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Myanmar's crackdown on peaceful protesters

The world must be stronger in its condemnation

ACCORDING to the UN Human Rights Office, at least 18 people have been killed and 30 others injured after the Myanmar police opened fire on protesters in several places in Myanmar on February 28. The Burmese police have used live rounds, rubber bullets, stun grenades and tear gas to clamp down on protesters who came out onto the streets to voice their dissent against the Myanmar Army's unlawful seizure of power and the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and much of her party leadership on February 1. The coup has once again brought a halt to Myanmar's steps towards democracy after nearly 50 years of military rule, and this latest crackdown has demonstrated the consequences of decades of absolute military rule.

The UN and a number of countries, including the US, UK and the European Union countries, have condemned the latest military crackdown on peaceful protesters in Myanmar. The UK and the US have also decided to impose sanctions on military leaders who directed the coup, as well as some of their business interests and close family members. While this is a step in the right direction, we hope we will hear stronger voices of condemnation and see a more concerted effort from the international community in holding the military junta in Myanmar to account. Organisations like Human Rights Watch and the Burma Campaign UK, while warning against the negative impacts of generalised sanctions on ordinary citizens, have instead urged for more targeted sanctions at military-owned businesses, and have also urged countries with strong trade relations with Myanmar to stop trading in resources that are tied with military interests.

However, none of these efforts will be of any consequence if Myanmar's regional allies are also not brought to the table of discussion, most of whom have been conspicuously silent since the military coup occurred, or have termed it to be an "internal affairs" matter. The UN and the international community must work together with China, India and the ASEAN countries and exert their influence to ensure that the journey towards democracy in Myanmar does not end here. During the Rohingya refugee crisis and the exodus of 2017, it was clear that condemnations without targeted sanctions and disruptions in trade relations (especially with neighbouring countries) did not have any influence on the Myanmar authorities, whether it was the military or democratically elected leaders. There is now a very real possibility that other populations in Myanmar will experience similar levels of violence, as the army and security forces continue to act with impunity and crack down on protesters. We hope that the world will not make the same mistake twice and stand by as history repeats itself.

Online harassment of children has frighteningly increased

Legal redress and social awareness can deter it dramatically

IT is disturbing to know that during the Covid-19 pandemic, many children have experienced various forms of online harassment. This is the finding of a study conducted by Ain O Shalish Kendra, a human rights organisation, in five districts—Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Cox's Bazar and Satkhira. Most of the children surveyed were students, with 17 percent being working children. More than half of those harassed were girls. Ninety-four percent of the children said that they were impacted by the pandemic, which is hardly surprising considering the isolation of being deprived of regular school days, socialising with friends and other activities that had to be stopped because of the pandemic. With little entertainment options, children have become more and more dependent on social media, which comes with its own dangers.

The research found that these children experienced online sexual harassment and abuse, cyber bullying, blackmail, being exposed to pornography or other sexually explicit content, or having their private information exposed on the Internet.

According to the study, online harassment has increased as much as four times from pre-pandemic times, which highlights the heightened vulnerability of children to being victimised on digital platforms. Legal complexities and lack of awareness are the main reasons why such crimes are on the rise. Parents and children must be aware of this kind of abuse, but apart from a lack of awareness, the fact is that existing laws do not address this issue adequately.

As experts have pointed out, paedophilia and online harassment are not addressed properly in our legal system. The Digital Security Act 2018 for instance, does not have a specific provision on paedophilia. Why is that? The number of child rapes and attempted rapes of children that we get to know about through the news is enough evidence that paedophilia exists in our society. Online platforms are a haven for many paedophiles because of the anonymity they provide, allowing them to connect with unsuspecting victims. Law enforcers, moreover, are not trained to deal with children or skilled enough to collect evidence to file a case against an abuser.

Another major reason for why abusers continue with their online harassment is that the legal process to get justice for this crime is so long and complicated that parents and children are reluctant to opt for legal action. According to a barrister quoted in a report in this paper, the conviction rate for cyber-crimes is only three percent. No wonder the victims and their families remain silent.

To deal with this issue, the recommendations given by ASK are well worth adopting. They include—increasing awareness and taking preventive measures by incorporating issues related to online harassment in the school curriculum, making parents aware of this danger and developing parental control applications, and trying online child harassment cases under a cyber crime tribunal. Existing laws that can try these cases, moreover, need to be reformed to prevent such online crimes.

Padma Bridge will transform our economic landscape

FABIHA BUSHRA KHAN and JABUN NAHER

THE construction of the Padma Bridge is expected to be completed by 2022, making it the 122nd longest bridge in the world and the longest bridge in Bangladesh. This marvelous infrastructure has opened the doors of great potential, especially for the marginalised populations in the southern-west parts of Bangladesh. It will contribute substantially to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through the creation of strong supply chains that will enhance investment, external and internal trade, employment generation and poverty alleviation, and eventually better the socioeconomic status of the people in that region.

It is expected that the bridge will contribute to nearly two percent of GDP in our economy. According to conventional economic analysis, the accumulative effects on GDP could be traced as follows. Ease of transportation will create new business opportunities for the agricultural and industrial sectors. This will generate a new investment hub for both local and foreign investors, which in turn will lead to the establishment of new industrial units resulting in numerous employment opportunities. As demand for labour increases, there will be more recruitment, reskilling or up-skilling of the labour force according to industrial needs and a possible rise in wages. The wider

economic opportunities will eventually alleviate poverty, raise living standards and produce intergenerational gains through greater affordability of education and healthcare.

Given that the agricultural sector is still a vital contributor to GDP, the aforementioned economic gains would be substantial in the case of considerable proportions of investment mobilised

increased scope for industrialisation will likely raise the number of educational institutions in the region, along with the creation of greater economic opportunities. Thus, human capital development will be enhanced, the proportion of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) youths will decrease as they integrate into the formal employment network and enthusiastic

southern-west parts of the country would dampen the frequency of the rural-urban migration caused by the various livelihood prospects in Dhaka. Hence, investment and employment opportunities in south-western Bangladesh could potentially lead to industrial decentralisation and lower population concentrations in Dhaka, which could be a key instrument to



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Increased investment and industrial growth in the southern-west regions induced by enhanced connectivity will have multiple spillover effects in the form of network economies benefitting the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

towards agriculture. The Padma Bridge will create this invaluable opportunity wherein enhanced connectivity across the country, coupled with strong supply chains, will enable agricultural produce to be transported to different parts of the country within a reasonable time period. Farmers will benefit from being able to maintain the quality of perishable commodities as well as lower production costs arising from transportation and storage facilities. Furthermore, direct communication with the large dealers of agricultural commodities will also ensure fair prices for the farmers. It is noteworthy that this, in turn, will provide a unique potential for the economic engagement of the youth labour force, who could be incentivised to seek employment or create enterprises in the agricultural sector.

Youth engagement in social, economic and civic activities is a fundamental mechanism to address the much debated concept of demographic dividend. The

young entrepreneurs could flourish, particularly in small and medium-sized businesses.

In addition, increased investment and industrial growth in the southern-west regions induced by enhanced connectivity will have multiple spillover effects in the form of network economies benefitting the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). In essence, integration of SMEs into local production systems will enable them to network with other firms and support institutions, and gain from economies of scale in purchase, production and distribution. Therefore, greater access to markets and resources will enhance the sustainability of MSMEs and allow the businesses to thrive through gains in productivity, profitability and being able to influence decisions at policy levels.

Last but not the least, the urbanisation pressures on Dhaka are expected to reduce as enterprises developed in the

improving the quality of life in the capital.

The multitude of economic prospects offered by the Padma Bridge mandates the right set of policies targeted towards the most relevant economic actors. Policymakers will need to design and implement business facilitating policies that will boost investor confidence and make business environment conducive to foreign direct investment. The strategic interventions will result in further gains if the policy focus promotes inter-firm networks to attain sustainable and inclusive industrial growth. Furthermore, policies can result in multiplier effects if youth development is prioritised through ensuring their employment in formal job settings and encouraging the establishment and growth of youth entrepreneurship.

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The job market is transforming, university education should too

SEBASTIAN GROH and EILEEN PEACOCK

IMAGINE for a moment you are a university professor, in front of you are seated 30 students, and you have their best interests at heart. How do you equip someone now with the necessary skills for a job in five to ten years, that does not even exist today? A new role in a new sector we cannot possibly fathom just yet. A daunting task, isn't it? But this is the exact question we asked ourselves in a recent series of meetings in the Graduate School of Management (GSM) at BRAC University. To assist in our work, we scrolled through the 21st-century skills as defined by the World Economic Forum, which we found were provided with a rather close expiry date. However, doing a curriculum review today, knowing the red tape and associated time until implementation, we need at least an eight to ten-year time frame.

Recently, we had the honour of moderating a panel with a very experienced group of human resources (HR) leaders from Nestle, bKash, Grameenphone, Renata, Standard Chartered, and the World Food Programme. We confronted them with this question, and their response was rather astonishing.

They all agreed that the content of the actual curriculum does not matter too much (which is something we actually put a big focus on to date)—what matters are the methods of teaching being used and the skills being acquired. Those, they argued, would be largely independent of the actual discipline. Moreover, since the pandemic, many young candidates have literally transformed themselves through self-paced online learning, meaning that a marketing graduate in today's world no longer necessarily ends up in the marketing department or a finance student in the finance department. These boundaries have been largely softened, and instead, now we have more versatility in students and more flexibility in employment.

Adding onto that (for the student reader of this article), in your next interview, prepare yourselves for the following questions: what did you do in 2020? How did you deal with the pandemic, what did you learn during that time, and how did you use it to gain a better understanding of the world

and yourself? These are just some of the questions an interviewer might ask you.

It was in August 2011 that Marc Andreessen coined the famous phrase "Software is eating the world" in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion article. This easily leads to the assumption that when choosing a subject, the student should rather focus on software engineering related topics. However, our panelists stressed that they did not expect their applicants to always be tech-savvy, it was rather the awareness and curiosity for technological change that was a must-have (again, independent of discipline!) and that it was crucial to have a general awareness of what is going on in the business world. The recommendation was to follow key leaders on LinkedIn (not Facebook!) and see what they are concerning themselves with.

So where does that leave us at the GSM? We need, and to some degree have already been forced (given the closure of universities due to Covid-19), to

how to reflect and critically judge based on strong ethical foundations. As the late Marvin Minsky, co-founder of MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, put it: "No computer has ever been designed that is ever aware of what it's doing".

BRAC University's online learning platform buX allows students to study in a self-paced manner. Nowadays, by default, all exams are open-book, or rather open-Internet, which means the questions we ask must hit exactly the points which our HR leaders were highlighting—critical thinking, knowing what is important and what is not. If I have the whole Internet at my fingertips, the exam questions need to test exactly those skills, otherwise what value would the student be adding if (s)he simply copies from the slides that may have been distributed? The panelists even went so far as to recommend leaving the PowerPoint at home altogether and to focus only on engagement, because students have to learn how to operate in

We need, and to some degree have already been forced (given the closure of universities due to Covid-19), to transform our way of teaching. As Jack Ma fittingly put it, if machines are to take over, you need to find your niche where you can compete with them.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

transform our way of teaching. As Jack Ma fittingly put it, if machines are to take over, you need to find your niche where you can compete with them. This leads us to think, not about how to teach someone to learn a text by heart in a short time, but for example, about how a leader shows empathy, something which the smartest algorithm will have an extremely difficult time to learn. Or about

and contribute to a group effectively. So it is not so much content after all, but rather style, methods and the skills you are targeting for your students to acquire through everything you do as a teacher.

In addition, we have been particularly happy about this remark from our HR leaders, stating that there needs to be a lot more interaction between the corporates and the students, and

internships are not a part of that. Building on the large success of Bangladesh's freelance community that provides services for companies across the world and a strong up-and-coming entrepreneurship community, it was suggested by the panel to also focus on these kinds of targeted engagements with corporates, for example, via an opportunity marketplace. Why not invite corporates and representatives from startups over, not only for motivational speeches but also to engage with the students for an active interaction?

In summary and borrowing from Marvin Minsky once more: "If you understand something in only one way, then you don't really understand it at all. The secret of what anything means to us depends on how we've connected it to all other things we know. Well-connected representations let you turn ideas around in your mind, to envision things from many perspectives until you find one that works for you. And that's what we mean by thinking!". In the spirit of an open society, this is where our youth needs to excel at and what universities need them to prepare for.

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