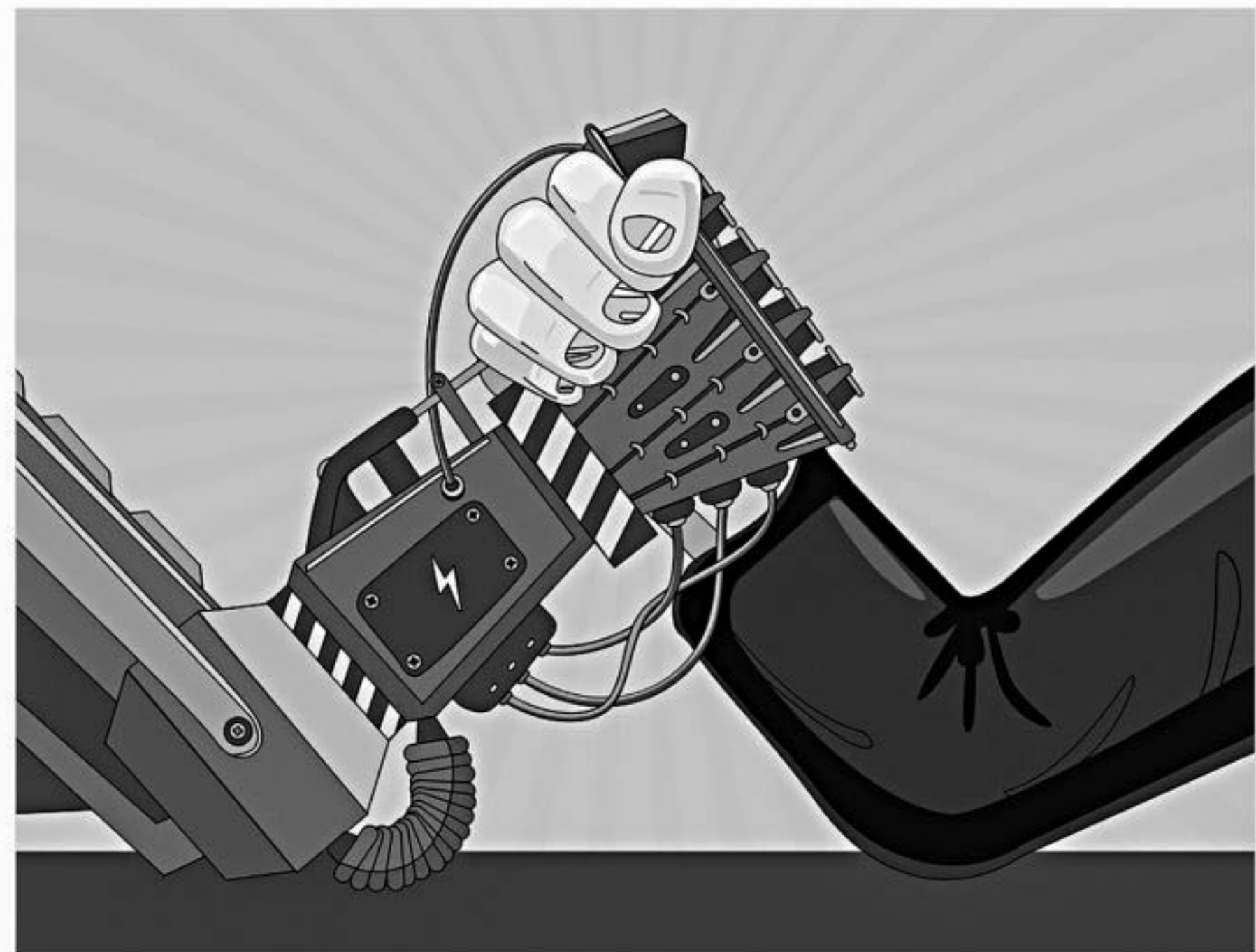
RMG factories. According to estimates by Access to Information in Bangladesh (a2i), 60 percent of jobs in the RMG sector in Bangladesh may disappear by 2040 due to automation. The extent of automation can only be expected to increase in the future. Due to pressure from labour rights groups, environmental groups, and international compliance laws, it will be difficult to sustain the large number of RMG production units that currently exist in the country. The most likely outcome is

Policy Dialogue (CPD), use of advanced technologies in the RMG sector of Bangladesh is prevalent in 47 percent of large-scale RMG enterprises, compared to 25 percent of medium-scale RMG enterprises.

Automation has the potential to destroy jobs for workers, especially jobs that involve simple repetitive tasks. Thus workers who are at the very bottom of the production process, and who are often female, are highly vulnerable to loss of jobs due to automation. On the other hand, automation will also create new jobs. Machines will require operators and repair technicians. Some workers who have the necessary education and training, and who will probably be male, will take up these jobs. Automation will create winners and losers, and widen the gulf between male and female employment. Thus automation poses a serious threat not only to employment, but also to gender equality.

Countries should specialise in the production and export of goods that intensively use their relatively abundant factor of production. In other words, capital abundant countries should specialise in the production and export of capital-intensive goods, whilst labour abundant countries should specialise in the production and export of labour-intensive goods. Bangladesh, being a labour abundant country, specialises in the production and export of RMG, which is hitherto a labour-intensive industry. If the RMG industry becomes more capital intensive as a consequence of automation, Bangladesh will have to look for a new sector for specialisation that will be sufficiently labour-intensive to absorb its enormous young labour force. The rise of automation means that the hour of reckoning has arrived for policymakers to redesign the existing anachronistic education system, whilst at the same time, revisit efforts to create the jobs of the future.

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the military, are being used to scan for flaws in fabrics by utilising artificial intelligence. Chinese RMG factories are witnessing not only a precipitous fall in employment, but also a profound shift in the nature of jobs. Workers who were previously occupied with monotonous tasks are now assisting engineers in designing better machines for the assembly line.

Automation has already started to affect Bangladesh's labour market. Robots have been introduced in some

that the number of RMG production units will decrease in the future. Most of the small RMG factories will be either forced to shut down or be taken over by larger companies. As a result, the market share will become more concentrated.

As most of the surviving RMG firms will all be quite large in size, they will invest a substantial amount of resources in automation, in order to boost their productivity and profits. Technology adoption is directly related to factory size. According to a study by the Centre for