

Trial of brutal murder of Bangladeshi maid in KSA

Local and KSA authorities must ensure justice is served

RIGHTENING details have emerged of a female Bangladeshi domestic worker who was tortured and killed at her employer's house in Saudi Arabia. According to a report in *The Daily Star* published on Friday, Abiron Begum Ansar, a 40-year-old maid from Khulna who went to the kingdom in 2017, had to endure unspeakable horrors while cooped up in a Saudi household of eight members. According to her family, during her stay there, she was brutally tortured. Her employers would not give her food, and they would beat her, pour hot water on her body, and even put her head into a grill, they alleged. At one point, her family completely lost communication with her. After her lifeless body was flown back to Bangladesh on October 24, 2019—before being kept in a Saudi mortuary for seven months—family members who saw the corpse described it as “so horrible that we could not look at it”.

This could have been yet another case of torture-leading-to-death of a hapless migrant worker, a group that remains as inconspicuous in their life as in their death. But subsequent developments in Abiron's case offer hope that justice, however delayed, may not be denied. *The Daily Star* report mentions progress in the trial of the case in a Saudi court, a rare instance in the country. The three accused arrested in the murder case have been denied bail, and the court will hear their case on January 20. If the victim family's demand for Qisas (or retributive justice), which forms part of the law in Saudi Arabia, is honoured, it will serve as a deterrent for other exploitative employers and set a legal precedent for similar cases in the future. This is especially significant for Bangladesh, which had to see about 500 bodies of its female migrant workers flown back over the last five years, at least 200 of them from Saudi Arabia alone. The law must be evenly applied to all responsible for those deaths, and Bangladesh must do everything within its power to ensure that justice is served and the usual suspects for the migrants' misfortune—local agents, recruiting agencies and corrupt government officials—aren't let off the hook.

Abiron's case also brings renewed attention to the deeply exploitative global multi-billion-dollar migration industry, where migrants, especially domestic workers, are subjected to frequent abuse with few rights and little freedom. Domestic workers, mostly women, have to suffer a litany of exploitation at the hands of their employers including forced labour, beatings, sexual assault and underpayment. But their sufferings and deaths often remain unacknowledged. Given how this industry works, involving multiple stakeholders, the policy options for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries may be limited. But each has a duty to do its own part, in curbing corruption and reducing sufferings. The Bangladesh government must work harder and collaborate with its partners and counterparts to give its large migrant workforce a fighting chance to live and work with dignity.

Sharp rise in motorcycle accidents in 2020

When will road accidents be brought under control?

DURING a recent press conference held at Jatiya Press Club, Nirapad Sarak Chai revealed that according to their findings, nearly 5,000 people were killed and 5,058 were injured in 4,092 different types of accidents last year, including rail and riverine incidents. Even though there was a steady decrease in the number of road crashes largely due to pandemic-induced restrictions on public transport, motorcycle accidents witnessed a hike in 2020 compared to the previous year.

Among all the vehicles responsible for accidents, the highest 1,127 were motorcycles while 698 were buses, 931 were trucks and 410 were cars and jeeps, and the rest are other types of vehicles. According to data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), 17.53 lakh motorcycle licences were issued against 30.32 lakh registered bikes, meaning 12.79 bikers must be riding without a licence, making our roads unsafe. The rate of bike accidents were 19 percent in 2019 and went up to 27 percent in 2020. According to Nirapad Sarak Chai, lack of proper monitoring and management; non-implementation of the Road Transport Act 2018 and the 111 recommendations given by a committee for reducing road crashes; unhealthy competition among drivers and lack of awareness among pedestrians are among the reasons behind the rise in road accidents.

Our history with road accidents is appalling to say the least, and calls for the immediate attention of all concerned authorities to make all-out efforts and properly implement the Road Transport Act 2018. Besides, swift initiatives should be taken to create mass awareness campaigns. The practice of wearing helmets (for motorcycle riders) and refraining from talking on mobile phones while on the roads, must be strictly monitored. The number of skilled drivers need to be increased, road dividers must be constructed wherever required and service roads need to be built along highways for slow-moving vehicles. Correcting the faults in road designs will also prove beneficial for road safety. Only if we make every effort necessary to bring back discipline on our roads, will we be able to put an end to the unnecessarily loss of life from accidents on our roads.

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

SINCE the atrocious attack on the Capitol by Donald Trump supporters on Wednesday, the Congress has formally certified the victory of Joe Biden, some Cabinet members of the Trump administration have resigned, and some are considering invoking the 25th Amendment of the US Constitution and removing Donald Trump from office. The highest ranking Democrat in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, has extended his support and Speaker Nancy Pelosi has threatened to start the impeachment process unless Trump is removed from office. A few Republican leaders have blasted Trump for his support of the failed insurrection, and the condemnations from home and abroad against these attacks have become louder. It is against this background that Trump has promised an “orderly transfer of power” to Joe Biden. In a taped video broadcast on Thursday evening, Trump effectively conceded and made a *volte face* about his support for those who ransacked the Capitol, saying “The demonstrators who infiltrated the Capitol have defiled the seat of American democracy.”

But questions remain as to whether the assault on democracy has ended, whether Trump's promise is an attempt to buy time and avoid the possibility of impeachment, and how much impact the attack will have on domestic politics and the United States' image around the world.

The violence incited by Trump will have an array of negative impacts on both domestic politics and America's international standing. The negative impacts on domestic politics are due to the fact that the attack was neither sporadic nor spontaneous, but a result of almost five years of deliberate undermining of democratic institutions. The physical attack was just one step from the rhetoric of Trump and his allies who incessantly denigrated the norms and institutions which are essential to democracy and responsible governance. Since his entrance to the political scene in 2015, Trump has imparted a siege mentality in his supporters, that they are being hounded by the deep state and that someone out there is hatching a conspiracy to take away their country from them. This, in conjunction with the call by Trump in Wednesday's rally to “Walk to the Capitol”, was the final act of unleashing a mob. When Trump, who promised to have a “wild” protest, told his loyal supporters that “you will never take back our country with weakness”; the message was not subtle, but rather very loud and

clear. The deep anger against democracy found its most potent symbol—the Capitol, the citadel of democratic power. By trampling the culture of tolerance and pursuing divisiveness, Trump had sowed the seeds of anti-democracy; the attack was the fruit of that poison tree. Rhetoric was engendering violence, although in limited scale, but on January 6 it revealed its full force.

This dangerous anti-democratic mindset has been reared by the Republican party for quite some time. The silent embracing of the birther movement, the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 and the increasing rightward movement of leaders are just a few examples of how it was mainstreamed. The party will be bound to be a part of American politics, thus the mindset is unlikely to disappear after this incident. There is hardly any indication

complicity.

In the past four years, violent White supremacist organisations have proliferated—Qanon and Proud Boys are cases in point. Members of the organisations are alleged to be at the forefront of Wednesday's mayhem. They have received Trump's unequivocal support as “patriots”. He called upon them to “stand by” and they did, until he said, “Let us walk to the Capitol”. He had enormous power and influence on them as the President, but whether they will remain loyal to him after his departure from the White House or find another person is an open question. Some of the Senators who objected to the election results might be vying for this job. Whether these organisations will increase violent acts in the future is unknown at this point. Trump is definitely departing



PHOTO: REUTERS

that the Republican party is ready to address the problem as a party. There are two reasons that the party will not shun the extremist ideology of which Trump is a product, and which he has succeeded in making the mainstay of the party. First, there are leaders who adhere to this ideology. It is their political creed. Second, the fear of losing in the next elections, or worse yet, being defeated in a primary against a Trump-backed challenger. The number of House members who had supported the two objections based on fictitious allegations of election fraud or their interpretations of the Constitution is testimony to both factors. In one instance, 121 House members supported it; in another, the number was higher—138. The politics of expediency triumphed over the interests of democratic norms and institutions. Since Wednesday, some Republicans have criticised Trump, but there was no acknowledgement of their

from the White House, but is unlikely to leave the political stage. His dark shadow will loom large over mainstream politics. Perhaps he will remain in person and continue to disrupt normalcy until he becomes a candidate in 2024. In between, the 2022 midterm will become the testing ground of his influence. However, the legacy of Trump will be violence, and aiding and abetting domestic terrorism.

This will be the biggest challenge of governance in the United States; as such, this will be a challenge for the Biden administration. How to address this deep schism will also be a challenge for the media and civil society. Unfortunately, some of the media's roles in the past four years have been deeply disturbing.

Trump's “America First” left the United States alone. US policies have alienated the country from the global community. Whether the US is a reliable ally has become a matter of concern for its allies.

The age bar complication in secondary admissions

What could be the proper solution?

MOHAMMAD DIDARE ALAM MUHSIN

EVENTUALLY, the matter seems to have been settled with the intervention of the High Court. The country's education system, already hit hard by the coronavirus crisis, has recently been plagued by complications regarding the date of birth of students applying for admission at the secondary level. Considering the risk of infection, the authorities decided to do away with admission tests for government primary and secondary school students, and instead make selections through lottery after receiving applications online. The deadline to apply for admission to secondary schools was December 15 to 27. As parents went to apply for their children, along with the often encountered slowness of the Internet and server issues, they had to contend with another problem—in many cases, applications for sixth grade admissions could not be processed because the date of birth specified in their birth certificates did not comply with the minimum age limit (at least 11 years) set by the authorities. As a result, many failed to submit applications within the stipulated deadline. There has been a lot of noise in the country about this.

Ultimately, the High Court stayed the order of the concerned authorities after a parent filed a writ petition, ordering that students below the age of 11 can also apply for admission in the sixth grade in government high schools. At the same time, considering the internet and server problems, it directed the concerned authorities to extend the deadline for submitting online applications by seven working days.

At any stage in this country—be it school, college or university—the admission process is like going into battle. In the case of children and adolescents, parents become the main participants in this war and go to great lengths to enrol their children into prestigious schools. The huge crowds,

the noise and the decorations during the admission season are really worth seeing. Many parents even hire one or more tutors or enrol their wards into a coaching centre to prepare them for admission tests. On the other hand, the school authorities not only have to organise this huge workload of student admissions, but also often have to accept the pressures of the requests of various influential quarters for the admission of students beyond the rules.

Apparently, one of the reasons for the parents' desperate attempts to enrol their children into a handful of reputed schools is the huge difference in quality between

the help of one or more private tutors. If these students were not concentrated in a few schools but were scattered more widely in different educational institutes, perhaps the picture at the end of the year would take on a slightly different form. However, parents are unlikely to be interested in listening to this. They will run after reputed schools. Moreover, companionship also has a special importance. The boys and girls with whom your children are growing up, socialising and competing with, certainly have an important role to play in the formation of their overall mindset and the development of their innate talents.

Although everyone is already familiar with the other problems of online applications, the birth date complication was a new addition here. It's not like these restrictions of the date of birth and age limit were not there before, but perhaps, this is the first time that these things are actually being monitored seriously.

these schools and others. However, many will question what exactly is meant by quality here. Of course, at the end of the year, when the results of various centrally conducted examinations come out, there are big celebrations for the success of students from these schools. However, the question remains, is this because of the high quality of teachers, teaching materials and teaching methods? Or is it because the most studious and brightest children go to these schools because of the reputation they enjoy? Maybe both factors have their roles here.

The reason behind these questions is also that a large number of students studying in these schools tend to seek

Over the past few years, the authorities have been organising admissions based on the results of Junior School Certificate (JSC)/Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC)/Dakhil examinations, instead of organising admission tests for ninth and 11th graders through an online application process. As a result, the tendency of the parents to engage in these unnecessary races has come down a lot. There were, however, some problems in launching the online system at first; for example, the inexperience of the applicants in this system, the inability of the server to take enough load, errors in published results, some miscreants using

Perhaps the most discussed topic in the global media since Wednesday was, does the US have the moral authority to claim to be the standard bearer of democracy and criticise others? The images broadcast to the world on Wednesday created more damage to the US' image than what was done in the past four years.

Undoubtedly, China and Russia, two countries which have been challenging the liberal democratic global order, will find arguments in favour of their model of governance. Authoritarian rulers will find excuses and try to justify their actions using these images. Restoring the standing of the US on the global stage, a promise Biden has made, will be a difficult task. In the realm of foreign policy, this is Trump's parting gift to Biden.

For the Western liberal world, the worrying lesson is, if it is possible in the US, it can happen anywhere. They are quite appropriately understanding that the attack was not only on a building; the very idea of democracy came under physical assault. This is happening in the wake of an ongoing global backsliding of democracy, pernicious polarisation, economic crisis and the global pandemic which has weakened trust in government.

Those who are questioning whether the United States can talk of democracy and insist on others to practice democracy, should take note that for the past four years, Americans have continued to engage in movements to preserve their democratic rights, that media have continued to unmask the authoritarian agenda of Trump, citizens have voted in a free and fair election and chosen their leaders, state-level administrations have withstood pressures from Trump and acted independently, the courts have thrown out at least 60 cases which were filed to delegitimise the elections, and Congress has ratified the will of the people. These are proof that institutions have weathered the crisis and can endure. The past four years have shown the fragility of democracy in the United States, but it is naive to write the obituary of democracy in the United States.

Besides, the crisis of democracy in the United States cannot be a justification for the absence of democracy in any country. The fundamental rights—from freedom of expression to vote freely—of citizens in any country cannot be contingent on whether the US is demanding it. Instead, it is imperative for the people of the respective country to restore it. Many of those who are lamenting the crisis in the United States are not doing it because they are disturbed to see democratic ideas trampled, but are rather trying to justify their support for authoritarianism.

Ali Riaz is a Distinguished Professor of political science at the Illinois State University, a nonresident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council and the President of the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS).

the roll numbers and other information of students to apply in advance, etc. However, the problems encountered were nothing unexpected while introducing a new system, and were gradually disappearing. It would be pertinent to mention here that although the system of admission tests for ninth and 11th grades has been abolished, schools across the country have been admitting students through lottery in the first grade and through written tests in the second to eighth grades. This year, for the first time, it has been decided that students in all grades, from first to ninth, will be selected for admission through lottery due to the pandemic.

Although everyone is already familiar with the other problems of online applications, the birth date complication was a new addition here. It's not like these restrictions of the date of birth and age limit were not there before, but perhaps, this is the first time that these things are actually being monitored seriously. Setting a minimum age for a student studying in a grade can be important for many reasons. There are specific age limits for entry and retirement in government services in the country. There are different age groups for participating in various domestic and international events and competitions. Specific age limits are also considered for obtaining various scholarships abroad, participating in employment and gaining immigration in some countries. However, what is being overlooked here is that if a child becomes fit to study in the first grade at a relatively young age, then there is a likelihood of them taking an affidavit and accepting a fake date of birth in order to increase their age. How acceptable is this in terms of ethics? Are we making them accustomed to unethical behaviours from a young age? The ultimate solution for this seems to be in taking strict measures to ensure that all births are registered at birth.

Dr Mohammad Didare Alam Muhsin is Professor of Pharmacy at Jahangirnagar University.