

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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## Can Dhaka really be congestion-free?

*We hope the new plan works*

WE welcome, albeit with a pinch of salt, the formation of a special committee led by Dhaka South City Corporation mayor to remove illegal vehicles from the streets and free footpaths from grabbers, thereby easing the intolerable traffic congestion that plagues us every day. At present, according to Accident Research Institute of Buet, every day, around 5 million working hours are wasted away while the average speed of vehicles during rush hours is 5kmph. The losses therefore are huge—between Tk 20,000 crore to Tk 50,000 crore.

It is heartening to know that the committee will initiate a move with the police to identify illegal vehicles including rickshaws, battery-operated rickshaws and CNG-run auto rickshaws. Intrusion from other districts and illegal parking will also be stopped. While all this sounds very encouraging on paper, we cannot but be a little sceptical considering the fact that traffic congestion has been disrupting our lives for years and many such drives from the government have been initiated with little long-term results. We hope that this two-month target will not be another well-intentioned move that fizzles out in the long run, only to maintain the unbearable status quo. The Road Transport and Bridges minister has admitted that many such decisions in the past were not implemented but has promised that things will be different this time. Perhaps this is because nobody is addressing how such traffic violations occur in the first place—because the traffic rules are not enforced properly and many violators go scot-free.

The minister has rightly identified the key to a successful drive which is sincerity in carrying it out and sticking to the programme. The people of Dhaka are exhausted and depleted by the scourge of traffic gridlocks. They are also tired of empty promises. We fervently hope that this time the plan to free the streets of illegal vehicles and the footpaths from illegal occupiers, will work.

## Knocked down buildings reoccupied!

*People choosing to be in harm's way*

IT is a peculiar situation obtaining with regard to the pulled-down structures constructed illegally alongside the rivers and water bodies belonging to the government. While only a part of some of these structures, only that which has encroached on government land, has been broken, the rest of the structure, in most cases houses, remains standing being on valid land. And these are being reoccupied by the owners or perhaps others seeking shelter from nature, or with the sinister motive of reoccupying and reconstructing illegally on the same spot, putting lives at risk. Most of these structures are in a dangerous state, as a picture in this paper of June 19 shows.

We compliment the BIWTA for pulling down nearly a thousand such illegal buildings, but does the responsibility of the authorities end with breaking down the illegal constructions only? If it is the only remit of BIWTA, it devolves on the civil administration, we feel, to ensure that these buildings are not reoccupied. Sign postings declaring the building dangerous should have been displayed in front of these buildings, and regular observation on these structures should have been arranged with the help of the local police, councillors and UZ members. It must be done in order to ensure that, firstly, the BIWTA eviction drive is carried to a positive conclusion and the banks of the rivers and canals are freed permanently, and that no one can move into the knocked down building till it is made safe enough, and under a certificate of the local authorities.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### First magnetite iron mine unveiled in Bangladesh

This letter is in reference to a report titled, "Bangladesh discovers first magnetite iron mine in Dinajpur", published in this newspaper recently. The report stated that, for the first time in Bangladesh, a magnetite iron mine has been discovered by the Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB) at Isabpur village in Hakimpur upazila of the Dinajpur district, bringing new hope for the country's economy.

The GSB made the ground-breaking announcement following extensive examinations after drilling a well for two months and it is a matter of national pride and prestige. The work done by the team of GSB is commendable as they have unveiled such a discovery with their limited technology without any aid from foreign experts.

The GSB informed that a 400-foot thick iron layer was found 1,750 feet beneath the surface and it stretches over an area of 6-10 square kilometres. Apart from the presence of gold, there are copper, nickel and chromium in the layer.

The discovery made by the GSB team has certainly saved a huge amount of foreign currency as no foreign aid was required. The team has proved themselves to be efficient in the past for other mine discoveries in several parts of Bangladesh. The government should encourage them to continue their initiative drives through financial reward and technological support, so that they can keep doing their job with such excellence.

Md Zillur Rahaman, *By email*



# Global Peace Index: Can numbers define world peace?



RAMISA ROB

PERCEPTIONS of peacefulness can vary from person to person, nation to nation, depending on various factors such as the interplay of religious convictions, ethics, with real-life experiences. So logically, everyone's views will not be reflected in, and can even be contradicted by the "Global Peace Index"—a measurement of "relative" position of peacefulness in 163 nations around the world, performed every year by non-profit think tank, The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), headquartered in Sydney, Australia. But if world peace itself reflects a broad, intangible concept, how can it be defined and described with numbers and statistics?

On June 12, 2019, *The Daily Star* reported on the Global Peace Index 2019, with the headline, "Bangladesh among least peaceful countries." Reading just as much, I immediately recalled recent national news detailing widespread violence, from domestic abuse to rape, and the inevitable premonition I would feel when walking on the street alone, especially at night, as a young woman. Perplexed with this jolt of reality, I concluded the ranking was befitting.

Then I read that Bangladesh was in the 101st position, while the United States—the so-called "land of the free, home of the brave," where many young people from all over the world, myself included, migrate for higher education—ranked lower, in the 128th position. Despite the prevalence of gun violence, I must admit that I always felt "safer" walking on the streets in the US, even just a week after my university town was terrorised by an active shooter. Contrastingly, young girls in Bangladesh are warned to avoid trespassing public spaces at night-time, even during "politically restful" weeks.

The main dilemma here is that violence against women and children is not separately accommodated in the Global Peace Index. Self-evident in the term "global peace" though is the understanding that violence within the nation will be situated and compared with other nations on the world map. So, a nation's domestic safety should not be conflated with its index ranking, as a whole; violent crimes, homicide rates, incarceration rates, are merely components of one of three "thematic" domains, *ongoing conflict and social security*, used to define "peace" in the GPI.

The other two include: the extent of *ongoing domestic and international conflict*

and the *degree of militarisation* (the number of armed services personnel per 100,000 people and military expenditure as a percentage of GDP). With this combination, the GPI generates "results," essentially judgments that profess to encapsulate "world peace," with ostentatious "average country scores" to compare nations, regionally and globally.

The irony, however, is that the report distils complex information related to gender-based violence from Gallup World Poll, to erect a simple bar chart titled, "Percentage of men and women who feel safe walking alone in 2018," that ambiguously declares, "the greatest disparity can be found in high peace countries." At a surface level, this section implies that sexism is most noticeable

surveyed.

Yet, this same nation is classified as the 37th, "highly peaceful" nation in GPI. On the other hand, the United Kingdom, which ranked 45th in the GPI (18 ranks lower than Chile), earned a high 12th place in WPS Index, 50 places above Chile. At the very least, such discrepancies show every reason not to *blindly* trust all indexes.

In a way, global indices like the GPI are inherently far-fetched because they average diverse, qualitative information to derive black and white conclusions—a generalist lens that negates the scale and impact of intimate violence. Such untrustworthy elements of the GPI's rankings are best exemplified in its characterisation of North America, which

On the other hand, GPI ranks South Asia as the second "least peaceful" subcontinent, where confusion emerges from the study's vague innuendo that, "South Asia usually has lower levels of violent crime than the rest of the world, as the region's challenges are more likely to be political than criminal." Are we really to believe that violent crimes, from domestic violence to child abuse, are lower in this region than the rest of the world?

A report by the World Economic Forum published on October 12, 2018, contradicts the statement, by labelling India as the 20th most dangerous country and Pakistan as 11th, in terms of organised crime, terrorism, homicide and reliability of police forces. The index also glosses over a bias in data collection that violent crimes rooted in misogyny and classism in South Asia are a normalised problem that remains underreported. So, if the GPI is so far from reality, is it even fruitful for domestic, regional and international foreign policymakers?

The praiseworthy maxim in the GPI that I believe could use international attention is the straightforward suggestion that militarisation disrupts tranquility in the world—demonstrated in the report's placement of politically powerful, economically affluent and even domestically peaceful nations that perpetuate international conflict, as lower than nations affected by their transgressions. For example, Palestine ranks 142nd, Israel is 146th; Ukraine 150th and Russia 154th. Israel, the US and Russia are deemed "least peaceful" in terms of mobilising troops, respectively.

Yet, I reckon that weighing the militarisation of the aforementioned countries as the most influential cause of international conflict can be only my opinion. But global indices elevate themselves above being mere speculation, by employing metrics to describe the state of world peace. And in the process, they reveal a multitude of blind spots, thereby painting a flawed dimension of peacefulness.

Alas, officials around the world, including but not limited to the UN Secretary General, have endorsed this index; after the 2017 report, former Chief of Staff, Dr Jonathan PJ Sandy, of Sierra Leone (which ranked 1st in the region of West Africa that year), praised the GPI as an "impetus for the country." So now, I can't help but notice that the bigger problem here is the standardised but troublesome universal attraction to statistics and numbers, that seems to be, yet should not be the way to go about everything in today's era.

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ILLUSTRATION: RAMISA ROB

in nations like Switzerland and Iceland, where other forms of violence are rare, and that in nations like Afghanistan (which ranks lowest of all nations in the GPI), other issues such as intensity of terrorism burden both genders to feel insecure. But is this oversimplified formula always the case?

Take for instance, Chile, where 71 percent of children have been victimised by violence, and 8.7 percent of children have been subjected to domestic sexual abuse in 2017, according to the IV UNICEF Survey on Violence and Abuse. Similarly, from 2017-18, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index by Georgetown University's Institute for Peace and Security and The Peace Research Institute Oslo, which measured peace and security relating to women's inclusion and justice, ranked Chile at 62nd position out of 153 nations

faced the highest deterioration but somehow still achieved the second "most peaceful region" prize, behind only Europe.

The summation renders this difference—Canada's starkly higher rank overall, as the 6th most peaceful nation in the world, added to the low country score of the US, balances itself. This is not crude data, however; North America's downturn is contextualised to have occurred since 2016 US presidential elections, after the departure of former President Obama, so you can easily pick up what the GPI herein implies. The problem then, is not how the GPI presents its findings, but rather in its methodology: what is the use of averaging the US and Canada geographically, when only one nation is actually accountable for the downtrend of the whole region?

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Justice for Journalists



LEON WILLEMS

IT has been more than eight months since Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist and critic of his home country's government who had been living in self-exile, was tortured, killed, and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. As the Saudis bent over backward to obscure the truth about Khashoggi's fate, Turkey launched an investigation. As expected, not much has come of it.

Turkey is hardly a credible advocate for press freedom: in 2018, more than 80 journalists in the country received long prison sentences or fines for their work. But even if the Turkish government's indignation over Khashoggi's murder was exaggerated for diplomatic gain, Turkey's judiciary has complied with its international obligations to investigate. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is utterly flouting its obligations on this front. Under international pressure, the Kingdom is conducting hearings for 11 suspects. But according to Agnes Callamard, the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, these secretive, closed-door hearings are more about saving face than securing justice.

"We do not know who are charged as defendants, who among them face death sentences, and what are the charges," Callamard noted at a recent conference in Berlin. Western governments, she continued, "should not rubber-stamp a trial process that is ignoring all international standards."

By accepting the results of criminal proceedings that lack transparency and due process, the international community would fail Khashoggi and severely damage the broader effort to end impunity for crimes against journalists. Unfortunately, there is precedent for precisely this outcome.

In 1982, at the height of El Salvador's civil war, Colonel Mario Reyes Mena ordered his troops to set up an ambush

just outside of the city of El Paraiso. Four journalists working for the Dutch broadcaster IKON, who were in the country to report on the war, walked right into the trap, and were essentially executed.

Amid the ensuing global outrage, El Salvador's government tried hard to conceal the truth, claiming that the reporters were accidentally caught in crossfire between the army and the rebels. The United States government, which trained, advised, and supplied the Salvadoran army, backed this explanation in public statements, spurring outraged protesters to descend on the US Consulate General in Amsterdam.

prosecution for human-rights abuses committed during the war. But the Salvadoran Supreme Court overturned that law in 2016, declaring it unconstitutional.

Now, an ill-equipped and understaffed Salvadoran prosecutor, acting on a criminal complaint filed by the lawyers of one of the slain journalists' brothers, is investigating possible criminal charges against Reyes Mena, as well as Francisco Antonio Moran, the former head of El Salvador's secret police. But it is hardly clear that justice will be served, not least because of an enduring culture of impunity for crimes against journalists.

That culture is on stark display in Saudi



People protest the murder of Slovakian journalist Jan Kuciak and demand that the authorities prosecute those responsible.

PHOTO: REUTERS

But the victims' colleagues did not give up: their research indicated that the four journalists had, in fact, been deliberately targeted. Nearly a decade later, in 1993, the UN Truth Commission tasked with investigating the Salvadoran civil war confirmed this view. Yet Reyes Mena, now 79 years old, lives a quiet life in a suburb of Washington.

At first, this impunity could be explained by a 1993 amnesty law protecting the military, paramilitary groups, and guerrilla fighters from

Arabia, and not just over the Khashoggi killing. Dozens of journalists are in prison in Saudi Arabia. One of them, Turki bin Abdulaziz al-Jasser, was reportedly tortured to death last year. Saudi Arabia has faced no diplomatic penalty for such behaviour.

But impunity for perpetrators of crimes against journalists is not a foregone conclusion. Last year in Slovakia, the 27-year-old journalist Jan Kuciak, who had been investigating alleged political corruption linked to organised crime, and

his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were shot dead. After the killings, people took to the streets to demand that the authorities prosecute those responsible.

Public pressure, together with the European Union's demands for due process, had a powerful effect: the prime minister resigned, the general prosecutor was replaced, and an investigation was launched. In March, the businessman Marián Kocner was charged with ordering the murders.

Even in El Salvador, there is now a glimmer of hope that justice will be served. Thanks to the work of human-rights lawyers and activists, the resolve of the victims' family members and former colleagues, and pressure from the Dutch government, the public prosecutor's office is preparing to take statements from the relatives of the slain IKON journalists.

To support such efforts to secure justice for serious violent crimes against journalists, Free Press Unlimited, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders have created "A Safe World for the Truth." Investigations of such crimes—carried out by a team of journalists, forensic specialists, legal experts, and public data researchers—will be at the heart of the project.

To encourage public pressure like that seen in Slovakia, the investigators will publish their findings in documentaries and on social media, and deliver them to the relevant authorities. If this does not spur credible action to bring perpetrators to justice, we will create an international body to prosecute cases in a transparent and open People's Tribunal on Crimes Against Journalists.

Journalists around the world risk their lives every day to shine a light on what those in power want to keep hidden. Those who end up paying the ultimate price—such as Khashoggi, Malta's Daphne Caruana Galizia, and Belarus's Pavel Sheremet—deserve justice, not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the journalists who are still here, working to reveal to their readers, viewers, and listeners the world as it really is.

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