



FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 23, 2019, KARTIK 7, 1426 BS

Amicable settlement best option

Role of ICT affairs advisor laudable

WE welcome the timely move by the prime minister's ICT affairs advisor who stepped in to ward off a potentially volatile standoff between the telecom regulatory authority (BRTA) and two of the largest telecom operators, Grameenphone and Robi. The issue of the two telecom operators owing the BRTA Tk 13,446 crore was based on audits, the amount hotly disputed by the two companies, which landed the whole thing in court.

As for appointing administrators in Robi and Grameenphone, one wonders whether differences on an audit report can be ground enough for the government to resort to such a drastic measure. Naturally, the move caused a ripple effect on the country's biggest bourse, the Dhaka Stock Exchange, and posed a potential damage to the country's image of a foreign-investment friendly destination.

A number of options are being mulled. First is the formation of a committee to review the audit reports on how much is owed by the operators to the government. It has been suggested that representatives from the said companies, the NBR and BRTA would be part of the process and that the two would submit a "deposit", in advance, which would be adjusted after the re-evaluation of the audit.

What is of import is that the government has opined for an out-of-court settlement. Indeed, the two telecom operators had been asking for arbitration when the issue of paying dues first emerged and had cooler heads prevailed then, much of the embarrassment being faced by the regulator and ministry now could have been avoided. At the end of the day, it is the millions of customers who have had to pay the price for a needless tug-of-war between the regulator and operators that saw bandwidth cuts, which adversely affected call and internet quality for a period of time. And it is for their sake, we hope, that an amicable settlement will be reached sooner than later.

Little progress in bringing discipline on our roads

Why is it taking so long to implement the Road Safety Act?

AS we observed the National Road Safety Day yesterday, with the government and various non-government organisations holding many programmes to mark the day, we cannot but feel disappointed at the slow progress of the government agencies concerned to make our roads safe. We are worried to learn that the number of deaths and injuries from road crashes has increased alarmingly, with the directives given by the government and the High Court mostly remaining unimplemented.

According to the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Buet, at least 3,488 people were killed and 5,863 others injured in 3,131 road crashes across the country till October 18 this year. If adequate measures are not taken and the directives by the government are not followed by the agencies concerned, it will be impossible to cut down the number of road accidents by 50 percent by next year, as per the target of one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

In order to ensure safe roads for all, the main reasons of road crashes—the high number of unfit and small vehicles, unlicensed and underage drivers—need to be addressed. According to a report by Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), around 4.79 lakh vehicles are running on the roads without valid fitness certificates. Although there was a HC directive to the owners to collect valid fitness certificates for their vehicles by August 1, very few of the owners complied with the directive. Also, it is of utmost importance that the Road Transport Act, which was passed in the parliament in September last year, comes into effect immediately. Moreover, if extortion in our transport sector cannot be curbed, traffic rules will continue to be blatantly flouted.

However, it is not only the government's responsibility to bring order on our roads; people also must abide by the traffic rules. This requires intensive public education through all kinds of media and awareness campaigns. We hope the government will not bow down to the pressure created by the transport owners and workers to amend the law and immediately make the Road Safety Act effective. At the same time, unfit vehicles should be taken off the roads without any delay. Moreover, BRTA should improve the public bus services and bring down the number of small vehicles, which would not only reduce the number of road crashes but also reduce traffic jams on the roads significantly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pollution is a constant threat

With a gradual decrease in monsoon showers as we near the winter months, dust begins to reign supreme across one of the most polluted cities in the world, Dhaka. Harmful chemicals in the air, paired with the dust, create a fatal combination risking our health. According to this daily, we have seen frequent reports on the harmful effects of pollution as a result of unfit vehicles, brick kilns and industrialisation among others. Children, pregnant women and elderly people are gravely at risk when breathing in the polluted and dusty air. Different types of cancer, respiratory illnesses like bronchitis, along with other health problems are on the rise amongst the city dwellers.

A feasible way to combat this issue would be to plant more trees across the capital. A planned approach towards urbanisation will also bring significant benefits. As the existing problems already pose a great threat, everyone should be made aware as to not worsen the situation any further. The government must strengthen the policies and enforce strict environmental standards. If we do not take effective measures immediately, it will be too late to free ourselves from the clutches of this deadly pollution.

Kaniz Hasan

The coming unemployment crisis

Is it inevitable? No, it is avoidable through proper actions.

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERRESH OMAR JAMAL

creating enough quality jobs is looking increasingly difficult globally.

Its ramifications, which are surely being felt by ordinary people every day, can also be seen from a broader perspective. The shift in the political climate in the US and other countries, where people are opting to *vote in* those they view as anti-establishment—against an establishment they believe has failed them—as well as increased protests and social unrest that we see across continents, share one common root: the problem of joblessness.

That problem extends to Bangladesh and could possibly be even bigger here. In 2014, a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit said the rate of joblessness among Bangladeshi graduates was about 47 percent. Although the report raised some eyebrows at the time, a more recent World Bank report seems to support it to some degree.

The report, titled "Tertiary Education and Job Skills", said that more than a third of graduates in Bangladesh remain unemployed for a year or two after graduation. Another survey report by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) estimated that the unemployment rate among university graduates is 38.6 percent. Similarly, the Labour Force Survey 2016-2017 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found 46 percent of unemployed people to be graduates. And besides unemployment, a new study conducted by the General Economics Division under the planning ministry found there are currently 1.38 crore underemployed people in the country.

A person is considered to be underemployed when their employment is inadequate in terms of working hours, earnings, productivity and use of skills, and the person is looking for better or additional work in conformity with their education and skills. Put simply, large numbers of people are not getting employment in accordance with their educational "qualification".

One reason for this could be that educational institutions, while providing people with certificates, are not equipping them with what the market (or employers and businesses) considers as valuable. Which is why, after graduating, people are settling for jobs they consider themselves to be overqualified for.

But the same government study also found the country had made little progress in creating jobs in the industry sector and that 85 percent of all jobs recently created were in the informal sector. Between 2005-2006 and 2017-2018, employment elasticity, which indicates the ability of an economy to generate employment opportunities for its population as a percentage of its growth, plunged from 0.55 to 0.25. According to

data, the services sector is the only sector that saw an increase in employment elasticity from 0.27 in FY2009-10 to 0.40 in FY2017-18; in agriculture, it sank from 0.71 between FY2005-06 and 2009-10 to -0.09 between FY2010-11 and 2017-18; in construction, it came down from 2.22 in FY2009-10 to 0.55 in FY2017-18; and in manufacturing, employment elasticity decreased from 0.87 in FY2009-10 to 0.65 in FY2017-2018.

Therefore, while our educational institutions *are* guilty of failing to provide students with the skills being demanded by the market, part of the problem is that our economy is simply not creating enough jobs when compared to the rate at which it is growing. And the foreign minister, while recently saying that the government is taking initiatives to create 1.5 crore jobs in the next five years, admitted how the current reality poses "a huge challenge".

To compound the problem, overseas jobs for Bangladeshis have been going down for the last two years. In 2017, more

Perhaps not.

The high unemployment we are experiencing currently did not come about by happenstance. It is the result of failed policies, inefficient institutions and outdated thinking—all of which are reversible.

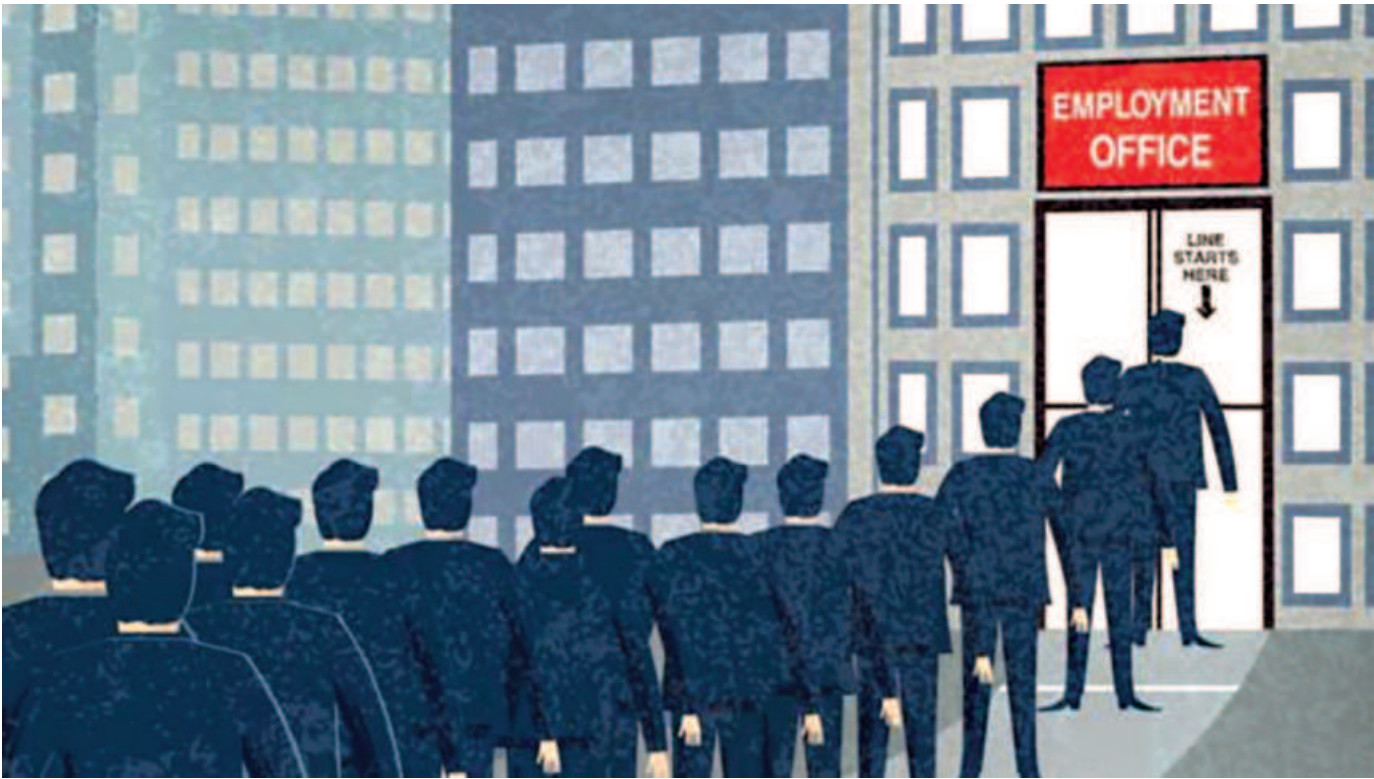
For example, the foreign minister also admitted that despite the government's best efforts, creating enough jobs in the country will require a much bigger contribution from the private sector. And we have seen private-sector investment remain stagnant for a number of years now. However, in that regard, the government is also somewhat to be blamed. As according to the IMF, "The percentage of defaulted loans in Bangladesh is around 11 percent. This means a good amount of fund was not paid back to the banking sector. For this reason, the country's private sector is not getting required loans" to invest.

This is but one policy issue that is holding private investment back, albeit perhaps the most significant one. There

greater and better opportunities for its migrant workers—if other countries such as Nepal and Philippines can do it, as they have recently done, there is no reason why Bangladesh should not be able to.

However, in the long run, one of the safest bets to reduce unemployment is to provide people with better training and education. In developed countries, education policies are often based on solid research findings. Bangladesh must do the same for its policies to pay sufficient dividend. University and private-sector collaboration should be increased so that curriculums developed by higher educational institutions meet industry demands—which they are not doing right now.

According to a research titled "Tracer Study of Graduates of Universities in Bangladesh" done by BIDS, the rate of employment among private university graduates is higher at 44 percent compared to public university graduates at 32 percent. One explanation given for this is that private universities generally



than 10 lakh Bangladeshis secured jobs overseas which came down to 7,34,181 in 2018, according to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training. In the first eight months of this year, the number of jobs Bangladeshis got were 4,17,084, which puts the projected number of jobs by year-end at 6,25,620—a further decline from last year.

Lastly, a study conducted last year by Access to Information programme under the ICT Division, along with some local and international experts, found some 53.8 lakh jobs spread across five specialised industries—garment, food, agriculture, furniture, tourism and hospitality, and leather and footwear—to be at risk of disappearing within the next two decades because of technologies that will be adopted during the impending fourth industrial revolution. Thus, all things considered, the future of jobs in Bangladesh does seem to be quite bleak.

But is it inevitable for us to go through a period of even higher unemployment?

are a host of others that continue to make Bangladesh a difficult place to do business in—as evident by its poor ranking in the WB's Ease of Doing Business Index, where it last came in at 176 out of 190 countries.

Along with the lack of private sector investment, the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce of Industry identified infrastructure deficiency and energy crisis as the three major barriers to boosting Bangladesh's industrial output. Cutting out the high level of corruption and inefficiencies that have continually plagued our infrastructure and energy projects would surely help, at least by quickening the completion of infrastructure from its current slow pace, giving businesses more structural support.

In terms of jobs abroad, Bangladesh has one of the highest migration costs among developing countries which again results from corruption. The government needs to address this and more effectively negotiate with recruiting countries to get

update their curricula quicker than public universities, having taken market demands into account. The research further said that though both employers and universities are aware of the importance of university-industry collaboration, "we found serious lack of this sort of collaboration taking place in reality"—and here, private universities once again performed better than public universities.

Rewinding back to the important question of whether a coming unemployment crisis is inevitable, it is obvious that the answer depends on our collective action from here onwards. What is also obvious is that our actions in the past have been very inadequate in that regard.

To avoid the unemployment crisis that all the data show is inevitably approaching, we have no other option but to do better.

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We need to declare a planetary emergency

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

new series of documentaries called "Seven Worlds, One Planet" due to be broadcast on the BBC.

He has spent a lifetime making iconic documentaries on the natural wonders of both the earth as well as the oceans over many decades. However, in the last few years, he has become alarmed by how much we humans are destroying our natural environment and has been raising his voice to make us all realise that we need to declare a planetary emergency and act to protect the environment we all live in.

There are two major parts of this planetary emergency: the first is about extinction of species and natural habitats around the world, and the second is about pollution where greenhouse gases are by far the most dangerous pollutants leading to a climate emergency which has been the rallying cry of the 16-year-old Swedish schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, who has galvanised millions of school children around the world to come out every Friday to protest and demand action.

There is also a growing movement amongst adults called extinction rebellion—taking actions of civil disobedience in the major cities of the world, such as London, Berlin and New York, including by scientists who are usually the last to take such drastic action actively courting arrest by their actions.

The reason for this alarm on the side of species and ecosystem loss include the fires in the Amazon, loss of coral reefs in the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, loss of ice in the North Pole as well as

desertification in the Sahel in Africa and the loss of over a million life-forms that are making us approach the next mass extinction of species. Just recently, there have been scientific reports on the loss of bees that are essential for pollination in many crops on which we depend for our food. Most recently, scientists have shown a drastic loss of bird species in North America.

At the same time, the increase of greenhouse gases has already resulted in a global temperature rise of over one degree centigrade and we are headed for over three degrees unless we declare a climate emergency and drastically reduce those

are global in scale, they are reflected in a severe way in Bangladesh as well.

Being a country with a population of over 160 million people living in an area of less than 150,000 square kilometres, on three of the world's biggest rivers, we are one of the countries most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, while also being responsible for destroying some of our most important ecosystems such as the Chakaria Sundarbans in the Chattogram region, and many of our freshwater wetlands around the country.

We are fortunate to have the world's biggest mangrove ecosystem, the Sundarbans, which is a Unesco-declared



The increase of greenhouse gases has already resulted in a global temperature rise of over one degree centigrade and we are headed for over three degrees unless we declare a climate emergency.

PHOTO: FREDERIC J BROWN/AFP

emissions to keep global temperature rise to below at least 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees. This is still possible, but not without drastic action to transition from our existing fossil fuel-based economies to sustainable energy-based development at the global level. At the same time, the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change are already being felt around the globe and need to be adapted to.

Although these two planetary crises, one biological and the other atmospheric,

World Heritage Site, largely located within our borders. While we have been relatively good, until now, in conserving this natural ecosystem, we are in danger of putting unbearable pressure on it due to haphazard and unplanned industrial and commercial projects being set up there in anticipation of the completion of the Padma Bridge. We still have time to prevent its destruction if we can plan, and implement, environment-friendly development and nature-based solutions

in the southwest of the country as the bridge is completed.

At the same time, the rivers and open waters with their hundreds of species of fish and other creatures are also under threat due to overfishing and reduction of open water fisheries, and these need to be conserved. A successful example of how to do this has been the temporary ban on Hilsa fishing during the breeding and migration season, which has led to a restoration of their production.

Although there are many excellent examples of projects and pilots where government, NGOs and communities have come together to encourage and practice good, environment-friendly development activities that allow the people to benefit from the natural resource without destroying them, we are unfortunately fighting a losing battle as the tide is moving in the opposite direction of destroying our remaining ecosystems in the name of "development".

It is, therefore, high time for Bangladesh to take the lead, both nationally as well as globally, to declare a planetary emergency and take necessary actions to protect our remaining ecosystems and address climate change while also making advocacy at the global level, a part of our diplomacy going forward. The Bangladesh parliament could take the lead in declaring a planetary emergency and then the government of Bangladesh could become a global leader, bringing along the climate vulnerable countries such as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). This would require putting in place laws and regulations to protect our remaining natural ecosystems and, more importantly, getting citizens to become the main protectors of the environment, led by the people's elected representatives. Then the government could genuinely lead other countries in this global effort.

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