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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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New e-commerce policy must protect consumers

The draft policy is not what we need

THERE is no doubt that the e-commerce industry in Bangladesh needs to be regulated in a better way. In recent years, e-commerce has been plagued with scams and controversies, and at least 13 rogue companies have wound up with liabilities worth several thousands of crores of taka. Legal experts and consumer rights bodies have opined that there is a pressing need for a digital commerce policy that is binding and enforceable, and where the violators of the policy are punished. This is not the case under the existing National Digital Commerce Policy, 2018, where there is no scope for legal remedy, despite a recently issued guideline.

While we completely understand and support the drafting of a new e-commerce policy that will set up administrative and judicial mechanisms to protect both consumers and merchants from fraudulent activities, we must also stress the importance of protecting their privacy as well. According to the draft policy on e-commerce firms, prepared by the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) last month, all e-commerce firms will have to come under one digital platform that will be monitored by multiple state agencies. This means that the commerce ministry, the Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC), the Consumer Association of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU), the law enforcement agencies, and the NTMC will all have access to information on orders and delivery, information about dealers, and details of their financial transactions.

Why do so many different government agencies need to know all this? Does it not make more sense to have a proper system to address the grievances of wronged consumers, rather than poring over the details of the daily workings of individual companies, even before they have been accused of any wrongdoing?

According to the draft policy, all e-commerce companies will have to register with the digital platform or else they will not be allowed to operate, and when registering, they will have to provide information on their business model, including passport information and other personal details. Only a few days ago, the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh spoke of how some Japanese companies are thinking of entering the e-commerce business in Bangladesh. Will they still show the same interest when they hear of the amount of information they will have to divulge to the authorities, and how closely their activities will be monitored by different government agencies?

It is absolutely essential that we come up with a system that protects the rights and interests of Bangladeshi consumers from scammers in the e-commerce industry. However, this also involves protecting their right to privacy, which this latest draft policy has very little regard for. The government must also ensure that the policy does not act as a deterrent for e-commerce firms looking to enter into a thriving industry which, despite the recent controversies, has the potential to create jobs and boost the economy.

Embezzlement of Jashore education board’s money is no new tale

Cases must be met with thorough investigation and swift justice

WE are concerned by the recent discovery that a racket—which includes top officials of the Jashore Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education—tampered with at least 36 cheques and stole almost Tk 7 crore from a bank account of the education board over the last five years. Said cheques were issued to 10 business outlets—two of which had no dues with the board at all—and three board officials, according to a report by this daily. The board’s team of internal auditors on October 7 found that the amounts mentioned in the board’s ledger and on the cheques were different from the amounts withdrawn from the bank.

What is most significant here is the involvement of top officials in the misdeed. When the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed a case over the embezzlement, it accused the education board’s chairman, his secretary, and accounts assistant. It is also worth noting that, as per the head of the audit team, the board’s account section was “too dependent” on the accounts assistant, who went into hiding soon after the team lodged its complaint, and only resurfaced by returning Tk 30 lakh of the embezzled amount, in two phases through bank drafts.

But the involvement of top officials in the theft of public money from the very organisations they run is nothing new at all. Last year, the shocking story of how a driver working for the DGHS had amassed wealth equalling more than Tk 100 crore over his 35 years of service came out. Though the driver was sentenced to 30 years in prison for it, we doubt that he was able to pull this off without his higher-ups enabling him, while carrying out similar deeds of their own. Similarly, a 44-member syndicate of bureaucrats, politicians and officials of the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) in Cox’s Bazar systematically siphoned off Tk 78 crore from three development projects. In all cases, it is public money, which should only be expended for the public’s benefit, that is being stolen by these corrupt officials and professionals.

While we commend the ACC’s speedy investigation into the audit team’s complaint, this is only one incident concerning an education board, and that itself has been able to steal a hefty amount of taxpayers’ money. We would, therefore, urge the authorities to crack down on such government offices so that ill-meaning officials and employees cannot carry out such embezzlements. Moreover, the journey of these cases from investigation to conviction must be speedy, efficient, and thorough. Very often, it is the delay in justice—or the ultimate lack thereof—which encourages and enables corrupt government employees to keep bleeding the public of what they are owed.

Bangladesh needs to upgrade its defence integrity structure



THE Berlin-based Transparency International released its “Government Defence Integrity (GDI) Index 2020” on November 16, 2021. With an overall score of 25 on a scale of 100, which is well below the index average of 39, Bangladesh has been ranked in the second lowest category of countries having “very weak institutional resilience to corruption.” The index shows that there are a large number of risk areas of varying degrees in the defence sector of Bangladesh, which demand high levels of strategic and policy priority aimed at creating a robust and upgraded integrity structure and ensuring its rigorous



Bangladesh has ‘very weak institutional resilience to corruption,’ according to the 2020 GDI Index by Transparency International. PHOTO: COLLECTED

practice. Time is ripe for Bangladesh to start the process of developing a comprehensive defence integrity strategy through a participatory and inclusive process.

The GDI is produced on the basis of a framework of good practices of integrity that promotes accountable, transparent and responsible conduct in the defence and security sector, and prevents the waste of public resources through corruption and other forms of abuse of power. It uses more than 70 indicators on prevalence, effectiveness and enforcement

of institutional control across five broad categories of risks: political, financial, personnel, operational, and procurement. Countries are ranked into six categories as per the score they receive. Countries that score 83-100 are grouped in grade A, having very robust institutional resilience to corruption; those who score 67-82 are in grade B, having robust institutional resilience; those who score 50-66 are placed in grade C, having modest institutional resilience; 33-49 in grade D, having weak institutional resilience; 17-32 in grade E, having very weak institutional resilience; and a score of 0-16 places one in grade F, having limited or no institutional resilience to corruption.

The GDI assesses the legal and policy framework on the one hand, and the state of implementation on the other, so as to assist the relevant authorities to identify the gaps as well as indicate scope of improvement. The index shows

been ranked in grade A (very robust institutional resilience). Only seven countries—Belgium, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Taiwan, and the UK—have been placed in grade B for having robust institutional resilience. Twenty-five, including several countries considered to be otherwise better governed—like Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, India, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US—have been ranked in grade C (modest institutional resilience against corruption). The remaining 53 countries are in one of the lowest three categories, having weak, very weak, and limited or no institutional resilience. The grade F countries include Sudan (5), Egypt (6), Algeria and Myanmar (8), and Iraq (9).

Bangladesh’s overall grading of E (very weak institutional resilience) aside, our highest grading in terms of specific categories of indicators is C—i.e. modest institutional resilience in the category of personnel risks—while in terms of operational risks, we have been assessed to have the lowest grade of F—i.e. limited or no institutional resilience. In the remaining three categories, we achieved similar grading as the overall assessment.

Looking closely into the sub-categories of indicators, Bangladesh has achieved the best grade of A in defence budget transparency and detail, defined narrowly in terms of comprehensiveness of budget information and timeliness of the same being available to the parliament. On the other hand, in terms of more important aspects of budget scrutiny, the score is in the lowest grade. Dimensions that may be considered as silver lining include disciplinary measures for personnel (A), payment system (A), and chain of command and payment (A).

The source of major concern is in the political risks category, under which Bangladesh’s performance in sub-categories, like legislative scrutiny, defence committee, defence policy debate, CSO engagement, anti-corruption policy, organised crime links, organised crime policing, and intelligence services oversight have been placed in the lowest grade F—limited or no institutional resilience. Similarly, the lowest grade under the financial risk category is attributed to secret spending, legislative access to information, secret programme auditing, and access to information.

In the personnel risk category, scores under the sub-categories like the numbers

of personnel, military code of conduct, and corruption prosecutions have also been graded the lowest—limited or no institutional resilience (F). The same grading has been received under defence procurement as per sub-categories like procurement legislation, compliance standards, open competition vs single sourcing, and tender board controls. Sub-indicators like internal audit, military-owned business scrutiny, disclosure of actual purchases, and scope for anti-collusion controls have been identified to be in grade E or very weak institutional resilience.

While the above findings of GDI do not necessarily imply existing lack of integrity or the state of prevalence of corruption as such, they do imply the depth and width of prevailing risks, and indicate the scope for work needed to be undertaken to move to the higher levels of integrity and anti-corruption. The Transparency International does not stop at making this assessment and merely launching the index; it offers its expertise to support reform initiatives, including drafting of integrity action plan, conducting training, and capacity-building of stakeholders to upgrade the level of integrity.

The key takeaway here is that Bangladesh needs to attach top priority to revamp its defence integrity structure and practices as early as possible. To begin with, a comprehensive defence integrity strategy should be developed in line with the national integrity strategy adopted by the Bangladesh government in 2010. The drafting process of the defence integrity strategy should be participatory and inclusive—not only to ensure technical and professional excellence, but also to enhance the level of public ownership. Various stakeholders, especially defence and security experts, politicians and political analysts, civil society and the media, should be involved in the process of drafting the country’s defence integrity strategy.

On the other hand, it should be recognised in earnest that openness and disclosure, external oversight (especially political and legislative), adoption and rigorous practice of anti-corruption policy as well as creating space for public debate are the key to upgrading the level of integrity of the defence sector and enhancing public trust.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman is executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

Preventing Premature Newborn Deaths: The KMC Approach



BANGLADESH has made tremendous strides in improving neonatal health status and achieved the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goal (MDG) related to reducing child mortality (MDG 4) in 2010, five years ahead of its target year, 2015. The transition from MDG to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) in Bangladesh is set to reduce neonatal mortality from 28 newborn deaths per 1,000 live births in 2012 to 12 or less by 2030. Eighty percent of newborn deaths are preventable, and the government has declared its commitment towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 3.2).

Prematurity is one of the leading causes of newborn mortality in Bangladesh, which contributes to 19 percent of all newborn deaths in the country. Prematurity is defined as babies born alive before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. Every year in Bangladesh, around 600,000 babies are born prematurely, and among them, around 17,000 babies die. This is the reality as Bangladesh observes World Prematurity Day today.

A simple technique, skin-to-skin contact of a premature baby with parents or caregivers, can save a lot of newborn lives. The method is widely known as Kangaroo Mother Care or KMC.

Premature babies with a birth weight below 2,500 grams are likely to be physically immature and more prone to die. Birth at adolescent age, malnutrition, infections, high blood pressure, short inter-pregnancy interval, and LINC factors (lifestyle, infection, nutrition, and contraception) are the prime factors for premature birth.

Conventional neonatal care of low-birth-weight infants is expensive and needs both highly skilled personnel and permanent logistic support. Conventional neonatal care is the type of care a prematurely born or sick baby receives in a special area of the hospital called the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The NICU has advanced technology and trained healthcare professionals to give special care to premature babies. Evidence suggests that KMC is a safe, effective, and low-cost intervention to reduce morbidity and mortality in premature and low-birth-weight newborns. In KMC, the

continuous skin-to-skin contact between the newborn and the mother (or other family members) helps the baby maintain warmth, facilitates breastfeeding, helps prevent infections, and strengthens the child-parent bond.

On a personal anecdote, I met Aklima Akter and her husband Fahad at Lakshimpur District Hospital. Aklima prematurely gave birth to a baby weighing only 1,700 grams; my baby who is born weighing less than 2,500 grams is considered a low-birth-weight baby. The paediatric consultant at the hospital referred the baby to the hospital’s KMC unit for the next course of management. There, Aklima and Fahad, with the help of trained service providers, learned how

to the service providers both at the upazila level facility and at the district hospital who are well-trained and equipped to manage such cases with the technical support of USAID’s MaMoni Maternal and Newborn Care Strengthening Project (MaMoni MNCSP), implemented by Save the Children and consortium partners. Also, other newborn health stakeholders—World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef)—offer financial and technical assistance to the National Newborn Health Programme (NNHP) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) to establish KMC units in the facilities. Currently, a total of 250 KMC units are available in Bangladesh.

This year, the theme for World Prematurity Day is “Zero Separation. Act now! Keep parents and babies born too soon together.” This theme reflects on supporting families with premature babies and addressing the separation of parents and babies during their early hours and days. This has become even more important as since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, many facilities, as part of hygienic measures, have restricted contact between parents with the newborns, and many parents are separated from each other for being in isolation and unable to have family time as a couple. The message of this year’s theme is that family-centred developmental care for babies born too soon, too small, or too sick is safe and



The Kangaroo Mother Care method is a safe, effective, and low-cost intervention to reduce morbidity and mortality in premature and low-birth-weight newborns.

SOURCE: WHO

to follow the KMC protocol to maintain the body temperature of the baby, as preterm, low-birth-weight newborns are unable to efficiently maintain their body temperature on their own. Basically, in KMC, parents transmit their body temperature to their baby by maintaining skin-to-skin contact. After two weeks of providing KMC to their baby for more than 20 hours a day every day, Aklima and Fahad were discharged from the hospital when the baby started gaining weight regularly, and the parents were confident enough to give KMC at home. The couple continued giving KMC to their baby at home and came for weekly follow-up check-ups for the next three weeks, until their baby’s weight reached 2,500 grams.

In Aklima and Fahad’s story, one more child survived a preventable death, thanks

However, even with all these efforts, the KMC facilities are yet to be available nationwide. There has been some progress, but challenges remain in the scaling-up of Kangaroo Mother Care. From the service provider’s perspective, key challenges include the rotation of KMC-trained nursing staff, as it hinders capacity-building efforts, engaging the designated nursing KMC focal person with other activities. On the other hand, keeping the baby in KMC position during hot and humid weather, staying in the facilities, feeding smaller babies, continuing KMC, and follow-up visits after discharge are the key challenges from the KMC mother and her family’s perspective. These challenges need to be addressed to make the KMC method successful.

possible, even in the times of a global pandemic.

Kangaroo Mother Care is a powerful, easy-to-use method to promote the health and well-being of newborns born preterm and/or low birth weight. KMC is a part of government efforts to reach SDG targets. The KMC approach has been included in the newborn action plans in Southeast Asian countries and health sector programmes in Bangladesh. The KMC method will play a vital role in significantly reducing newborn mortality in Bangladesh. However, there is a long way to go till we can ensure that no child has to die from prematurity and the related complications.

Dr Umme Salma Jahan Meena is a public health expert and is currently leading USAID’s MaMoni MNCSP and emergency response to Covid-19 as the chief of party.