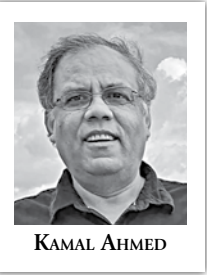




Shattered dreams of a UK degree and quest for justice



KAMAL AHMED

YEARS of campaigning and legal challenges have finally given some hope to thousands of international students, including Bangladeshis, subjected to historical injustices since 2014 over a wrongful allegation of cheating in English tests. The language test was conducted by a non-profit organisation—Educational Testing Services (ETS). A first tier Appeal Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) in its verdict issued on June 18 concluded that “the generic evidence is not reliable because a number of students have been identified by ETS as having cheated but who did not in fact cheat.” A UK-based rights group, Migrant Voice, which has been supporting the victims of this injustice, has now signed a partnership with the law firm Bindmans LLP to launch a group compensation scheme against the Home Office. Due to the huge number of victims, it has been likened by many as being similar to the Windrush scandal.

In 2014, acting on a BBC investigation that unmasked some colleges in England facilitating foreign students to use proxies to cheat and other means of fraud in their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the UK Home Office concluded that about 34,000 of them had definitely cheated. They were among 58,458 students who had taken the test between 2011 and 2014. The Home Office decided that only 2,000 had not cheated and a further 22,000 had questionable results. Most of these students were told to leave the UK and were unable to challenge this wholesale stigmatisation. But, some of them were determined to not to accept such collective criminalisation and punishment and started their vigorous campaign on many fronts—lobbying MPs and human rights groups, and mounting legal challenges.

The latest judgement came in the appeal lodged by Wahidur Rahman, a Business graduate from Sylhet International University, who stayed back in London with support from relatives and the local community to fight for justice and to clear his name. Wahid was not alone in this fight. A few others, including fellow Bangladeshi Amin Sheikh, Rony Mondol from India, Mohammad Naved from Pakistan, with the support from Migrant Voice, have successfully overturned the Home Office's decision. Amin Sheikh, another Business graduate who was meant to pursue his Masters at the University of London in 2012 won his case last year. But, he told me that it cost him more than 15,000 pounds.

While victims of this terrible injustice were living in fear of immigration raids and uncertainties, some languishing in detention centres, the Home Office suffered serious embarrassment following a report produced by the government's National Audit Office (NAO). The report, published in May 2019, said that

cheating had been “large scale”, but innocent people may have been deported. The head of the NAO, Sir Amyas Morse, said the Home Office “should have taken an equally vigorous approach to protecting those who did not cheat but who were still caught up in the process, however small a proportion they might be”. The NAO said, as of March, 11,000 people who had taken the English tests had left the country after an accusation was made against them.

With the assistance from Migrant Voice, both Wahid and Amin and a few other Bangladeshi students took the lead in organising a multinational student campaign against the unfair victimisation, seeking their right to prove their innocence. Migrant Voice helped students in their campaign to get justice by training them on techniques of an effective campaign, how to speak to the press—with some going on live television to tell their story and contact their MPs.

Their representations to local MPs resulted in drawing support from all the parties in the House of Commons. Among them, Stephen Timms, MP from East Ham, one of the London

stressed that it must be brought to an end. *The Guardian* reported that the public accounts committee, too, in a report concluded that the Home Office's “flawed” handling and “rush to penalise” the students caused “injustice and hardship for many thousands of international students”. The newspaper also added that the Home Office, however, was still reluctant to revisit the issue.

Apart from renewal or reissuance of visas, whether students can now expect any other forms of compensation such as financial or mental health support from the Home Office still remains unclear. Cameron Ball, Campaigns Organiser at Migrant Voice says, as we understand, there has yet to be any compensation issued by the Home Office. But, he referred to TOEIC Justice Project launched by the law firm Bindmans following a recent partnership with his organisation Migrant Voice. Bindmans says, “It is a fact that many people were unjustly accused: over 4,000 people have so far been vindicated by challenging the Home Office in the tribunals and Courts. We know that many more will be found innocent in the future.” He added that, exoneration is an immense relief, but it is not a remedy for the six years of lost youth, damaged relationships, and mental health damage that the victims of the TOEIC scandal have experienced. Some may also have been detained pending deportation when there was no legal basis for this action. It is not known how many Bangladeshis have succeeded in clearing their names, but estimates suggest up to one thousand victims are still facing serious difficulties due to not being able to submit their appeals, expiration of visa and not being able to work or access state-run health services.

While British MPs, jurists and rights activists have been trying to pursue their government to change its course and allow the accused foreign students to clear their names and pursue their academic dreams, Bangladeshi students allege they felt abandoned by their own government. Wahid recalled his frustrating experience of writing emails and calling officials at the Bangladesh High Commission, but failing to find any sympathetic ears. Another student, on condition of anonymity, told me that one official at the High Commission informed him that the Foreign Ministry in Dhaka refused to own them when the British government sought Bangladesh's help in removal of those accused students following the revocation of their visas. Our request for an official narrative about the subject has not been met by the High Commission.

Any reluctance or refusal on the part of the Bangladesh government to intervene in aid of fee-paying students in distress abroad is a matter of grave concern. It can be hoped that it will now make a representation for compensations to be paid to the victims of this gross injustice and assist others who are fighting to clear their names.

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constituencies having a large number of Bangladeshis, had diligently pursued the issue in parliament asking questions at different occasions and securing a special debate on the subject on July 24, 2019. He argued that it is “implausible” that more than 90 percent of those who took the Home Office test were involved in cheating. Many of his constituents have been affected by the allegations and he sought a reconsideration system for those wrongly accused.

According to the official record of the parliamentary debate, Hansard, Stephen Timms told the house that a professor of digital forensics at Birmingham City University told the all-party parliamentary group on TOEIC last month (June 2019) that it was “unsafe for anyone to rely upon computer files created by ETS...as a sole means of making a decision”, but those files were the only basis for the cheating allegations. Calling it a grave injustice, he noted that appeals were not allowed in the UK. 10 other MPs representing constituencies with large immigrant communities took part in the debate and voiced their support and

Should Bangladesh consider a way around lockdowns?



SUDIPA SARKER

BANGLADESH is currently going through a 2nd wave of Covid-19 with the Delta variant causing havoc mostly in the rural areas close to the border regions. To curb the spread of the disease, Bangladesh entered into a strict lockdown on July 23 and consecutively extended the lockdown. However, is the lockdown helping or harming?

The infection rate and the death toll are not only higher this time than during the last wave of Covid, but the rates are high outside the big cities, and many deaths are happening in the rural regions. But the lockdown measures have mostly been applied to cities.

Even with the lockdown restrictions on movement, it was impossible to stop people going from one place to another during Eid. Those who left the big cities for Eid did not get enough time to return safely to their city homes and workplaces. Moreover, though many factories are closed, people still need to

other events till the beginning of next year. No mass gathering should be allowed until next year. Restaurants can only open at 50 percent capacity. Shopping centres should also run only at 50 percent capacity. Not all shops should be allowed to open on the same day.

TRANSPORT: We should have more (not less) public transport to ensure that people can have a safe journey from one place to another. Buses, trains, and ferries should run at 50 percent of their capacity. Factories and offices should provide transportation for office and factory employees. No transportation means no employees on the premises.

VACCINATION: Prioritise vaccinating people in the rural region and from the vulnerable groups of the population. People who are around the age of 25 years, in most cases, are not the most vulnerable people. Also, the government can introduce a vaccine passport. Positive campaigns promoting vaccination should be launched in the rural areas.

ICT FOR ENSURING SAFETY AND MONITORING OF THE SPREAD:



PHOTO: STAR

What can countries like Bangladesh do to avoid present and future lockdowns?

move for essential services. With public transport remaining inaccessible, there is a massive demand for whatever mode of transportation is available, increasing the risk of the virus spreading.

As a result, the current lockdown is hardly helping to bring down the infection rate and death toll. The failure of lockdowns to curb the disease demonstrates that they are not adequate to reduce the spread of the disease, especially for developing countries like Bangladesh.

So, what can countries like Bangladesh do to avoid present and future lockdowns? The following strategies can be considered:

OFFICES AND WORKSPACES: No sector other than the essential ones should open at 100 percent capacity after the current lockdown. The other sectors can open only at 50 percent capacity for the employees that need to be present at the office/factory premises. Work from home should be mandatory for all office workers.

TESTING: Increasing the testing capacity of rapid antigen tests and bringing the cost of testing down to a reasonable level is crucial. It will allow many people to test at least twice a week before going to office, visiting a hospital, visiting a close family member.

PUBLIC GATHERING AND SPACES: There should be no parties, weddings, or

Parks and other open spaces can stay open, but can only be visited for an hour a day. People can do grocery shopping physically only for one hour. A digital app should be used to manage and monitor. A nationwide antibody test should be run to understand how much of the population is already infected with the virus. Such a test will help to know how far Bangladesh is from achieving herd immunity. Running a nationwide survey online to understand how many people have tested positive with Covid-19, how many people experienced symptoms of it, how many people in the close family tested positive, died, experienced signs of Covid, etc. could be helpful.

SUBSIDISING HEALTHCARE: When most people are not vaccinated, only having frequent tests can keep the country open and safe. However, testing at private hospitals is very expensive. Also, private hospitals do not do a rapid antigen test. Bringing the cost down of the test can encourage people to do the test more often and enable tracking and tracing of the real spread of the disease.

There have been enough lockdowns and consequently enough infections since March 2020 to understand that in a densely populated country like Bangladesh, lockdowns can only do so much.

Sudipa Sarker is Assistant Professor of Business Development and Technology, at Aarhus University in Denmark.

ADLAI STEVENSON I
23rd Vice President of the USA (1835 – 1914)

A hypocrite is the kind of politician who would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump and make a speech for conservation.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Long-eared hound

7 Robust

11 Statue setting

12 Shortly, in poems

13 Sluggish

14 Basic idea

15 Disney princess

16 Circus worker

17 Choreography bit

18 Sentence part

19 Bassoon's kin

21 Tell tales

22 Warhol, for one

25 Golf goal

26 Antlered animal

27 Brightens

29 Misses

33 Taboo acts

34 Singer Minogue

35 Forum wear

36 "In Cold Blood" author

37 Luau instruments

38 Made amends

39 Days gone by

40 Lasso users

DOWN

1 Soothing ointments

2 Alaskan native

3 Deli fixture

4 Fizzy quaff

5 Smooth

6 Top rating

7 Viking of the comics

8 Zoo residents

9 Wigs out

10 Menu choice

16 Letter before iota

18 Harbor cities

20 Diamond features

22 Bad boxer

23 Grove yield

24 "Lust for life" singer

25 Confined

28 BLT base

30 Isolated

31 Bottle size

32 Canary chow

34 Green Hornet's valet

36 Lot sight

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

6-19

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C O S T S S I G M A
A P O R T E R R O L
B E L I E W E A V E
E N D A C E P E R
R U E M A R P U T
S P R E E S A L P S
I S R A E L I
D I N S B R A N D S
E G G J A R G A P
U N I U S A I N E
C O R A L N U R S E
E R O D E D R O O D
S E N D S S U N N Y

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

THE KIDS WANT TO MAKE YOU BREAKFAST ON SUNDAY.

THAT'S SWEET!

I'M NOT SURE WHAT THEY'RE PLANNING TO MAKE

ANY REQUESTS?

HOLD THE PLAY-DOH.

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

THAT'S ALL, MISS BUXLEY. I'LL BE IN HERE WORKING ON MY "TO-DO" LIST

THE TROUBLE WITH HIS "TO-DO" LIST IS IT'S ALWAYS A "MISS-BUXLEY-DO" LIST