

Don't use 'public safety' to muzzle protests

Govt must ensure citizens can hold peaceful protests

In politics, especially in Bangladesh, some excuses never seem to be out of fashion. They remain in circulation regardless of how ludicrous they sound, and how consequential their effects may be. One such excuse is "public safety", an otherwise legitimate concern, but one which is often used by the authorities to curtail the opposition's freedom of assembly. This week, we saw protesters allied with BNP being dispersed by police even before they could congregate for a planned rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club. After sporadic clashes—during which 75 bullets, 26 pellets and four teargas shells were fired by police—nearly 300 leaders and activists of the party were sued, and 13 placed on remand.

One wonders what endangered public safety more—a protest rally that was never held, or clashes leading to injuries and lawsuits triggered by police intervention? Police officials, some of whom also reportedly faced assaults from BNP men, may have pre-empted the rally on safety grounds but their action amounted to depriving them of their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of assembly. This is totally unacceptable in a democratic country. The opposition parties have the right to congregate to express their grievances, and police can only ensure they do so in a peaceful manner, not pre-empt their gathering altogether.

We have seen similar pre-emptive tactics used in Rajshahi where all transport services were abruptly suspended in a bid to foil BNP's plan to stage a rally on Tuesday. The "transport strike" was apparently orchestrated to pre-empt their mobilisation. But, according to our reports, it was the ordinary citizens who suffered the most because of the transport crisis. The Tuesday rally was part of a BNP plan, announced on February 5, to hold protests in six city corporations across the country demanding fair parliamentary elections, and unsurprisingly, all planned rallies since then were foiled using similar excuses. All this adds up to the suspicion, as one political commentator told *The Daily Star*, that the government is unwilling to "give any political mileage to its opponents."

We believe ensuring public safety should be the top priority for law enforcement agencies whenever a rally is held or planned, but it doesn't give them *carte blanche* to do whatever they want. "Public safety" cannot be used as a pretext for stifling dissent or criminalising peaceful expression. The government must respect and protect people's right to register their protests, both online and offline, and must try harder to address their concerns. Using undemocratic means to counter its opponents may give it a short-term victory, but it harms all of us in the long run.

Decaying masterpieces at DU Library

Artworks by renowned artists must be conserved

We are deeply dismayed to learn of the sorry state that the artworks of two of Bangladesh's most notable artists are currently in. According to a report published in this daily yesterday, a sculpture by Novera Ahmed and three murals of Hamidur Rahman are rotting away on the walls of Dhaka University Central Library due to negligence and lack of maintenance by authorities.

Besides becoming difficult to view, the artworks also bear other signs of abandonment such as dust, cracks, lack of light and ventilation, spider webs, discoloration, termite infestations, and splatters of paint from when adjoining walls and roofs were being repainted. Such neglect for the works of two artists who collaborated to design the historical Central Shaheed Minar in memory of our Language Martyrs is indeed shocking.

The original design of the Dhaka University library building by renowned architect Muzharul Islam has also been disrupted with new constructions.

Although both Novera Ahmed and Hamidur Rahman were great artists in their own rights, their work (most of which portray concepts of family, religion, nature, and everyday Bengali life and patriotism) holds national importance and needs to be cared for, wherever in the country they are situated. The neglect of these artworks is also the neglect of Bangladesh's own rich cultural history, whose conservation and preservation are already in dire straits due to lack of proper manpower and resources.

Hence, we would urge the concerned authorities to maintain and/or restore not only these four pieces by Novera Ahmed and Hamidur Rahman, along with Muzharul Islam's DU library building, or say, the Kamalapur Railway Station Plaza, but all other similar works of art and architecture which are in danger of being overshadowed by "development".

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Misuse of sitting service buses

There are numerous passenger-faring vehicles on our roads, with buses mostly being used for commuting. While passengers get on sitting service buses to get to their destinations comfortably, these buses do not follow any of the set rules and regulations. They increase the rent in the name of sitting service, but run them as if they are following a rental business, "No half pass" being a common sticker on their buses. Thus, no fare considerations exist for students. And "sitting service" is used as a stretch, as passengers often don't manage to find a seat and still pay full price. It is high time that this issue be handled by the authorities responsible.

Md Sirazul Hossain, Dhaka College

Death in destination countries

Avoidable tragedy and accountability



C R ABRAR

A few days ago a news item carried by *The Guardian*, a UK daily, created a major stir in the national media of several Asian countries. The piece was an expose of an ongoing tragedy involving deaths of migrant workers in Qatar. It revealed that more than 6,500 migrant workers from South Asia have died since the country earned the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. On average, every week, 12 migrant workers have died since December 2010 while working on various infrastructure projects including stadiums, an airport, roads, the public transport system, hotels and a new city.

The report stated that 69 percent of deaths among Indian, Nepali and Bangladeshi workers were officially categorised as "natural". Other significant causes were road accidents (12 percent) workplace accidents (seven percent) and suicide (seven percent). Interestingly, the classification of natural death was usually made without an autopsy and thus failed "to provide legitimate medical explanation for the underlying cause of these deaths".

The Qatar government did not dispute the number of deaths. The figure includes white collar workers who have died naturally, and the government insists that "the mortality rate among these communities is within the expected range for the size and demographics of the population".

The *Guardian* report was revealing in many ways. Not only has it highlighted "the lack of transparency, rigour and detail in recording deaths in Qatar", it maintained that embassies in Doha and labour sending countries were "reluctant to share the data, possibly for political reasons". The reluctance of the labour sending countries in engaging with the issue is palpably demonstrated in the inconsistencies between figures furnished by various government agencies, largely due to the absence of a "standard format for recording causes of death".

In view of the massive infrastructure development that is taking place in preparation for the World Cup, *The Guardian* report has zeroed in on Qatar. While such a spotlight helps generate awareness about the ongoing tragedy in the country concerned, we must bear in mind that avoidable premature deaths of relatively young migrant workers is a pervasive phenomenon in all the Gulf states. The deaths in Qatar have given rise to some important insights.

Firstly, the unwillingness of both countries of destination and origin to share information and data on deceased workers is a major challenge. Further, lack of clarity and transparency impedes

framing of appropriate policies and actions to address problems. It also works as a major barrier for the families of the deceased migrants to access justice and claim compensation.

Secondly, the propensity of receiving states in asserting that most workers die of "natural causes" is unacceptable. There is an urgent need for amending laws for ensuring "autopsies to require forensic investigations into all sudden or unexplained deaths". It is worthwhile to mention that as early as 2014, in a report, the Qatar government's own lawyers recommended commissioning an independent study into the deaths of migrant workers from cardiac arrest, and amend the law to "allow for autopsies...in all cases of unexpected or sudden death". There is also the need for labour receiving countries to pay heed to the call of Human Rights Watch to "pass legislation to require that all death certificates include reference to a medically meaningful cause of death".

As an overwhelming majority of migrant workers are the principal breadwinners of their families, the slackness in identifying actual causes of death not only ruin those families, it fails to bring proper closure to the loved ones of the deceased migrants.

Thirdly, heat stroke has been identified as an important cause of death of many migrant workers. The ineffectiveness of the summer working hours ban as highlighted by a ILO commissioned study in October 2019 was acknowledged by the Ministry of Labour and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy of Qatar. The study found that workers working outdoors were "potentially performing their job under significant occupational heat stress conditions for at least four months of the year". The Ministry of Labour disseminated enhanced guidelines on heat stress aimed at workers and employers earlier, but unfortunately those were neither comprehensive nor obligatory for employers and did not come with any enforcement mechanisms. It is also pertinent that *Cardiology Journal* in July 2019, based on a study on 1,300 Nepali workers between 2009 and 2017, found "a strong correlation between heat stress and young workers dying of cardiovascular problems in the summer months". The study was conducted by a group of

climatologists and cardiologists.

In official records, deaths deemed of "natural causes" include cardiac arrest, heart attack, respiratory failure and "sickness". Analysts have argued that such terms make it impossible to understand whether they may be related to working conditions such as heat stress. Once categorised as "natural causes", labour laws in most of these countries, including Qatar, deprive the families of any compensation. As an overwhelming majority of migrant workers are the principal breadwinners of their families, the slackness in identifying actual causes of death not only ruin those families, it fails to bring proper closure to the loved ones of the deceased migrants.

Cardiac arrest as a cause of death has been viewed as "highly problematic". The United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) offers guidance to doctors that "The mechanism of death (for example cardiac or respiratory arrest) should not be reported as the immediate cause of death as

under the auspices of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board from 2011 to 2020. A majority of those were from the Gulf states. Stroke, heart attack or accidents were assigned as prime reasons for death of men, while women were alleged to have committed either suicide or died of torture. On average, more than seven families received the bodies of their migrant loved ones each day (54 returns per week).

Evidence from the field informs us that there have been cases in which bodies with obvious injury marks were certified to have died from proverbial "natural causes". So far, such malfeasance of the state authorities of destination countries with the acquiescence of the authorities of countries of origin has allowed the tragedies to persist. There is an urgent need to put a halt to this avoidable misfortune. The process should start with the recognition by state authorities of the reality that young migrants are indeed dying of causes that are preventable.

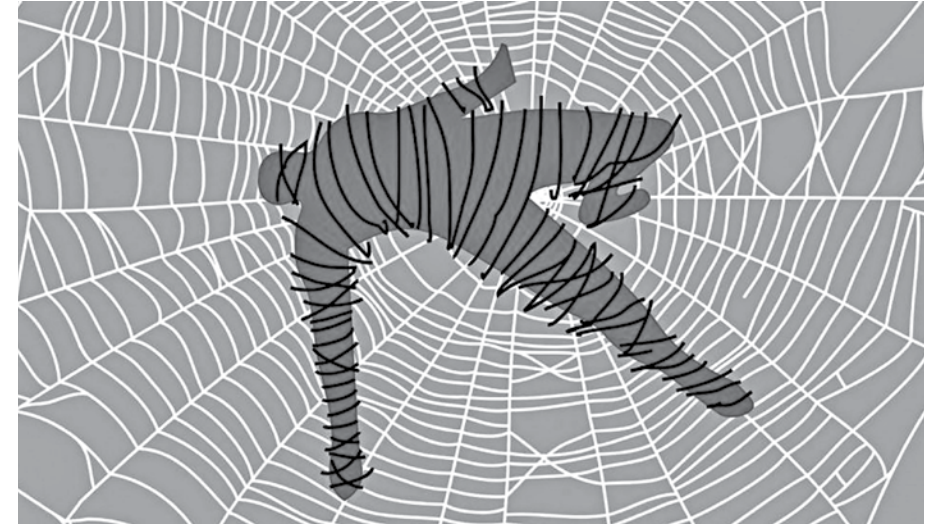


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

it is a statement not specifically related to the disease process, and it merely attest the fact of death" (emphasis added).

The *Guardian* report has drawn attention to the dark reality of labour migration in the Gulf states. In many instances, contract substitution after arrival, not being placed against jobs as per the contract, non-payment and irregular payment of wages, ill treatment and abuse by employers and supervisors, and lack of access to healthcare and redress mechanism—all inflict immeasurable mental harm on the workers. Also, poor living conditions including cramped settings, inadequate water supply, lack of sanitary toilet facilities and the like hinder migrants' enjoying quality rest during breaks. All these factors, among other conditions, are likely to contribute to hypertension, respiratory or cardiac arrests or exacerbate existing conditions.

More than 28,000 bodies of deceased Bangladeshi migrants were repatriated

This should be followed up by proper investigations in suspected cases after the bodies of deceased migrants arrive in countries of origin.

The origin countries should demand that destination countries ensure that all migrants, male and female, in public or domestic spheres, work and live in decent conditions and are able to secure redress of their grievances. They should also push destination countries to conduct mandatory autopsies in all cases of unexpected and sudden deaths and recompense the families if the latter qualify for it. The origin countries should also rally forces in the Colombo Process, Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Global Forum on Migration and Development to demand an immediate end to this tragedy in the spirit of the much celebrated Global Compact of Migration.

C R Abrar is an academic with interest in migration and human rights issues. He is the Chair of the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Tackling the Covid hunger crisis

GORDON BROWN and MARK LOWCOCK

TODAY, 270 million people—equivalent to the combined population of Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy—are on the brink of starvation. This number has doubled over the last 12 months. And it is the world's children who are suffering most.

An estimated 11 million children under the age of five face extreme hunger or starvation in 11 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Asia. Of these, 168,000 will die of malnutrition by the end of 2022 unless they receive emergency support. And a total of 73 million primary schoolchildren in 60 low-income countries are chronically hungry.

Hunger was already on the rise before the coronavirus pandemic, mostly as a result of war and conflict, and climate change exacerbated it. But the secondary effects of the pandemic have created a global hunger crisis.

One reason for this is that Covid-19 has broken the lifeline of school. More than 1.6 billion children have missed time in the classroom since the pandemic began, and nearly 200 million are still not back at school.

Previous crises have shown that school closures carry huge social and economic costs, including increases in child marriage and child labour. Some young people end up paying the ultimate price: complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 in low- and middle-income countries. Ultimately, crises reverse progress on ensuring that all girls have access to quality education.

Moreover, schools provide many poor children with their only nutritious meal of the day. School closures mean that millions of children have lost their opportunity not only to learn, but also to eat. Children have missed more than 39 billion school meals during the crisis. Women and girls are often the first to miss meals, and account for more than 70 percent of people facing chronic hunger.

The damage caused by just a few weeks of missed nutrition can stunt a hungry child for a lifetime, and malnutrition can stunt a country's economic progress for a generation. So, getting children back into

school where they can be educated and fed must be a high priority.

With relatively little money, the international humanitarian system has achieved much. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), for example, feeds around 100 million people per year. And when Covid-19 severely disrupted commercial airline services, the UN created a logistics system to transport health and humanitarian workers and vital supplies, including food. But a crisis on this scale requires an ambitious plan that involves more than just providing school meals. Humanitarian organisations can't do it alone.

At their June summit, the wealthy G7

and the World Bank—the one wholly global organisation capable of mobilising substantial additional resources on a sustained basis.

But there is a very simple, common-sense solution to the immediate crisis: new international money. At least USD 600 billion in Special Drawing Rights (the International Monetary Fund's reserve asset) can be allocated to poorer countries. Leaders and lenders can agree on up to USD 80 billion of debt relief on the condition that the money goes to education, health and nutrition. And the World Bank and regional development banks can rapidly expand grants and loans.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

economies should commission a long-term plan to address rising global food needs. The plan should include provisions for pre-emptive action: building up food stocks, developing insurance as a protection, and supporting developing-country farmers and food growers with long-term investments to help them become self-sufficient.

Policymakers must also adopt innovative ways to generate financing, including guarantee-based facilities that can maximise the use of development aid and private-sector funding, which was at the heart of the 2015 Addis Ababa proposals for financing the Sustainable Development Goals. Another priority could be a closer partnership between the

With around USD 10 billion this year, the world could stave off famine in Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria, and the Sahel. And it could prevent mass hunger—which immediately precedes famine—in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia's Tigray region, and other vulnerable places.

This may sound like a lot of money. But it's the equivalent of a dollar a month from each person in the world's richest economies, and represents a fraction of one percent of wealthy countries' pandemic-related stimulus spending. We need to move quickly. This means giving grants up front to the WFP and leading NGOs like Save the Children to feed hungry children and their families.

With only 31 percent of refugee children enrolled at the secondary level, and just 27 percent of girls, Education Cannot Wait—which helps displaced children into school and has raised almost USD one billion in its short existence—needs to be fully funded. By directing additional resources to education, we can get 136 million children in some of the poorest and most conflict-affected countries back in school—and help them stay there.

Covid-19 has also exposed another educational divide: two thirds of the world's school-age children lack internet access at home, which prevents them from online learning. Today, only five percent of children in low-income countries have such access, compared to 90 percent in high-income countries. A UNICEF-led project to connect the world could bridge this gaping digital divide.

The UK government has pledged to play a leading global role in getting all children into school and ensuring that girls receive 12 years of education. But we will not achieve that noble objective unless the G7 summit addresses this issue, in addition to food security.

Time and again, education has demonstrated its power to transform individuals, families and entire countries. But chronic hunger can have devastating consequences: cruel and preventable deaths, violent conflict and mass displacement.

Ignoring the global scourge of hunger is thus not an option. What happens in the world's most fragile places has knock-on effects in the most stable countries.

The choice facing world leaders is simple: act now to tackle the hunger crisis, or pay a much higher price later. Immediate action will be cheaper and save more lives than responding only after multiple famines have taken hold and a generation's missed education has exacted a terrible toll.

Gordon Brown, a former prime minister of the United Kingdom, is United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education and Chair of the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. Mark Lowcock is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021.

www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to The Daily Star)