

Children's growing vulnerability

It's time the state acted firmly to arrest the situation

THE statistics are shocking. A report by Bangladesh Children's Rights Forum presents a very grim picture of the safety of children in our society, where more than 2000 children fell victim to different kinds of hazards last year. This has been culled from published reports, and one fears the actual figure might be even higher, since many incidents of violence against children go unreported.

The largest number fell victim to rape, and the incidence of child murder rose by more than 23 percent in 2018. Apart murder and rape, a good number of children were subjected to violence, torture and abduction, and the number of children's death by drowning nearly doubled from the previous year. Regrettably, the special provision in the child marriage act has been exploited to perpetuate this horrendous practice—a violation of children's right in itself.

One of the reasons for the incremental increase in the incidence of violence against children is the longwinded process of trial and the exploitation of the legal loopholes by the accused that allow the perpetrators to escape punishment or the case to ultimately fizzle out. Not only should exemplary punishment be made mandatory, arrangements should also be made to hasten the trial process. The government may also consider ostracising convicted child abusers from society or at least restricting their movement.

It says very little about a society that seems to be helpless in providing adequate safety and protection to the weakest section of our citizens—the children—particularly to the girls. And perhaps it is time the government, and the society at large, spent some time cogitating on the reasons of the dismal state of children's safety and determining measures to mitigate the situation. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Vanishing consignments from Chittagong port

How can that happen in a restricted area?

LESS than a week ago, we wrote an editorial on how a syndicate of clearing and forwarding (C&F) agents in collusion with importers, and possibly port officials, were able to clear some 4,000 consignments using forged documents over a two-year period. Yesterday, we published a report that said that some 295 consignments of goods had disappeared from a restricted area of the Chattogram port—which is part of the more than 5,584 unreleased shipments that arrived at the port over the period 2016-2018. We are told that some 1,000 out of the 5,584 consignments cannot be traced.

One question that remains unanswered is why port authorities do not auction off the consignments within the stipulated period. The rulebook says that importers can keep consignments for 15 days at the port under the supervision of the Chattogram Port Authority (CPA). Upon failure to collect any consignment, the CPA is supposed to give the importer an extension of another 15 days, and after that these goods are to be auctioned off. We are, however, seeing the build-up of containers and consignments stretching back to two years. Second, how can consignments go missing from a restricted area? We are told that this part of the restricted area did not have CCTV coverage, which again is a failure of the CPA and needs to be investigated.

As we had pointed out earlier, the Chattogram port is our biggest point of entry for goods and the continued lack of oversight by port authorities opens up questions of security. The possibility of dangerous goods entering the country through the port is now very much possible, given our failure to tackle these recurring incidents of consignments going missing. This is a matter that needs to be dealt with on a priority basis by the CPA and law enforcers, who must bust the gang responsible and also plug the loss of revenue that the national exchequer should be getting but isn't.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Tough stances against loan defaulters

The newly-appointed Finance Minister A H M Mustafa Kamal asked the bankers to go tough on reducing non-performing loans (NPL) as it is quite high compared to other countries. Needless to say, in recent times loan default, especially in the state-owned banks, has emerged as a topic of frequent discussions in the media. The issue is related with investment, economic growth, employment generation and poverty alleviation, which are inextricably connected with the financial soundness of the banking system. The banking system of Bangladesh is currently under tremendous stress because of unbridled increase of loan default.

As the causes of loan default, the following reasons can be cited: The incompetence of the bank personnel i.e. lack of professional knowledge, improper valuation of collateral, wrong assessment of cash flow, faulty documentation, lack of monitoring and follow-up; Indications of poor governance in the banking system; Political influence and backing for loan sanction; and ineffective judicial system of loan recovery.

The remedial measure of the above shortcomings are improvement of professional know-how of the bankers, establishment of corporate good governance, stoppage of political interference and backing, and quick disposal of lawsuits in the court. We believe the newly formed government will focus on these issues.

Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

The burden of history and the role of intelligentsia

AZMM MOKSEDLUL MILON

SINCE the day of the 11th parliamentary election, the people of Bangladesh have seen the rise of two diametrically opposite discourses: one created by the incumbent government and the Election Commission, saying that the election was free and fair, and the other created by the defeated parties, saying that it was an egregious example of election engineering. Under these circumstances, the sacred duty of the intelligentsia was to create a third narrative exposing the truth and dispelling all the falsehoods. Unfortunately, while the two opposing alliances are waging an endless battle of words, the intelligentsia are either silent or divided among themselves to the point of assisting the politicians to turn our living history into a concocted story of fiction.

The parties defeated in the 11th parliamentary election have claimed that the ruling party, with the help of law enforcing agencies and the administration, engineered the election by stamping ballot papers and stuffing ballot boxes the night before the election and barring opposition activists and polling agents from going to the polling stations. Thus, legally and logically, the burden of proof lies on the incumbent government: they must produce evidence to disprove all these allegations, which they sought to do—quite convincingly, one may argue—over the past few weeks. In response to the claim of the opposition that 80 percent vote casting is not normal in a general election, they have cited the examples of the elections of 1996, 2001, and 2008 when the turnout was 74.96 percent, 75.59 percent, and 87.13 percent respectively; they also claimed that they have won a landslide victory in the election not only because they have led the country to achieve commendable economic progress but also because they started their election campaign years ago while the opposition parties were busy complaining about their problems.

Moreover, the election observers who came from Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Canada jointly stated in a press conference that the 11th parliamentary election was “much better” than previous elections in Bangladesh, calling it a “glowing example for other democratic countries.” (*The Daily Star*, January 1, 2019). The Election Commission has also claimed that the election was a free and fair one, as neither any country nor any international organisation has made any negative comment about the electoral process (*The Daily Star*, January 4). If these explanations have any merit, the discourse created by the opposition would amount to a case of political libel that should have been challenged both legally and politically.

However, neither the ruling party nor the Election Commission has legally challenged the allegations brought against them. Instead, they claimed that they have been successful in proving that a free and fair election can be held under a political government. Thus, legally and logically, the burden of proof lies on the defeated parties: they must produce evidence in support of the alleged election engineering and disprove the claims made by the Grand Alliance and the Election Commission. Interestingly, only a few electronic and print media outlets at home and abroad have reported instances of irregularities in the electoral process.

Recently, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has termed the election

in the ballot box, as per subsection 2(f) under article 31 of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 1972; therefore, it is not difficult to find out whether each vote was cast by a different voter or if the same person stamped and cast multiple votes.

Unfortunately, the opposition has simply chosen to reject the election as “farical”, claiming that most of the votes were stamped and cast by the activists of the ruling party; they have yet to file any petition with the High Court, as per article 33 of the Conduct of Election Rules 2008, directing the Election Commission to scrutinise the fingerprints on the counterfoils of ballot papers to identify the fake votes. However, if the allegations of the

divided in their version of what really happened and mostly blindly aligned with either of the two political discourses.

But it is also clear that the general people who traditionally trust the politicians and political parties only through the intelligentsia are no longer confused—they know the truth, and they also know that everything has a political interpretation and that nothing is now truly reported and honestly interpreted in the media. Thus, the members of the contemporary intelligentsia, who seem to have taken history as a form of art to the extent of thinking that they are absolutely free to manipulate it, must keep in mind that history and journalism are arts that must be wedded to science in the form of research and objective



Supporters of the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League join a campaign ahead of the 11th parliamentary election in Bangladesh, on December 21, 2018. The election, held on December 30, gave Awami League a landslide victory.

“partially participatory, non-competitive, questionable and faulty,” claiming in the initial report of a survey that vote rigging took place in 47 out of the 50 constituencies that it surveyed. Surprisingly, the defeated opposition alliance, despite being a larger force than the TIB, has yet to produce concrete evidence to support their claims. They could, for example, easily collect at least 30 percent signatures from their supporters in each constituency to prove that the total turnout could not be 80 percent as more than 30 percent of people did not (or could not) go to polling stations. They also know that every voter has to put his/her fingerprint on the counterfoil of the ballot paper before he/she stamps and casts their vote

opposition are true, the discourse created by the government will be known in future history books as a Machiavellian propaganda because the truth is in the minds of the people—and it will remain intact there whether we read it now or in the future.

Historically, the politicians and the political parties do not write history; they just create it in the name of the people often by intentionally injecting their own ideals and propaganda into it; therefore, the burden of history lies solely on the members of the intelligentsia. It is their sacred duty to produce data and evidence and create a narrative based on them. Surprisingly, the intelligentsia—the academics, researchers, artists, writers, journalists, etc.—are still blatantly

reporting. But those who deviate from the path of truth will live in the dust of history forever.

To sum it up, the intelligentsia have failed not only to unearth the truth—which is in the minds of the people—but also to differentiate it from libels and propaganda—which are at the heart of the politics as we know it. History may forgive the politicians and forget what they have propagated over the last few weeks, but it will never forgive the so-called educated and enlightened people who have truly failed Bangladesh.

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Reimagining the future of work

We stand at a crossroads as seismic shifts take place in the world of work

CYRIL RAMAPHOSA AND STEFAN LÖFVEN

TECHNOLOGICAL advances are changing the nature of many jobs, and leading to the need for new skills. The urgently required greening of economies to meet the challenge of climate change should bring further employment possibilities. Expanding youth populations in some parts of the world, ageing populations in others, may affect labour markets and social security systems.

On one path, countless opportunities lie ahead, not only to create jobs but also to improve the quality of our working lives. This requires that we reinvigorate the social contract that gives all partners a fair stake in the global economy.

On the other path, if we fail to prepare adequately for the coming challenges, we could be heading into a world that widens inequalities and leads to greater uncertainty.

The issues are complex. As co-chairs of the Global Commission on the Future of Work we, and our fellow members of the Commission—leading figures from business and labour, think tanks, government and non-governmental organisations—have been examining the choices we need to make if we are to meet the challenges resulting from these transformations in the world of work and achieve social justice.

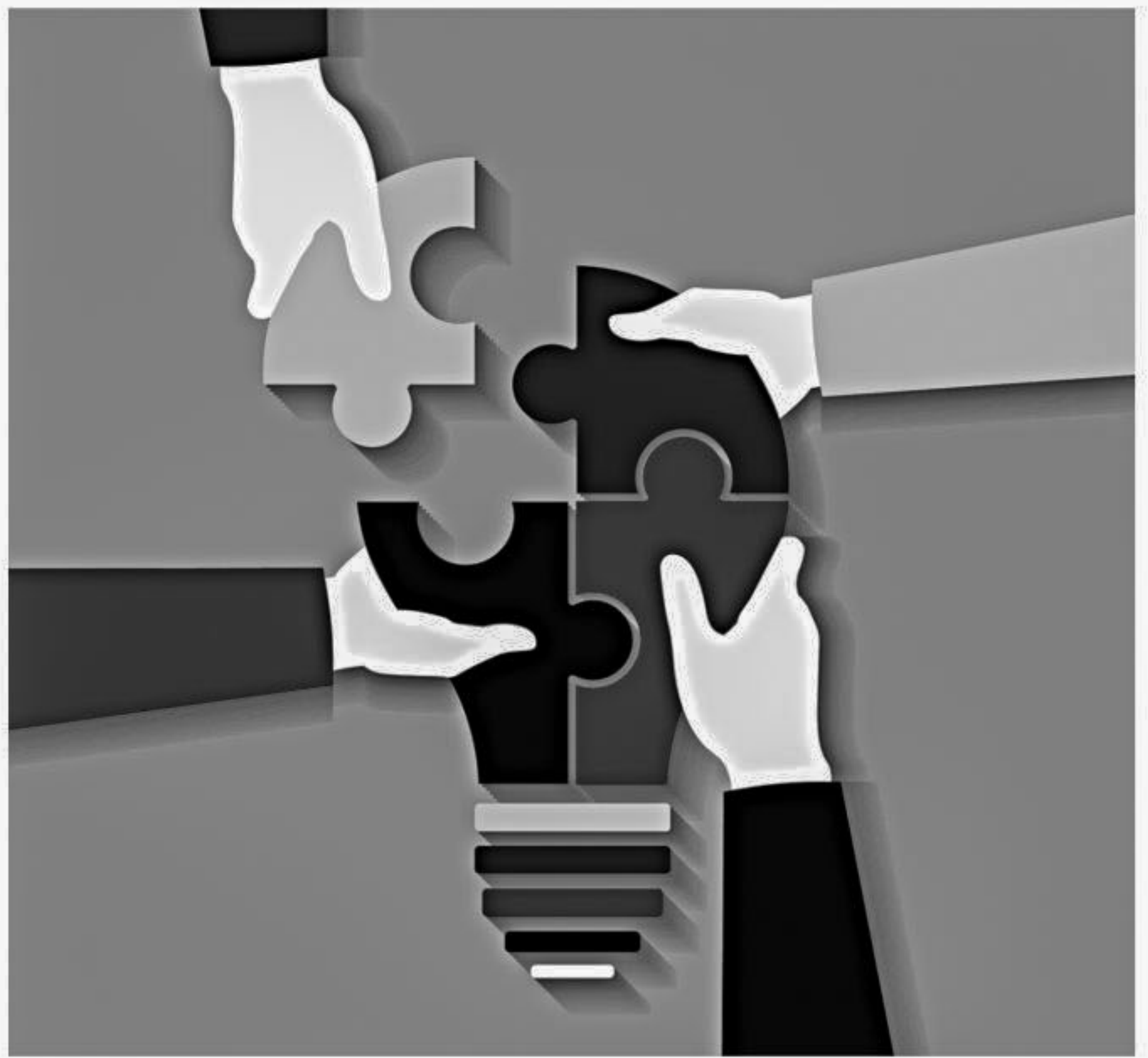
We call for a new, human-centred approach that allows everyone to thrive in a carbon neutral, digital age and affords them dignity, security, and equal opportunity. It must also meet the changing needs and challenges facing businesses and secure sustainable economic growth.

The opportunities are there to improve working lives, expand choice, close the gender gap and reverse the damage that has been wreaked by global inequality. But it will need committed action on the part of governments and social partners to turn those opportunities into reality.

So how do we achieve this? Three areas of increased investment are needed:

First, we have to invest more in people's capabilities: This means establishing an effective lifelong learning system that enables people to skill, reskill and upskill—a system that spans early childhood and basic education through to adult learning. It also means investing in the institutions that will support people as they go through transitions in their working lives—from school leavers

institutions of work—including the establishment and implementation of a Universal Labour Guarantee. This will ensure that all workers enjoy fundamental rights, an “adequate living wage”, limits on their hours of work and safe and healthy workplaces. Linked to this, people need to have more control over their working time—while meeting the needs of enterprises—so that they can



to older workers. Making gender equality a reality and providing social protection from birth to old age are also critical. These social investments will not only increase productivity. They will also allow for a more inclusive growth, where informal workers and business can both benefit from and contribute to a sound formal economy.

Second, we must invest more in the

fulfil the full range of their responsibilities and develop their capabilities. Collective representation through social dialogue between workers and employers needs to be actively promoted.

Workers in the informal economy have often improved their working conditions by organising. Unions need to expand membership to informal workers,

whether they work in the rural economy, on the city streets of an emerging economy or on a digital platform. This is a critical step towards formalisation and a tool for inclusion.

We're also calling for governance systems for digital labour platforms that will require these platforms and their clients to respect certain minimum standards.

Finally, we need to invest more in decent and sustainable work. This includes incentives to promote investments in key areas, such as the care economy, the green economy, and the rural economy, as well as high-quality physical and digital infrastructure. We must also reshape private sector incentive structures to encourage a long-term, human-centred approach to business. That includes fair tax policies and improved corporate accounting standards. We need to explore new measures of country progress to track important aspects of economic and social advancement.

Beyond these critical investments, there is a further opportunity: to place discussions about the future of work at the heart of the economic and social debates taking place at the high table of international policy-making. This could revitalise the multilateral system at a time when many are questioning its legitimacy and effectiveness.

Yet none of this will happen by itself. If change is the opportunity, we must seize the moment to renew the social contract and create a brighter future by delivering economic security, equal opportunity and social justice—and ultimately reinforce the fabric of our societies.

The Global Commission on the Future of Work is an independent body set up in 2017 by the International Labour Organization to undertake an in-depth examination of the future of work. Its report was launched on January 22, 2019 to mark the start of the Centenary year of the ILO.

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