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Good news on the remittance front

But don't miss the wood for the trees

THERE cannot be anything better in the midst of the gloom and despondency that Covid-19 has brought upon us than the news that remittance in the month of July has beaten all odds. It has belied all the negative predictions that Bangladesh would be one of those Asian economies, according to the Asian Development Bank, that would suffer the most from a fall in foreign remittance. Defying all expectations of a huge fall due to the economic slump caused by the global coronavirus pandemic, we have seen our workers abroad send in USD 2.6 billion in July, a record for a single month. This has pushed foreign exchange reserves beyond the USD 37 billion mark for the first time in history. Equally gratifying to note is the percentage of increase—62.5 percent more than last year and 42.1 percent from the month of June, according to Bangladesh Bank. A big thanks to our expat workers for this.

The worries that the most important prop of our economy would be severely dented by the pandemic that has affected all the economies has not come to pass, at least as of yet. While we can justifiably feel happy about the remittance figure, we should go deep into the underlying causes and see whether the spike is episodic—is it a one-off phenomenon, or will it be a repetitive feature, of course with the normal variations? Is the spike the result of the two percent incentive declared by the government to discourage illegal transfer by expatriate workers? While that is good news, it would be well to consider that the rise could also be due to the fact that the returning workers have chosen to bring back all their savings from abroad, there being little chance for them to get back their jobs once the pandemic has receded.

While we might feel comfortable with the current situation, we should plan for the eventuality that the large number of our workers who have returned home may not get their jobs back. As such, we should focus on creating jobs for the returnees while they are here and help them to seek new destinations after the pandemic is over, as well as add value to these workers and help them graduate from low to higher paying jobs.

Young but wise: Inspiring story of a library activist

Atif Asad's initiative should inspire millions in their quest for knowledge

YOUNG and wise are not attributes we use interchangeably or place side by side when describing a person. Wisdom, we like to believe, comes with age. Yet the story of 19-year-old Atif Asad, a resident of a remote village in Jamalpur's Sarishabari upazila, shows us that it is never too early to start the good fight. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, Atif, a first-year honours student at Jamalpur Government Ashok Mahmud College, has established a library to enlighten not just students like him but also people in general. The library, founded in January 2018 with only 20 books, now boasts over 2,000. This is not your usual brick-and-mortar library in the heart of a town where people occasionally visit and read in the comfort of carefully archived collections with modern amenities. Housed in the veranda of his house with shelves made of jute sticks, he built his library from the ground up, slowly enriching his collection with help from young learners and local benefactors. His vision is built on a model of maximising outputs that sees him take his books to the doorsteps of his readers, rather than expecting them to visit his library.

This model has proven to be effective in a poor village like his where education is viewed as a luxury for those who can afford it. Riding his cycle, Atif travels to neighbouring villages 10 to 15 kilometres away to give his books, and makes the same journey to bring them back when his readers—now around 100—are finished with them. This is no easy task for someone who also has to work as a mason's helper to provide for his family as well as support his own education. His struggle didn't diminish his spirit; on the contrary, it enabled him to look past the tribulations of his life and focus on the importance of literacy for people who come from similar backgrounds.

We congratulate Atif for his tireless service for his community and expect others to follow his example. Such initiatives are an important way of improving lives in the rural backwaters of Bangladesh, which usually receives scant attention from the country's policymakers. Atif's story is also proof that any radical change desired in a society must involve contributions from the community members who understand their limits and problems and can solve them in the best way possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop promoting smoking

Smoking and the consumption of tobacco products are harmful for health and our surrounding environment. It is not possible for the government to directly ban tobacco because a significant number of people are employed in the sector. However, the advertising, promotion and display of tobacco has been banned in public under the Smoking and Use of Tobacco Products Act 2005 (Amended 2013), but there is no proper enforcement of this law.

Cigarette packs are displayed openly in many stalls as well as leaflets and stickers promoting cigarettes. Many of the youth become tempted to smoke because of these promotions. To reduce the number of smokers and keep the new generation away from this harmful substance, it is necessary to stop the advertisement of cigarettes and smoking in public. There is no alternative to ensuring proper implementation of the laws enacted for this purpose.

Abu Faru, Bandarban

Kajol may have been found, but justice is still missing



THE OVERTON WINDOW
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

OVER 120 days have passed since photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, also the editor of *The Daily Pokkhokhal*, went missing after leaving his office on the evening of March 10. Fifty-three restless nights and days his family spent searching for him. Fifty-three days the media wondered aloud whether one of their own would return alive. Yet, for 53 days, the authorities showed little interest in finding what happened to Kajol.

This, despite the coincidental fact that the day before he disappeared (March 9), almost close to midnight (at 11:30 pm), a case was registered against Kajol under the infamous Digital Security Act, along with 31 others. As well as the presence of a CCTV footage from outside his office showing several unidentified men snooping around his motorbike—and at one point meddling with it—for at least three hours before he was to be last seen. It wasn't until a month and a half later that Kajol was suddenly "discovered" near the India-Bangladesh border by a BGB patrol—as the authorities claimed—in what appears to be a bizarre stroke of luck.

Instead of finding what happened to Kajol during those 53 days, the authorities immediately put all their effort to go after him. In fact, if one didn't know any better, one might think that Kajol had committed a violent crime judging by the way he has been treated since being "discovered" near the border, beginning with him being dragged into a local court in Jashore with his hands cuffed behind his back—in violation of a High Court directive in this regard.

Why weren't the authorities at all curious to know what had happened to him? Did they already know? If so, why haven't they shared it, not even with his family? These are reasonable

questions. After all, according to Ain O Salish Kendra, between 2014 and August 2018, 310 people had disappeared in the country, of whom only 33 people have so far been "discovered"—and we know nothing about what had happened to them either.

The sheer number of disappearances and the state's outright failure to uncover and reveal what happened to those who disappeared have prompted even the United Nations Committee against

horrible scenario.

So why did two police stations refuse to file a case of disappearance at the request of Kajol's family until a court intervened? And what explains the contrasting urgency with which the authorities accepted multiple cases lodged against Kajol by persons affiliated with the ruling party?

As if the ordeal he had to endure during the time that he was missing wasn't bad enough, the authorities



Photojournalists stage a demonstration demanding the safe return of Shafiqul Islam Kajol, in front of the National Museum in Dhaka, on March 18, 2020. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Torture to question the government's claims and actions in those cases. But even if we accept that "the government is correct that the state-actors are not involved" with the many strange disappearances, then that "only means that non-state actors have become so powerful in the country that they can abduct anyone" and even "kill the abductees if they want," according to distinguished professor at Illinois State University, Ali Riaz. If that is the case, even then it is the government that is responsible for addressing this equally

charged Kajol for illegally entering Bangladesh under the Passport Act right after they had "discovered" him. And as soon as he received bail for that, he was again arrested under the Criminal Procedure Code Section 54, which allows police to arrest someone without a warrant and detain them for up to 15 days without a lawyer.

Even more ironically, during a bail hearing for that case on the 15th day of his detention, Kajol was refused bail on the ground that the magistrate had asked the police for a report which the police

didn't submit even though the last day of submission was the day before. Finally, on May 20, the Section 54 case was dismissed after the police submitted the report and confirmed that several cases had been lodged against Kajol under the DSA.

Without going into further legal jargon, it can be said that what appears to be happening is that Kajol is being punished through a process that is ideally meant to deliver justice.

For more than 120 days, he has been denied his freedom in one way or another, and still, somehow Kajol is yet to receive his day in court. And, it was only on June 23 that he was arrested for the first time in the DSA case, after having spent 52 days in jail already on top of the 53 days during which he was missing.

How is that justice? And is this "actually" about justice?

So far, many artists, journalists, human rights defenders and others have emphasised that it is not, through their activism for Kajol, which may very well have led to his (relatively early) "discovery". And the huge number of people that have vehemently opposed the treatment of Kajol illustrates quite blatantly how the majority of people view this case.

And how they do is not how the authorities have tried to portray it, but more in line with what Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch said: "Bangladesh authorities are flouting the rule of law, arbitrarily arresting anyone they feel might be criticising the government... At a time when the government should be reducing the prison population to protect against the spread of Covid-19, they are locking people up simply for their comments on social media."

The authorities, of course as we all know, have repeatedly denied such allegations before. And will no doubt do so again. But the (mis)treatment of journalists—as in Kajol's case—that we have been witnessing for some time now, speaks much louder than empty rhetoric.

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A ten year journey to achieve resilience to climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
SALEEMUL HUQ

IN January 2021, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh will be holding the 7th annual Gobeshona conference with an overall

theme of starting a ten year journey to promote locally led adaptation towards resilience in Bangladesh, as well as in other vulnerable developing countries, including the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) countries. The aim of the proposed journey is not to announce a new grand top-down action plan for the upcoming decade to 2030, as there are already sufficient goals including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. In Bangladesh, we have just published the Perspective Plan to 2041.

In contrast, the ten year journey is an attempt to influence and modify all the top-down efforts by national governments as well as international institutions who are supporting adaptation and resilience plans, and to ensure that they genuinely support the empowerment and actions of the most vulnerable communities, in both towns as well as rural areas, in order to enhance their resilience to the adverse impacts of climate change while also tackling poverty at the same time.

The first element of this journey is the structure of knowledge sharing and evaluating our successes or failures (we explicitly accept that we will indeed make mistakes and that we will acknowledge such mistakes and do our best to learn from them and not repeat them). This will be done through three key meetings each year. The first meeting will be the annual Gobeshona conference held in Bangladesh each January where the partners who will be involved in carrying out the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) of locally led adaptation (LLA) will meet and share their findings. One such group is the LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC), who will be carrying out a bottom up learning programme in each LDC.

The second annual meeting will be the international conference on community based adaptation (CBA), which takes place mid year in a different part of the world each year. This meeting brings together several hundred participants from all over the world who have been actively engaged in LLA for over a decade.

The 14th annual CBA conference this year was supposed to have been held in Bangkok, Thailand in May this year, but had to be postponed to September and will now be an online event. This event brings together the Community of Practice on CBA from all over the world and next year's CBA15 will be held in Bangladesh in the second half of 2021, hosted by BRAC. At this annual event, the grassroots groups themselves will share their experiences and evaluate to

involved. This will be an occasion to see to what extent this noble, but very top-down, initiative actually enhances LLA.

Finally, the fourth meeting each year is the annual Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is held in November or December each year on a different continent. The next COP26 will be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021 (postponed from November 2020

government is already working on its Eighth Five Year Plan, and then the Ninth Five Year Plan will take us to 2030. At the same time, we also have the Perspective Plan to 2041 and the Delta Plan to 2100 to guide us. The setting up of the Global Centre on Adaptation for South Asia in Dhaka will also be an opportunity for Bangladesh to share knowledge with other vulnerable developing countries on adaptation and resilience.

Finally, the goal of the ten year journey



PHOTO: ZIAUL HAQUE OISHARJH

what extent the top-down efforts are actually helping them on the ground. It will be a place for all national and international projects and programmes to come and be answerable to the grassroots communities. One set of LDCs who are part of the LDC Initiative for Effective Adaptation and Resilience (LIFE-AR) have already promised to allocate 70 percent of their adaptation funding to support LLA and will be invited to report back regarding their performance at each CBA conference.

The third event that takes place each year is the United Nations General Assembly, which is also associated with the UN Secretary General holding a Climate Change Action Summit. At last year's summit, the UN Secretary General launched an initiative on adaptation and resilience with the United Kingdom and Egypt as the co-leaders with several other countries, including Bangladesh,

due to the pandemic) and will bring together all the national governments in the UNFCCC to review progress. Under Article Six of the Paris Agreement adopted at COP21 in 2015, countries agreed to set up and achieve a global goal on adaptation, which should also include locally led adaptation.

This journey is being planned to include a number of partners, ranging from national governments of some of the LDCs as well as CVF under the leadership of Bangladesh. At the same time, intentional development partners, multilateral development banks and UN agencies are also invited to join to share their experiences in supporting LLA. The one condition for joining is to be open to being critically evaluated by the grassroots groups that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of their respective programmes.

In the Bangladeshi context, the

is to enable the countries involved to transform themselves from being some of the most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change to becoming some of the most resilient. This will require all the citizens of each country to understand the risks of climate change impacts and also become prepared to deal with them effectively when they occur.

The one big lesson that the global Covid-19 pandemic has already taught us is that in every country where the leaders as well as the citizens have listened to the scientists and acted according to their scientific advice, the death toll has successfully been minimised. This lesson applies to tackling the climate change impacts which will continue for decades to come.

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