

World Day Against Trafficking in Persons

The challenge is huge and so huge efforts need to be made to stop this scourge

ACCORDING to various studies, human trafficking is the third largest crime industry in the world behind drug dealing and arms trafficking—which are also often connected to human trafficking—and is the fastest growing activity of transnational criminal organisations. Bangladesh, like all other countries of the world, has been suffering greatly from this evil. Recently, Interpol released details of “Operation Liberterra”, a mission coordinated by authorities in dozens of states which led to the rescue of 430 human trafficking victims and the arrest of 286 suspects. The victims included migrants and underage girls who were being smuggled to Greece from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Syria.

Judging from recent news reports and research findings, it seems that human trafficking from Bangladesh is on the rise. Whether that is actually the case or is due to the authorities doing a better job of capturing the criminals responsible for this evil is hard to determine, but what is obvious is that thousands of people are falling victim to traffickers every year. And much of it is due to people desperately trying to migrate abroad for better jobs, unaware of the dangers of getting trafficked and being forced into various forms of slavery in the process.

Over the past couple of years, the authorities have certainly done a better job in terms of fighting human traffickers and rescuing trafficking victims, which has led to Bangladesh earning itself an upgrade to Tier 2 in the ranking of countries fighting trafficking, according to a US report. In the process, a few trafficking masterminds have also been identified and captured, and it was discovered that one way or another, most of them were either politically connected or themselves politically powerful individuals. This also illustrates how people who are influential and powerful in society are running such criminal networks, using their connections to benefit themselves from what is essentially a form of modern-day slavery. This obviously makes it more difficult to fight human trafficking. Nevertheless, the authorities must take every step necessary to stop this crime.

Promoting safe migration is a proven strategy to reduce vulnerability to trafficking. The government should also invest in skills development of prospective migrants to ensure greater security for them. Investment in making higher-quality pre-departure information available is equally important, as is the provision of protection by Bangladeshi representations to migrants abroad. However, at the end of the day, given the nature of this crime and trafficking networks being transnational in their set-ups, the authorities must coordinate with other countries in transnational actions to stop human trafficking—by reducing the operational space for organised trafficking and smuggling networks.

Dengue surge requires urgent action

Govt must raise awareness, allocate health resources for dengue patients

IT seems neither the Covid-19 nor the dengue virus is backing down from their sweeping spread across the country. What is worse is that most patients of dengue this year seem to be contracting the dangerous Serotype-3 variant of the virus. All 20 samples of dengue patients from various hospitals tested by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) were found to be of this variant. As of 8 AM on Wednesday, the total number of dengue patients this year stood at 2,098. It should be noted that the number was only 565 on July 7. Curiously, the dengue virus has a tendency to spread widely every alternate year. During the 2019 outbreak, for instance, there had been 101,354 confirmed cases and at least 179 deaths, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Doctors from the IEDCR and Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital (SSMCH) say that not only is the Serotype-3 variant more dangerous, it can also be deadly for patients who have contracted any variants of the virus previously. Prompt and proper treatment is also required for patients suffering from the rare dengue haemorrhagic fever, which happens to be common amongst those infected this year.

Unfortunately, this is the worst possible time for Bangladesh to be dealing with such a variant of the dengue virus, given that the daily Covid-19 infections number crossed the 16,000 mark on July 28, indicating a huge uptick on that front. Needless to say, hospitals across all divisions are already overburdened trying to treat Covid-19 patients, and vacant ICU beds are either scarce or unavailable. Meanwhile, most dengue patients are resorting to treatments at private hospitals. The situation is such that two dengue wards at SSMCH are reportedly occupied by Covid-19 patients.

But the dengue surge must be stamped out before it gets out of control, not only because the prevalent Serotype-3 variant is more dangerous but also because patients contracting both dengue and Covid-19 simultaneously are said to have fewer chances of recovery as the treatment for one virus may interfere with that of the other.

The good news is that, as reported by this daily, the DGHS had received a health ministry proposal to have six hospitals dedicated for dengue treatment along with the required manpower. Though we hope this proposal will be finalised and implemented soon, we must urge relevant authorities to thoroughly plan the management of these hospitals so that their operation is efficient and effective. The execution of this plan should not be delayed or taken lightly so that we can avoid a dengue situation like the one from 2019—or something even worse, given the present grim Covid-19 scenario.

Euro 2020 and social resistance against racism in UK



KAMAL AHMED

THE ongoing Tokyo Olympics is the latest sporting event where the trend of taking the knee by players has made its way in. Athletes at these Games are allowed to make a protest after the International Olympic Committee relaxed Rule 50, which previously forbade athletes to make any kind of “demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.” It follows the Euro 2020 where knee-taking by English footballers had stirred a political debate, but eventually won over the argument against racial injustices. These are powerful imprints of the anti-racism movement Black Lives Matter (BLM). No wonder the editors of Oxford Dictionary, in 2017, added the changed meaning of the word “woke” to be awake to sensitive social issues, such as racism, from its traditional usage as past participle of “wake”. It became popular as the BLM movement started using the hashtag #StayWoke on social media. But many others, particularly the conservatives, deride the term as an insult. Thereby, it is unlikely that the ongoing debate about whether society is becoming too woke or anti-woke will be resolved anytime soon.

However, the solidarity shown in support of three English footballers who were subjected to racial abuse on social media and public sphere, after their failure in scoring from penalty shots in the Euro 2020 final, was something new. The torrent of abusive messages aimed at the trio—Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho—was horrendous. It was especially hard for the Manchester United forward Marcus Rashford as he had been already a target of some members of the right-wing forces, including the ruling Conservative Party of the UK, for his off-pitch activism that angered them.

After England’s defeat in the final, Rashford’s mural in Manchester was also defaced. When the news broke, hundreds of people visited the mural and paid tributes to him for his playing and social activism. Later, the city council decided to preserve all those messages saying that these tributes needed to be preserved for future generations to mark the national moment of solidarity. Politicians, irrespective of party affiliations, including those well-known for their dismissive

attitude towards benefits of diversity and multiculturalism, and media outlets including those xenophobic tabloids, all in unison supported the English team. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, much criticised for his offensive comments about women, ethnic minorities and gay people and for refusing to condemn those spectators who booed footballers for taking the knee, started his day, the night after, with a tweet: “This England team deserve to be lauded as heroes, not racially abused on social media. Those responsible for this appalling abuse should be ashamed of themselves.” Home Secretary Priti Patel, who termed the knee-taking as “gesture politics”, also expressed her disgust and promised actions against the social media onslaught.



Players take a knee in support of the Black Lives Matter movement before the Euro 2020 match round of 16 between England and Germany at Wembley stadium in London, June 29, 2021.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The England manager, Gareth Southgate, said the abuse players had received was “unforgivable”—“It’s just not what we stand for. We have been a beacon of light in bringing people together, in people being able to relate to the national team, and the national team stands for everybody and so that togetherness has to continue. We heal together as a team now, and we’re there for them [Sancho, Rashford and Saka] and I know that 99 percent of the public will be as well,” he said. English captain Harry Kane went one step further by saying, “If you abuse anyone on social media, you’re not an England fan and we don’t want you.”

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram said they had removed hundreds of racist messages and suspended offending accounts. The

resistance appears to be holding firmly. On July 21, Marcus Rashford tweeted saying that the right-wing magazine *The Spectator* was planning to run a story on him the next day about how he had benefited commercially in the last 18 months. Clearly, he had suspected that the aim of the planned article was to discredit his activism. Rashford wrote, “To clarify, I don’t need to partner with brands. I partner because I want to progress the work I do off the pitch and most of any fee I would receive contributes to that. Last summer, 1.3m children had access to food support, through my relationship with Burberry children have a safe place to be after school where they will be fed, following the November investment vulnerable children have safe places to

during the second week of July, according to official television audience figures produced by rating agency Barb. It was due to a viewer boycott prompted by one of its presenters taking the knee in solidarity with the England football team—viewers who pledged to stop watching the channel, making accusations that it had sold out and gone “woke”, or were in favour of Black Lives Matter. Earlier, the channel faced significant threats of boycott by some big brand advertisers who said they want to see its output “genuinely balanced”. This stance taken by some brands, unrelated to the EURO 2020, is not that outlandish.

Businesses’ reaction to BLM protests in the United States and Europe this time have been markedly different to their past silence at instances of police brutality against Black people. Since the killing of George Floyd, many global corporations and brands, especially in the US, proactively extended their support through actions like aligning their marketing campaigns with the BLM. Nike then placed an ad on social media saying: “For once, don’t do it, stop pretending that’s not a problem in America. Don’t turn your back on racism.” Other shoemakers like Adidas and Converse repeated the same ad, while Netflix tweeted, “To be silent is to be complicit”.

Some British brands too started aligning them. Unilever announced, “Previously called Fair & Lovely, we changed our brand name to Glow & Lovely to embrace a more inclusive vision of beauty”. However, it was nothing like the United States. Perhaps the reason can be better explained with the results of an opinion poll by Opinium carried out in November 2020, which showed that about 55 percent of people in the UK believed that BLM had increased racial tension. In the UK, the resurgence of BLM last year stoked new debates over Britain’s colonial past and history of slave trade. Some leading Conservatives were very vocal against the movement and the equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch, urged schools not to support the “political” movement in lessons. Despite such underlying tension, the English football team’s success in winning the argument about taking the knee gives hope that the tides are turning. It emerged in social media trending analysis that post-tournament anti-racism had a more than 99:1 share of the argument online. Undoubtedly, it can be termed as a glorious example of social resistance.

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Pandemic-hit groups need access to alternative livelihood options

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THE Covid-19 pandemic has become a protracted crisis and will be with us for an indefinite period of time. It has already caused unquantifiable loss and suffering. Citizens’ confidence and strength have been shaken to the core, and many societal fault lines and fragilities have been exposed. Nevertheless, there has been a huge effort to explain many of the new phenomena by way of research. Recently, the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) of Brac University published a report titled “Covid-19 Livelihood Crisis, Social Cohesion Challenges and Mitigation Options” which sheds light on some of

Given the limited nature of existing social safety net programmes (notably in urban areas), depletion of savings as well as accumulation of debt, 17 percent of the respondents said they depended on alternative sources of earnings. However, there is a considerable variation in opting for alternative livelihoods in terms of the respondents’ profession, gender and educational level, amongst other factors.

Transport workers, for example, particularly struggled during the 2020 lockdowns, with 27 percent of them having opted for alternative earnings. One in four returnee migrants also explored alternative livelihood upon their return to Bangladesh. As for people belonging to other professions, 17 percent of day

There is an urgent need for more institutionalised efforts to create alternative livelihood provisions, particularly for the urban informal workers.



People wait at a playground in the capital’s Siddheswari area to receive food and cash assistance amid the lockdown, on July 8, 2021.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

the financial effects of this pandemic.

CPJ conducted its research in major urban areas of Dhaka division in December 2020. The findings show that about 20 percent of the 1,064 respondents were unemployed; of them, 81 percent lost their jobs due to Covid-19. The CPJ study shows that the mean income of low-income groups declined by about one-third compared to their pre-pandemic earnings. The returnee migrants experienced a staggering 67 percent decline in their income. Over 80 percent of surveyed households experienced an adverse impact on their savings and assets.

labourers and private-service holders, 15 percent of micro-entrepreneurs, and 11 percent of household aides tried to earn a living from alternative sources.

Various unstructured interviews show that while some of the household aides have managed to find alternative employment, a large number weren’t re-hired after lockdowns. The returnee migrants who experienced the highest income loss amid the pandemic faced dilemma between remigration and alternative livelihood plans. Nearly two-thirds of the returnees would like to return to their overseas jobs but they

face various hurdles. On the other hand, many returnees are opting for alternative opportunities within Bangladesh. However, for many of them, payment and working conditions appear less than satisfactory compared with the benefits of employment abroad.

There is also a significant gender gap noticed in terms of the remigration and alternative livelihood plans of the returnees. For instance, less than 10 percent of male returnees explored alternative livelihood options, and 25 percent of them found jobs. In contrast, 48 percent of female returnees explored alternative livelihood opportunities but only 12 percent were employed.

Critical factors

What are the critical factors taken into account when it comes to securing alternative livelihood amid the pandemic? Returnee migrants opined that acquisition of new skills (94 percent), control of virus (88 percent), usage of individual savings and assets (85 percent), institutional support like bank loans (78 percent), and family support (74 percent) are critical to pursuing an alternative livelihood in Bangladesh.

The CPJ survey revealed that financial support is a critical factor in relation to alternative livelihood options. The survey shows that those in dire need of financial help amidst the pandemic found little support from formal institutions, such as banks and NGOs.

Another group in need of urgent support is the urban informal workers—85 percent of the 61 million people in the country’s labour force

work in the informal sector, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Yet, their voices have been hardly heard during the pandemic. Of the government’s 23 stimulus packages involving Tk 1,24,053 crore for the pandemic-hit people, most are directed to the formal sector. One practical problem in helping the informal workers is lack of database. Thus, addressing the data gap by taking advantage of information technology is critical. A reliable database can help international development partners and NGOs as well as in adopting innovative policies, which will facilitate alternative earnings for urban informal workers.

Provisions of alternative livelihoods have gained currency in many parts of Asia during the pandemic. There have been organised initiatives under the aegis of the International Domestic Workers Federation based in Hong Kong, India, and Sri Lanka. In the Philippines, “Move Up”, an urban resilience project funded by a number of international development agencies, gives partner communities a chance to explore alternative livelihood options.

Given the limited nature of social protection facilities available in Bangladesh and financial constraints to support the poor and new poor, there is an urgent need for more institutionalised efforts to create alternative livelihood provisions, particularly for the urban informal workers. The protracted nature of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns and shutdowns will affect certain groups, as highlighted in this article, more than the better-off sections of society. This will result in greater inequality and widening of gaps between various sections of the population. If such negative trends continue, social injustice and societal unrest will become major challenges.

Our policymakers need to pay careful attention to the various research findings and engage with the relevant stakeholders to address the issue of alternative livelihoods. The development partners, donors, NGOs, community organisations and academics should forge a united front to create realistic alternative livelihood options for the vulnerable sections of the population during their hour of need.

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