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A losing war on drugs

The authorities should acknowledge their tactics have failed

MOHAMMADPUR Geneva Camp's drug lord Ishtiaq Ahmed is reportedly back in the drug game at the highest level. After a hiatus of around two years—after the anti-narcotics crackdown began in 2018—the big-time narcotics dealer has reclaimed his throne in one of the worst drug infested areas of Dhaka city.

According to police intelligence, over 90,000 pills are sold daily in the Mohammadpur area. And out of the 150 cases that are filed with Mohammadpur Police Station per month, around 75 are narcotics cases related to the Geneva Camp area. Therefore, Ahmed's gang, which he managed to rebuild since some of his associates were arrested following the beginning of the anti-narcotics drive, continues to have a big influence on the city's drug scene.

The main reason for his success in rebuilding his empire has been the backing he receives from corrupt law enforcers—who are on his payroll—and a top underworld criminal who had got a life term but came out of jail recently, according to intelligence and camp sources. Reportedly, Ishtiaq's men give Tk 8-10 thousand to some officers at Mohammadpur Police Station every night and Tk 75 thousand to detectives every week to run his business without hindrance. Last month, Ahmed even felt safe enough to return to the country and is now running his business from India, having reorganised his gang.

With the massive wealth he amassed, Ishtiaq has over 100 bighas of land in Savar and Ashulia, and cases against him are pending with the Anti-Corruption Commission. However, the question remains on how Ishtiaq managed to become so powerful in the first place. It is clear, given his background as a raggicker, that Ishtiaq had to have the backing of powerful individuals in his bid to become a big-time drug dealer. And it is similar backing from unscrupulous law enforcers and others that has allowed him to return to the top of the drug running industry.

Given this reality, we cannot help but ask what the anti-narcotics drive has achieved. Except for claiming over 400 lives, has it really achieved anything?

The fact remains that killing small time yaba carriers in suspicious "gunfights" will not slow down the supply of drugs in any shape or form. The only way the drug menace can be overcome—from the supply side of it—is through the arrest and prosecution of big-time drug dealers and masterminds, such as Ishtiaq Ahmed. At the same time, crooked law enforcers and politicians such as the ones shielding him must also be brought to book.

Books in DU libraries gathering dust while students read guidebooks for jobs

Speaks volumes about the state of our higher education

WE are concerned at the fact that the libraries in the capital, including the central library of the University of Dhaka (DU), are increasingly being used by students for reading BCS guides rather than for academic purposes. A report published in this daily on March 1 revealed that DU students, mainly those willing to sit for recruitment tests for BCS and other government jobs, start gathering in front of the Central Library gate with their own reading materials, including guides and notebooks, at the break of dawn. Our correspondent visited a number of the city's prominent libraries and found that out of a total of 1,395 readers present in those libraries, 1,355 were reading BCS and other job-related books and guide books.

According to DU statistics, the number of books issued by the two university libraries has declined by 61 percent in the last 10 years. Data shows that the two libraries issued 9,15,425 books to DU teachers and students in 2008-09 academic session, which comes to an average of around 2,500 books a day. However, in 2017-18, the total number stood at 3,52,310, an average of only 965 books a day.

While the fact remains that students' reliance on physical books has declined in this digital age and the vast majority of students nowadays prefer reading e-books for academic purposes, there is clearly another side to this trend—students are losing interest in the value of knowledge. And this is because in our fast-changing job market, a large number of fresh graduates fail to get their desired jobs even after completing their bachelor's and master's degrees with good grades. So, it is only natural that they opt for government jobs, the entry exams of which are also extremely competitive. This explains why students are studying guide books instead of academic ones. However, it is also true that the resources in the university libraries are often outdated, which discourages the students to go there for academic purposes.

While the purpose of higher education should be to generate and share knowledge, such a job-centric attitude of university students is unfortunate. The issue is something our policymakers and the university authorities must pay immediate attention to.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take necessary steps to avoid fires

As the spring season has set in, the weather will become quite dry and warm. The weather of the second month of spring, namely Chaitra, is invariably as hot as summer. In the previous years, we saw that fires erupted in this time of the year in households and factories due to overheating, causing irreparable damage to life and property. If necessary precautionary measures had been taken, most of these accidents could have been avoided. We hope that the authorities will address this issue and save human lives.

Zabed Wali, Chottogram

The Unhappiness Factor

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

WHEN we read about a woman being "gang-raped", then raped again by her "rescuer" (*The Daily Star*, October 28, 2019), how long do we spend thinking about the unbelievable trauma this woman has gone through? How long do we wonder what happened to her, how she will go on with her life, how she will raise her two-year-old son in front of whom she was subjected to this torture? Do we bother to think whether the child has been scarred for life, whether her husband will be supportive or abandon her, or if her in-laws, her neighbours or even her own family will treat her the same way they did before? Chances are that we will not. News items like these are a daily affair and most readers will either avoid the report (too disturbing to the sensibilities) or quickly go on to the next "more important news", which may be the spiralling price of onions or how the Tigers fared in a Test match.

Apart from a few seconds of pity for the "unfortunate woman", the issue of violence against women is not the top priority for either the media or the media consumers. The biggest fallacy of patriarchy is that women's physical and mental wellbeing do not really matter. This bizarre block of irrational thinking has led to this collective apathy in our culture towards crimes against women and girls over the centuries.

Which is why, despite all the efforts of rights bodies, UN organisations and women themselves to demand the elimination of all forms of violence against women, there is no abatement. But all over the world, it has been established that this perpetual discrimination against women, the worst consequence of which is violence, retards a nation from going forward in every single way. It is therefore not hard to understand why in countries where there is unfettered violence against women, economic and social development will always take a backseat.

And the key reason is unhappiness. As clichéd as it may sound, when there is no peace or happiness in the home, there is no peace in society. A society where women and girls are being regularly subjected to all kinds of abuse cannot function normally, let alone develop or flourish. Most of all, it cannot be a happy society. A BBS-Unicef

survey interviewed women between the age of 15 and 49 and found that 25 percent of those surveyed justified being beaten by their husbands for any one of the following reasons: for going out without telling him, for talking back at him, for not being attentive enough to his children, for refusing to have sex or burning the rice. Can we say that women, who are conditioned to think it is normal to be subjected to violence as

may even be left physically disabled because of the attacks on her by her partner, is likely to fall into depression and even decide to take her life to escape the trauma.

We don't need sophisticated data to know that when a woman is depressed, which is most likely if her partner is abusive, the unhappiness will seep into every corner of the home, affecting the children and even the abusive

neighbourhoods and in each district of Bangladesh, and you have a gigantic meteorite of unhappiness weighing the whole country down. And this is minus the gross discriminations and unlimited deprivation of nutrition, health, education, recognition and so on that adds to the ill-being that the majority of our women and girls are burdened with.

In this grim backdrop, it would be foolish of our leaders to be in denial mode. Buzzwords like "high growth rates" and "middle income country status" have little meaning when the situation of women and girls is in such an appalling state. There may be more women in the workforce with significant numbers in the corporate sector, but they are still grossly discriminated against in terms of pay, promotion and position. But what is more devastating is that many of them face sexual and other forms of violence from their partners, relatives or strangers on the street. Child marriage, which is a form of violence against girls, is also very much part of our culture, especially for poor families.

The onus is therefore on our leaders—they have a huge role to play. Our lawmakers have the power to make sure that the legal system works for women and not against them. Conviction rates of rape cases have to be higher, with the state protecting the victim and her family during the trial process. A report in *The Daily Star* gives a harrowing account of how cruelly even child rape victims are treated at the one stop crisis centres of government hospitals—a testimony to the unbelievable lack of sensitivity or empathy for victims of sexual violence. Domestic violence is still considered an inconvenience of marriage that must be endured. We cannot scream "greater social awareness is needed" without creating specific campaigns that will target boys and men so that they realise that when they inflict violence on women and girls, they are in effect destroying the balance and harmony of their own communities, in fact, their own lives. They are in essence, taking our society, and our nation backwards from the path of progress. We do not have an "unhappiness index" to measure the ill-being of citizens. But we definitely have a countless number of women and girls robbed of their right to be happy to know what such an index would look like. Our leaders have the power to change the tragic endings of these stories, a change that is guaranteed to have tremendous positive outcomes on every aspect of development.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

part of married life, can be happy?

In a household where the woman is being verbally and physically abused, children will be deeply affected and may suffer from mental illness well into their adult lives. Research has found that children growing up witnessing such violence may become abusive partners or parents, or become victims themselves, as they will accept such abusive behaviour. Violence creates imbalances inside the family. A woman who is in constant fear of being abused and who

partner, and then creeping into the entire community. Just imagine, in a neighbourhood, if one out of every three women and girls experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner (worldwide according to UN Women), how functional/happy/productive can that neighbourhood be? It is a staggering fact that such violence is still frighteningly high, despite all the laws being enacted and widespread campaigns by international and local organisations. Now multiply this unhappiness with all

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Will the Coronavirus Trigger a Global Recession?

JEFFREY FRANKEL

AT the start of this year, things seemed to be looking up for the global economy. True, growth had slowed a bit in 2019: from 2.9 percent to 2.3 percent in the United States, and from 3.6 percent to 2.9 percent globally. Still, there had been no recession, and as recently as January, the International Monetary Fund projected a global growth rebound in 2020. The new coronavirus, COVID-19, has changed all of that.

Early predictions about COVID-19's economic impact were reassuring. Similar epidemics—such as the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), another China-born coronavirus—did little damage globally. At the country level, GDP growth took a hit, but quickly bounced back, as consumers released pent-up demand and firms rushed to fill back orders and re-stock inventories.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that this new coronavirus is

Commodity exporters—including Australia, and most of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—are likely to be affected the most, as China tends to be their largest customer. But all of China's major trading partners are vulnerable.

likely to do much more damage than SARS. Not only has COVID-19 already caused more deaths than its predecessor; its economic consequences are likely to be compounded by unfavourable conditions—beginning with China's increased economic vulnerability. China's economy has grown



PHOTO: PHILIP FONG/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

significantly more slowly in the last decade than it did previously. Of course, after decades of double-digit growth, that was to be expected, and China has managed to avoid a hard landing. But Chinese banks hold large amounts of non-performing loans—a source of major risks.

As the COVID-19 outbreak disrupts economic activity—owing partly to the unprecedented quarantining of huge subsets of the population—there is reason to expect a sharp slowdown this year, with growth falling significantly below last year's official rate of 6.1 percent. During the recent meeting of G20 finance ministers, the IMF downgraded its growth forecast for China to 5.6 percent for 2020—its lowest level since 1990.

This could hamper global growth considerably, because the world economy is more dependent on China than ever. In 2003, China constituted only 4 percent of global GDP; today, that figure stands at 17 percent (at current exchange rates).

Moreover, because China is a global supply-chain hub, disruptions there undermine output elsewhere. Commodity exporters—including Australia, and most of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—are likely to be affected the most, as China tends to be their largest customer. But all of China's major trading partners are vulnerable.

For example, Japan's economy already contracted at an annualised rate of 6.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2019, owing to last October's consumption tax hike. Add to that the loss of trade with China, and a recession—defined as two consecutive quarters of shrinking GDP—now seems likely.

European manufacturing could also suffer considerably. Europe is more dependent on trade than, say, the United States, and is linked even more extensively to China through a web of supply chains. While Germany narrowly escaped recession last year, it might not be so lucky this year, especially if it fails to undertake some fiscal expansion. As for the United Kingdom, Brexit may finally have the long-feared economic consequences.

All of this could happen even if COVID-19 does not become a full-blown pandemic. In fact, while the virus is proliferating in some countries, such as South Korea, a high infection rate is not a prerequisite for economic hardship. The spectre of contagious disease tends to have a disproportionate impact on economic activity, because healthy people avoid traveling, shopping, and even going to work.

Some still cling to growth optimism, rooted in recent trade agreements negotiated by US President Donald

Trump's administration: the "phase one" deal with China and the revised free-trade agreement with Canada and Mexico. But while those agreements are far better than they would have been had Trump stuck to the headline positions he once defended, they do not represent an improvement over the situation that prevailed before he took office; if anything, their net impact is likely to be negative.

Consider the "phase one" deal with China: not only does it leave in place high tariffs; it also remains fragile, owing to a lack of credibility on both sides. In any case, its impact is likely to be limited. China may not be able to deliver on its promise to purchase an extra USD 200 billion worth of goods from the US, and even if it does, that is unlikely to translate into higher US exports. Instead, those exports will simply be diverted from other customers.

While global recessions are exceedingly difficult to forecast, the odds of one—particularly one characterised by less than 2.5 percent growth, a threshold set by the IMF—now seem to have risen dramatically. Unlike advanced-economy growth, global growth rarely falls below zero, because developing countries have higher average trend growth.

So far, US investors seem unconcerned about these risks, but they may be taking too much comfort from the US Federal Reserve's three interest rate cuts last year. Should the US economy falter, there is nowhere near enough room for the Fed to cut interest rates by 500 basis points, as it has in past recessions.

Even if a recession does not materialise in the near term, Trump's approach to trade may herald the end of the era when steadily rising international trade (as a share of GDP) buttressed global peace and prosperity. Instead, the US and China may continue on the path toward economic decoupling, within the context of a broader process of de-globalisation. COVID-19 did not place the world's two largest economies on this path, but it could well hasten their journey along it.

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