

Saudi Arabia's new travel advisory

The ministry should help mitigate expatriate workers' plight

EXPATRIATE workers are among the worst affected by the pandemic. They have had to suffer the consequences since the start of the pandemic and they continue to suffer. Given that the Middle East employs the largest number of Bangladeshi workers, and we get the largest chunk of foreign exchange from that region, the Covid-19 induced disruptions affect the workers as well as our foreign exchange reserves.

While it is not surprising that individual countries would put in place such health and safety measures as they deem necessary and appropriate, when those countries happen to also employ a huge number of foreign workers, the consequences go beyond the borders of that country. We are now encountering another such consequence, with Saudi Arabia issuing a fresh travel advisory that came into effect from May 20 for citizens of non-restricted countries, including Bangladesh, which mandates possession of medical insurance for Covid-19 and hotel reservations for institutional quarantine. The new Saudi health safety requirements are likely to affect 6,500 expatriate workers. Violation of the requirements carries very harsh penalties like deportation and permanent ban on re-entry.

The new advisory would require between Tk 60,000 and Tk 70,000 for institutional quarantine—something that an expatriate worker may not be able to come by easily or quickly. We believe that our government should step in to ameliorate the sufferings the new advisory will cause. The relevant ministry should help in arranging money for both the insurance and the cost of hotel quarantine or visitors to the Kingdom. It is the time, if ever there was any, for the ministry of expatriates' welfare to live up to its name, and do something for the welfare of the affected expatriate workers. Reportedly, there are several hundred crores of taka remaining idle in the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund, and the expenses accrued by expat workers due to the new travel advisory could be defrayed from this account.

We hope that the ministry will respond and react positively to the letter from recruiting agencies to the ministry seeking support in this regard. We also believe that the government should accord priority to these workers for vaccination. This might obviate the need for institutional quarantine.

DU student's death deserves thorough investigation

Police have some explaining to do for their role in this case so far

WE would like to join the call for an impartial investigation into the death of Hafizur Rahman—a Dhaka University student—whose death remains shrouded in mystery. The brother of the victim identified his body at the Dhaka Medical College morgue on Sunday, over a week after the Shahbagh police found the fatally wounded young man on DU campus. We do not understand how the police, after finding the victim with his throat slit near the Central Shaheed Minar on May 15, failed to inform his family or the DU authorities for more than a week.

According to the victim's family, Hafizur had returned to Dhaka from Brahmanbaria on May 15, a day after Eid, and informed his family that he had reached safely. Later, having found his phone switched off and failing to trace his whereabouts, they filed a general diary with Brahmanbaria's Kasba Police Station. Shahbagh police were also notified of him going missing later. According to the OC of the Shahbagh police, some policemen from the station had found the wounded Hafizur on the night of May 15—without realising it was him. But then, why didn't they make the necessary effort to identify the wounded man? And why didn't they at least inform the DU authorities of the incident that occurred on their campus?

The police have also hinted that they suspect the young man had taken his own life. However, according to his family, there were no signs of him being in such a state of mind and he seemed fairly joyous during the Eid celebrations. Moreover, a social media video showing the wounded Hafizur being helped by three policemen to get on a rickshaw has only made things more confusing. And according to the inquest report by police, there were more wounds on his body, which demands further investigation.

We understand that DU has formed a four-member probe committee to investigate the matter. And it is a case that has many unanswered questions. These questions need to be answered by the police, whose role in this case itself has so far been questionable. Be that as it may, we call on the authorities to investigate the matter with a fine-tooth comb and uncover what really happened. Hafizur's family deserves at least that much.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop drug abuse

Our country's youth are goaded into drug abuse from an early age. Personal trauma mixed with bad company can lead to drug abuse, and often addiction. The negative impacts range from loss of appetite, malnutrition, infections, changes in personality, etc. to severe mental health issues and memory loss. Imprisonment and arbitrary detention of drug abusers only make things worse. Rehabilitation is the proper way to fix this problem, along with steps to discourage the use of drugs.

Md Shamim Hasan, Dhaka College

The relationship between government employees and journalists



M FOUZUL KABIR KHAN

I felt distressed and embarrassed after coming across the news of senior journalist Rozina Islam's ordeal of harassment at the health ministry and her eventual arrest. From the very beginning of my stint in government offices, I have been meeting and greeting journalists on a continual basis. I have never seen such a hostile relationship among these parties before. How did it come down to this?

In 1979, at the very beginning of my career, I met some journalists for the first time, inside the Chattogram customs building. As per a court order, we raided the premises of some business organisations in Khatungonj for a case filed under the category of falsifying product announcement, arrested some people and seized some counterfeit seals and documents. Naturally, journalists crowded the place. We briefed them about

doing their work and we are doing ours.

Once, a journalist asked me about a specific issue of interest and wanted to know whether it was true or not. When I informed him of my inability to discuss the matter, he showed me a photocopy of a document that was generated by my department. He also showed me photocopies of notes written by myself and my superiors. He even managed to show me a copy of a document from the president's office. I asked him how and where he found these documents. He smiled and replied that they have their own sources for obtaining such information. I said, isn't it wrongful conduct? He replied, what can we do? Despite this being a public interest issue, you will not let us know the details, so we had to resort to this method. Notably, the Right to Information Act had not been enacted then. However, I did not call the journalist names, nor did I call in guards from outside to harass him. Instead, I took measures to prevent the photocopying of sensitive documents in future. This, the so-called "information theft" of journalists, is not a new

Secrecy is the biggest enemy of proper governance and it is also the cornerstone of corruption. Thus, the amount of secrecy at public offices should be brought down to a minimum. Effective implementation of the Right to Information Act should be carried out immediately.



Police escort journalist Rozina Islam to the Metropolitan Magistrate's Court in Old Dhaka on May 18, 2021.

PHOTO: STAR

the issue. Even then, they would often come to me on a one-to-one basis or as a team to ask different questions. I would let them know as much as I could. And also, I would refrain from discussing the more sensitive issues.

The journalists would reach out to their other sources and publish news accordingly. If the government's interests were hampered or if any false news was published, we would send them a rejoinder. They would always publish the rejoinder with utmost importance, and alongside, they would also publish a statement defending their own position. No matter what, our communications were never severed and our personal relationships were never affected. For this reason, I would also sometimes get important news from them in advance, which would be helpful towards public work. Then, when I got transferred to the Dhaka customs building in 1982, I started communicating with the journalists of Dhaka city. I could not concur with every piece of news they would publish, and even though some of them would embarrass me, I still thought they are

phenomenon. In fact, smartphones have eased the act of taking photos to a greater extent.

I started working for the National Board of Revenue (NBR) after returning from studying abroad. During this period, my relationship with journalists became much more intimate. Three issues under my radar interested them greatly. Firstly, the ongoing discussions with the World Bank and the IMF regarding the restructuring of revenue collection activities; secondly, the changed rates of duties and excise taxes (later on, value added tax) in the upcoming budget; and thirdly, the negotiations regarding SAPTA and SAFTA agreements, etc. As my experience grew, I also became more proficient in dealing with journalists. I have no hesitation in admitting that just like flying trial balloons, I used to gather some ideas on public opinion by giving the journalists a heads-up regarding upcoming changes in policies. I also aided in publishing news that would facilitate the discussions with the World Bank and the IMF.

I also took the help of journalists in

combating decisions taken by selfish politicians that went against public interest. I can proudly state that I have acted as the anonymous source for many headline news items. A lot of the time, I would get the nod from my superiors before conducting such activities. On certain occasions, I would do them deliberately. On those occasions, the secretary would single me out to ask how that particular news ended up in the newspaper. However, on most occasions, news like those would only help serve the public interest; not our personal interest, and during certain times, news from "anonymous sources" would also help us in taking decisions!

As we developed a good personal rapport during my stint at the NBR, journalist Shakil Anwar (currently working at BBC) publicised the news of the economic re-evaluation of the Jamuna Bridge project and bringing back the World Bank as its financier under the banner of UNB, and many other news outlets published it as their headline news item.

Afterwards, when I joined IDCOL, there were not many public interest stories there, but still, due to our personal relationship, some journalists would visit, and we would indulge in casual chitchat. They would always give good coverage to our different events. Over the course of time, a few journalists even became my personal friends!

Even at my latest area of work, the Power Division, I continued to have deep and regular communications with the journalists. Some of them criticised our work and published news items accordingly. If the claims were baseless, I invited the relevant journalist to discuss and I tried to explain the reality. I accepted their constructive criticisms. I put in efforts to remedy the situation because, as government employees, none of us are above accountability. Additionally, who can wholeheartedly claim that all of their decisions were correct?

Sagar-Runi and Rozina Islam were among the journalists that used to

regularly visit the Power Division. Back then, Rozina was working in *Dainik Sangbad*. None of them seemed unprofessional. I informed them as much as I could. I refrained from discussing matters that could not be revealed. They did their work, and we did ours. None of us became a source of mental stress for the other, and we never expressed any malicious intentions towards each other. Instead, we maintained a mutual sense of respect among ourselves.

So why did this happen now? I assume, the relationship between the two parties have deteriorated. In our times, student leaders would attain government jobs according to their own merit. However, when they joined the government job, they did not continue assuming their former student organisation's identity. I am observing that nowadays, people keep on assuming their student organisation's identity even after joining a government job. For this reason, they fail to maintain an air of neutrality in their place of occupation.

Surely, even during those times, the politicians had family ties and other kinds of personal relations with government employees. We all knew that an officer of the Chattogram customs building was a close relative of the then president. However, this information would never be revealed from his dealings, and he never took any advantage of this identity. But nowadays, position, placement and promotion—all are dependent on relationships like these. These officers are no longer acting like officers. They are behaving like party cadres.

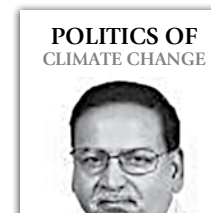
Even the journalists are not confining themselves to journalism. Flattery, blackmailing, politics and business—a lot of journalists are being labelled by these attributes. Thus, journalists in general are losing respect. If such failings did not exist, a professional government officer and a professional journalist would never indulge in such enmity.

What can be done? Secrecy is the biggest enemy of proper governance and it is also the cornerstone of corruption. Thus, the amount of secrecy at public offices should be brought down to a minimum. Effective implementation of the Right to Information Act should be carried out immediately. Any information sought in public interest should be delivered with precision and pace. The rehabilitation of people using party cadre identities in government jobs should be ceased.

Newspapers and news outlets that only exist in name and do not have an established reader and viewer base should lose their Declarations. The National Press Council and the journalists may prepare a code of conduct for people who are engaged in their profession. The journalists should pick a single option from either journalism, flattery, politics or business. Otherwise, the downfall that has started cannot be stopped, and the situation will become much grimmer in the future.

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Tackling three global emergencies at once



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE world is having to tackle three major emergencies at the same time. The first is obviously the Covid-19 pandemic that is still raging around the world, the second is climate change, which is also getting much worse every year, and finally, there is biodiversity loss, which will mean the loss of up to a million species if we cannot stem the tide.

What is being done and what more needs to be done, at both the global as well as national levels?

At the global level, for climate change, we have the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. For biodiversity, we have the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), and for Covid-19, we have the World Health Organization (WHO) and its COVAX vaccine initiative. Both the CBD and UNFCCC will be holding their respective annual Conference of Parties (COP) in the next few months.

However, one of the aspects of recognising these three issues as global emergencies is that waiting for a meeting once a year is simply not fit for purpose any more. As climate activist Greta Thunberg keeps reminding world leaders, an emergency requires that we drop everything and deal with the emergency. These issues need to be addressed, at both national and global levels, every single day of the year.

Unfortunately, the world is not geared towards working on global issues collectively, as the vaccination initiative for the pandemic has starkly illustrated. Every country is trying to tackle the coronavirus within its own borders, with the rich countries vaccinating their entire population first and not providing

vaccines to poorer countries. This is based on the totally false assumption that they can stem the tide of infections from crossing international borders. In fact, the selfishness of the rich countries doesn't stop at monopolising vaccines; they even prevented developing countries like India from manufacturing vaccines by blocking manufacturing licenses being given for free in order to protect the super profits generated by their big pharmaceutical

sanctions on countries that fail to comply with global agreements.

For example, Australia, which has the highest per capita emissions of greenhouse gases, has consistently reneged on its commitments to take action to tackle climate change as its politicians are completely beholden to the coal lobby in their country. This is particularly galling for many Australians, as their country is one of the most



PHOTO: COLLECTED

companies.

This same level of global disarray is also evident when dealing with biodiversity loss as well as climate change. The Paris Agreement had already put in place what needed to be done, and all countries agreed to take actions, but they didn't do what they promised to do. Therefore, it is no longer worth it to simply hold annual COPs for both biodiversity and climate change. Rather, we need to put in place a strong global monitoring system to see who is complying and who is not. This should also be associated with imposing

vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, as well as being the most well-endowed with sunlight and wind to promote renewable energy in the place of coal.

Hence, the time has come to name and shame countries and if necessary, impose sanctions on them for non-compliance with global agreements.

Finally, it is important to note that the solutions for tackling all three of the global emergencies is no longer three separate sets of activities taking place in separate domains and silos, but rather a joint approach at the highest levels

of national and global leadership. The three global emergencies must be the biggest issue at the upcoming G7 Leaders' Summit in the UK, as well as the G20 Summit that will follow later.

Another important global meeting will be the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), where I have the privilege of chairing Action Track 5 on Resilience. This is being run as an innovative "People's Summit" where we are taking ideas from all sectors of society, and all countries, to come up with a set of solutions to be implemented over the coming decade in order to make our national and global food systems more resilient than they are at present. The UNFSS will not be just another agreement that countries sign on paper, but rather actions that coalitions of actors will take forward in new and innovative ways.

It is clear that we need to find better ways to engage with different sectors of society across the globe to tackle the three emergencies effectively.

In Bangladesh, we do have some positive recognition of the three emergencies, as our parliament was the first to declare a Planetary Emergency. However, we now need to put that into practice and implement it, which is not happening fast enough.

A significant opportunity to fast track the implementation of ways to tackle all three of the global emergencies that are also affecting Bangladesh is the recently drafted Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, which is being released as a draft for public consultation. This is the opportunity for all sectors of society in the country to engage in not just giving inputs to the plan, but in being engaged in its implementation.

The essence of an emergency is that it needs all hands on deck to deal with it. This is equally true at national as well as global levels.

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