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NHRC needs to grow a backbone

Is the rights commission being kept intentionally weak?

THE appalling record of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is no secret to anyone. While people continue to suffer from rights abuses and injustices in greater numbers each year, it is busy deflecting blame and justifying its existence with the bare minimum it does. But as an analytical report by *The Daily Star* shows, while significant government restrictions do exist to make it impossible for it to pursue certain cases, the NHRC itself is as much to blame for its own lacklustre performance. The commission, according to data cited by our report, could not resolve nearly half of the cases filed with it over the last decade. Between 2011 and June 2021, a total of 6,736 complaints were lodged with the NHRC, but only 55.11 percent of them were disposed of.

The number of cases it takes up appears woefully short, and gives an inaccurate picture of the rights situation in the country. Even more problematic is the extremely low number of cases it calls “resolved” and the barriers it says it faces in bringing cases to a successful close. The problem starts with its definition of “resolved”. As a report by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) points out: “In most cases, the commission classified a case as resolved when the government replied that no evidence was found of any involvement of the law enforcement agencies into human rights violations or that the matter is still under investigation. Only in a handful of cases, the authorities state that steps had been taken against those responsible.” Clearly, what it thinks “resolved” is what the government wants it to think, which is deeply concerning given that many of the allegations are against government functionaries themselves.

In most cases, the commission only takes nominal measures, like issuing a public statement, sending notices to a relevant ministry and reminding them to address human rights violations. The fact is, any rights organisation could do those things without having the mandate that NHRC does. The commission, as the nation’s rights custodian, has some serious soul-searching to do here in terms of what’s expected of it and what it can do to justify its continued existence.

As for the barriers it faces, there are many. It is vastly understaffed, brings a bureaucratic approach to solving human rights problems, and has what a former chairman calls an “inherent weakness”. The NHRC is not legally permitted to investigate anything related to the disciplined forces, including police. “In India, the human rights commission can at least investigate the police forces. But here, other than writing letters to the home ministry, we cannot even do anything about the police, let alone investigate,” says Dr Mizanur Rahman, who was NHRC chairperson from 2010 to 2016. For example, even as just over half of the overall cases were solved over the last decade, only a fraction of the complaints against law enforcement agencies were resolved. The complaints include extrajudicial killing, custodial torture, custodial death, enforced disappearance, etc.

We believe the commission can do more, much more, even within its existing legal mandate. And what systemic and logistical barriers it faces—including legal jurisdiction and manpower issues—are nothing that a well-meaning administration cannot remove. That it hasn’t done so in the 13 years of the NHRC’s existence, and despite the country’s abysmal human rights record, is deeply disturbing. We urge the government to sufficiently equip and empower the NHRC to address people’s grievances. A weak rights commission is as good as no commission.

Absence of renewable energy focus in budget disappointing

Govt must demonstrate its commitment to clean energy and phase out coal-based power plants

THE government’s recent announcements on abandoning coal-based power generation and shifting towards cleaner energy was welcomed across the board, as it demonstrated its commitment to tackling the climate emergency for the sake of future generations. However, it is hugely disappointing to see that, so far, these commitments are existent in word only—the latest budget for fiscal year 2021-22 did not, in any way, reflect the plan to shift towards a coal-neutral economy. In fact, coal-based power plants are still being financed—the annual development programme (ADP) allocation for the incoming fiscal year includes nine coal-fired power projects, whereas none of the projects under the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) have been included in it.

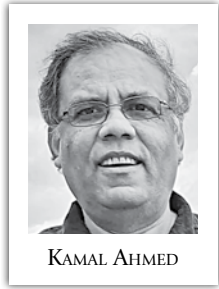
In a report printed in this daily, experts expressed their concerns and urged the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources to put a stop to all kinds of activities related to coal-based power generation, particularly those which are in the pipeline. They also pointed out the imprudence of the latest budget allocating even more resources to power generation when the country is already burdened with overcapacity, whereas only 38 percent of the ADP allocation for the power sector is enhancing the country’s transmission and distribution capacity—the dearth of which is one of the major reasons for load shedding.

It is disheartening to see the government not make good on its promise to shift towards renewable energy and, once again, shrug off the recommendations of experts. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the extension of tenure of most of the quick rental power plants—despite the official stance on gradually phasing them out since most of them remain unutilised—makes it all the more difficult to create space for demand for renewable energy in grid areas. At a time when the whole world is shifting towards cleaner energy, why are we failing to take even the simplest steps forward, despite experts recommending us to do so for ages?

It is high time for the involved authorities to put their money where their mouth is. A shift towards renewable energy is not only good for the environment, but can lead to improved public health, stable energy prices and supply, better resilience and more. We urge the government to review the budget of fiscal year 2021-22 and include provisions for renewable energy-based power generation and demonstrate a strong commitment to phasing out coal-based power plants.

On players ‘taking the knee’

Sportspersons deserve praise for standing up against injustices



IMAGINE a scenario where players are being booed for making gestures that contain a political statement, but when play resumes and the players clinch stunning successes, spectators in the same gallery go wild in celebrations. This is what we have been witnessing in the United Kingdom for quite some time, as footballers (taking the cue from sportspersons in the United States) started “taking a knee” since last year to highlight racial injustices and show support to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Frustrated in seeing such contradictory behaviour from spectators, a prominent British jurist, former Chief Prosecutor Nazir Afzal, tweeted on June 13, the day England won against Croatia in Euro 2020, “Some booing the knee & then cheering Raheem Sterling for scoring the winner just after he got his Honour for his work on racism, is some level of hypocrisy.”

The issue of fighting racial injustice has drawn widespread support globally, but it has also given right-wing populists the chance to stoke further division and spread hate, particularly targeting immigrants. And, immigrant talents have been a dominant force in the Western sporting arena for quite some time. As a result, the players themselves are being frequently subjected to racist abuses. It is quite rampant and savage, especially on social media platforms. A three-day social media boycott between April 30 and May 3 by footballers (supported by The Football Association, Premier League and some politicians) to highlight social media companies’ inaction on eradicating online hate and racism seemed to change very little.

Despite The Football Association (The FA) and UEFA weighing in to support the footballers in their actions against racism, particularly on taking knees at football matches, a section of English spectators continued booing their team. Such supporters, who have been booing their players for displaying anti-racist gestures, argue that by taking a position on divisive issues of social justice, the players are bringing politics into sports.

Players taking the knee at Euro 2020 (being played in 2021 due to the pandemic), the most important European tournament, has in a way already exposed the divisions within Europe. Only a handful of teams (out of 24) have been taking the knee as a show of support to racial justice while the rest have not. Teams that are refraining from such gestures have expressed differing views in justifying their positions. All those teams have

repeated incidents of “monkey” chants towards non-white players. Teams that are taking the knee include all three nations of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland and Wales, along with France, Belgium and Austria. But in England, too, the issue has become very divisive, with some tacit support from some politicians belonging to the party in power. Hence, booing continued during the latest match on Friday evening between England and



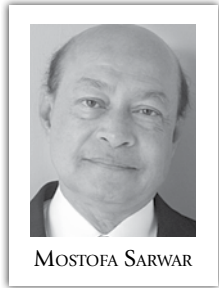
Players and officials take a knee ahead of the international friendly match between England and Austria at the Riverside Stadium on June 02, 2021 in Middlesbrough.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

said that they strongly condemn any and all forms of discrimination. However, some national associations, like that of the Czech Republic, without referring to the BLM movement, have said that they would take a neutral “apolitical stance” on certain topics that have been resonating in the sports environment. It was evidently clear that to the Czechs, supporting BLM was political. Czechs, however, claim that their jerseys have the UEFA Respect inscription, which refers to the UEFA’s campaign against racism. The Croatian Football Federation said that the players have a right to their own opinions on these topics and that they also have a right to choose whether they want to engage in any form of activism. The Croatian players have jointly decided not to take the knee. However, it must be noted here that in recent years, several European matches in Croatia had to be held without any spectators due to

Scotland, despite appeals from The FA not to do so. However, the boos circulating around the stadium were eventually drowned out by applause from other supporters. Recent intervention by the Culture Secretary in the controversy surrounding the English Cricket Board’s suspension of cricketer Ollie Robinson over historic racist and sexist tweets also fuelled controversies against the Conservative Party on the issue of racism. The Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden, criticised the suspension of Ollie Robinson, terming the action as being “over the top”. Another Conservative politician, Brendan Clarke-Smith MP, compared taking the knee to making a Nazi salute in the 1930s. Amidst these controversies, when asked by the media, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s office refused to comment on whether he condemns booing of the national team’s players.

Biden’s hardball diplomacy a welcome change from Trump’s appeasement of Putin



THE contentious Biden-Putin summit ended inconclusively on June 16, 2021, in the tranquil 18th century villa La Grange, surrounded by rose bushes, overlooking the serene waters of Lake Geneva. Before the meeting, the rhetoric between Biden and Putin was heated. On March 16, 2021, in an interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC, Biden said that Putin is “a killer” without a “soul,” and Putin recalled his ambassador in angry response, insinuating that Biden was a hypocrite. The United States also withdrew its ambassador. Ten years before that, Vice President Biden, at the Kremlin, told the then Prime Minister Putin that he thought he had no soul.

Biden’s stance prior to the meeting was chilly. He opted for a solo press conference, an unusual practice at a summit between countries—even for adversaries. Per Biden’s wishes, the summit handlers also did not arrange any joint meals between the men, despite ample time and opportunity. And Putin himself lowered expectations for any diplomatic breakthroughs.

Put mildly, the summit began with pessimistic undertones. Biden’s wish list included setting up “red lines” against interference in US elections and ransomware extortion of American businesses. Agenda items also included nuclear arms control, discussions of Russian violations of human rights (including the jailing of political dissident Alexei Navalny), Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and military operations in industrialised Eastern Ukraine, and Russia’s military and political interference in Syria and Belarus.

In contrast to the prior administration, Biden has appeared to take the hacking of American interests seriously. Recent ransomware attacks by the cybercriminal group DarkSide forced Colonial Pipeline Company, which runs the largest refined oil pipeline in the United States, to shut down its operations, and disrupted the business of JBS, the United States’ largest beef processing company. Both companies had to pay steep ransoms (Colonial Pipeline USD five million and JBS USD 11 million) in cryptocurrency.

The Biden administration’s response was firm. The FBI recovered a large portion of Colonial’s payment—USD 2.3 million in cryptocurrency. Biden issued stern warnings to DarkSide and added

that Russia has “some responsibility” to address the ransomware attack. DarkSide admitted its involvement but Putin denied any role on Russia’s part. The group was knocked off of its web hosting platform and cryptocurrency from an account the group uses to pay affiliates was drained. They have supposedly disbanded—for now. DarkSide may not have worked directly under Russian intelligence agencies, but it is alleged that they certainly had their collective

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blessings, so long as the hacks did not negatively impact Russian interests. Aboard Air Force One on June 10, Biden’s National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan assured reporters that the President would discuss recent ransomware attacks during his meeting with Putin in Geneva.

It was a different world during Trump’s presidency. In March 2020, Cozy Bear, a cybercriminal group with ties to Russian Intelligence, hacked software released by SolarWinds, an American network monitoring company that services several major US government agencies and corporations, including the Department of Homeland Security, the Pentagon, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Energy and Microsoft Corporation. After a few weeks of tone-deaf silence of “The Stable Genius,” and after US intelligence agencies concluded that there was likely a link between the hack and Russia, Trump deflected the blame to China via a December 19 tweet.

Trump’s tweets and actions during his presidency included a curious, consistent pattern of Russian appeasement.

In Syria, for example, Trump abandoned America’s most loyal regional ally in the fight against the Islamic State,

the Kurds, defying the recommendations of his security experts and military generals. This allowed Russia to secure the rule of Bashar al-Assad, ally of the United States’ perennial foe, Iran.

Trump regularly turned a blind eye to (and seemingly facilitated) Russia’s persistent, illegal attempts to extend its hegemony into Ukraine beyond its annexation of Crimea and into Donbas, defying the advice of his administration’s own experts and America’s European

In response, Labour MP Dan Butler, in a scathing article in the *Metro* newspaper, criticised the prime minister for not condemning the booing spectators.

In recent years, English footballers, particularly from ethnic minority groups, have increasingly been speaking up about issues of socioeconomic injustices, causing discomfort and embarrassment to the leaders of the ruling party. A most notable example is the successful campaign for providing school meals at homes during lockdowns for poorer families, spearheaded by Manchester United’s rising star Marcus Rashford. His open letter to the Prime Minister and social media campaign calling for businesses to contribute in feeding children forced the government to change its policy. Afterwards, some commentators termed him as the most high profile opponent of Boris Johnson’s government in the past year, instead of the Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer.

Readers in Bangladesh can perhaps remember Hamza Chowdhury’s celebration of Leicester City’s FA cup win with the waving of a Palestinian flag. He was joined by Wesley Fofana too. It was in solidarity with the Palestinians amidst an Israeli military campaign in Gaza that killed more than 200 innocent civilians, including at least 63 children. There is no doubt that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the 73 years long conflict remains the most sensitive issue in international politics and diplomacy. Many people feared that penalties or disciplinary actions would be taken against them. But the players’ club firmly stood behind them. Hamza and Wesley’s actions angered Jewish groups, who argued that football is no place for political statements and gestures of this nature can incite and inflame racial hatred, abuse and violence. However, the FA has so far refrained from taking any actions against the two players.

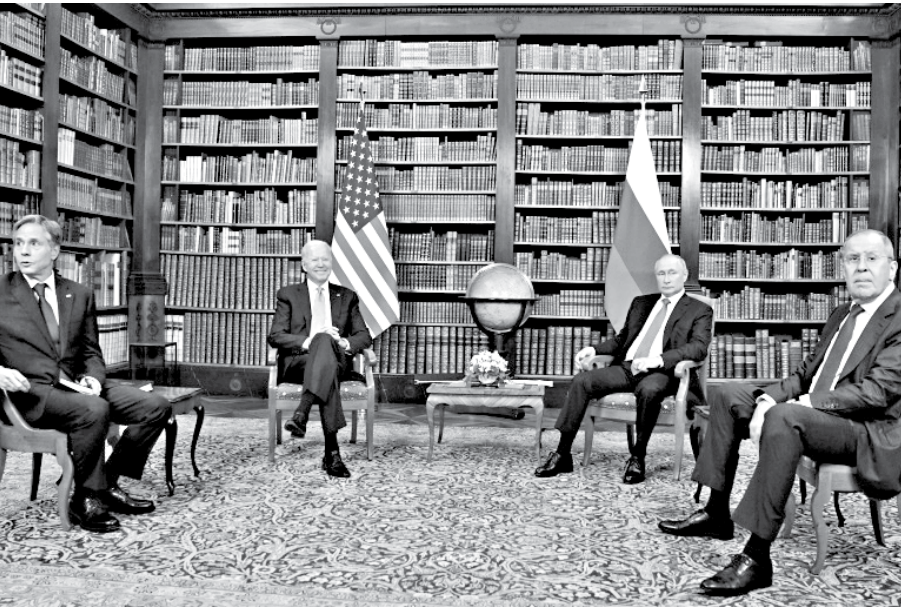
On the day the Hamza and Wesley duo carried the Palestinian flag at Wembley, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in London and other cities in the UK in solidarity with Palestinians. It is now becoming clear that keeping issues of social injustices and human rights out of sporting arenas may no longer be sustainable.

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on his way into talks with Putin—and conveyed a sense that America had at least the potential backing of the West. Trump, in contrast, shunned European allies and seldom laid any groundwork for diplomacy. Putin apparently noticed the difference, pointedly acknowledging that “care” was needed to work with Biden, who was a “focused” “professional,” “skilfully” capable of achieving America’s goals. And reports indicate that Biden’s communications with Putin were clear-



US President Joe Biden, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attend the US-Russia summit in Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE

allies.

Trump acted like a paper tiger in dealing with Iran’s nuclear ambitions and its regional hegemony, accomplishing nothing beyond wrecking the treaty that sought to hold Iran’s nuclear programme in check—perhaps because Iran is a Russian ally. He made a lot of noise about the Maduro government in Venezuela. Much ado turned into nothing, once again: Maduro and Putin are close buddies. And in Libya, Trump made a friendly phone call to Russian surrogate General Haftar, despite the American State Department’s support for the UN-recognised Fayez Sarraj government.

The pattern is clear. In crises, Putin flexed his muscles and Trump retreated to the corner, especially when it came to Russian interests. Trump may not be a Russian asset. But his inaction was.

Biden’s approach is different, and it already shows. Before meeting with Putin, Biden built rapport and consensus with the G7, NATO and European Union allies. This placed him in a position of strength

cut. If American interests are violated, there will be consequences. There were few such reports during the Trump administration; they often spoke alone.

During Trump’s presidency, Russian interference in US elections was ignored because the interference favoured Trump. In most other cases, appeasement of Russian interests was the order of the day. This damage will be hard to overcome. Nevertheless, Russia is shrinking like the magic piece of shagreen from Honore de Balzac’s novel, *La Peau de chagrin*. All of Putin’s mischief reduces Russia’s credibility and exhausts her resources, accelerating the drift into rising China’s shadow. Depending on how desperate Putin gets, that drift may start to have unanticipated effects on the world stage, including Bangladesh—triggering Cold War de ja vu.

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