

Jobs are the reason 'it's the economy, stupid!'

Minister's suggestions are bewildering

What about the rights of expatriate workers?

We are left surprised and confused by the expatriates' welfare minister's suggestion that the police not record cases under the Anti-trafficking Act against recruiting agents should workers, sent abroad with proper documents, fall victim to trafficking. The rationale behind this suggestion stems from the fact that the Anti-trafficking Act carries harsher punishment (up to death penalty). And as we learn from our esteemed minister, a police probe into such cases puts the recruiting agencies under increased scrutiny which, apparently, is scaring away recruiting agents and this in turn may cause a fall in the number of people going abroad to seek employment, eventually hurting inward remittance.

Such a directive, if it becomes government policy, will achieve only one thing: taking away the rights of the victim to seek redress from erring recruiting agencies, of which there are many. While recruiting agencies registered with Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) may cry wolf and complain about police harassment, there have been many cases of ordinary people being fleeced off their savings and sent abroad with proper documentation but ending up in jobs that are different from what was promised (or not jobs at all). There have been cases where they have been treated as "slaves" with limited pay and poor working conditions, with their passports confiscated, etc.

We find that the minister's suggestions are squarely based on giving benefit to recruiting agencies, and nowhere in his statement do we find any reflection on the rights of citizens who risk everything, often selling off what little worldly possessions they have and even resorting to money lenders to cough up the money demanded by recruiters to go abroad for work. We love to show off the billions of dollars generated by our expatriate workers who often toil under very difficult circumstances, but wish to shy away from giving them the protection of the law. This suggestion does not deserve any consideration and the right to file cases under the existing trafficking act must remain.

Striking case of gang-rape by police

Bring the perpetrators to justice

We are outraged at the alleged gang-rape of a woman by an OC and other policemen at the Khulna Railway Station on August 2. From what we learned from reports that have emerged since, the accused allegedly have committed the crime in a very organised manner: detaining the woman inside a train, forcing her to disembark from there and taking her to the police station only to rape her. What is more, the alleged rapists even filed a case against the victim for possessing five bottles of Phensedyl reportedly to cover up their crime.

Now, while the victim is languishing in jail, her family members are feeling insecure as some plainclothesmen are constantly keeping them under watch. According to the victim's mother, unknown callers warned them several times of dire consequences if they did not settle the matter through negotiations outside court. Some even came to their home and threatened them.

The incident is reminiscent of the shocking rape and murder of Yasmin by three policemen more than two decades ago. Although we do not often come across such horrific news where law enforcers are involved in such crimes, what we often see is law enforcers taking the side of the rapists and deterring the victims from filing cases. We saw this in the case of Nusrat, a madrasa student who was sexually harassed by her principal and later burned to death allegedly at his order. We also regularly see the nonchalant attitude of the law enforcers towards the victims of rape and sexual harassment when they seek help.

In the latest case, with some members of the police themselves accused of raping, we wonder where the victim's family would go to seek justice and how safe they would be should they continue to pursue justice. The way they are allegedly being threatened and intimidated only goes to show how vulnerable they are against such powerful perpetrators.

We hope necessary steps would be taken to ensure the safety of the rape victim and her family. At the same time, we demand a fair investigation into the incident and punishment of the perpetrators, if found guilty. The delay in preparing the medical report and completing the investigation will only mean that our law enforcers are above the law.



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

BD ANGLADESH'S economy has made massive strides since 1971. After independence, the initial challenges that the economy faced were enormous. And while Bangladesh managed to overcome most of them, many new challenges emerged in the years that followed.

Economic difficulties often arise from external factors independent of the actions and decisions that are made within a nation. Nevertheless, good policies and visionary thinking should always anticipate and aim to mitigate those. At other times, economies need to undergo structural change, as Bangladesh did during the last five decades by gradually moving from an agrarian to a more industry- and services sector-based economy.

Today, one of the biggest challenges that we have is to create enough employment opportunities for our people. Although the current unemployment rate stands at 4.2 percent (which is not very high), according to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17, the youth unemployment rate stands at an astonishingly high 12.3 percent. The inactivity rate—i.e. the proportion of working age population not in the labour force—is also high, at 41.8 percent, which is one reason why the unemployment rate looks deceptively low on paper and doesn't give an accurate picture of the real unemployment rate, which is surely higher than 4.2 percent.

What is more concerning, especially for policymakers, is that job creation slowed down in recent years despite Bangladesh recording impressive GDP figures during that time. Between 2013 and 2016-17, while the average annual GDP growth was 6.6 percent, the average annual growth of jobs was only 0.9 percent. And as Dr Selim Raihan pointed out in an article in *The Daily Star*, the decline in the employment elasticity over the last decade, from 0.54 during 1995-2000 to 0.25 during 2010-2018, further reflects "the slow growth in job creation." He says one of the major aspects of creating jobs is "the need for economic diversification," but "the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh is highly concentrated around low value-added readymade garments." And new businesses remain reluctant to open shop and sell different products given that Bangladesh has still one of the least business-friendly environments in the world, ranking 176th among 190 countries in the World Bank's 2019 Doing Business index.

By consistently ranking poorly, Bangladesh has proven itself to be unadaptable and slow in making changes even when they are badly needed. And this is a big problem, particularly in light of a recent study conducted by Access to Information (a2i) programme under the ICT Division, along with local and international experts, which estimated that around 53.8 lakh jobs spread across five specialised industries—garments, food and agriculture, furniture, tourism and hospitality, and leather and footwear—are at serious risk because of the impending fourth industrial revolution. Of the five, the garments sector is expected to be the worst hit with as many as 27 lakh jobs disappearing by 2041, followed by 13.8 lakh jobs in the furniture sector, 6 lakh jobs in the food and agro-processing and tourism and hospitality sectors, and 1 lakh jobs in the footwear industry. This leaves the economy very little time to undergo another round of structural change, one that will strengthen it enough to absorb the blow of losing all these jobs without collapsing under the weight of rising unemployment, and other socio-economic unrest that may occur as a result.

Steps should be taken to shift workers from sectors that are bound to become more machine-intensive to others. Greater numbers of people should be trained to operate advanced machineries that will have to be adopted in the near future. However, a major drawback

here that experts continue to mention is that our education system is nowhere near capable of adequately providing that training, nor is it sufficiently flexible to incorporate the latest methods and ideas into its curricula fast enough.

In addition to woes in the domestic job market, Bangladesh's overseas employment has also dropped by 18 percent in the first six months of the current year, following a reduction in recruitment by Middle Eastern nations, according to official data. Whereas a total of 332,754 workers went abroad during the period between January and June this year, 392,002 workers left the country during the same period last year, according to data of the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training. This decline has happened consistently in the last years: in 2018, Bangladesh sent 734,181 workers abroad compared to 1,008,525 in 2017. Manpower recruiters believe reversing this trend will be difficult considering the realities prevailing in those countries, and because demand for low-skilled workers, which is what the vast majority of Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East are, has been waning.

The combination of these factors means there is a

fact that, in this century and the last, high unemployment, particularly among young people, has been one of the foremost catalysts that sparked social upheaval, violence, revolution, civil wars, and all sorts of other unsavoury situations. In fact, when we look at other catalysts such as foreign intervention and instigation, we will see that instigators rely primarily on the existence of such conditions, as anyone who wants to create social disharmony knows what impact employment and unemployment levels can have on the broader public psyche.

The challenge of creating more jobs, therefore, is not restricted to only GDP or any other isolated issue or statistic. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it is much more than that, as we can see from numerous examples around us—Syria: where US diplomatic cables show how US officials were working to stir up the young unemployed Syrian population against their government; Greece: where around 50 percent of the youth are unemployed, and its parliament and other government buildings are regularly surrounded by angry mobs setting whatever they can find on fire; France: where the Gilet Jaunes (Yellow-Vests) have been swarming the streets



Youth unemployment remains a big problem for Bangladesh's economy. SOURCE: CORPORATESANGBAD

perfect "storm" that is brewing slowly—and has, in fact, been "gathering" for some time now. One of the biggest problems we have when it comes to our government, its institutions and officials, is their slow recognition/admission that not everything is always hunky-dory, as their natural tendency has become to first attempt to fool the public into believing that everything is, and admit the truth only as a last resort. As a result of such childish delay, the kind of policy and administrative interventions that are necessary often arrive late. And by then, the issue at hand tends to snowball into something much bigger.

When it comes to matters related to employment/unemployment, that game plan is certainly a recipe for disaster. Firstly, the number of young and working-age people in the country is now round about at its peak. These people are going to do something. If they do not find proper employment, many of them might resort to a life of crime. Secondly, in addition to the different types of social costs, there are various kinds of economic losses that we, as a nation, will incur if we cannot incorporate these people into the larger economy and society. Yet what needs to be understood most crucially

every weekend since November 17, 2018, despite getting beaten to a pulp by the extremely brutal French police.

With all these alarms ringing, one would hope the government and its various institutions would move swiftly to address this coming crisis from every possible angle. However, given the record of irrationality and apathy governments usually tend to portray, it may not be wise to just settle for that.

Here, while citizens should whole-heartedly try and persuade the government to take the right course of action when it comes to policies and decisions that concern job creation, as well as their implementations, other important and influential stakeholders in society should also step forward and find their ways to help—whether that be through funding educational institutions that can develop the high-skilled Bangladeshi workers of tomorrow, or establishing a business that would thrive and create employment opportunities for thousands of people, or some other means that best suits them.

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Despite global climate extremes, why is climate action so slow?



SNEHA PANDEY

OVER a hundred people have died and hundreds of thousands have been displaced in the first few weeks of the South Asian monsoon this year. These numbers were

highest in Nepal, where the heaviest rainfall of the decade swept people, hillsides and highways away, leaving some of the world's poorest to deal with unfathomable losses. Similar extreme conditions have been reported in other parts of South Asia, including India and Bangladesh, as well. With still a few more weeks of monsoon left, however, this disaster is far from over and casualties will continue to mount. Referring to these flood damages, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) sent out a message reminding people of the "urgent need to act on climate change".

There was initial speculation that richer countries (of the Global North) would fare much better because, among other reasons, the weather was likely to get more pleasant as the climate warmed. However, this assumption is fast proving to be short-sighted, with temperatures surpassing 40 degrees Celsius in the region. This July—the month shaping out to be the hottest in Earth's recorded history—heatstroke has been responsible for the deaths of several dozens of people in the US and Canada. New temperature highs are also being set in France, Britain, Germany and other European nations. In fact, the UK is seeing a record number of drownings as people desperately use bodies of water to stave off the heat. Other major economies aren't faring

much better either. The Middle East is experiencing higher-than-normal temperatures in the 50s. Australia reported scorching temperatures in January this year—the hottest month in recorded history for them. Today, climate change has indiscriminately swept across the globe creating "hellish" conditions for all.

As the mercury continues to rise, the environmental and human impacts of climate change will become much bigger than they currently are. However, once the temperature rises to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels—the upper limit that the Paris Agreement has famously identified—these impacts will become irreversible. Despite this understanding, however, the UN calculates that the current 2030 mitigation commitments are nowhere close to being enough. The fight against climate change has, surprisingly, not picked up the pace. Why?

Climate denialism
 Modern civilisation was built on the back of fossil fuels. Therefore, today, much of the world's economy, technology, infrastructure and lifestyle is complexly tied to the carbon-intensive Big Oil industry. However, modern innovation in green technology is beginning to make fossil fuel somewhat obsolete. To fight back, Big Oil lobbyists have infiltrated some of the biggest markets—like the USA and Australia—and effectively managed to turn climate change into a partisan issue. This has fueled climate denialists, which eventually led to President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement.

A 2019 survey conducted in 23 of the world's biggest countries found that among developed economies, the US and Australia had the greatest percentage of people who doubted the legitimacy of climate change. In the US, for example,

as much as 17 percent of the people agreed that "the idea of manmade global warming was a hoax that was invented to deceive people."

Such climate-denying constituencies, that vote for candidates who promise to scrap environmental protection policies, obviously hinder climate progress. However, climate denialism by itself does not paint a complete picture. After all, for every climate denialist, the study shows that there are many more who concede that fossil fuel emissions are leading to a rapidly destabilising planet. What then is keeping countries (and their people) from pursuing stronger mitigation actions?

Behaviour lag
 Because the science behind the changing climate is so complex, there is no straightforward solution that can completely rectify this issue. Addressing climate change requires fundamental shifts of cemented human behaviour on many fronts—a feat that is hard to achieve. For this reason, climate change has been referred by experts as a "policy problem from hell".

Low carbon technologies like alternative fuels and energy storage have existed for well over a decade. However, the policies and infrastructure of many nations, which were designed during the age of fossil fuels, are locked in. Any change is perceived as too costly for the economy. This happens despite evidence that once initial capital costs are met, greener technology often tend to be more cost-effective.

As climate change increases the frequency of extreme weather, recent research suggests that people may start perceiving these events as normal. The study, which analysed the tweets of two billion Americans, shows that after as little as two to eight years of repeated impact, people tended to see extreme events as a result of natural climate

variation (and by extension, not a consequence of climate change).

Compounding this problem is the fact that the causation between one particular extreme event and climate change is rarely established. Because climate change causes environmental disruptions in so many different (often hidden and cascading) ways, tying any particular event to climate change requires extensive research and resources. These causal linkages are, therefore, rarely established, leaving room for people to question the role of climate change in any single extreme episode.

These tendencies to normalise or question the legitimacy of climate change impacts in our own lives and immediate environment often lead us to justify that the rapidly warming climate is not affecting us. It is often perceived as a threat to distant people from another generation, other socio-economic strata or geographic region. This rationalisation gives us plenty of mental space to postpone action—to not change lifestyle, consumption, footprint, or policies.

Consensus and cooperation
 It is human nature to look for immediate benefits over long-term ones. And this is exactly what we tend to do when it comes to climate change. We either deny that there is a crisis or rationalise that taking action is expensive or unnecessary because the impacts are so very far away.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that climate change impacts are already on all our doorsteps. The climate emergency is a global collective problem—it can only be solved with every nation's consensus and cooperation. It is, therefore, time to put short-term interests behind us and work towards the greater good.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Eid, dengue and waste management

Around this time last year, the government fixed 2,954 spots in 11 city corporations of the country for slaughtering sacrificial animals to speed up the disposal of waste, blood and leftovers after the slaughters. Around 21,000 cleaners employed by the Dhaka south and north city corporations (DSCC and DNCC) were involved in clearing out waste on August 22, 2018 (Eid day). We hope to see similar actions this year also, and it is even more crucial that officials enforce the requirement that sacrificial slaughtering only takes place in designated places, in order to combat further spread of Aedes mosquitoes—the primary vector of dengue.

Though officials have implemented programmes to protect citizens from dengue infections, it is imperative to efficiently devise strategies for animal waste removal in light of the upcoming Eid-ul-Azha. As for city dwellers, it is important for them to understand that removing waste swiftly will prevent these deadly mosquitoes, which have been terrorising our nation for the past month, from continuing to do so. We must all fulfil our collective social responsibility to remove waste swiftly.

Md Shamiul Islam, by email