

Preying on people's misery

Break the nexus behind human trafficking at Jashore border

THE investigative story on human trafficking published on the front page of this daily yesterday only goes to show the adaptability and shrewdness of criminals and gangs involved in trafficking, who will apparently go to any length to conduct their business. Due to increased vigilance of law enforcement officials along the border points of the district of Jashore, which have long been used as routes for human trafficking, criminals have come up with a slew of innovative strategies to deceive law enforcers and carry on with their business. These new tactics include posing as a couple at the checkpoints, with the help of fake marriage certificates and passports, to get across the border to India, and making underage girls pose as the children or siblings of the traffickers by producing fake documents and passports. Unsurprisingly, each of the border points is reportedly controlled by local ruling party men who dole out cash to law enforcers to buy their silence and cooperation. But despite this open secret of the involvement of law enforcers and people using political identity, there seems to be almost a reluctance to clearly acknowledge this fact or perhaps it is a lack of knowledge about the issue—both of which are worrying. The commander of the BGB did not give a direct reply when asked about the involvement of ruling party men, and an additional police superintendent of Jashore did not have any information about the involvement of law enforcement officials. The government needs to immediately address the problem of human trafficking taking place along the Jashore border and elsewhere in the country. In this particular case, the powerful nexus operating behind the scenes must be broken, and the local ruling party men involved, along with law enforcers in cahoots with them and others, must be identified and brought to book. Thorough investigations need to be carried out so that the details of how the nexus operates are revealed. Furthermore, vigilance at the border points has to be strengthened. We also need vigorous campaigns to raise awareness about human trafficking like elsewhere in the world.

Tackling the city's traffic jam

The government should act on the HC's directive

WE appreciate the High Court's timely directive to the government to prepare a masterplan to address Dhaka's traffic congestion. Over the past few decades, the city's traffic jam has turned acute due to corruption and mismanagement in the road and transport sector. Also, Dhaka's transport system suffers from a lack of vision, which is evident from the various projects undertaken by the government in the past to ease traffic movement in the city. According to government estimates, the flyovers in Dhaka serve only eight percent of the commuters. Currently, the construction work of several mega projects, including Dhaka Metro Rail Project, is underway and, once completed, these are supposed to ease the city's traffic gridlock. However, the government cannot remain oblivious to the fact that people's sufferings have increased because of mismanagement in the construction of these projects. Of course, such projects are needed to relieve the capital city of its perennial traffic congestion. But what is also needed is coordination among the government agencies concerned, which is seriously lacking.

According to a BUET report, traffic congestion eats up five million working hours and costs the economy Tk 37,000 crore a year. A World Bank analysis in 2017 found that the average traffic speed in Dhaka has dropped from 21 km to 7 km (per hour), only slightly above the average walking speed. But transport experts believe that this congestion can be reduced by 40 percent just by improving the management of traffic and creating public awareness. Increasing the number of public transports, having designated spots for car parking, building more footbridges, and freeing up the footpaths for pedestrians' use are some of the basic steps which can make a lot of difference. Therefore, instead of taking isolated projects to curb the city's traffic jam, the government should go for preparing a masterplan with the assistance of all the stakeholders.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The importance of a deep breath

At the end of each day spent driving through the traffic of human life, the tiniest new cache of negative memories—a feather-weight slice that ironically weighs more than the hundred tonnes of joy consumption—simmers a grisly dish of pessimism to the forefront of daily rundowns, encircling our exhausted minds. The disappointment from all the things we hoped to achieve in the day, but couldn't, enlarges its scale to a cumbersome session of brooding over the past months that went by and our dreams that drowned in it. The next day begins, and again we carve out the same smile to display a life worth envying, while bottling up our feelings day after day. When that glass fills to the brim, droplets of hope become lethal icicles for far too many. According to a research study conducted by Md Selim Chowdhury, professor of psychology in Dhaka University, around 11,000 people die by suicide in Bangladesh every year.

But there's an exit. It lies in the simplest beauty of our existence: breathing. So, keep a moment for yourself every day, take a deep breath, exhale the negativity, inhale a fresh start, and your problems too shall pass.

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

THE recent tragic deaths of seven people at the hands of angry mobs on suspicion of being child abductors, in different parts of the country, are jolting reminders of the dangerous consequences of spreading rumours. Apparently, the latest series of mob killings were sparked off by a preposterous tale being circulated regarding human heads being collected for the building of Padma Bridge.

It is terrifying how quickly a rumour, no matter how ridiculous, can spread and create widespread panic. This panic mongering is facilitated by technology—we have seen mob lynchings in India instigated by Whatsapp messages and mass attacks in Ramu because of a fake Facebook post. Social media, undeniably, has added a dangerous dimension to such mob mentality as more and more people have access to smart phones and Internet and yet cannot differentiate between truth and fake news. They also have a tendency to believe everything social media serves to them, without bothering to verify the information fed to them.

A few days ago, three different individuals related to me the same absurd tale: a bizarre practice of human sacrifice apparently taking place (in this day and age) near our under-construction Padma Bridge! It sounded like something out of a ghoulish ancient legend—a mysterious structure, in this case a bridge, requiring human blood in order to make it sturdy. Admittedly, the three accounts were from simple folks who were prone to believing any strange gossip they were told. My first reaction was extreme annoyance at the preposterousness of the story. But then, strangely enough, two more people, a cook and a homemaker, related almost identical theories. The strange part was that one had heard this from a relative in Faridpur and another in Kishoreganj and another in Barishal. The stories were being spread by word of mouth but also through social media. A few days ago, it was reported that law enforcement agencies had arrested eight individuals on charges of spreading rumours on Facebook that "human heads and blood are required to build the Padma Bridge."

On July 21, *The Daily Star* reported five people being beaten to death and 10 others seriously injured as they were suspected of being kidnappers involved in taking children as human sacrifices. What was most heart-breaking is that four of these women were mentally challenged, and one of the men was speech-impaired and had wanted to see his daughter secretly as she was living with his ex-wife, who had remarried. Another woman, a single mother-of-two, had gone to a school in Badda to ask about the admission process. Some locals



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to this query is the lack of qualified teachers in private universities, which therefore rely on teachers from public universities. But there is also a demand-side story that I find very tempting. The salary and benefits that the public university teachers receive aren't enough to maintain a decent standard of living in an environment of higher rate of inflation.

As a full-time teacher of a private institution, I am not permitted (or encouraged) to teach at other universities. Public university teachers require official consent before they can accept teaching jobs outside their university. These teachers, particularly those in senior positions, have a light teaching load compared to their private university counterparts. And given the comparably large number of teaching staff at public universities, the non-teaching duties of a teacher are fewer.

The combination of light teaching load and less administrative responsibility is designed to incentivise teachers at public universities to conduct fundamental and applied research, to improve the country's educational and scientific competitiveness. The fact that the research output of public universities is unimpressive—for a quick check, see the global ranking of our universities—suggests that teachers are not thinking about research questions in their free time but are rather worried about making ends meet.

The frenzy of an angry, misguided mob

'decided' she was a kidnapper and beat her to death. Did anyone try to verify that they were really kidnappers? Of course not. Because, that's not how mob justice works. All you have to do is shout out an accusation ("hijacker", "kidnapper") that will feed into the fears of the public, and everyone around will start pouncing on the individual and beat him/her to a pulp; if they die, even better for the sake of "justice". The crowd becomes frenzied, in total unison, leaving aside logic, conscience and, most of all, any regard for the law.

I shudder as I recall many years ago how a mother had faced the same fate when she had got down from her rickshaw, where her child was also sitting,

gross lawlessness that leads to murder, often of innocents. Mob justice cannot be an acceptable means of justice and those who take part in it, no matter how many of them there are, must be held accountable. Law enforcers are mandated to prevent such gruesome attacks but how many times do they actually intervene?

Here, there is some merit in the argument that often police are outnumbered and it is practically impossible to stop a huge mob that has reached such levels of frenzied anger. But then what is the answer? Are we going to just stand by and accept the fact that people can be attacked by a mob anytime any place for a crime, perceived or real, and the law has no role to play? Can it

women who were so mercilessly killed by a mob just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time? The government must take immediate steps to dispel these kinds of dangerous rumours and initiate widespread campaigns to tell the people that taking law into their own hands is not the answer. But to really convince the public of this, they must make people believe in the legal system, in the idea that handing over the alleged perpetrator is the right (and only) thing to do rather than taking part in a group murder. Mob justice is the result of an implicit distrust and disillusionment with existing legal systems. If perpetrators of crime did not get away through legal loopholes, if there was zero tolerance



to help another child wandering on the rail tracks, reach safety. But this act of responsibility sparked a horrible reaction from those who had seen her. They assumed she was a child lifter and, despite her desperate pleas for help, she was beaten to death in front of her child.

So, are most people bloodthirsty creatures who just want to lash out their frustration on an individual who they think deserve to die? If so, why does this not happen in other countries? Maybe because there is a basic confidence in the legal mechanisms that they think cannot be manipulated by money and influence. Maybe because people have a fear of breaking the law.

Undeniably, the responsibility lies with the government to prevent such

be acceptable to us that 36 people were killed by mobs in various parts of the country in the first six months of this year (according to Ain o Salish Kendra)?

Such acquiescence will only serve to increase public insecurity and dangerously diminish the authority of the law of the land. However flawed our legal system is, it is the only system we can rely on to ensure that individuals accused of crime will get due process.

According to a news report, suspects of the mob violence have been apprehended after being identified through CCTV footage. Again, we hope that these people are indeed the guilty ones and they will be accorded appropriate punishment—through a legal process.

But what of those poor men and

for law enforcers violating the laws they are duty-bound to enforce, if there was no such thing as influence of power and money to manipulate the system, perhaps the mob would not be so prone to pouncing on a person just because someone "said" he/she was guilty of a crime. Until this happens, the least law enforcers can do is increase their presence on the streets and remain vigilant, quickly extricate the person being targeted, arrest as many people of a mob killing/assault as possible, either on the spot or after CCTV identification, and make sure they are punished for what is clearly one of the most heinous crimes under law.

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Why do the best minds of public universities perform so poorly in research?

When household incomes are squeezed due to rising prices of consumer goods and services (food, health, housing, education, transportation, and entertainment), the resulting financial worries elevate cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. The connection that I want to establish here is that the underlying economic stress of price inflation is holding the brightest minds in our public universities back from conducting research which requires peace of mind. Inflation is pushing our researchers to rent their valuable time to third parties, rather than nurturing

new knowledge, but *renting* existing knowledge.

Our public universities get the best students of our society. Yet due to the lack of time spent by teachers in office or their occupying themselves with outside work, these bright students are not being transformed into next-generation geniuses. There is no doubt about the capability of our teachers at public universities. But because they have to stress about maintaining a decent standard of living in the face of higher price inflation, they are forced to occupy their research time with non-research

life. Rather, these high-calibre professors should focus on training the future researchers so that our country can have a bright future.

Why am I talking particularly about public universities? Because these universities have both high-calibre teachers and students, which is not always the case in private universities. Moreover, the bulk, if not all, of the public money allocated for research is given to public universities. Finally, as a taxpayer, knowing that my tax money is used to finance public universities, I have the constitutional right to question the poor state of scientific research at our public universities.

It is not unusual to observe poor research track record when a country is at the early stage of economic development. Put differently, is scientific research a luxury good for Bangladesh? If Bangladesh wants to become a high-income country within the next three decades, it must produce a lot of capable researchers across different fields. Otherwise, its graduates equipped with average skills run the risk of losing jobs to robots or clones like them!

If India can develop a competitive space sector, Bangladesh can also create a competitive research sector. The ICDDR,B in Dhaka shows that it is possible to have a world-class research centre in Bangladesh. But it also requires a change of mindset to look beyond the current practice of higher education at public universities and, to varying and debatable degrees, their private counterparts.

The paradox still remains. Why do the best minds (students and teachers alike) in our public universities perform so poorly in research? I discussed price inflation as one important piece of the puzzle. Understanding the other pieces of the puzzle requires candid and constructive discussions.

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their mind for high-impact knowledge creation.

Don't get me wrong. I am not pointing to any limitation of our public universities or marginalising those teachers who are moonlighting in private universities or in consultancies. My argument is about how the inflationary malaise is causing resource misallocation in the sense that prime human capital is being wasted by not *creating*

activities. Consequently, the brightest students that enter the public universities miss out on the opportunity to become world-class researchers, which requires time, resource and guidance.

I consider this outcome as the "underdevelopment" of our higher education, due to sustained high inflation. Public university professors should not have to worry about making ends meet or how to finance their retired