

Ensuring safety of children still a far cry

Govt. has a duty to protect the rights of every child

NOT a day goes by that we don't hear or read about children being raped, beaten, or killed. According to Manusher Jonno Foundation's (MJF) report titled "Bangladesh Child Situation-2018: Newspaper Analysis", in 2018, 246 news reports published in six leading national dailies cited the murders and attempted murders of 276 children across the country, which is an increase from the 208 reports in 2017 citing 224 victims. Even the reported number of children killed in 2018 (227) is an increase from the previous year (196).

There is an urgent need to re-evaluate our priorities because we have not been able to address the root causes behind the rampant violation of child rights in our society today. What is also dispiriting is that despite the existence of laws and initiatives, and even in countless cases where violence against children comes to light, the perpetrators get away with committing horrific crimes because of myriad reasons (political influence being one of them). And the fact that conviction rates in cases filed against the repression of women and children are less than one percent only goes to show that the process of trial is not properly equipped to dispense justice in cases related to child rights violation.

The state has to do more to ensure the safety of children in the country. Judicial reform should be of utmost priority. The problems associated with lengthy, costly procedures which dissuade families to seek legal action must be addressed, and disposal of cases must be sped up because we must not forget that punishment acts as a deterrent. Sensitising and training law enforcement personnel is another area that needs focus; it is of paramount importance that child victims are dealt with sensitively and that investigation reports are done with diligence and care. The government has a duty to ensure that victims and their families do not face intimidation and harassment at every step of the legal process, and send a clear message that hurting children shall have its consequences.

Wasa must fulfil its primary responsibility

People suffering because of its inaction

IT is unacceptable that the residents of south-eastern Dhaka are getting sewage-like stinky water from Dhaka Wasa. Unsurprisingly, the problem that the residents of that area have been facing is nothing new. According to the residents, this is a 20-year-old problem which has never been addressed properly by Wasa. So now the residents of the area are totally dependent on the nearby 20 mosques of East Jurain and South Shahjalalbagh to get fresh water supply from deep tube-wells.

Unfortunately, Wasa-supplied water has become an issue in both south and north Dhaka. A recent TIB report has revealed that about 35 percent of service-seekers complained of getting poor-quality water from Wasa throughout the year while nearly 45 percent of service-seekers in the capital said that they didn't get adequate supply of water from Dhaka Wasa. Only a few days ago, we have seen a sample of Wasa-supplied water in Jurain when the residents of the area went to the Wasa office with a jar full of muddy water. There is just no scope for the Wasa authorities to deny the fact that water supplied by them is undrinkable and sometimes unusable for other household purposes also.

Wasa must do everything in its power to ensure that the water supplied by them is potable and adequate. They must also test the water frequently to ensure that it is safe for use. The High Court in November last year formed a committee to test the quality of Wasa-supplied water. We would like to know if the committee has performed its duty properly, and if it did, it should make its findings public.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Increasing house rent in Dhaka: Who will address it?

With only about twenty to twenty-five percent people having their own houses, Dhaka is inhabited by over 20 million people. There have been little visible efforts to relocate major offices and structures which are blamed for Dhaka's population density, and as a result, the city is increasingly under the threat of being unlivable. People mostly come to this city to make a living. Dhaka is the most important hub of businesses in the country which eventually results in the burgeoning demand for rented houses. The house owners are capitalising on this situation by increasing rents.

It's no wonder that house rents take up a major portion of people's income today. It's like the tenants are completely in the grip of the landlords. The city authorities are well-informed about this matter but apparently, they are not doing anything about it. This is a very important issue for the residents. The government should address the house rent issue urgently.

Abu Hasnat Evna Mostafa
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question is how this is possible in the first place. The diverted water is causing havoc for at least seven streams downhill which are on the verge of drying up and threatens to both adversely affect the forest's biodiversity and deprive the people of an indigenous village of water supply. Investigative reporting by this paper has found that the company which recently constructed a new factory has also dug a 100-metre canal to channel the water away from the stream and filled up 1.26 acres of pond in the Kumira area to expand its factory.

The factory in question has 4,200 workers and the company authorities have stated that it had tried to bore for underground water but nothing was found 1,000 feet down. The factory will need 220,000 litres of water for drinking purposes and a further 60 million litres of water to operate the factory on a daily basis. Water is needed in various steps in a steel plant. It is used for cooling, boiler feed water, intake water—where water is pumped to the steel from water source. In fact, it would be impossible to list all the uses of water in a factory of this kind where access to a continuous supply of water is an essential prerequisite to making steel.

The forest official responsible for the area has alleged that the company built the dam overnight employing hundreds of labourers. "They built the dam by dumping sandbags. They even cut a hill to direct water to their steel factory. Drying up of the streams will wreak havoc on the wildlife of the reserve forest and people living downstream," he said. Those living in the Tripura Palli, home to some 200 indigenous families, are simply too afraid to comment on the development fearing retribution, but they are at the forefront of the damage if water flow is not restored. And it is not only the indigenous communities that are intimidated, the forest authorities also were allegedly threatened when they went

to stop the illegal developments.

We are told that a case has been filed against the company. The land department, forest department, department of environment and the district administration must get involved in what is clearly a case of encroachment and illegal construction, deliberately hampering the free flow of water that feeds several other smaller streams downhill. The fact that the factory failed

by multiple authorities here. The sad reality, of course, is that when it comes to industrialisation, conserving forest resources and biodiversity always takes a backseat in Bangladesh. As Bangladesh races ahead to reach the status of a middle-income country by 2021, we are confronted with finding that fine balance between biodiversity and destruction and exploitation of natural resources.

But the laws are quite explicit about

both, for a first offence. For subsequent offences, the punishment is up to 10 years' imprisonment or a fine of Tk 1 million or both.

It has never been a question of not having requisite laws, rather the stark absence of enforcement. The lack of oversight, regulation, and implementation of existing laws to protect the stream from an illegal construction, which has impeded the



The Chattogram-based GPH Ispat Ltd has constructed a makeshift dam on a stream bordering the Jangal-Bashbaria reserve forest in Sitakunda. The dam is a threat to the forest's biodiversity and could deprive an indigenous village of water.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

to find sufficient water underground is its problem. That should have been part of the feasibility study before the construction of the factory. Again, forest resources cannot be utilised for company profits because there are people living in the area who are dependent on natural water that flows from the forest.

We have found through our own investigation that a hill has also been cut to direct water to the factory. So, there are ample grounds for action

nature conservation. We have enacted several pieces of legislation over the years to protect forest resources but we find that it is always forests that take the hammering when we look for industrial land. For instance, Bangladesh Environment Preservation Act 1995 (amended in 2000) states that cutting of hills without the approval of the authorities concerned is prohibited. It carries punishment up to two years imprisonment or a fine of Tk 200,000, or

natural flow of water in this case, will inevitably have grave consequences for the people living downstream and effectively depopulate other streams of the fish population. We can only hope that the custodians of the forest and other relevant authorities will move to save this waterway and the biodiversity that is dependent on it.

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US 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Challenges facing the Democrats in the primary season

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

THE 2020 US presidential election is about a year and a half away, and the Democratic primary season is about to unfold. While it is hard to make a prediction at this stage, what is certain is that the Democrats are supremely energised. Their intense energy level was on full display in the 2018 mid-term polls. The high turnout of Democratic voters helped them take back the Congress in a spectacular fashion, making inroads into areas Trump had dominated in 2016.

Mr Trump himself is the driver of this energy. A large number of Americans loathe his divisive politics, his disdain for and trampling of American values, his fanning of fear to mobilise his base by manufacturing a false narrative on a number of issues. Immigration, global warming, and relations with traditional allies are some examples. Indeed, many analysts think that the rise of hate crimes, not only in America but also beyond, can be traced to his inflammatory rhetoric. His words give legitimacy to the rising culture of violence.

One trend among the Democrats at this early stage of the primary season is to identify themselves as liberals. A Chicago University poll, General Survey GSS, put 54 percent of Democrats in the category of liberals. In 1972, the same poll put the number of liberals at 32 percent. Another poll, Cooperative Congressional Election Study, run by a group of Harvard researchers, found that even those calling themselves conservatives among the Democrats have a left orientation. They support Medicare for all by 90 percent, a minimum wage of USD 12 by 80 percent in place of the existing USD 7, and unrestricted access to abortion for women—all pet liberal issues.

Obviously, this leftward tilt is a reaction to the Trump culture. The point to note, however, is that in a typically capitalist society like America, a leftist-oriented campaign is not the right method to win elections.

We may take a quick look at some of the Democratic aspirants who have declared their candidacy. The most prominent name to have entered the crowded field of Democratic candidates competing to take on Donald Trump in the 2020 election is the former US vice-president Joe Biden, who announced his

bid to win Democratic nomination late last week. He may emerge as a formidable figure in the race.

Another person who also hogged the limelight is Bernie Sanders, a Senator from Vermont. He was involved in a tight contest with Hillary Clinton in 2016 before losing the nomination fight. The general view was that his left-leaning ideas, portraying him as a kind of a socialist, had caused his defeat. He is in his mid-seventies, but his energy and rhetorical power are enviable.

We will examine him more closely but at this point let us just briefly mention some other figures who are also taking a

Amy Klobuchar (Senator, Minnesota): Some analysts believe she can win back some of the Obama supporters who went to Trump in 2016.

Cory Booker (Senator, New Jersey): An African-America politician with a unifying power. His ties with the Wall Street may be a weakness.

Kirsten Gillibrand (Senator, New York): She has a liberal mind-set, supports funding for public school, and wants to fight special interests and lobbyists in Washington.

Recently, Senator Bernie Sanders' strategy to reach out to Trump supporters has attracted media focus.



US 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders participates in a moderated discussion at the We the People Summit in Washington, April 1, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

shot at the presidency.

Beto O'Rourke, ex Representative from Texas: O'Rourke captured public attention through a sparkling campaign for the Senate in 2018 mid-term against Republican stalwart Ted Cruz. He lost by a narrow margin but his potential was left in no doubt.

Kamala Harris (Senator, California): The daughter of an Indian immigrant mother and a Jamaican immigrant father, who describes herself as a black. She served as Attorney General of California, is sharp and articulate with a balanced mind. She has shown an ability to connect with the voters.

He demonstrated his courage of convictions and enjoyed media attention by a somewhat surprising but stirring appearance in a conservative Fox Channel-sponsored town hall meeting attended by a diverse group of audience. It was his third appearance in Trump-leaning forums. Usually, the Democratic candidates have concentrated on mobilising Trump opponents. His critics say that this is a risky move because it may scare off the Democratic centre and nullify the gains made by centrist Democratic lawmakers in suburban areas in 2018 mid-term.

In 2018, it was mostly the traditional

Democrats who did well. For instance, in Wisconsin and Michigan, traditional candidates wrested both Governors' seats from the Republicans.

Sanders has prompted a debate about whether the Democrats should nominate a Democratic version of Trump like him, whose combativeness closely matches Trump's, or a consensus-builder who can rise above partisan anger and bring people together.

As Sanders tries to get his campaign to acquire a tempo, he has already made it clear that he will try to sway voters, especially those who have shut their eyes and ears to the vacuous, insubstantial stuff that Trump keeps vocalising. A few things that Sanders has said should be of interest to the readers of this piece.

In the Fox Channel town-hall meeting, lambasting Trump's support for the Saudi war in Yemen which caused a devastating humanitarian crisis, Sanders observed: "Saudi Arabia should not be determining the foreign policy of this country." He also criticised the president's habit of saying things unconnected with the reality: "Trump cannot even tell the truth as to where his father was born... I don't think that the American people are proud that we have a president who is a pathological liar." It is worth noting that even the conservative Fox moderators did not contest Sanders' characterisation of Trump as a liar. Earlier in a Union Hall meeting in Michigan, he said: "The biggest lie was that he [Trump] was going to stand up for working families and take on the establishment." Clearly, his objective was to open the eyes of Trump base to the unreliability of their president.

That Sanders has a good hand on the voters' pulse was also demonstrated when the audience in Fox was asked to indicate their reaction to the Medicare for all, and every one raised their hands.

A new twist has been added to what is already a complex scene by the Muller report on possible obstruction of justice by Trump on the question of Russian collusion in his 2016 campaign. The Democrats-controlled Congress has quite a job in its hand as it takes up the report and tries to build a compelling case that there was an obstruction of justice by the president. If they succeed, they will make the voters see that Trump is acting purely out of an ego-centric motive instead of any institutional concern.

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