COVID-19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS

The great wage robbery

C R ABRAR

"GULF countries are highly dependent on migrant workers in almost every major sector… and yet they have utterly failed to protect migrant workers, and treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve"—these words were spoken by a representative of Amnesty International while highlighting the plight of migrant workers during Covid-19 times.

In a letter to the UN Secretary General, Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants expressed concern that during the pandemic, some destination countries are exerting pressure on the origin countries to take back the latter's nationals, and appealed to him to exert his influence on those governments "to take the responsibility of this group of vulnerable workers at this time of crisis".

Despite migrant workers' colossal contribution in building the edifices of and shoring up the economies of the Gulf and other Arab countries for decades, coronavirus has betrayed the ill treatment and injustices that have been structurally embedded in this labour market. If anything, thanks to the pandemic, the reality that has thus far remained behind the scenes has been laid bare. Neither the opulent host countries nor most of the countries of origin (always in a rush to secure the flow of remittances), have ever cared to duly acknowledge the problems that over time became well entrenched, let alone put in place mechanisms to address them.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, narratives (largely on social media) of migrants located in various destination countries convincingly conveyed the dire quandary they are in. Many are without adequate food for days or even weeks, crammed in unhygienic and unsanitary quarters, some even without proper shelters, making a mockery of the WHO call for social distancing. A large segment remains idle as construction sites and other production facilities, restaurants and markets remain shuttered. Faced with a situation of possible deportation, many were forced to accept withholding or reduction of wages without any guarantee of whether they would be reimbursed at all, a measure that is in breach of labour standards. Bereft of any earnings and with fast depleting savings (if they had them at all), they face virtual starvation and are trapped in great uncertainty. Those lucky to retain jobs are unable to send money to their loved ones at home as remittance transfer facilities in destination countries remain closed. The diplomatic missions of their respective countries command meagre resources—far less than the amount the distressed migrants need.

In this grave uncertainty, what has come as a bolt from the blue is the arbitrary termination of contracts by employers. Like aftershocks during an earthquake, a large number of migrant workers were speedily notified that their services are no longer required. It was done at a time when their contracts remained valid. This was not the end of their affliction. To their bewilderment, not only did the workers not receive a penny as compensation for arbitrary termination, but they faced the loss of all outstanding dues as well—wages, benefits and the like.

Taking advantage of their governments' plans to send workers back to their countries of origin, the employers who could still manage to run their enterprises are terminating the contracts of migrant workers. Covid-19 for them is a God-sent opportunity to rob the workers of the huge sums of money that they are owed. A huge number of cases were reported where months of due wages and benefits have been withheld.

Employers in destination countries know quite well the iron grip they command over the market. They are also aware that if they require the services of migrant workers in future, their own governments would have no issues in granting them work permits. Yet again, the recruiting agencies at both ends would work in unison to get big cuts from the exorbitant costs of the new visas that they would sell to aspirant migrants as manna from heaven, and the authorities in the countries of origin would be too keen to see one more worker go abroad, with the anticipation of an additional amount, however small, in the flow of much coveted remittances, deemed as an important indicator of national development.

The relatively well off migrants also appear to be sinking into hardship. Migrant workers who over the years acquired specialised skills and graduated to become independent contractors, have also been adversely affected. With the stagnation in economic activities, they are worried about recouping the amounts spent for work that has already been completed.

The conditions of long term enterprising labour migrants who managed to mature through the ranks and subsequently become co-owners of enterprises, such as tailoring shops, motor garages and convenience stores, are no better. They are worried that the hardline policies (of sending back migrants to their countries of origin) may act as an inducement to their Arab partners (in whose names the enterprises are registered) to dump them. Needless to say, the legal regime of the Gulf and other Arab states do not provide any protection to foreigners who make such investments. Despite prohibitions in the law, this practice is largely abetted by the authorities, to the huge benefit of the non-investing local partners. Covid-19 may have come as a boon to these rent-seekers, allowing them to strip the entrepreneurial migrants of their *de facto* ownership.

Large scale return, deportation or repatriation of migrant workers during the times of Covid-19 is a reality. Since the

Asian workers at a construction site in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. Dubai is one of the locations for some of Bangladesh's 10 million migrant workers who are mostly employed in the Middle East.
PHOTO: AFP/KARIM SAHIB

outbreak of the pandemic, more than 200,000 have been sent back to their countries of origin in Asia. In all likelihood, the figure will "rise exponentially" when the flights resume over the next few months. Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) predicts countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines will experience eventual return of a massive number of their migrant workers—"millions will be repatriated to situations of debt bondage as they will be forced to pay off recruitment fees and costs, despite returning empty handed".

Under duress from destination countries, the countries of origin reluctantly became party to repatriation (in effect deportation) procedures conducted hastily, without any redress mechanism. Such procedures have been put in place when courts and other dispute settlement mechanisms in the countries of destination remain closed.

A joint statement issued on June 1 by five leading INGOs and trade unions observed that "Without ensuring companies and employers are doing their due diligence to protect and fulfil the human rights and labour rights of repatriated migrant workers, states … became complicit in overseeing procedures where millions of workers will be returning without their earned wages …nor seeing justice". Those workers were not provided with any document (contract, pay slip, attendance roll etc) by their employers, through which in future they can lodge legitimate claims of compensation for the harm they have been subjected to, if ever a justice mechanism is put in place. While the workers endure unparalleled hardships without any possibility of redress, unplanned facilitation of "repatriation" frees employers from any accountability.

The psychological toll of deportations on the pauperised and debt ridden migrant workers can never be accounted for. As yet, no exercise has been initiated to assess the measurable potential loss of remittances, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, through this wage thuggery by the countries of destination. The much celebrated Global Compact for Migration, New York Declaration, 2016 and regional (Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue) and international processes (Global Forum on Migration and Development) have thus far failed to generate even a dim ray of hope for the millions of aggrieved migrants.

Today is the International Day of Family Remittances. It is observed to celebrate migrants' contributions to millions of households, and also to communities, countries and entire regions. Covid-19 has disrupted the flow of resources, eroding the resilience of migrant households. On March 19, 2020, the UN Secretary-General has called for global solidarity in responding to the coronavirus crisis, stating "remittances are lifelines in the developing world—especially now".

Unfortunately, the pandemic has proven the brittleness of the cherished concepts of "global solidarity and cooperation" on migration. If the call for Build Back Better is ever to succeed and if the attainment of the SDGs still remains a target from the precipice where it stands now, if the globalisation process is ever to matter to the marginalised of the world, then it is incumbent on all states and international actors to ensure accountability of the wage robbers. Otherwise, in all likelihood, the painstakingly built migration-development nexus will suffer a brutal jolt.

C R Abrar is an academic. He coordinates the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

Transitioning to online teaching

JUDE WILLIAM GENILO and **ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN**

ON March 16, 2020, amidst fears of the coronavirus outbreak, the Bangladesh government issued a directive decreeing all educational institutions under the Ministry of Education to close. To minimise possible academic losses, the University Grants Commission (UGC) declared that all universities introduce online teaching of courses. This directive resulted in universities, particularly some private ones, to quickly shift courses online. We consider ourselves lucky that our university had the infrastructure, the technical knowledge and the experience to make this move smoothly. However, not all universities were so fortunate, resulting in many debates over the issue.

The UGC's directive to shift classes online came when we were in the first half of the term, with midterm exams looming. Faculty members were instructed to give assignments, take home exams, and viva exams in lieu of synchronous online written examinations. Online teaching and assessment strategies had to be rethought given the levels of students' Internet accessibility. A survey revealed that 60 percent of our students had reliable Internet access, 30 percent had intermittent Internet access, and 10 percent had no Internet access. The students without Internet access could not participate in the online sessions and therefore, special policies needed to be formulated to accommodate them.

It should be noted that a Quacquarelli Symonds Limited (QS) survey conducted among 16,000 students and 400 university administrators worldwide showed 54 percent of respondents shifted to online teaching and 63 percent of student respondents expected their universities to move online. The data was gathered from February to March 2020.

Regarding infrastructure, we had integrated a learning management system (LMS), Moodle, an open-source learning platform used worldwide, in 2007. After intermittent training, the LMS was officially launched in Spring 2014. Initially, our faculty members used the platform as an additional support to teaching and not as a replacement for classroom or face-to-face classes. The system, thus, was being used as a supplementary space to upload helpful, additional course materials, distribute and collect assignments, record grades, take attendance, conduct quizzes, and chat with students so that learning continued beyond the classroom.

Newly hired faculty at our university are trained in Moodle every semester and refreshers offered for others. In September 2018, we formed an Online Education Study Group to recommend measures on how to move forward with online teaching and learning at the university. The group suggested assessing the impact of online education at our university and others; prioritising online education strategies that build upon our core values; limiting online engagements to those instances that yield clear benefits to students and relevant stakeholders; and undertaking consultations with faculty members regarding online learning strategies.

Given these, various departments and centres at the university have made inroads in conducting online learning. Much of these have been instrumental in facilitating the shift from face-to-face classrooms to online teaching during this critical time, while prior familiarity with an LMS among faculty members and students became the most important factor in facilitating this shift.

Despite this familiarity, however, Moodle was never used for teaching exclusively. So, options to use other mediums to complement Moodle were recommended when the emergency situation arose. The goal was to reach and accommodate as many of the students in a course as possible, and to prioritise the delivery of the course content, rather than focus on the platform used. For video conferencing, the faculty opted to use Zoom, Meet and Hangouts. For students with intermittent access to the Internet, documents and other materials were uploaded not only

> *For students with intermittent access to the Internet, documents and other materials were uploaded not only to Moodle, but to Google Drive and Facebook groups, or emailed directly to them. Faculty members also recorded their synchronous lectures and uploaded them to the course-related Facebook private groups or YouTube.*

to Moodle, but to Google Drive and Facebook groups, or emailed directly to them. Faculty members also recorded their synchronous lectures and uploaded them to the course-related Facebook private groups or YouTube so that students who could not login at the time could view them later while others could use them for review.

In addition to the use of a full-fledged LMS, an initiative was taken to link up with Coursera to allow students and faculty members access to other online courses from universities worldwide. In April 2020, Coursera granted us access to more than 4,600 free certified courses for 1,000 of our community members for the next six months. This agreement with Coursera proved beneficial not only to the students but to faculty and admin members as well, many of whom are taking advantage of this opportunity.

When the lockdown began and educational institutions shut down, faculty members at our university formed a Facebook group to serve as a platform to exchange notes regarding online teaching and learning. This group proved extremely useful in collaborating on different practices regarding student management, assessments, pedagogy, course syllabi writing, online learning platforms, cyber security, and other concerns. In a sense, the platform became a community of practices as well as a support group of the Teachers Helping Teachers kind.

We think it safe to say at this point that our university has achieved a good measure of success in transitioning to online teaching/learning. A report from the university's Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) verifies that 94 percent of classes were held successfully in the Spring 2020 semester. But since this is the first time we conducted classes online, we needed to also gather data to explore ways to improve the experience for all concerned as we move forward and prepare for the upcoming semester. The first step was a broad-based student survey to gain some insight into our primary stakeholders' experiences, as mentioned earlier. This survey revealed that 75 percent of our students live in Dhaka and 92 percent have smart phones. This, of course, augurs well for our next semester. This data will help in choosing alternatives for students in remote areas with limited or no access to the Internet.

Second, the university's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) also conducted a survey of the faculty members to gauge their physical wellness, mental wellbeing, financial status, online class response, and the support they need to improve online participation. Data from this survey is being used to plan for training sessions and seminars.

Third, course and teacher evaluations were conducted online through the University's Resource Management System. Typically, every term, faculty members are evaluated by students for their knowledge of the subject matter, teaching styles, learning assessments, professional behaviour and student development. Courses are investigated in terms of content/organisation, learning environment, learning resources, teacher contributions, and student contributions. These evaluations are compiled and sent to faculty members to help them reassess their course contents and teaching styles for an improved experience in the next semester. The same process will be followed this time too.

As we move on through this pandemic, we feel it is important to support each other every step of the way—not only within our individual institutions, but across universities, because there is always scope for improvement and learning. If we, as faculty members, model supportive behaviour amongst ourselves, it is only natural that our other stakeholders will follow suit. This step by step breakdown of the measures adopted by our university, therefore, will, we hope, serve as a support to others who may be struggling to adapt to the "new normal."

Dr. Jude William Genilo is Professor and Head of the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, and Director, IQAC, at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. Arifa Ghani Rahman is Associate Professor of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

FIRST WOMAN IN SPACE
June 16, 1963

On this day in 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina V Tereshkova became the first woman to travel in space, having been launched into orbit aboard the spacecraft Vostok 6, which completed 48 orbits in 71 hours.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Climber's descent
7 Glade grazer
11 Change over time
12 Jane of fiction
13 Hold back
14 Feudal farmer
15 Necklace parts
17 Like Solomon
20 Pound resident
23 Squid's squirt
24 "Understood!"
26 Cunning
27 Sedan or SUV
28 Relatives
29 Keep at it
31 Termination
32 Go piece
33 Order to Spot
34 Breakfast choice
37 Small dog, for short
39 Mideastern peninsula
43 Finished
44 Come back
45 Darlings
46 Stuck, in a way

DOWN
1 Warning color
2 Broad st.
3 Poker prize
4 Site
5 Wicked
6 Singer Horne
7 Tyrant
8 Hole in the head
9 Mess up
10 Game caller
16 Soccer or softball
17 Bits of smoke
18 Bay
19 Shoot up
21 Panda's home
22 Convenient
24 Less friendly
25 Argon or ethane
30 Looks of scorn
33 Bed boards
35 Tombstone name
36 Open space
37 Some music
38 Time to prepare
40 Except
41 Hot blood
42 Linking word

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	M	U	S			M	I	N	O	R
O	H	A	R	E		A	R	O	M	A	
M	O	R	N	I	N	G	S	T	A	R	
E	Y	E		Z	I	G		E	R	E	
			T	E	P	I	D				
C	A	S	E	S			E	A	G	L	E
O	X	E	N				V	A	I	N	
D	E	C	O	R		G	I	L	D	S	
			R	E	B	U	S				
H	O	P		S	U	N		D	O	E	
E	V	E	N	I	N	G	G	O	W	N	
M	A	S	O	N		H	A	Z	E	D	
S	L	O	W	S		O	P	E	D	S	

BEETLE BAILEY   BY MORT WALKER

I'M SORRY, SIR, DOGS AREN'T ALLOWED IN THIS RESTAURANT

HE'S AN ASSISTANCE DOG

OH, THAT'S ALLOWED

HE TURNS THE PAGES FOR ME

AND I DECIDE WHAT WE EAT

BABY BLUES   BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

GESUNDHEIT

K'CHEW!

SNIF!