

Will the Turag meet Buriganga's fate?

Industrial effluents being dumped with impunity

THE Turag river is being contaminated with the untreated liquid industrial waste that is being dumped into the canals, streams and waterbodies around the garments washing plants and textile units located in Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) area. Local inhabitants tell of a time when the Turag canal water was so fresh that people could drink from it. Unfortunately, all that has changed as the untreated liquid waste from industries and the sewage from Tongi municipality area stream into the Turag River on a daily basis.

The problem is that the drives conducted by the Department of Environment (DoE) are not enough to discourage polluters from dumping untreated chemicals. The situation has grown worse over the last two decades as washing and dying plants have mushroomed in the area. What is interesting here is that, the DoE tells us that only 490 units out of 6,500 industrial units in Gazipur discharge liquid waste. While 455 of these units have installed Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs), it is obvious that they are not utilised fully and hence the problem. The other problem, according to a study conducted by Buet is that many factories have expanded whilst their corresponding ETPs have not, and this leads to the extra volume of waste water being dumped into water channels without treatment.

Polluters getting away with contaminating the water supply has a long history in Bangladesh. For years, the Buriganga River was subject to waste water dumping by factories in the Hazaribagh tannery estate. Now, we are seeing a similar situation unfolding in the Turag River where the regulatory body is unable to enforce the Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (amended in 2010) that states textile dying factories are legally bound to install and run ETPs. Development is a must for the country, but it must be sustainable development that does not destroy the environment and livelihoods of communities. We need to take heed of the damage being done before the Turag is categorised as a dying river.

Unsafe school in Jhenaidah

Children's lives at risk

WE find it horrible that a school built in 1960 and declared unsafe by the Education Engineering Department (EED) in Jhenaidah in 2015 is still in operation. The two-storey building located in Kotchandpur upazila town has exposed iron rods and the plaster keeps falling off the ceilings and yet we find no effort by authorities to repair the structural problems that are putting the lives of some 600 students at risk. Why has such a crucial matter as maintenance of school buildings been treated with such neglect and apathy? We are talking about the lives of children here as well as their education, which is being severely disrupted because of this situation.

The children are in fear of when the plaster of their roofs may come crashing down on their heads and this is hardly panic working. Back in 2018, five students had to be admitted to the hospital due to injuries caused by falling plaster. We are informed that the building had sustained damage in an earthquake in 2017 but higher authorities have paid no heed to the matter and hence hundreds of children continue to go to a school that is considered unsafe. There has been no attempt to make necessary repairs.

It is high time the education ministry took this precarious situation seriously. If it is a question of fund constraint, it is the ministry's responsibility to get those funds from the government and carry out such essential maintenance work. There is just no excuse for such disregard for children's safety. We hope immediate steps will be taken to make sure that repairs will be made as soon as possible so that the children may go back to school without the risk of being injured or killed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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May peace prevail in India

India, the largest democratic country in the world is now in an upheaval. I watch with great disappointment and disbelief how the country is falling apart over issues regarding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). According to reports, at least 25 people have died and hundreds have been injured since the demonstrations began to unfold.

It is alarming to learn that in the backdrop of refusal by chief ministers of states like West Bengal, Kerala, Punjab and Chhattisgarh to implement the CAA, Prime Minister Modi has said that no state can block its implementation. Why is the prime minister so adamant? Would it not be wise to come to an understanding for the sake of democracy? I am deeply worried for all the innocent people who are risking their lives to keep India's pluralistic image alive. I earnestly hope good sense will prevail and the disputed issues would be settled amicably.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Despite improvements, journalism remains as precarious as ever



TASNEEM TAYEB

2019 has seen a significant drop in the number of journalists being killed—49 as against the annual average of 80 journalists killed for the past two decades. The annual report by Reporters Without Borders, known better by their French initials RSF (Reporters Sans Frontières), termed this figure "historically low".

2019 also marks three years of the detention of *Al Jazeera* journalist Mahmoud Hussein, who had been picked up and incarcerated since December 20, 2016, by Egypt's el-Sisi regime. And Hussein has been held in sordid conditions—he has suffered a broken arm and has been denied passable treatment—without charges or trial, in gross violation of international laws. The law of Egypt itself sets a maximum of 620 days of pretrial detention for people under investigation for felony. So, by which law is he being held and why?

While the former has no answer, the latter can be attributed to Hussein's courage to shine light on the misdeeds of the el-Sisi administration. And if this can happen to an *Al Jazeera* journalist—an esteemed international broadcaster—one wonders what happens to journalists who work for local newspapers; even worse, what happens to those working as freelancers?

2019 is also the year that witnessed the sentencing of the killers of dissenting Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in which five people had been awarded the death sentence, with another three sentenced to jail terms, while one of the prime suspects was allowed to go scot-free! Saud al-Qahtani, who along with 16 other Saudis had been sanctioned by the US last year for their alleged role in the killing, is now a free man, acquitted of all charges.

But this should come as no surprise because all the while the international governments had been condemning the Saudis for the gruesome murder of the journalist inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul—CIA suggested the involvement of top Saudi leadership in the murder—the US along with other powerful countries kept selling weapons to the Saudis to pursue the war in Yemen.

And a closer look at the RSF report figures suggest that the decline in the number of journalists killed in 2019 can be, to some extent, attributed to the lesser number of journalists killed while covering war this year. Numbers from Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen suggest that journalist casualties in these three countries combined stood at 17 this year—half of the 34 from 2018.

But is this good news? Perhaps. RSF spokeswoman Juliane Matthey attributed this decline in number to

certain factors, such as better training of journalists who cover war. Regarding the sharp decline in the number of journalists killed in Yemen in particular—from 10 in 2018 to two in 2019—, Matthey said, "But that is partly because many journalists have changed their job because of the unstable situation". According to RSF, a journalist has resorted to working as a server at an eatery in the capital, Sanaa; while another has become an ice-cream vendor.

But what is more alarming is that while the number of journalists killed in warzones had decreased, journalism in "countries at peace" has become more precarious than ever.



People holding placards and photos of slain journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, stage a protest called by Galizia's family and civic movements, on November 29, 2019 outside the office of the prime minister in Valletta, Malta.

In 2019 more journalists—59 percent—have been killed in these "countries at peace". In Mexico alone 10 journalists had been killed in 2019, the same number as last year. And although Mexico is not a war zone, it is riddled in wars between drug cartels.

And journalists being killed deliberately for their work has gone up by two percent, according to the RSF report. Meaning more journalists are now at risk of being targeted and killed on the account of their profession.

And detention of journalists has also seen an increase in 2019. With 389 journalists currently in held various prisons by suppressive governments a worrying trend is emerging—of incarceration and punishment of journalists for unearthing the unpleasant. While dictators in the guise of "elected

leaders" like el-Sisi of Egypt, rough handle journalists and detain them without any charge, simply on the strength of their muscle power; others more tactful, like Russia, detain journalists on flimsy charges and let them perish in jails. And in detention centres in China and Turkey a good number of journalists have been held for their dissenting voices. And in the face of such persecution, journalists like Levent Kenez had to seek shelter in other countries.

The more polished ones like Viktor Orban of Hungary have adopted creative means to manhandle free press—creating a government media monopoly.

According to a report by *Freedom House*, an independent watchdog organisation, in Hungary "nearly 80 percent of the media are owned by government allies." The same tactic had also been used by Aleksandar Vucic's of Serbia.

And in other, more democratic countries such as India and Bangladesh, the governments have taken a more free-market approach to stifle journalistic dissent. According to a report by *Al Jazeera*'s Sohail Rahman, earlier this year in Kashmir, the Indian government had stopped advertising in two major newspapers without citing any reason. As much as 50 percent of the revenues for these papers came from government advertisement and announcement. The government in Bangladesh went one step ahead and as early as 2015 had outrightly asked big corporations,

including telecom and consumer goods companies to "restrict" their advertising in two of the mainstream newspapers. To this day, the two newspapers are bearing the financial brunt of this government move.

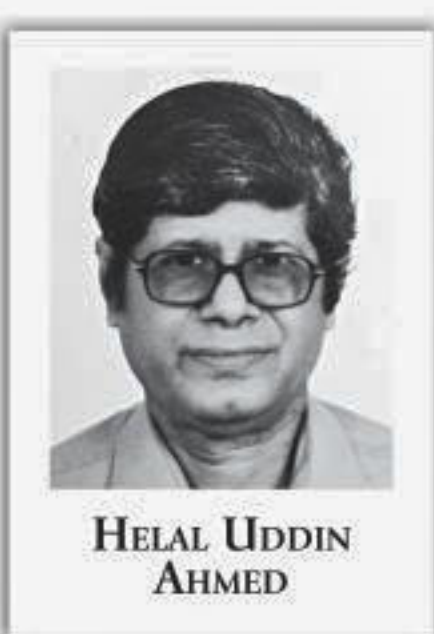
And in the US the very foundation of journalism has been brought into question by the president, who terms any news unflattering to him "fake news". And in a more sinister narrative, the US president has branded journalists "enemy of the people"—a tag that has been previously used by repressors like Stalin and the Third Reich to punish dissent. And amidst all these, journalism today

remains as precarious a profession as ever—be it in a democratic "country at peace" or a repressive one like Turkmenistan, which according to the RFS Press Freedom Index, has the most repressive media environment in the world.

And journalists will keep facing persecution until the true killers of Jamal Khashoggi, Daphne Caruana Galizia, Mena Mangal and Jan Kuciak are punished; until Mahmoud Hussein is released from detention; until Levent Kenez is allowed to go back to Turkey and write without fear of repercussions; until Kashmir's Qazi Shibli's whereabouts is made known. Do world leaders have the courage to reinforce such freedom of press?

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RMG growth: Battling the challenges



HELAL UDDIN AHMED

EXPORT of Bangladesh ready-made garments (RMG) has been declining since the past four months. There are reasons to believe that Bangladesh's weaknesses compared to rival producers in the area of product development and diversification have contributed to this falling trend in garments exports. Bangladesh is deemed to be a "sellers' market", where the buyers come, place purchase orders and then import garments. But nowadays, the buyers have many viable alternative sources, as the productivity and product diversity of countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Cambodia have been boosted in recent times.

With the exception of a handful, most garments manufacturers in the country lack any research and development (R&D) set-up. But the R&D teams in the factories of competitor countries are usually stronger. The local factories usually take three to four months for product development (from design to sample preparation). But countries like China spend only 15 to 30 days for the purpose. Lack of efficiency and weak productivity have become critical factors, as a result of which average production cost unnecessarily goes up, thereby offsetting the advantage of lower labour costs in Bangladesh.

The comparative standing of countries weak in product development is bound to deteriorate in the coming days. It is however encouraging that the BGMEA has started some work on the issue. The rising wages is another factor relevant for the sector's competitiveness. The average monthly wage of a garments worker in the country was USD 35 a decade ago. But the wage has risen substantially since then. It is likely to rise even further in the coming months, which would entail additional expenses for the entrepreneurs. But the buyers are not interested in paying additional money for their purchases.

Consequently, there is no alternative to improving productivity and product development if the growth trend is to be sustained.

Another element of unpredictability in RMG business has been the recent proliferation of online trading. Many buyers prefer to do business online now instead of undertaking physical visits. Therefore, the nature of business is fast changing and smaller establishments are competing with bigger ones on equal footing through the world wide web for attracting buyers. The shapes and forms of retail marketing are therefore undergoing significant changes. However, the big



Bangladesh can improve her share only through constant product development and diversification.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

buyers usually maintain consistency in their sourcing and typically do not make sudden or erratic moves.

Bangladesh's status with respect to safety in factories was precarious a few years ago. But things have improved a lot in this domain. The capacities of factories have also increased substantially, standing at a much higher level now compared to competitor countries. Besides, the local entrepreneurs have demonstrated their resilience time and again in the face of natural and man-made adversities. They do not step back when the buyers ask for anything challenging. Another positive feature of Bangladeshi RMG

establishments is their environment-friendly attribute. They also enjoy good reputation in the area of timely delivery and consistent quality of products. Overall, Bangladesh still remains a lucrative destination for the RMG buyers globally.

However, in the past our entrepreneurs engaged workers after installing garment machineries, and then automatically received purchase orders from the buyers. Their businesses thrived in this way. The entrepreneurs then took it for granted that business would naturally come once machines were installed and workers were deployed. But this premise is not working anymore with respect to the buyers. Now

the latest trends in the European and American markets for devising their marketing and production strategies. Many expatriates now work in managerial roles in our RMG factories, which in most cases are unnecessary. Instead, experienced and skilled designers, and product development personnel should be recruited from abroad. Money should also be invested in larger proportion in the area of product development.

Bangladesh's main rival in the RMG arena is still China. But whereas China caters to 33-36 percent of the global market, Bangladeshi exports account for only 6.4 percent of the total. That means, there is a huge gap between the two top exporters. Bangladesh can improve her share only through constant product development and diversification, and concomitant value addition. As for Vietnam, which is now almost at par with Bangladesh, the investors are mostly from China. Many Chinese investors have factories in Vietnam in addition to those they run in mainland China. As a result, the benefits of product development in China also trickle down to Vietnam. This makes the job of sourcing by buyers easier in Vietnam. This is the main reason why Vietnam is doing so well in RMG exports in recent times.

At present around 50 percent of the demand for woven fabric in local RMG factories have to be met through imports. It entails lot of time and money. The lead time for RMG manufactures would have decreased considerably if the fabric was produced locally through enhanced investments in the sector. The value addition in RMG would also have increased as a result. There is, as a result, a good case for focusing on product development in the textiles sector as well. The local factories will have no option but to continue importing high-end textiles from abroad if appropriate investments are not made for producing high-end textiles locally. This is neither desirable nor cost-effective, and the government as well as textile entrepreneurs should take initiatives on an urgent basis for attracting investments in the sector.

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