

When search for a livelihood ends in abuse and death

Time to stop sending women migrant workers to Saudi Arabia as domestic help

Address overseas recruitment malpractices now

Without reform, we risk being blacklisted

It is not every day that the minister of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment comes out with a frank admission that there are serious irregularities in the recruitment process that sends hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis to work in foreign labour markets annually. And because the steps to address these malpractices have generally not worked, we are witnessing more and more migrant workers ending up in foreign countries without valid documentation. The end result of such irregularities is not lost upon host countries and it has led to suspension of recruitment of Bangladeshis by some of the most important labour destinations like the UAE, and now ending up in deportation from countries like Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

A large portion of Bangladeshi workers are at the mercy of unscrupulous recruiting agents. Even in markets where our workers can enter free of cost, there are other issues that have not been addressed. For instance, the case of domestic workers going to KSA are supposed to be aged between 25-38, but there have been instances when 18-year-old girls or women as old as 55 have ended up there because the recruiting agency deliberately falsified information in the passport showing them to be younger or older than they actually are. One of the consequences of workers going abroad, either with falsified documentation or ending up in overseas labour markets as undocumented individuals, is the country earning a bad name. Foreign employers are increasingly viewing us as a country having little regard for the law and in the absence of serious moves at policy level to plug the loopholes in the system, our workers are steadily being edged out of the traditional labour markets of the Middle East and elsewhere. The problems associated with recruitment agencies have been thoroughly documented and it is the sheer lack of action at state level that has created this mess. No one is held accountable and a continued failure to gauge the implications of such inaction will result in falling inward remittance, which the country so badly needs to pay for its imports.

Why this delay in submitting charge sheets?

Bring the Nasirnagar attackers to justice

It is so unfortunate that three years after the arson attacks and vandalism on the homes and temples of Hindus in Brahmanbaria's Nasirnagar upazila, the investigations have not been completed. Reportedly, among the eight cases that were filed with the Nasirnagar Police Station after the attacks, only in one case have the police submitted the charge sheet. But unfortunately, in that case too, no hearing has taken place till today. Moreover, those who were arrested in connection with the case are all now out on bail.

Given the inordinately prolonged legal process, one wonders if the victims of the attacks will ever get justice. The fate of other similar cases in the past does not give us much hope. The victims of communal violence in Ramu, Cox's Bazar, in 2012 and in Horkoli Thakurpara, Rangpur, in 2017 are still waiting for justice.

However, since the attacks in Nasirnagar took place in broad daylight and the police have enough evidence already to press charges against the perpetrators, we hope they will soon submit the investigation reports in all the cases. And the higher authorities in the police force should monitor the whole investigation process so that there is no scope for manipulation. In the meantime, the witnesses should be protected from any harm.

Moreover, just like the recent Bhola incident, the violence in Nasirnagar was also triggered by an anti-religious Facebook post, which was later found to be fake. Since a majority of the incidents of communal violence in the recent past took place because of posts on the social media, it is imperative that the government finds a way to ensure the security of the social media users.

The delay in the investigations and the culture of impunity that this breeds are the reasons why the minority communities across the country have to live in constant fear. This must end.



NAZNIN TITHI

ON October 24, Abiron Begum's family members received her dead body in a coffin from the Shahjalal International Airport. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the 40-year-old woman from Khulna went to Saudi Arabia in 2017 with the hope of overcoming her economic hardship. But in a shocking turn of events, far from coming even close to fulfilling her dream, she had to give up her life due to the torture she was subjected to by her Saudi employer.

During her stay in Saudi Arabia, Abiron endured severe beatings at her employer's house, where she used to work as a domestic help. The last time Abiron had a chance to talk to her sister, she expressed about the terrible trauma that she had been going through. Reportedly, Abiron's employers used to beat her mercilessly; she even said her head had been shoved against a hot grill. She cried for help to her family over phone, who were equally powerless to do anything to save her. And at one point, her family completely lost communication with her.

Another report by *The Daily Star* revealed the ordeal of Kabirun Nahar, a 38-year-old woman from Moulvibazar, who had worked as a housemaid at a Saudi household and also returned to Bangladesh recently. She was never paid by her employer. And when she finally gathered the courage to ask for her salary, her employer got "enraged by her audacity" and pushed her off the second-floor staircase of the house. She returned home from the Kingdom on September 12 with scars in her forehead, a six-inch-long stitched wound on her left knee, and her right leg bandaged from her toes to her ankle.

Dalia Amin, a 22-year-old woman who returned home from the Gulf country last August, had survived an attempted rape by her employers by jumping off the window of the building where she used to work, which resulted in a broken vertebra and leg. Reportedly, she was not only tortured but also "sold" several times.

These three cases from the last three months represent the inhuman conditions in which a large number of our female

migrant workers have to work in Saudi Arabia. The search for a livelihood ends in death for many, while for others, the trauma of torture and abuse never go away after returning home.

Most of these women who return home after facing such merciless torture and sexual harassment by their employers are not accepted well by their own families and the society at large. And the families of the deceased workers can never know the real reasons for their deaths as no investigation is done in this regard. Official documents only state that they either died by suicide or suffered strokes.

the economically vulnerable women from across the country with the hope of better jobs and better pay in Saudi Arabia. Clearly, the government agencies who work with migration and expatriate workers' welfare do not have any oversight mechanism in place. In the absence of such a mechanism, the recruiting agencies with the help of local *dalals* are carrying on with their recruitment business in full swing.

According to Shariful Hasan, Head of Brac Migration Programme, while previously there were 15/20 recruiting agencies, currently the number rose to around 600. These agencies employ local

say that they come back because they cannot cope with the Saudi culture and are not properly trained for the jobs! Such statements demonstrate the failure of our policymakers to recognise the problem or the level of abuse these women have had to face.

Moreover, one wonders if the responsibility of the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh ends with only keeping the women migrant workers, rescued by the Saudi police, in the shelter homes and repatriating them to Bangladesh eventually. Do they not have any role in protecting the basic rights and looking after the well-being of our women who suffer silently in their workplaces?



Leaning on the shoulder of another woman, Kabirun Nahar takes small steps at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on September 12, 2019. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

According to the Brac Migration Programme, more than 900 female migrant workers returned from the Middle East till October this year, most of them from Saudi Arabia. What is most appalling is that, between 2016 and June this year, dead bodies of 311 women workers were sent to Bangladesh from the Gulf countries. This year alone, 119 dead bodies of women workers have arrived home. Of them, 30 "committed suicide", 19 of them in Saudi Arabia alone.

The shocking number of deaths of our female migrant workers in Saudi Arabia alone brings to the fore a fundamental question: why are we still sending our women workers to the Kingdom?

Apparently, there are hundreds of recruiting agencies who have been alluring

dalals to persuade rural women to go to the Kingdom. Currently, if the recruiting agencies can send one woman to Saudi Arabia, the authorities then allow them to send two male workers, creating room for the agencies to take advantage of the situation. Another factor that has contributed to the rise in women travelling to the Kingdom is that women workers do not even have to pay the recruiting agencies to go there. Which means, more and more women are falling victim to unsafe migration.

While it is the government's responsibility to ensure safe migration of our women and protect their rights, when they return from Saudi Arabia after facing all kinds of violence at the hands of their merciless employers, the authorities often

It is a well-known fact that the "kafala" system in the Middle Eastern countries is one of the key reasons why our abused domestic workers cannot leave their workplaces after facing systemic violence. Under the system, the workers cannot even keep their passports with themselves. Their passports are kept with the employers which is a violation of their human rights. So even if the employers withhold the workers' salaries, they cannot leave the workplace without their passports.

Although in recent years, some Middle Eastern countries including Qatar and Bahrain have abolished the controversial "kafala" system, while Saudi Arabia is far from abolishing it.

Under the circumstances, if we want to end this vicious cycle of exploitation, torture, and death in Saudi Arabia, we should stop sending our women workers as domestic help. The government should seriously think about the issue. As Brac's Shariful Hasan believes, if we must send our workers to the country, we can send them as caregivers, nurses, and garment workers after providing them with necessary training, including language training, and only after making them aware of their rights and ensuring that they can seek remedies in case they face violence and other issues. Moreover, we should also look for alternative labour markets to send our female workers to.

Countries like the Philippines and Indonesia had stopped sending their women workers to Saudi Arabia long ago because of the inhuman working conditions prevailing there. We would also like to see a strong and immediate stance from our government on this issue.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

WORLD CITIES DAY

Why a national urban policy should be our top priority

ASHEKUR RAHMAN

BANGLADESH'S rapid urbanisation has accelerated the country's social and economic progress, making it one of the world's fastest-growing economies. But delays in adopting a national urban policy are limiting the rate and scope of these important gains.

Globally, urbanisation has been driving economic growth and contributes significantly to the national economy. Likewise, urban Bangladesh generates more than 65 percent of the national GDP. But its urbanisation process is still uncoordinated, somewhat unplanned, and most importantly, lacks a favourable policy framework. We still have not agreed on what kind of cities we want. While economic progress is helping Bangladesh to graduate out of the Least Developed Country (LDC) category, urban poverty and development requires significant attention.

government, the local government, the private sector, the civil society, and people all have critical roles to play.

Recognising the urban sector's importance and its challenges, the seventh FYP proposed allocating resources to address them. The government spent resources in line with the Five-Year Plan allocations through the Annual Development Programme (ADP), but the allocations should be aligned with the policy—which is still missing. The policy covers spatial, economic, social, cultural, aesthetic, and environmental aspects of urban life and aims for achieving an urban reality that can ensure freedom from hunger and poverty; the capacity to live a healthy life; access to education, shelter, and basic services; and a secure and liveable environment at home and outside.

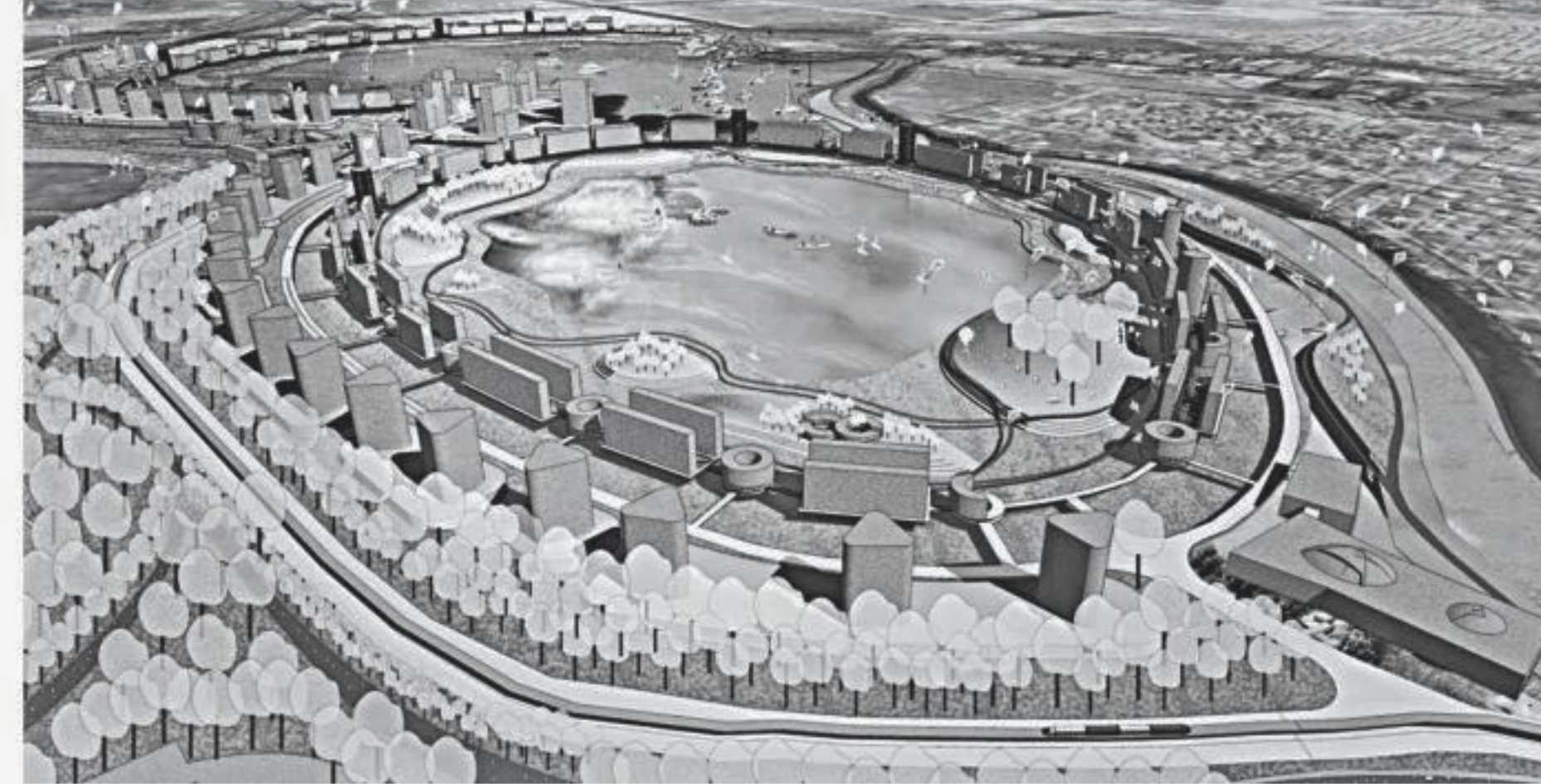
Undeniably, we cannot fully realise our

concentrated mainly in four metropolitan cities: Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, and Rajshahi. By 2030, this trend in population migration from rural to urban areas will become even more pronounced. Dhaka's population is estimated to double and Chattogram is expected to grow into Bangladesh's next megacity with a population of 5 to 10 million, largely driven by migration.

The existing urban areas will become even more concentrated: towns will become cities, and cities will become megacities. These will also experience population booms. The government is aware of these growing trends and formed a committee to draft the National Urban Sector Policy back in 2005. Eminent urbanist Prof Nazrul Islam led the committee and submitted the first draft in 2006. A wider stakeholder consultation

in a city has also become increasingly important in attracting new investments. Without a policy framework, we cannot expect such investments when other cities around the world are providing city services through smart, innovative approaches and techniques.

The way cities progress, stagnate, or become dysfunctional, depends on how well urban development is planned, coordinated, and managed. These factors, in turn, depend on the skills, money, and political will that are available for improving the lives of urban residents, including the urban poor. The alternative is poor transport networks, insufficient water supplies, public health crises, environmental degradation, rising inequality, and slum settlements, among other miseries that result from messy and unplanned urbanisation.



A new urban form for Dhaka that works with canals and wetlands. ILLUSTRATION: AFREEN AHMED ROCHANA/BENGAL INSTITUTE

Our cities' environment and living conditions are being degraded every day. For example, Dhaka ranks as the 3rd worst city on the Global Liveability Index 2019, a world ranking of 140 cities based on the quality of urban life in terms of stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure. The need for a national urban policy, therefore, has never been greater.

The Bangladesh government has consistently prioritised urbanisation in its national development plans, starting with the first Five Year Plan (FYP). Almost all subsequent FYPs, including the seventh FYP (2016-2020), emphasised its importance. The present plan stressed on adopting a proper vision for a sustainable urban future including formulating appropriate policies. The 7th FYP noted that "the country is still lacking a comprehensive national physical plan or land use plan which was highlighted in the 1st FYP, though the Planning Commission had recognised the importance of the urban sector (as evident in the Sixth 5-Year Plan and the Perspective Plan). The Cabinet is yet to approve the Urban Sector Policy; the first draft was completed in 2006 and the final draft forwarded for approval in 2014. Absence of an officially approved policy is a big hindrance to planned urban development."

The draft National Urban Policy aims for sustainable urbanisation, keeping the multi-dimensional nature of the urbanisation process in mind. It envisions a decentralised and participatory urban development in which the central

urban potential until we adopt the policy. The consequences of not having adequate policy directions are serious, particularly for addressing governance and poverty issues. Bangladesh's urban centres are beset with problems due to inadequate institutions and poor institutional framework for management and development. Currently, too many agencies are involved in regulating how urban areas function and develop. While Bangladesh has made considerable progress in reducing poverty, rising urban poverty and inequality is becoming a major concern.

Over time, Bangladesh's population will become more urban. About half of all Bangladeshis are expected to live in urban areas by 2035. Currently, more than 60 percent of the urban population is

followed in 2011 through a three-day-long Bangladesh Urban Forum (BUF), and the draft was shared by the Local Government Division (LGD) for feedback. The draft was then revised and placed for cabinet approval in 2015.

Guided by an inclusive policy, the quality of urban life and economy largely depends on the provision of infrastructure and basic services. Efficient delivery of essential services such as water, sanitation, health, education, transportation, power and telecommunication is critical for reducing poverty and improving welfare. Investments in improving the delivery of such services can significantly contribute to rising productivity and accelerating the pace of economic growth. The quality of infrastructure and service provision

Therefore, creating an urban vision as well as policy directions for sustainable urban development is essential. It has become crucial as Bangladesh has entered a new development and economic trajectory. As we pursue compact, networked, resilient, competitive, inclusive, and smart urban development, the vision needs to be aligned with policy recommendations for short, medium, and long terms. Bangladesh has established a new development paradigm through its approach to development through policy dimensions, innovations, and leadership, demonstrated through socio-economic progress; it acts as an example to many other countries. In the SDG era, when the global community has adopted the New Urban Agenda (NUA) as the urban roadmap for the next 20 years, implementing NUA will broadly focus on national urban policies.

However, an urban policy alone will not solve all problems that we are currently facing in our cities and towns. But the draft urban policy and strategy recommendations in various plans fully comply with and endorse SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and the NUA. Moreover, the Perspective Plan and long-term Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 also consider the basic recommendations of the Urban Policy regarding urban environmental sustainability. Such a long-awaited policy document, which is directly related to the future of Bangladesh, should not be left overlooked. We cannot wait any longer wait. It's time to act.

Ashekur Rahman is Head of Poverty and Urbanization at UNDP Bangladesh. Views expressed in this article are his own.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Construction site safety is a must

Even though construction work contributes largely to the development of a nation, the safety of the workers does not seem to be a priority to the concerned authorities. Except when it comes to the posh areas, most workers at construction sites toil in risky conditions. Lack of safety equipment is quite common amongst the workers. An accident on a construction site can result in a range of plights—from a minor injury to a lifelong physical impairment or even death in the worst-case scenario.

Often these labourers themselves are not aware of the fact that safety must be ensured prior to the construction work, and even when they are, it seems they are not well-trained to abide by the rules and regulations. It is the duty of the respective construction company to make safety compulsory. They should make sure that every worker is aware of the hazards that come with working on a construction site and they must protect workers from such dangers. Ensuring a better and safer work environment will not only benefit the workforce, but their wellbeing will also ensure that development remains seamless.

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