

Don't downplay the plight of our female migrant workers

FM's statement dilutes the gravity of the issue

We do not know what to make of the statement of the foreign minister that the number of abused female workers in Saudi Arabia is small. We are not sure either if we are on the same page of the English dictionary which describes the word abused in varied ways, all relating to mistreatment and deprivation of one individual by another. One wonders too whether he is abreast with the statistics and reports that have recorded the myriad instances of returning women workers' account of horrendous experience of their stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

For the record, according to Brac Migration Programme, all of the more than 2500 female workers returning from KSA between 2018 and 2019 were subjected to abuse of all kinds including sexual abuse. And to jog one's memory, in the first nine months of this year, 48 women workers came back home—in body bags. That is, more than five each month on an average. All of them had committed suicide!

When the minister counter poses to the journalists an abjectly ludicrous question as to how many of the three lakh female workers in KSA have died in that country, can we ask precisely how many dead female workers would be enough to move the foreign ministry to act, to do something to protect these helpless women from the constant abuse they are subjected to in almost all cases from the time they land in the employers' home in Saudi Arabia? And would the ministry not act if there were no deaths? For those who have not suffered the pain it is hard to realise that for the family of dead migrant workers, one dead is one too many.

The foreign minister's comments denigrate the women migrant workers, soil the memory of the dead workers and rub salt into the wounds of their family members. But more dangerously, it dilutes the gravity of the issue. Such a lackadaisical attitude on the part of the foreign minister would give a rope to the employers and a sense of impunity too.

It is just not enough to merely inform the authorities when such incidents occur, that being the normal reaction of the government as the minister gives us to understand. Justice must be demanded and the perpetrators punished for their heinous crime. In this regard we had suggested many times in the past that the government should reconsider sending women workers to KSA unless it can ensure their safety and security. These women workers may be indigents seeking greener pastures abroad but they are certainly not lesser human beings than any of us, certainly not their employers.

Bikers flouting traffic rules in public

Take strict action against the violators

A picture published in *The Daily Star* on October 30, where a man is seen talking over a phone while driving a motorcycle with three members of his family, is a perfect example of how the very basic traffic rules are often violated by the bikers in the city. What is most shocking is the fact that the two children on the motorbike are not even wearing helmets. Such practices are commonplace in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country where disregard for traffic rules by the bikers often lead to dangerous road crashes.

A survey by Nirapad Sarak Chai (Nischa) has found that the growing number of motorcycles are mostly to blame for the alarming increase in road accidents across the country. The Nischa survey found that among the deaths in road crashes in 2017, 27 percent were motorcycle riders. And according to Accident Research Institute at Buet, of the 280 accidents reported in Dhaka last year, motorcycles were involved in 24.47 percent of them.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) estimates that from 2016 to 2018, the number of motorcycles saw a threefold increase in the country—from 7 lakhs to 22 lakhs. And, as of May this year, of the total 40.18 lakh vehicles registered with the BRTA, 26.23 lakh were motorbikes, but only around 10.53 lakh bikers have licence. And still, there is a huge number of motorbikes which have not been registered at all.

Clearly, the bikers who do not even care for a license or registration to ride a motorcycle remain oblivious to other traffic rules in general. Under the circumstances, the BRTA must strictly follow the rule that in order to register a bike, the biker at least should have a learner's licence. In addition, the organisations working with the issue of road safety must initiate specific programmes to make bikers aware about the need for following the traffic rules. Moreover, the traffic police must take instant action against bikers and passengers for flouting the very basic traffic rules such as not wearing helmets.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Departing alive, returning dead

Violence against Bangladeshi domestic workers in the Middle East, mainly Saudi Arabia, is nothing new. We have been hearing such news for long. Often, these simple workers are lured by middlemen who take advantage of their situation. Once in the Middle East, they become "prisoners" who are tortured to unimaginable extents. The ones who are lucky enough to return alive, bear the scars of their horrendous experiences. Regarding the deceased, what is absurd is the fact that the Saudi authorities mostly "certify" the cause of death as "suicide" or "stroke". Our government must take immediate steps to stop the suffering of our people in foreign lands. It is clearly evident that the embassies are not taking strict measures. Some countries who used to send domestic help to Saudi Arabia got fed up of such barbaric behaviours and restricted the number of workers travelling there. We should simply not send our people to those countries where their safety cannot be guaranteed.

Alia Haq, Dhaka

EDITORIAL

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END IMPUNITY FOR CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS Muzzle me not, no impunity



MEER AHSEN HABIB

ACH year journalists, news media and supporters of free and independent journalism across the world celebrate November 2 as a red-letter day for journalism. The UN General

Assembly declared this day as the "International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists" in General Assembly Resolution A/RES/68/163. It urged the member states to adopt and implement specific measures countering the present culture of impunity for crimes against journalists. The date commemorates the abduction and killing of two French journalists of *Radio France International*, Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlonin while they were on assignment in Mali on November 2, 2013. The resolution condemns all forms of harassment, attack and violence against journalists and also urges member states to act to the best extent possible to prevent the same, ensure accountability and bring the perpetrators to justice. It further urges member states to ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies and that a safe and enabling environment prevails for the journalists to perform their work independently and without interference.

But before going further, let us examine the case of Ahmed Deepo a young and promising journalist aged 27, who was on assignment when he came under attack by a group of miscreants at the Science Laboratory intersection in Dhaka. Deepo spent the next few days in intensive care unit at the hospital and had to seek a two-month leave from work upon release from the hospital. Not only Deepo, but several other journalists, photojournalists and freelancers also came under attack on that day when they were covering the students' uprising calling for safer roads on August 5, 2018. There was much hue and cry demanding justice for the attack by individuals who allegedly belonged to the students' faction of the ruling party. Ministers pledged to bring the miscreants to book but nothing happened. The best part is that Deepo and his comrades did not give up their pens and cameras, or their constitutional right to freedom of

expression.

He survived the attack to share the horror and trauma he went through. But justice is still a far cry since the brutal murder of Meherun Runi and Sagar Sarowar, a well-known journalist couple, in their Dhaka apartment on February 11, 2012. Although the then home minister and top brass of the law enforcement agencies assured the nation that they will bring the killers to justice, the case remains shrouded in mystery till now.

The worst-case so far is perhaps the state-sponsored assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, an unorthodox Saudi journalist for *The Washington Post* and former editor-in-chief of *Al-Arab News*

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) termed Trump's stance as a dangerous lack of leadership in the protection of journalists.

According to CPJ, a total of 1053 journalists were killed between 2007 and 2019. Of them, 736 journalists were killed where motives were confirmed meaning that these were various forms of retaliation killing for reporting and making information available to the public. 14 journalists were killed during the same period in Bangladesh including the brutal murder of Sagar-Runi. CPJ research found that in 90 percent of cases the killers remain free and go unpunished, which leads to more killings



Justice remains a far cry for journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi who had been brutally murdered at their home on 11 February 2012.

Channel. He was murdered by the agents of the Saudi Arabian government inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018.

A most worrying trend for the journalists is that countries in the west and some countries in Europe, traditionally known as protectors of freedom of expression, are now questioning the credibility of the media and even terming them as "enemy of the people and state" in a bid to discredit and weaken their work. When the whole world condemned Khashoggi's assassination and demanded a fair probe, President Donald Trump, despite a CIA assessment that the Saudi crown prince had ordered the killing, refused to take a definite and strong stance. The

that ultimately result in the breakdown of law and judicial system.

To prevent this catastrophic disintegration, democracy and the press must complement each other. Other than the state-level accountability institutions, journalist and the media hold the state, government and its officials accountable for actions that affect the lives of the people of the society they live in. But their actions for ensuring accountability of the mechanisms often make their lives vulnerable—they face threats and attacks on their lives simply for carrying out their duties, while the perpetrators get impunity. Thanks to the absence of a strong legal framework or presence of loopholes in the legal system that such attacks are carried out on the people

who exercise their right to freedom of expression. Such killings are linked with a serious level of human rights abuse, crimes and corruption that damage the society as a whole.

Like any other democracy in the world, Bangladesh must fulfil its obligations to protect freedom of expression guaranteed by the constitution of 1972. We must not forget that presses were burnt down by the Pakistani forces in a bid to silence freedom of expression, and journalists including Shahidullah Kaiser, Selina Pervin, Sirajuddin Hossain and A K M Shahidullah are among the millions who had sacrificed their lives for the birth of our beloved country. We must accept the fact that democracy and journalism must sail together for the betterment of each other and to create a check and balance mechanism. The state must ensure an enabling legal environment for the journalists, take threats against them seriously and vigorously prosecute the criminals who attack journalists.

Since disinformation is on the rise, the safety of journalists is even more important now so that they can report and disclose the truth for the greater benefit of the society as a whole. In order to be able to expose the truth, journalists need a free and safe environment where they can perform their duties both online and offline, without censorship or persecution, fear of harassment and political pressure.

A favourable environment for freedom of expression is a must. However, Bangladesh at present appears not to fit the mould—thanks to formal restrictions through legislations like ICT Act 2006 and Digital Security Act 2018. This is not all, we have several acts, policies and laws in Bangladesh that directly or indirectly limit freedom of expression; sadly, we have no law that protects the rights of the journalists and guarantees a conducive environment for journalism. It is high time that the state and the government reinforced preventive measures and created a national safety mechanism in line with the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. As independent and free journalism is the backbone of a free society, undermining it means undermining our freedom.

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Battling climate induced displacement

Urgency needed in adopting a national strategy



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DISASTER induced displacement has become an important issue in the global disaster risk reduction (DRR) conversation.

The Co-Chairs' summary of 2019 UN Global Platform on DRR highlighted that forced to abandon their homes and livelihood, the displaced people are one of the most vulnerable population of the world, and the international community should do more to reduce disaster induced displacement. Bangladesh is globally acclaimed for its success in reducing loss of lives during disasters as well as managing relief after disasters. The country is on course to set yet another example by framing a national strategy for disaster and climate induced displacement.

Bangladesh has been identified as the seventh most affected country in the world due to "extreme weather event". Each year climate events and disasters such as floods, cyclones, storm surges and slow onset processes like droughts are displacing tens of thousands of households. A global study conducted in 2015 by Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that one out of every seven Bangladeshis will experience displacement by 2050. However, none of the disaster and climate change related national documents of Bangladesh addresses the concerns of the displaced.

The National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA 2005) visualises internal migration in the aftermath of climate hazards as a problem for the urban dwellers. The Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSP 2009) mentions migration but does not talk about the displaced. Again, it only mentions the need for monitoring different flows of migration. The Disaster Management Act 2012 made passing reference to emergency shelter and resettlement. It also does not provide any guidance on how to deal with various phases of displacement. The government's Standing Orders on Disaster (SODs) provide more detailed instructions to different actors at national and sub-national levels on managing displacement. However, the focus is overwhelmingly on initial emergency shelter.

It is against this backdrop that a comprehensive and rights-based Strategy on Disaster and Climate Induced Displacement has been prepared by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR). The document is based on UN Sendai Framework, UN Guiding

Principles on Internal Displacement as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. It also incorporates the goal of a "safe, climate resilient and prosperous delta" envisaged in Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. The strategy focuses solely on internal displacement caused by disaster and climate change related events.

The draft strategy recognises that displacement has grave implications for the rights and entitlements of individuals and communities. Affected persons may face multiple human rights challenges in the aftermath of disasters. Their safety and security are compromised and they may experience gender-based violence, unequal access to assistance, basic goods and services, and discrimination in aid provision. A section of children may also experience abuse, neglect and exploitation. Children, older persons and persons with disabilities who rely on family support for their survival, may experience separation. Loss and destruction of personal document, unequal access to employment and livelihood opportunities, and forced

programmes. The various steps suggested in the strategy are: generate knowledge to understand risks; ensure adequate resource allocation in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation; strengthen disaster risk governance; creation of decent employment through promoting and encouraging decentralisation of urban growth centres; and disaster-climate risk responsive land use planning along with identification of highly vulnerable zones and restriction on human settlement in unprotected high vulnerable areas. Prevention also includes disaster preparedness of vulnerable people for likely displacement. It relates to measures taken to ensure effective rights based evacuation including awareness raising, training of responsible actors, pre-identification of evacuation centres and development of standard operating procedure by key service providers such as the health sector, police and transportation.

Protection phase highlights strengthening emergency humanitarian and disaster relief assistance. When



Floods in Jamalpur exceeded previous levels manifesting the effects of climate change. The picture was taken on July 22, 2019.

relocation, unsafe or voluntary return are part and parcel of the experience of the displaced. The document chalks out a comprehensive strategy covering all phases of displacement of men, women and children—pre-displacement, during displacement and post displacement. Pre-displacement phase highlights actions required to prevent displacement; humanitarian emergency relief and evacuation are the key features of protection during displacement; and post displacement actions refer to durable solutions.

Prevention aims at stopping displacement by reducing vulnerability and enhancing resilience of the concerned communities through disaster management infrastructure development (embankment and dams) and adoption of climate change adaptation

displacement takes place it is important to intervene quickly and decisively to manage it and address urgent humanitarian needs. Effective management of evacuation centres and temporary centres addressing right to food, shelter, health, education and safety of all groups, including children, women, elderly and the disabled is essential. Planned measures are suggested for preventing and responding to protection risks faced by vulnerable groups such as children, girls, women, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

Durable solution refers to post-displacement phase. Strategic responses described in this phase attempts to avoid protracted displacement situation. According to UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, durable solutions can be achieved through three

types of measures. These are: return to place of origin, integration in the new location and resettlement/relocation to another safe place. Among these three types, return to the place of origin is the most preferred option. Return as a solution targets more specifically those who fall under "temporarily displaced" category. However, such return requires being sustainable in the long run from the perspective of safety, security, livelihood, ecosystem service, housing etc. The second option, which is local level integration is suggested when the displaced population cannot return to their areas of origin because of adverse environmental situations. Successful local level integration requires involvement of the host community. In case return and local integration are not found to be suitable options, the displaced deserve to be resettled in a safe place. The document also discusses institutional arrangement and funding.

In September 2015 the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) completed the draft strategy for the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) under its Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme II (CDMP II). The document was formulated through a series of consultation with affected people at a number of disaster and climate change hotspots, and workshop with relevant government functionaries, experts, civil society members and development partners. The strategy was presented at the official session of the 2019 UN Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Geneva. Following the event, the state minister of MoDMR took the initiative to update and revise the document. RMMRU on advice of MoDMR, in collaboration with Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER), completed the task and handed over the document to the state minister for MoDMR. The strategy is now ready to go through the inter-ministerial consultation process before final adoption.

The importance of this rights-based document lies in the fact that it has been initiated by the government and prepared by a group of Bangladeshi professionals for the betterment of a marginalised group. If it is adopted in the near future, Bangladesh is going to be the second country in the world to have a strategy on the displaced. Civil society organisations working on displacement strongly urge the government to adopt the strategy before the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference—COP25.

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