

Justice denied?

Delay in medical exam of rape victims is inexcusable

IT is quite outrageous that there was a delay by the police in bringing a number of rape victims to hospital for medical examination even after the filing of a case, making it difficult for doctors to find any meaningful evidence of rape by then. This continues despite the fact that the High Court in a directive in 2015 ruled that the police would be held responsible for any delay in conducting medical tests after a case is filed and that such a delay would constitute a punishable offence.

As explained by a forensic expert quoted in a report in this daily yesterday, delays in medical test may destroy evidence and reduce the chance of getting proper results, making it impossible for the victim to get justice. And, according to a staff member in Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, as many as 20 percent of rape victims that the hospital receives each month are brought in late.

In Bangladesh, the prosecution of rape is normally extremely complicated and time-consuming. As it is often the case that the burden of proof lies with the victim, very few of them end up getting justice.

We have to understand that due to social stigma attached to such cases, victims themselves have to somehow gather the courage to report the incident to the police. The fact that some policemen show negligence in conducting medical tests on time, even after a victim takes the bold step of filing a case, is unacceptable.

As laid out by the court, the authorities concerned should take serious measures to punish officers who have demonstrated negligence in such cases. In addition, efforts should be taken to make law enforcement officials aware of the court directive and the importance of conducting medical tests of rape victims as soon as possible.

Bangladesh's deadly roads

No meaningful steps taken to curb accident casualties

A recent report published by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, a passenger welfare body, paints a grim picture of the number of people killed in accidents in 2018 across the country. Road accidents took the biggest share of casualties with 7,221 deaths (93 percent) followed by train accidents and accidents on waterways.

We don't see any change in drivers' mindset and that is why they continue to drive recklessly and engage in risky overtaking. Authorities have not done enough to rectify faulty roads, and the BRTA, which is responsible for granting vehicle licences and overseeing fitness of vehicles, remains ineffective.

One must admit that there is a huge lack of awareness on roads and that it is not just on the part of drivers, but general people too. People do not have a good grasp of traffic laws, and those who do ignore them willfully. The end result of course is that the death toll keeps rising with each passing year. We need to do something about this and it requires a two-pronged approach. While technical problems of roads can be solved easily, changing mindsets requires a national campaign that will not fizzle out in a week or a month.

Implementation of laws, again, is not a stopgap measure by introducing "traffic week" or "traffic month". Rather, it requires a change in mindset so that enforcement of the law takes place in every area: implementing the traffic rules, granting of licences to people who actually pass BRTA driving tests, educating people to cross roads safely, using signals before changing lanes, disallowing unfit vehicles from plying the roads, among other things. It is a tall order but there can be no shortcuts when we try to bring order out of total chaos and each of us must do our part so that there are fewer avoidable deaths on our roads.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Brexit: A new referendum?

After WWII, the economy of Europe was in a shambles due to the devastation that comes with a war of such magnitude. In the wake of the war, European countries took measures to extend economic and political cooperation among themselves—an effort which resulted in the establishment of a unified organisation, called the European Economic Council or EEC. The EEC was later renamed as the European Union following the enforcement of Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Now, the EU has 28 member states. And, it has its own common currency, the euro, which some countries like the UK did not adopt.

The member states have witnessed amazing growth and prosperity under the EU. Yet, the British people have chosen to exit the EU in a referendum. Now, the two parties—the UK and the EU—are negotiating an exit deal. Theresa May, the British prime minister, recently presented a deal which was rejected by an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians.

If the UK exits the EU with no deal, it will face enormous economic and financial challenges, leaving a negative impact on its investment, GDP and employment—something that will rattle the global economy as well. Given the impasse regarding the exit deal, it's perhaps in the interest of the UK to hold a new referendum to see whether the British people still believe that leaving the EU is a good idea.

Mohammad Zonaeed Emran, By email

Pratik's death and irregularities in the university recruitment process



THE recent case of suicide of Taifur Rahman Pratik, a student of Genetics Engineering and Biotechnology Department at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), because of the alleged injustices done to him by his teachers, should be a wake-up call for the public universities where, according to several research studies, anomalies and irregularities in the recruitment process are rampant. Shanta Tawhida, Pratik's sister, a teacher of Dhaka University, termed his death as "murder". On her Facebook page, she wrote the names of some teachers of Pratik's department who she alleged were responsible for her brother's death.

The fact is that many of the existing irregularities in the recruitment process of teachers can be curbed by formulating uniform guidelines for recruitment.

According to his sister, although Pratik came first class first in his honours examinations, certain teachers of his department were not happy about him applying for the position of lecturer at the department. She alleged that Pratik's teachers gave him lower marks in his master's courses and did not approve a supervisor for his thesis. Upset with his teachers' non-cooperation, Pratik gave up hope of being a teacher and was planning to study abroad. But the extent of hostility of his teachers towards him was so high that they even denied to give him the "letter of reference" that he needed to apply to a foreign university.

A probe committee has been formed to investigate the suicide, and we can only hope that the reasons for his suicide



Taifur Rahman Pratik

would be unearthed soon. Police's primary investigation has found that Pratik died by suicide due to "long-term frustration". While finding out the reasons for his death is the responsibility of the police, it is also the responsibility of his university to find out what factors contributed to his frustrations which eventually led to his suicide.

As the investigation is ongoing, we cannot jump to conclusions as to why Pratik ended up taking his own life. But so far, whatever information Pratik's sister has come forward with tells us that Pratik might have been unable to cope with how helpless he became in the face of animosity and lack of support from his teachers. This is not the first time that teachers and people in positions of authority in our educational institutions have been pointed out and blamed after a student's suicide. And in this particular case, if the teachers' non-cooperation and unwillingness to help Pratik with his academic plans are really to blame, then we need to look at the very recruitment process that gives such kinds of teachers—who are biased and unfair in their treatment of students—a place in our public universities.

There has been an alarming rise in the incidents of students' suicide in public universities in recent years. In a report published in this daily on January 16, 2019, 19 students from five public universities died by suicide last year. While as many as 13 DU students died by suicide between 2005 and 2016, the

same number of students committed suicide only in two years' time during 2017-18.

In such a situation, most public universities have set up mental healthcare cells to deal with issues related to students' mental wellbeing, although the effectiveness of these cells is not beyond question. However, several issues such as misuse of power by some teachers (e.g. treating students unfairly) and other corrupt practices such as teachers influencing the academic results of their favourite students by giving them good grades, and corruption in the recruitment of lecturers, among other things, that affect a student's mental health significantly, have hardly been addressed by universities.

This is why the fate of students, including those like Pratik who want to join a university as a lecturer, depends on their relationships with teachers wielding power in our universities and their political leanings. This is an open secret in our public universities. Many incidents of unfair recruitment have been reported by newspapers where even money was involved.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), in its report titled "Recruitment of Lecturers in Public Universities: Governance Challenges and Ways Forward," released in 2016, found political leanings and nepotism to be two of the dominant factors in the recruitment process at the 13 public universities they surveyed, while

regionalism and religious identity play a major role in appointment of lecturers in many of these institutions. It said that adherence or inclination to the ideology of the ruling political party has always acted as an important factor in the recruitment of lecturers.

The report also found that there are no comprehensive rules for recruiting lecturers at the universities surveyed and that irregularities in the recruitment of lecturers often start from the academic stage. There have been instances where teachers manipulated or influenced academic results of some preferred students and subsequently helped their recruitment, the report found.

American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS), another research organisation funded by the US state and education departments, also found nepotism, political affiliation and money to be the defining factors in the recruitment of teachers and administrators (*The Daily Star*, January 14, 2016).

The fact is that many of the existing irregularities in the recruitment process of teachers can be curbed by formulating uniform guidelines for recruitment. Currently, candidates only have to sit for a viva voce to be recruited as a public university teacher. The government has recommended public university authorities to take a written test along with viva voce for the appointment of teachers but only a few universities have adopted this recommendation. And although teaching capabilities should be one of the most important parts that a job interview should assess, this is not included in the recruitment process in most of our public universities.

Formulating uniform guidelines for recruitment is a policy decision that the public university authorities must take to ensure a healthy educational environment in campuses.

Going by news reports and allegations brought before the media by his family, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that Pratik was perhaps a victim of the unhealthy power relations that exist between teachers and students in the majority of our public universities and also a victim of the corruption that takes place in the recruitment process in the absence of any uniform guidelines.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Brexit demands a new British politics



THE populist revolts in the United States and the United Kingdom have each reached a critical juncture. At the start of his third year in office, US President Donald Trump presided over the longest federal government shutdown in history. Having painted himself into a corner, he remained largely at the mercy of congressional Democrats to negotiate an end to a crisis he created. (The shutdown has ended temporarily.)

Likewise, British Prime Minister Theresa May, having failed to secure parliamentary approval for her Brexit deal, now must negotiate either with the opposition Labour Party or with Tory Brexiters and the Northern Irish Democratic Unionists who prop up her government.

post-Brexit settlement quickly, which means the contentious "Irish backstop"—a necessary safeguard for preserving the Good Friday Agreement and peace in Northern Ireland—will never have to come into play.

To be sure, "Remain"-orientated Conservative and Labour MPs have complained that the political declaration is not prescriptive enough, while Brexiters argue that it is too prescriptive. But the EU made clear from the very start that a divorce treaty must be concluded before the details of the future relationship can be negotiated. No amount of griping will change that now.

Besides, the framework outlined in the political declaration can still be revised in the coming weeks. For example, Andrew Duff, a Liberal Democrat Remainer, has suggested that a UK-specific conceptualisation of the free movement of people or customs-union membership could break the parliamentary impasse.

But while British politicians will no doubt find new doors to open, whether they can reach a multiparty

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leaders are to have any hope of uniting their bitterly divided country, they will have to lead by example.

Looking ahead, the EU will remain somewhat flexible, as it has from the start. What it will not tolerate are attempts by British politicians—Labour or Conservative—to settle domestic political disputes by dumping them onto European policymakers' shoulders.

In this context, British requests to extend the Brexit negotiations should be assessed in good faith and granted if more time is needed to settle technical matters. But no extension can go beyond July 2, 2019, as that is when a new European Parliament will be seated, following an election in May that will be a battle for Europe's soul. With populists in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere campaigning against the EU's foundational values, European politicians have much more than British domestic political squabbles to worry about.

As for the Remainers seeking to overturn the 2016 Brexit referendum, they should remember that the UK need not remain outside the EU forever. The current deal on the table would not prevent Britain from reapplying for membership, even during the transition period. To my mind, it is almost inevitable that some compelling young British politician will emerge one day to lead the UK back into the EU, where it belongs.

But for now, the clock is ticking, and those who will be the most adversely affected by Brexit—including British businesses, young people, Britons living in the EU, and EU citizens living in the UK—deserve an orderly withdrawal. Given that a chaotic countdown to a disastrous "no deal" Brexit—in which the UK crashes out of the EU single market and customs union—would poison UK-EU relations for decades to come, no responsible politician should even entertain the possibility.

It is time for British politicians to come out of their trenches and start talking. Only Britons can move their politics from adversarial zero-sum brinkmanship to constructive consensus-building. Such a change in the UK's political culture is long overdue.



PHOTO: PETER NICHOLLS/REUTERS

Meanwhile, diplomats and politicians in Brussels have been deeply regretting May's latest setback. After all, the agreement that was voted down was not just "May's deal" but also the "European Union's deal"—a point that has been lost on too many British MPs.

Given the "red lines" that May drew around limiting immigration and removing the United Kingdom from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, the deal she reached is nothing if not balanced. By settling financial obligations and offering certainty both to EU and UK citizens caught in the crossfire, it provides for an orderly divorce.

Moreover, the political declaration accompanying the divorce agreement lays the groundwork for a close and enduring future relationship between the UK and the EU. Both sides have committed to negotiating a

agreement on which one to walk through remains uncertain. Cross-party solutions do not come naturally to the UK's bipolar, adversarial political system. And yet, where there's a will, there's a way to put the national interest before narrow partisan concerns.

A multiparty approach is, of course, familiar to continental European politicians. EU legislation regularly ends up being finalised through late-night negotiations between MEPs and ministers who have locked themselves in a room to thrash out the necessary compromises.

A cultural shift toward an EU-style "co-decision" process could well win the support of the British public, as well as of European Brexit negotiators, who have been eagerly awaiting a more representative position from London for two years now. And if British political

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