

Who bears responsibility for these deaths?

Chawkbazar fire displays gross disrespect for human life

ONLY two days ago, this paper ran an editorial on how chemical warehouses continue to operate in old Dhaka. By the government's own estimate in 2017, there were some 360 factories and stores of chemicals in the area, in blatant disregard for human life! The fire that engulfed Chawkbazar on the night of February 20 has already claimed 70 lives and scores have been wounded. Reportedly, the source of the fire was a chemical warehouse. The incident brings back horrific memories for old Dhaka residents who had to live through a tragedy that occurred in 2010 in Nimtoli and there the fire had started from a stove in a building that stored combustible chemicals on the ground floor. In the aftermath of the Nimtoli fiasco that claimed some 123 lives, we were assured that steps would be taken to remove flammable chemical storage from the residential area. As we have just found out, nothing much has happened and hundreds of families have lost their loved ones because the Nimtoli fire has disappeared from collective memory.

With the narrow winding streets of Chawkbazar, it took hours for the fire brigade teams to bring the flames under control. Given the density of buildings in the old town, where many structures share common walls, it was inevitable that the fire spread alarmingly. We are told by fire brigade sources that the landlord of the building had been asked several times in the past to remove the go-downs, but our question is why chemical storage facilities were allowed in such congested spaces in the first place, especially after the Nimtoli incident? How many more people need to die before assurances turn into concrete steps by concerned authorities to totally ban the storage of flammable chemicals where people live and the prohibition is enforced? We have ample laws to govern peoples' lives but when they are not implemented, we end up with tragedies like the one in Chawkbazar.

Hapless slum dwellers with nowhere to go

A rehabilitation programme should have been part of the drive

IT is unthinkable that 10,000 people should become homeless overnight as we saw happen with the residents of Dhaka's Bhasantek slum this week. An eviction drive launched by the National Housing Authority (NHA) on Tuesday has left thousands of people without a home—with nowhere to go.

The land, which was acquired by the government in the '70s, is apparently being cleared to make room for a project titled "Griho Shuchona Flat". While the NHA claims that the slum dwellers had been asked "many times" to vacate their homes and served multiple notices, residents say that they were never given a legal notice and an announcement was made only a week prior. These contradictory claims aside, one cannot deny that this is simply no way to reclaim government land. While the government has every right to take control over its own land, this particular situation could have been dealt with in a more humane manner. And why has the number of slums in the capital, many of which are on government land, been allowed to mushroom? We hope the government realises that the lack of adequate affordable housing in Dhaka is one of the major reasons why people choose slums to live in.

We are disappointed, but not totally surprised, that no action has yet been taken against all those people who had illegally acquired the land and helped set up these slums in the first place. It is extremely unfortunate that it's always the weakest section of our society that ends up being adversely affected every time something like this happens. The authorities should immediately take steps to rehabilitate these people and provide some form of relief until they can safely relocate elsewhere. And those who illegally took control over this piece of government land and profited off of slum dwellers for so long must be brought to book. These helpless people who have been forcefully evicted must not be the only ones to face the consequences.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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For better healthcare

Advancing community health is central to achieving the SDGs and universal primary healthcare. The foundations of community health within the context of primary healthcare are increasingly being recognised as crucial components of national policies and strategies to accelerate progress in health. In rural Bangladesh, community clinics (CCs) are the closest health facilities for the community people. CCs are the lowest-tier health facility at the primary level established throughout the country including in very hard-to-reach areas. Thousands of people are getting services from there and they have become an integral part of the health system.

All CCs have been provided with laptops and internet connection. But there are some challenges as well, and these stem from the lack of skilled healthcare professionals in rural Bangladesh. They are currently managed by community service providers who have received training only for a short period of time. Physicians who pass MBBS are supposed to serve the rural community for one year as interns; so they can easily be placed in CCs. They can serve these communities and improve the quality of treatment. The government should think about implementing this at the policy level. **Zubair Khaled Huq, by email**

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



NAZMUL AHASAN

populations put Bangladesh on top. A more recent report by Wealth X estimates that Bangladesh will witness, in the next five years, a growth in its "high-net-worth" population, which is the third highest in the world, at an 11.4 percent compound annual rate. In other words, if the number of Bangladesh's high net worth individuals is 100 today, say, it would be about 171-172 five years later in 2023.

Around the same time, a World Bank blog-post based on its "Poverty and Shared Prosperity-2018" report reminded us of the fact that Bangladesh was hosting the fifth largest poor population in the world. According to the World Bank standard, 24.1 million people in Bangladesh earn less than USD 1.90 (in terms of purchasing power parity) a day, thus, live in extreme poverty.

The irony of this scenario is overwhelming. Here is a country, often referred to as the next Asian Tiger, hosting one of the world's largest poor populations—that too, when the country's wealthy are experiencing a bonanza.

The widening disparity in Bangladesh was first notably illustrated by a government agency. In its Household Income Survey 2016, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that the income share of the richest five percent of the country rose by 57 percent in 10 years, while the poorest five percent had their income reduced by 59 percent in the same period.

While it makes sense that Bangladesh's solid economic growth is giving rise to the number of rich and ultra-rich individuals, what the growth doesn't explain is why our wealth and

income inequality is increasing. In fact, the growth doesn't explain a lot about other phenomena such as joblessness. All available data suggests the number of people entering the workforce every year outpaces the number of jobs being created in the country. According to the "Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2018" released by International Labour Organisation (ILO), Bangladesh is experiencing "the most severe worsening of the youth unemployment situation" in the entire Asia-Pacific region. And, in terms of employment of youth with tertiary education, Bangladesh is second to only Pakistan.

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than Bangladesh's 2018 budget, the largest in its history. The media interviewed unnamed businessmen saying many didn't feel it safe to keep their money in the country due to the turbulent nature of politics.

Does not all this imply that the benefit of the growth is reaped by a handful of "high-net-worth" or "ultra high-net-worth" individuals who are reluctant to reinvest their wealth in the country, thus, contributing to an abysmal job creation rate?

And, what has our government done to discourage the trend and create a stable environment conducive to private investment? Until the election, the

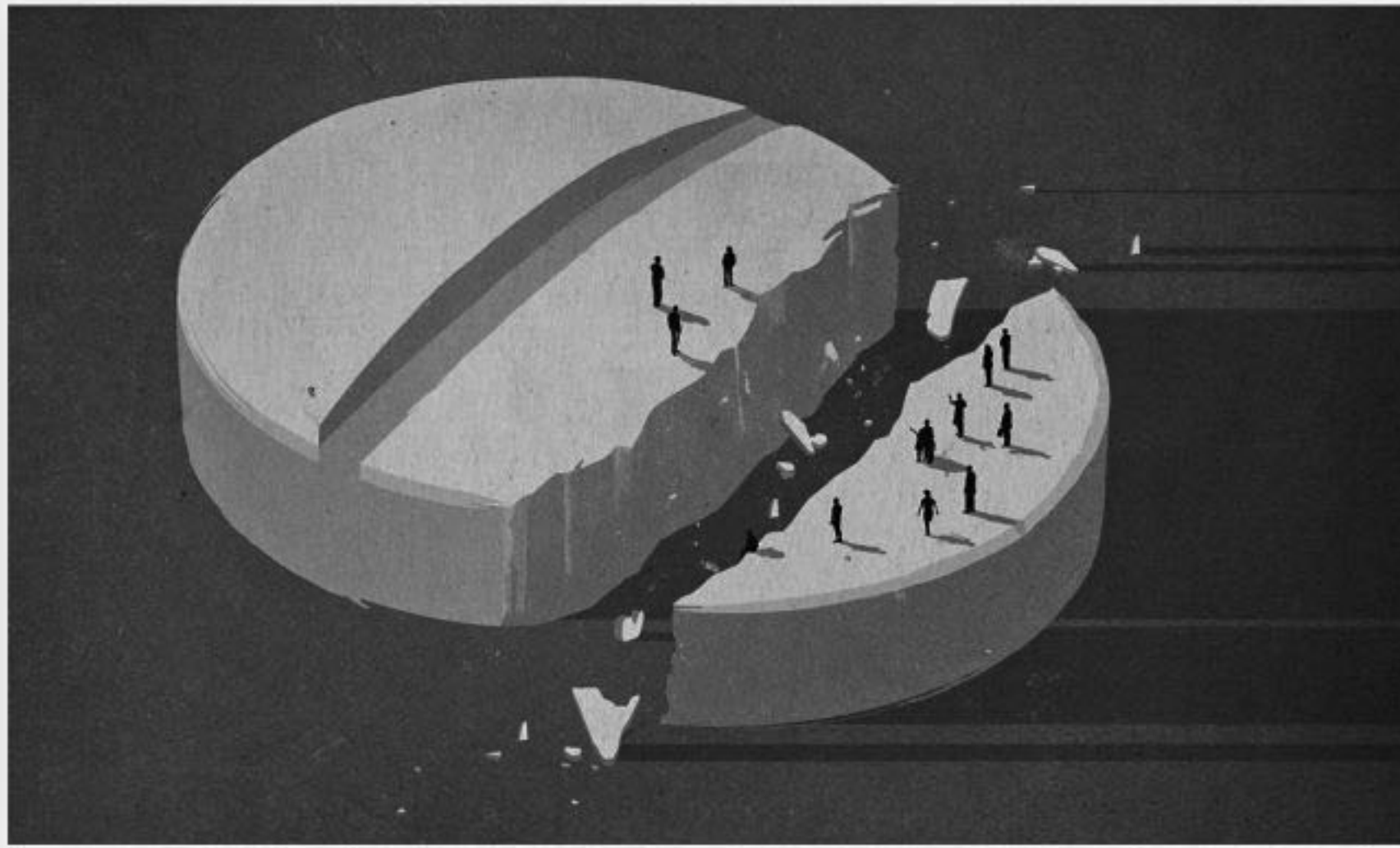


ILLUSTRATION: PATRIK SVENSSON/WE FORUM

There's another recent global report that must have disturbed many. The Global Financial Integrity (GFI) has recently listed Bangladesh among the top 30 developing countries in terms of illicit financial outflow. In 2015 alone, nearly USD 6 billion went out of the country, mainly through misinvoicing—an illicit practice adopted by some Bangladeshi exporters (colluding with foreign importers) to not bring their money home. To put it in context, according to economist Debapriya Bhattacharya, Bangladeshis laundered money three times the amount of foreign aid it received in 2015. And from 2005 to 2014, illicit flow from Bangladesh stood at USD 61.63 billion, which was more

government resorted to heavy-handed tactics to deal with political opponents although it risked plunging the country into chaos. However, the fact that the governing party now exudes enormous confidence will certainly be assuring to investors at home and abroad.

What's more, unlike many other global rankings that put Bangladesh in a bad light, "the ease of doing business" index seems to have been taken seriously by the government. It has decided to launch "one-stop service" and combine several investment-related state bodies so that potential investors can avoid the lingering bureaucratic hassle.

It's also a welcome sign that the anti-corruption commission (ACC) is

Will yaba smuggling end with the surrender of some godfathers?



GOLAM MORTOZA

use the words "dealers" or "traders" to mention the yaba godfathers. I am talking from a general perspective.

Yaba, a dangerous drug, is smuggled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. Those who bring this drug are plain smugglers. Those who import goods in a legal way can be called businessmen or traders. There is a difference between a businessman and a smuggler. Those who are calling them "yaba dealers" are actually accepting them as businessmen, which is disrespectful to real businessmen. So the 102 yaba godfathers who surrendered recently are in no way yaba dealers or traders.

Of the 2,000 yaba smugglers whose names are on the home ministry's list, at least 102 have surrendered. No steps were taken against them in the past when they had roamed freely in the Teknaf-Cox's Bazar area and continued smuggling this drug. Not only were they involved in the smuggling of yaba and other narcotics, they were also involved in many other nefarious activities in the region. Among the 102 who surrendered, 12 are from one family. In the home ministry's list, the top two patrons of the yaba smugglers were mentioned as Abdur Rahman Bodi, a former MP of the Awami League, and his brother Moulovi Mojibur Rahman. That Bangladesh has been flooded with yaba is through the sole contribution of the

Former MP Abdur Rahman Bodi has been saying all along that he, nor his family, are involved in yaba smuggling. During the recent anti-drug drive, the brother of Bodi's wife had died in crossfire but Bodi never admitted that the person was his relative.

According to the government's list, there are 73 big yaba smugglers, of them 30 have surrendered. Among the 30, 12 are Bodi's family members including Bodi's four brothers (Abdul Shukkur, Abdul Amin, Md Shafiq and Md Faisal), one cousin (Kamrul Islam Rasel), and his nephew (Shahedur Rahman Nipu). In some of the news reports, the number was mentioned as 14 or 16.

Bodi, whose name is at the top of the government's list, was given the responsibility of coordinating the whole surrender process. Although it was

He directed them to make the list more cautiously saying that "there are allegations against Bodi but no proof". The Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader has also expressed similar views. A section of the Awami League leaders from Teknaf-Cox's Bazar area have repeatedly alleged that not only Bodi but also his family members have led the yaba smugglers under the patronage of the high-ups. The yaba smugglers have carried out their activities in public without any hindrance and even got assistance from the administration. They have become powerful under the patronage of Bodi. How powerful they are has also been proven on the stage of the surrender ceremony when Bodi's cousin threatened media activists. Everyone in the front rows heard him saying: "I will teach you

family of smugglers. While most members of his family are involved in yaba smuggling, he, the main godfather, is now the coordinator of the surrender process.

Now there are two questions. First, why did they surrender in the first place? And second, will the yaba smuggling stop now?

The death of small drug peddlers in the anti-drug drive has frightened the big smugglers as they know that although a section of the administration is favouring them, there is also another section which is against them. With the huge money they have made from drug smuggling, they have built expensive houses in Teknaf, but they cannot live in these houses in safety. There is a possibility that they might lose their properties. Perhaps they have surrendered to save their properties. Maybe they have also considered the fact that their surrender would not create any problem in their smuggling which they will do secretly. Maybe they wanted to give people an idea that they are good people now, not yaba smugglers anymore.

Although Bodi is a former MP, his family is recognised as a family of yaba smugglers. During the last election, he did not get nomination from his party, but his wife did and has become an MP. In future, he might face many adversities because the media would not stop reporting on them. Thus, he took the initiative of arranging a surrender programme for the yaba smugglers. But since he himself and his own brothers did not surrender, he might now claim that he as well as his family members are not yaba smugglers.

Yaba smuggling involves hundreds or thousands of crores of taka. The border guards, the members of the law enforcement agencies and a big section of the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf administration are all partners in this smuggling. There have been allegations against some members of the law enforcement agencies of direct involvement in yaba smuggling. Moreover, not only a section of the ruling Awami League but also many from the BNP-Jamaat are involved in the yaba smuggling. Although there is political enmity among the parties, when it comes to yaba smuggling, they seem to have good relations with each other.

Those of the local administration who are involved in smuggling have not been identified. And Bodi and his brother, the main two godfathers in the list, have not surrendered. Around 1,500 enlisted yaba smugglers remained outside this surrender process. Besides those whose names are on the list, there are many others including the syndicates in Myanmar. There are reports that yaba smuggling is going on despite all these measures. So it cannot be said in any way that through the surrender of a section of the yaba godfathers, yaba smuggling in the country will end.

Golam Mortoza is a journalist. The article was translated from Bangla by Naznin Titli.



Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal hands out flowers to a listed drug smuggler during a surrender ceremony on the premises of Teknaf Model Primary School in Cox's Bazar.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

reported many times in the media with specific allegations against Bodi and his family members, including his brothers and nephews, of being yaba smugglers, Bodi himself did not surrender, nor did his brother Moulovi Mojibur Rahman, whose name came second in the list.

It is well-known that the administration of Teknaf runs as per Bodi's directives. But the names of Bodi and his family members have always been in the yaba smugglers' list, prepared by the local administration. Yet Bodi has always managed to get help from the government high-ups. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal has inaugurated the anti-narcotic week campaign with the assistance of Bodi. The minister has even expressed his doubt about the list prepared by the law enforcement agencies.

a lesson after the surrender. Yaba businessmen have connections everywhere." The minister and the high-ups from the administration must also have heard this but they remained silent.

Since Bodi's ancestors came from Myanmar, he has relatives living there. It is said that his family has yaba factories there. When his relatives involved in yaba smuggling face any problem in Myanmar, they come to Bangladesh to take shelter. In similar situations, his Bangladeshi relatives take shelter in Myanmar without any hassle. The Myanmar military also patronises this joint yaba syndicate.

During the anti-drug drives, Bodi went to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah while his relatives took shelter in Myanmar. During the surrender programme, it has been proven at last that his family is a