Correctional facilities turned into torture chambers

Prison systems in Bangladesh and across South Asia need urgent reforms

IN a recent discussion titled "Rights of the Incarcerated in South Asia" organised by the South Asia Peace Action Network (SAPAN), rights activists from across the region lamented the terrible conditions of prisons in South Asia. Among the many problems, they highlighted overcrowding, lack of privacy, inadequate healthcare facilities, substandard bedding and unsanitary conditions as being primarily responsible for these facilities turning into perpetual torture chambers for many. With that in mind, the experts called for prison systems across South Asia to be reformed.

Their call is especially pertinent for Bangladesh, as according to data presented at the discussion, Bangladesh has the highest prison occupancy rate among all South Asian countries, standing at 195 percent, as well as the highest proportion of pre-trial detainees, at 81.3 percent. That means our prisons have nearly double the occupancy that it can support, which is utterly inhumane. Many of the detainees are still waiting for trial—which means they may be innocent people who are being forced into overcrowded prisons with hardened criminals. While remaining in such conditions, these individuals as well as non-violent offenders and minors run the risk of becoming more prone to violence in order to blend in with the more seasoned criminals. This completely defeats the purpose of prisons serving as correctional facilities—instead, they might be producing more criminals than they are "correcting".

Moreover, our prisons barely have the capacity to provide what is required to rehabilitate criminals. In other words, they barely provide the services required for the inmates to be nudged onto a path to recovery from a life of crime—such as work facilities that give them the opportunity to earn their living to support their families and acquire skills to work honest jobs and develop that habit. What this means is that our prison system generally is not designed to help criminals recognise their mistakes and try and mend their ways, but it is simply there to erase these people from society altogether. This completely contradicts the purpose of correctional facilities. What we have now is more in tune with the prison system we had during colonial times—where prisoners had to bear the brunt of outdated laws and coercive practices—and the same, unfortunately, is true for the rest of South Asia.

At a time when South Asia is rapidly developing economically, it is unacceptable for us to lag so far behind in terms of human rights, which apply to prisoners too. We in Bangladesh must recognise the grave violations of prisoners' rights that are taking place under our current prison system. Prisoners must be treated better, and given better services. There should be greater oversight over how prison guards and other staff are treating prisoners. Most importantly, it is our current mindset about what should be the purpose of a prison, and how that purpose can be seen through, that must first change.

Strict action needed to stop trafficking of slum women and girls

Increase awareness, digital literacy amongst potential victims

WE are deeply concerned about the increasing cases of girls and women from urban slums being targeted by transnational human trafficking syndicates, as reported by this newspaper yesterday. The victims are mostly enticed with false promises of jobs in India (in beauty parlours, malls, etc.), which would pay them much more than any job in Bangladesh could. Being financially vulnerable, and with their limited livelihood options here, they fall prey to such traffickers and end up being sold to brothels in our neighbouring country. Families of victims only get to know of this horrific fate weeks or even months after they are trafficked—if ever.

What is most worrying is that the ring of traffickers seems quite tight, with perpetrators operating on either side of the border and coordinating their activities seamlessly, all the while staying out of the sight of law enforcers in both Bangladesh and India. Reportedly, these syndicates have "safe houses" in bordering districts such as Satkhira, where the victims are kept before being trafficked into India. Meanwhile, the accused syndicate trafficking women from slums is operating with up to 20 people, according to investigators, and their associates are usually locals from the slums or nearby areas who are known to the victims and their families. This particular ring has managed to traffic at least 50 such women and girls over the last six years, around 20 of whom belonged to a slum from Mirpur's Kalshi area in the capital. Besides this, law enforcers say that another 50 or so girls were similarly lured away in a recent TikTok trafficking racket.

While police and Rab often report arrests of some of these traffickers and claim to be actively working to thwart the syndicates' activities, the results on the ground leave a lot to be desired. According to the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report 2021 released on July 1, the government of Bangladesh prosecuted 517 suspected traffickers last year, but only convicted seven traffickers within the same time frame. The gulf between words and action seems to be widening. Only recently, reports emerged of the mother of a trafficked 17-year-old who wilfully got herself trafficked into India, after reportedly having received no help from local authorities. She did that at great personal risk, pulling off a daring rescue of her minor daughter who had been sold to a brothel in India.

We would urge the law enforcement agencies to prioritise saving current and potential victims of such trafficking rings by ensuring the culprits see justice instead of getting out on bail and resuming their heinous activities, as they reportedly have done in the past. It is also crucial for law enforcers on either side of the border to communicate their findings with each other and stay in constant contact regarding new leads. Finally, girls and women in urban slums (and other potential victims of trafficking) must be made aware of how these rings operate and how they abuse social media platforms to conduct their crimes, so that they may avoid an awful fate.

Can AI improve our budget implementation scenario?

It may facilitate faster economic growth and more equitable distribution of national wealth

SAYEED AHMED

ON July 25 this year, the *Prothom Alo* English edition published a news item about a bridge being built somewhere on the outskirts of Dhaka that led to nowhere. Funny as it may sound, such cases are not uncommon. More recently, *The Daily Star* too ran a story about a bridge lying unused for two decades for lack of any connecting road!

Now imagine the following scenario—a government entity submits a bridge project proposal for approval to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), Bangladesh's highest public fund allocation body. The proposal goes through an Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered system. The system points out that the proposed bridge doesn't connect to the existing road network, and the indicated beneficiaries do not match the national demographic database. ECNEC turns down the proposal, saving a significant amount of taxpayers' money from being wasted.

The above scenario may sound like science fiction in the distant future, but it's plausible. Ill-conceived projects are not the only problem though. Several development projects are falling behind schedules or costing more than the allocated budget. Sometimes, a whole ministry is failing to keep up. Such stories come to light only when the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division of the Ministry of Planning (IMED) investigates the progress of projects approved. Other times, a media report brings it to public knowledge. But by then, it may be too late to salvage it. A system based on AI could potentially avoid all these possibilities.

The Bangladesh government has already adopted a national strategy for AI—the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence

PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

AI can gain insights from past data ("training" or machine learning) and use this knowledge to discover the meaning of new data. As the amount of data increases with time, its knowledge base also grows, making the system more efficient.

in Bangladesh, March 2020. Although it doesn't categorically mention the IMED, there is no reason why this high-level government body shouldn't benefit from such a powerful tool in Annual Development Plan (ADP) implementation monitoring. ADP monitoring is similar to project management; only the scale is much larger. One only has to look at it from an AI perspective to reap the benefits this technology has to offer.

AI can gain insights from past data ("training" or machine learning) and use this knowledge to discover the meaning of new data. As the amount of data increases with time, its knowledge base also grows, making the system more efficient. The quality and amount of the data determine an AI system's effectiveness. On the other hand, biased data will make it error-prone and unreliable. Therefore, the first requirement of an AI implementation system is a vast amount of quality data in

several years. These include e-filing, the Project Management Information System, and e-Government Procurement (e-GP). All these systems gather a large amount of data relevant to project performance, physical progress, budget allocation, fund management and financial progress. Conventionally, it is up to humans to interpret such information, and determine a project's performance and intervention requirement. An adequately trained AI-based system can perform all these tasks and leave decision-making to humans. Of course, the decision-makers won't have to do whatever the system recommends. They can apply judgment as appropriate. Meanwhile, the system will continue working 24/7, analysing large data volumes, and providing time-critical information to support such decision-making.

The other requirement for AI-based systems is a substantial body of technical

electronic formats such as numbers, tables, texts and images. An AI-based system can train itself with these data and produce performance indicators or status reports for future projects after several rounds of refinement.

Government agencies in Bangladesh have been using information and communication management systems for

experts in AI, machine learning (ML) and data science. A close collaboration between such experts and domain expertise is a prerequisite for the success of any AI initiative. Fortunately, Bangladesh has both. Several home-grown software companies are already working on AI-related product development for American or European clients. The IMED will have no problem adding their domain knowledge to such a pool of expertise and start working on a small model. The model can be gradually scaled up as required.

The system can become even more effective with a Geographic Information System (GIS) to store the projects' location information. Bangladesh has been using GIS since the early 1990s on the Flood Action Plan (FAP) projects. Several Bangladeshi software companies are deploying GIS-based analytical tools for overseas customers. The synergy from combining GIS and AI will offer a more powerful tool to the policymakers by pointing out overlaps, gaps and duplication of government investments. Let's examine a few likely scenarios where such a system would be helpful.

A project's physical progress falls behind fund disbursement, and the allocated budget may not be enough for its completion. The system will pick it up and notify IMED to decide on remedial measures. Or, a project director may not be able to mobilise the contractor on time because of the delay in contract signing or land acquisition. It will never be possible for the IMED to identify such an issue with a manual monitoring system unless someone familiar with the project details points it out. But the AI-based system, by continuously interpreting the communications, can highlight it, along with the source of the delay. If any project's location or scope overlaps with that of another, the system will also highlight that. All these will enable the ECNEC members to understand better how the government's interventions are working.

The potential benefits of an AI-based system are aplenty, but there are also many cases of failed AI initiatives. Developing an effective AI-based system needs careful planning, coupled with learning lessons from others' experiences and meticulous work. An IMF blog has warned of a possible AI-induced widening gap between the rich and the poorer nations. But with its efficient and ethical use, AI can close such gaps too. Let Bangladesh launch its fourth industrial revolution with an AI-powered ADP monitoring system and facilitate more equitable distribution of national wealth.

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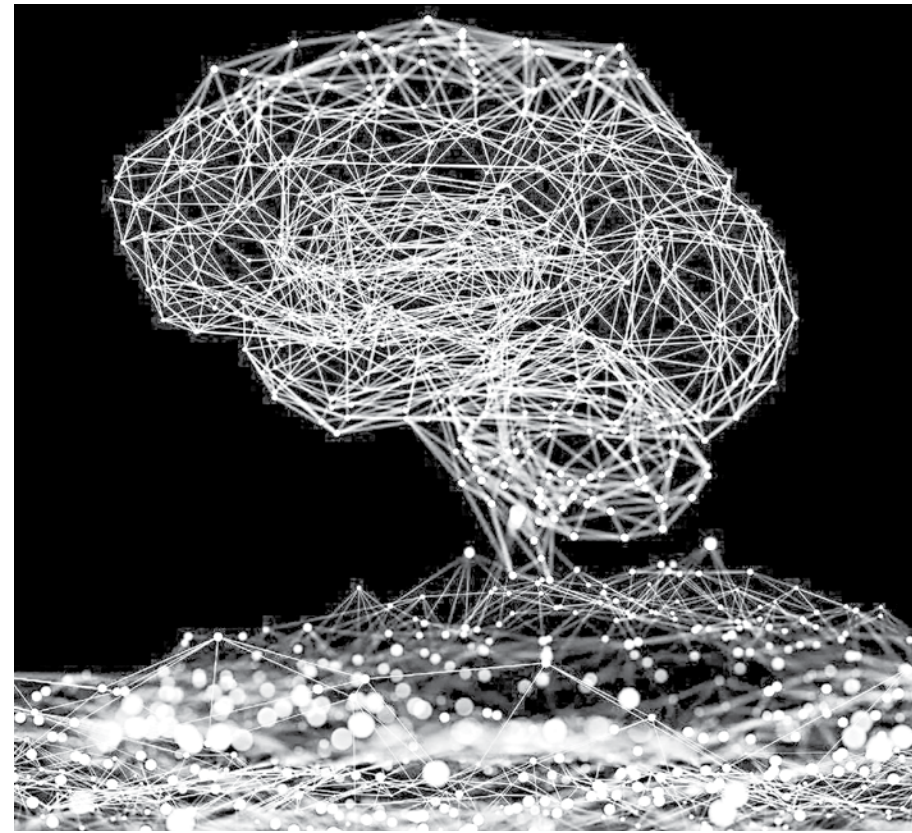
Captain Nawshad: A life of grit, determination and sacrifice

ANIKA TABASSUM

CAPTAIN Nawshad Ataul Quaiyum has passed away. The world goes on, you and I go back to work, and perhaps everyone will soon cease to talk about him except occasionally—even the hundreds of passengers he saved in 2016. Everyone, except his family. But today my heart is heavy, and so I can't help but write.

Captain Nawshad had recently been in the news after suffering from cardiac arrest mid-flight on August 27. He was piloting a Dhaka-bound Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight from Muscat that was carrying 124 passengers on board, which was forced to make an emergency landing at Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport in India's Nagpur. Soon after the landing, he was put on life support after being admitted at the Kingsway Hospital in Nagpur, where he sadly breathed his last on Monday, August 30. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

I didn't know him personally, but he is part of our extended family that is Biman Bangladesh Airlines. My father, who is now retired, was a flight engineer in Biman for many decades. As cockpit crew, he was colleagues with Captain Nawshad's father Captain Quaiyum. My parents tell me we attended Captain Nawshad's wedding.

As family of a crew member of Biman, we know what that life looks like. We know what it means for crew to carry out their duty in the face of obstacles, and being asked to risk their own lives to save those of others if the need arises. We have learned the definition of dedication, honesty and patriotism from these crew members. We know what it means to not have them around for important occasions, or even ordinary ones, because

they were gone on long and frequent flights for most of the month.

Captain Nawshad's sudden heart attack and his unfortunate demise at the age of only 44, while he was away from his family performing his duties, has moved hearts across the nation. After his death, the story of how he saved the lives of 149 passengers and seven crew members on December 22, 2016 has also resurfaced. On that day, a tyre of a Muscat-Chattogram flight at the

Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka burst moments before takeoff. The situation could have become serious, but Captain Nawshad used his skills, technical expertise and bravery to first fly in circles to burn fuel and reduce weight to make way for take-off and landing of some other flights, before conducting an emergency landing.

This is only one incident that we are now hearing off. In the life of a flight crew member, there are many such incidents where the passengers are unaware of

things that might have happened, had the crew not tackled the issue in time. And there are many that even we, the families of crew, haven't heard of—countless incidents that have gone unnoticed by the press and by passengers because of the skill of the cockpit crew of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, for their technical skill and efficiency are unparalleled.

There is an idea that being part of the flight crew is a fun experience only, which allows them to travel to many

different countries. However, when you are tackling an emergency at 30,000 feet above the ground, or waking up at ungodly hours of the night whenever you need to fly, or going through multiple tests and medical exams every year to remain fit enough to fly an aircraft, or you are unable to be present for your family all the time like regular people—you realise that a great deal of grit, determination and sacrifices are necessary for carrying out such duties.

Biman is often looked down upon as

the poor airlines of a poor country. Our national airlines may not live up to the standards of the fancy aircrafts of foreign countries that have ample resources to invest in their flagship carriers, but the people who work there to make your travel safe and peaceful prove with their health, sweat and honesty that they will do everything in their power to make the journey to your destination smoother.

Despite the fact that Captain Nawshad saved the lives of more than 150 people

As family of a crew member of Biman, we know what that life looks like. We know what it means for crew to carry out their duty in the face of obstacles, and being asked to risk their own lives to save those of others if the need arises.

Captain Nawshad Ataul Quaiyum.   PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

in 2016, he could not come back from this last flight alive. In any one lifetime, it is difficult to claim that one has measured up to the great work of saving the life of even one person, let alone that of scores of individuals. Is that not enough success, enough bravery—for this one ephemeral life we have? We pray that Captain Nawshad is granted eternal peace, and is remembered by all for his services to his nation.

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