

Inside the US Immigration Crisis: For children, borders are brutal



RAMISA ROB

LATELY, it's been nerve-shattering to follow American news outlets where the phrase—"detained child migrants"—is starting to mirror vicious buzzwords. Scareheads like "hundreds of migrant children held in internment camps" regularly precede a grim catalogue of inhumanity—soiled clothes, stench, no toothpaste, no bath, shirts stained with breast milk, no guardians—that always gets unwieldy, even in just one article. It's suffocating to read, to imagine the narrow breathing space in ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention centres. It's more devastating to see, even behind a screen thousands of miles away, the lifeless body of a toddler, her head still draped in her father's t-shirt; the pair, originally from El Salvador, drowned midway through their journey from Rio Grande to Texas, and their photo, ricocheting around the internet right now, captures the wrenching reminder that the core stakes in US border crackdown are, in fact, the struggling lives of children coming from all over the world, including Bangladesh.

The cries of children in cold, overcrowded facilities are in stark contrast to the foundational American values that once embraced all, promoting "the land of opportunities," "the home of the free"—which seem like cruel ironies in today's situation. Contrary to the conspiratorial creed that President Trump has ushered in fear-mongering videos and Twitter antics of the grand caravan, with "unknown middle easterners" (which he later admitted was an uncorroborated claim), the bell ringing on America is actually immigration reform, with revised policies. Though accountability for the current humanitarian crisis (rightly) hangs on Donald Trump's dizzying back-and-forth presidential decisions, it's not only an American national issue but rather a major

international one, which requires a unified action from all nations involved. On June 25, 2019, researchers from Human Rights Watch published an opinion piece on CNN with a self-explanatory title—"We Went to a US Border Detention Center. What We Saw Was Horrible." The situation outlined is harrowing: "Many, including children as young as 2 or 3, have been separated from adult caretakers without any provisions for their care besides the unrelated older children also being held in detention." The conditions are worse: "jail-like border facilities for weeks at a time without contact with family members, regular access to showers, clean clothes, toothbrushes, or proper beds." The neglect is in violation of Flores settlement that mandates safe conditions for children held in border patrol. Bad news is not at a dead end, however. Recently, judges in a San Francisco Federal Court Hearing lambasted the Trump administration's insistence that being able to merely sleep meets the Flores safety requirement. It's reassuring that the justice system might pursue what's humane, as the Senate, Congress, Republicans and Democrats scramble at each other's necks, delay immigration reform, and engulf news coverage.

A somewhat lesser known facet of the crisis is actually occurring in the Southern border of Mexico and Central America, increasingly used as a layover by refugees from all around the world, hoping to reach the US. In April this year, *The Washington Times* wrote: "thousands fleeing poverty or conflict in Nigeria, Cameroon, Bangladesh, Haiti, and Cuba have travelled across oceans, through the jungles and mountains of South America, on a route that—so far—ends here: the steamy crumbling Mexican city of Tapachula near the Guatemalan border." It's jarring to see Bangladesh, farthest in distance, even enlisted here. The foreign ministry in Bangladesh needs to look into this disturbing revelation. It's imperative to flesh out what internal conflict and specific circumstances are pushing young children to travel to the other side of the world.



The bodies of Salvadoran migrant Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his daughter Valeria were found on June 24, 2019, after they drowned in the Rio Bravo river in northern Mexico while trying to reach the United States.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

An *exposé* exclusively on undocumented Bangladeshi children at the US border was published in *Vice News* in April 30, 2019, where it was revealed that in 2018, officials in Customs and Border Patrol witnessed the highest influx of illegal immigration in a year from our nation. They apprehended more than 1,200 Bangladeshi undocumented immigrants attempting to enter the United States, more than double the 574 who entered in 2017. Young Bangladeshi migrants have consequently been targeted with strident scrutiny, and burdened with legally unwarranted procedures from the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the US. Each journey detailed in the report is unbelievably perilous, and the routes they've taken should be investigated by Bangladesh officials to stem the tide of illegal migration. One migrant narrated that he had flown from Dhaka to Sao Paulo, Brazil, then travelled by bus to Peru, where he took a boat to Ecuador, and reached Colombia, sometimes by walking, other times using buses. Whether he

had flown to Brazil on a valid visa in the first place is unknown. After reaching the Panama River, he swam across it, lost all of his documents and clothing and nearly drowned. He then travelled by bus to Costa Rica, took a taxi to Nicaragua, and finally travelled across Honduras and Guatemala and into Mexico.

The report also illuminates the case of a teenage Bangladeshi boy, "I.H." (who asked to be identified only by his initials); he arrived in the US in September last year, after his parents were allegedly targeted for political associations. He was admitted to a migrant shelter in Arizona where he was fed well and attending classes. Then one day in October, the staff took him to a dental exam (he didn't know what it was for) to determine his age in one of the most highly questionable techniques. I.H. had a birth certificate confirming that he was a minor, but an official in the US government's refugee office had warned the staff that approximately 145 Bangladeshi migrants might be posing as minors. Falsifying birth

certificates and passports is, in fact, common among illegal immigrants everywhere. The uptick in these happenings should galvanise Bangladesh law enforcement to monitor and ensure fake documents aren't pursued for illegal immigration schemes.

The officials in Office of Refugee Resettlement used the dental forensics as evidence to label I.H. as an adult (which is strictly illegal), and immediately shifted him to a detention center with three other Bangladeshi children. In I.H.'s case, the dental report was used as evidence to prove he's an adult, but in many other children's cases, the dental evidence suggested they were minors but officials placed them in adult detention centres anyway. Placing minors in adult facilities is a crime that is being committed too often, but one that largely affects a child's immigration options and in turn decides their future. Deemed as "adult migrants," these children can spend months in detention centres, or jail, without an attorney, whereas minors have access to the attorneys and are released in the least restrictive environment possible (as it should be).

Undoubtedly, the United States, in its current turmoil, is not the way out of misery; rather, it's a solidification of perpetual hardship. While the US should be called out for its ill-treatment of child immigrants, we are talking about helpless refugees whose life-threatening state has been rendered by the situation in their home countries. So to clarify, instead of taking measures to polish how our nation "looks" on the world map, Bangladesh should stand for children and young adults—desperate human beings in abject poverty—who are fleeing to foreign lands, because they cannot find any solutions here. Bangladesh and every other nation where this is happening have a responsibility to ensure the citizens are safe, just as much as the United States should safeguard righteous treatment of asylum-seekers arriving at their borders.

Ramisa Rob is a graduate of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Boris's Big Lie



GUY VERHOFSTADT

THREE years after the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum, the UK is no closer to figuring out how to leave the European Union, and what comes next, than it was when the result was announced.

And now a Conservative Party leadership election to replace outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May is in full swing. To those of us watching from the outside, the debate between the candidates confirms that they have learned nothing whatsoever from the past two years of negotiations with the EU.

Sadly, this comes as no surprise, given that the lead candidate is Boris Johnson, the Leave campaign's most prominent architect and a man who continues to dissemble, exaggerate, and disinform the public about Brexit. In 2016, Johnson and his fellow Brexiters duped a narrow majority of UK voters into thinking that leaving the EU would somehow furnish the British National Health Service with an additional 350 million pounds (USD 445 million) per week. He also drummed up fears that Britain's EU membership would somehow lead to mass immigration from Turkey (which happens to be the homeland of his paternal grandfather, Ali Kemal).

Though Johnson will most likely soon find himself in a position where he must make good on his promises, he continues to spread untruths. Chief among them is the myth that Britain can tear up the withdrawal agreement that May negotiated with the EU, withhold its financial commitments to the bloc, and simultaneously start negotiating free-trade deals. To Johnson's followers, however, he is more prophet than politician: only he can deliver a mythical "true Brexit" that will deliver the prosperity promised during the referendum campaign.

As is often the case with populists, reality does not square with Johnson's ensorceling combination of false promises, pseudo-

patriotism, and foreigner bashing. He and his fellow Brexiters speak of a "Global Britain" that will trade freely with the rest of the world, even as they drag their country down a path strewn with uprooted trade ties and substantial new barriers to commerce.

The real global trading power, of course, is the EU, which has recently concluded trade deals with Japan, South Korea, and Canada. As an EU member state, the UK automatically benefits from the 40 trade agreements the bloc has in place with more than 70 countries. If the UK opts for a "hard" Brexit and leaves without a deal, as Johnson has indicated he is willing to do, it would immediately lose preferential access to markets that account for around 11 percent of its total trade. (Though May's government has signed continuity deals with some countries, they do not cover nearly as much trade as the UK's existing



Boris Johnson. PHOTO: REUTERS

arrangement within the EU.)

Moreover, the EU is finalising negotiations for a new free-trade agreement with the Mercosur bloc—Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—as part of a broader Association Agreement between the two regions. That will cement the EU's position as the global leader of open trade. Though European companies already export a great deal to Mercosur—42 billion euros in goods in 2016; 22 billion euros in services in 2015—tariff barriers are currently high. European exporters face levies of 35 percent on cars, 20-35 percent on machinery and related components, and 14

percent on pharmaceuticals.

The proposed trade deal doesn't lack opponents, including some non-governmental organisations and EU member states with substantial beef industries. EU negotiators will have to strike a careful balance to protect the rights of all Europeans across economic sectors. They will also need to address deteriorating human-rights and environmental conditions in Brazil, and push for provisions to encourage companies to act responsibly, uphold food-safety standards, and police against imitations of European food and drink products.

All told, an EU-Mercosur trade agreement—which would be one of the largest trade deals in the world, comprising 750 million people—represents a win-win, creating opportunities for growth and jobs on both sides. At a time when the US and China are locked in a trade and technology war with no end in sight, the EU and the Mercosur countries have a chance to lead the world in a more promising direction.

Indeed, there is a strong strategic case for finalising the agreement. As Martin Sandbu of the *Financial Times* recently argued, "The EU does not have many military divisions... but it has something nearly as awesome. Authority over the world's largest market." The EU must use its collective purchasing power to raise standards globally, particularly with respect to environmental protection.

A successful conclusion to the EU-Mercosur talks would send a message to the rest of the world about the value and importance of open trade. With Johnson likely taking power in late July, Europe will have offered still more proof that Brexit is not only unnecessary but also detrimental to Britain's economic interests. The "buccaneering" Brexiters might then finally have to explain what it is they're still complaining about.

Guy Verhofstadt, a former Belgian prime minister, is President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group (ALDE) in the European Parliament.

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IN MEMORIAM

A Safe Pair of Hands

RANJIT GALAPPATTI

THE passing of Sharifuzzaman Choudhury was a very sad event for all of us who knew him and worked with him at the Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), and earlier at Danish Hydraulic Institute in the Surface Water Simulation Modelling Programme (SWSMP) in Bangladesh. To me, he was a friend and a close colleague with whom I worked for five eventful and enjoyable years.

Sharifuzzaman Choudhury graduated from BUET in 1969 and then joined Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and later Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), where he worked until 1983 when he joined the Master Plan Organisation (MPO) to work on the National Water Plan. In 1986, he joined Danish Hydraulic Institute as a local consultant to work on the SWSMP, which began within the MPO in 1986 and then continued in several phases until 1997 within WARPO and RRI, creating a series of computer models that continue to play an indispensable role in water resources planning and management as well as flood forecasting everywhere in Bangladesh since 1987.

I met Sharif on the very first day I started work on the Surface Water Modelling Programme in Gulshan as one of a group of four expatriates advising five modelling groups. Sharif was the Group Leader responsible for the South West Region Model, the most complex of them all.

The south-west region model eventually came to represent a network of 6300 km length of tidal rivers comprising more than 260 branches, and later expanded to cover the entire riverine area of Bangladesh south of the Ganges and west of the Lower Meghna. Sharif coordinated the surveys and the complex field measurement campaigns we had to mount and carry out prior to setting up the models. He was systematic, competent and utterly dependable. He was the ultimate "safe pair of hands." However, he was not simply a paragon of virtue; his dependability was frequently leavened by a mischievous sense of humour, his interest in sports and travel which made our interactions extremely enjoyable, both professionally and socially.

After my departure in 1994 upon the completion of my assignment, Sharif continued as the Deputy Director of the Surface Water Modelling Centre (SWMC) which absorbed the technology and the skilled personnel created by the modelling project. The SWMC was then



Sharifuzzaman Choudhury

converted to the present-day Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), and Sharif continued for 10 more years as Deputy Executive Director until his retirement in 2009.

During this period, I continued our interaction through several assignments I undertook in Bangladesh, all of them in collaboration with the IWM.

The IWM today is an internationally recognised centre of excellence for modelling water resources, river hydraulics and the state of the environment. The contribution made by the IWM and its predecessors to flood forecasting, flood management, water resources planning, modelling of cyclonic storm surges, and sediment dynamics in Bangladesh (and now increasingly in other Asian countries) is immeasurable. The success of IWM is based on its scientific and professional independence, its experienced and highly skilled and motivated staff, its ability to sustain and renew itself over the last decades.

The contribution that Sharifuzzaman Choudhury made to building the foundations of this exceptional institution—and establishing its independent professional and scientific character—must never be forgotten.

Dr Ranjit Galappatti is a former Team Leader of the Danida Surface Water Simulation Modelling Programme in Bangladesh.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across

1 Glasgow native
5 Bar mixer
9 "Shut up!"
11 Cobbler, at times
12 Sports spot
13 Port-au-Prince's nation
14 Flock father
15 Goes hungry
17 Kicked off
19 Rink surface
20 Condescending look
21 Convened
22 Let in
24 Outmoded
26 Less cordial

29 Dos preceder
30 Hollywood
32 Less decorated
34 Gorilla or gibbon
35 Asian capital
36 Shoe part
38 Some swords
39 Writer Sontag
40 Cincinnati team
41 Wagers

Down

1 Battle reminders
2 Diamond units
3 Like some shows
4 Badge makeup
5 Take wing
6 "Twelfth Night"

7 Notice
8 Spring up
10 Sampled
11 Herring's kin
16 House eater
18 Peruse
21 Commotion
23 Doomed flier
24 Like some books
25 Gave for a time
27 Go by
28 Do over
29 Aisle worker
30 Enjoys Aspen
31 Shorebirds
33 Old World deer
37 Soho saloon

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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