

Sanction Myanmar

How long will the international community ignore its human rights abuses?

At a recent seminar on the Rohingya crisis, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen pointed out a grim yet unassailable truth: Despite condemning the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military against the Rohingyas, the international community has failed to stop selling weapons to the country, and is continuing to engage it in trade as well. We commend the foreign minister for his candour, and express our support for his call for the imposition of economic and arms sanctions against Myanmar.

In 2017, the then UN human rights chief called Myanmar's "clearance operations" against the Rohingya community a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." Since then, Bangladesh has provided refuge to over 700,000 Rohingyas fleeing violence and persecution in their own country. While the international community has hurled words of condemnation at the perpetrators of this genocide and applauded Bangladesh for its humane response, their words ring hollow when considering that Myanmar has received arms worth USD 2.4 billion, including from some of our own development partners. According to a report in this daily, China, Russia, India, South Korea, North Korea, Israel, Ukraine and the Philippines are all supplying weapons to Myanmar, despite also calling for lasting solutions and peace within its borders.

It is not just that the Myanmar military, with the help of their civilian goons, have ruthlessly unleashed campaigns of violence and torture against their own citizens. It has refused to accept democratic reforms, engineered a coup to seize power over the country, violently put down pro-democracy protests, escalated its civil war with ethnic armed organisations, and is continuing to clamp down on free speech and civic spaces. Yet, in the last four years, many developed countries' trade relations with Myanmar have only improved, and international support for Rohingya refugees has also dwindled over the years. If the world continues to give Myanmar a free pass for human rights abuses for the sake of trade, what does that say about global justice and the moral responsibility of the international community?

Effective pressure on Myanmar must involve economic and arms sanctions—simply imposing sanctions on certain military officials, or even companies, is not enough. At the same time, major regional players must also play their part to ensure that Myanmar is held accountable for its actions. It is high time that the international community took the pressure off of refugee-hosting countries like Bangladesh, and shifted the focus to the source of the problem—which, in this case, is Myanmar's military regime and their human rights abuses.

Sonai: A river in distress

Take immediate steps to save it

Yet another river in Bangladesh is fighting for its survival against our insatiable greed. This time it is the Sonai River that flows through Madhabpur upazila under Habiganj district. Only the other day, we had written about the slow death of the Khowai River in the same district, but it seems there is no authority to take effective steps to save these rivers. Despite many laws that exist to protect the rivers of the country, we do not see their enforcement. We have lost many such beautiful rivers in the past as no attempts to retrieve them were taken. The tale of the Sonai River is the same as that of the others.

This river has now shrunk to the size of a narrow canal as a result of indiscriminate encroachment and dumping of trash by the locals. It has actually turned into a narrow drain that carries hazardous rubbish to the nearby haors, polluting the waters in these large waterbodies. When Sonai was young and vibrant, it connected the local people with those of different nearby upazilas, such as Nasirnagar, Lakhai and Ajmiriganj. The river was the main route used by the local traders to reach different trade centres in the district. But this was back in time when the width of the river was about 250 metres—it has almost halved now—and the depth was more than five metres.

It is also alarming that some influential people are extracting sand from the riverbed on a regular basis, thus threatening its very existence. At the same time, because of the accumulated toxic waste in the water, marine life including freshwater fish has disappeared from the river. Residents also complain of numerous factories on the riverbanks contributing to severe air pollution, resulting in respiratory illnesses among people.

Reportedly, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) repeatedly protested against the construction of a park on the riverbank, and the river commission has instructed the district administration to take immediate action against the proposed park owners. But no action has been taken so far. We agree with Bapa that such illegal and destructive activities occur when the role of the common people in decision-making, implementation and accountability is ignored.

The government officials of the upazila, however, have assured the people and the media that proper steps will be taken to evict the illegal occupants and widen the river. The results remain to be seen in the due course of time.

Throughout the country, big rivers are being deliberately reduced to canals through encroachment by powerful people where they construct houses, factories or shops right before the eyes of the authorities. Instead of occasional drives taken against the grabbers, concerted action needs to be taken to save the remaining rivers.

Supporting the hands that feed our forex reserves

A CLOSER
LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

BDANGLA-DESH and Malaysia have recently signed an MoU paving the way for Bangladeshi migrant workers to reap the benefits of employment opportunities in Malaysia. The MoU, which will be in effect till December 2026, ends a freeze of more than three years of manpower export to Malaysia, after allegations surfaced in 2018 of the exploitation of migrant workers.

While this is a welcome move for both Bangladesh and Malaysia, there are a few issues that need to be addressed immediately for the well-being of the workers travelling to distant lands to earn bread and butter for their families.

First of all, the problem of scamming Malaysia-bound migrant workers can be attributed to the model of the G2G-Plus deal that had previously been signed by

RM to local agents, who then paid other middlemen plaguing the manpower supply chain.

While how such a syndicate smoothly operated within the system is a cause for concern, what the government should be focusing on now is the elimination of such possibilities in the future.

Under the new MOU, Malaysian recruitment agencies will be included in the migration process. In addition, employers in Malaysia will bear the cost of migration incurred in that country. These are good signs. However, workers will still have to pay a certain amount to cover the migration cost in Bangladesh. Given the past history of massive corruption and extortion of migrant workers, both the countries will need to ensure a transparent system that will enable all parties to keep real-time track of the processes and transactions involved, so that the same mistakes are not repeated this time around.

The issue of extortion of aspiring migrant workers is not limited to Malaysia-bound candidates only. Recruitment syndicates and middlemen exploiting the

financial hardship when planning to travel abroad for a better future. As suggested by the Cost of Migration Survey, 2020 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), on an average a migrant worker needs around 18 months to earn enough to recover the money they had to spend to secure a job abroad.

However, extortion and debt bondage are only some of the problems faced by our migrant workers. There are certain syndicates that are engaged in

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The least we can do for our migrant workers is to ensure a safe and better life in their countries of employment.

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the two countries, which allowed only 10 agencies from Bangladesh to recruit workers from the country. The system allowed for the agencies to charge exorbitant amounts from the workers, leaving them destitute—and at times in a state of debt bondage.

Around Tk 400,000 was charged and taken from each worker travelling to Malaysia, which is way above the government-fixed migration cost. Information surfacing in 2018 revealed that a recruitment syndicate extorted more than 100,000 Malaysia-bound migrant workers alone, with a certain businessman earning more than two billion Malaysian ringgit (RM). Each worker had to pay 20,000

desperation of the underprivileged is not a new phenomenon in our labour migration landscape. On many previous occasions, this concern had been raised. The prime minister herself instructed the authorities concerned in 2019 to be vigilant so that middlemen would not be able to abuse our migrant workers. "We have to give special attention so that no one is cheated by middlemen. We have the responsibility to look after their [the migrant workers'] security and welfare because they're our citizens," she was quoted by this daily as saying.

Despite this, even to this day, there are instances where migrant workers face severe

human trafficking. These syndicates traffic unsuspecting victims to various destinations where they are forced to endure unspeakable horrors. Unfortunately, despite repeated flags and concerns raised by human rights bodies, the authorities cannot seem to curb this heinous crime.

For instance, in a report titled "Syndicate illegally sending migrant workers to Libya" published in 2013, this newspaper elaborated—citing a report by the Bangladesh embassy in Tripoli—the crime of an organised syndicate illegally sending migrant workers to Libya, despite there being very limited scope for work there at that time. And in March last year, 26 Bangladeshi workers were killed in Libya in a revenge attack by the family of a Libyan human trafficker. Recently, the nefarious activities of the TikTok ring and the Dance Club gang came to the fore. Both these gangs have been actively selling girls and women into sex slavery. Kamrul Islam alias DJ Kamrul of the Dance Club ring had been arrested earlier in 2019, but was later released, after which he returned to his criminal activities. One might wonder why a trafficker was released after arrest. The answer to this question would perhaps require a separate column altogether.

In the light of the prevailing scenario, a three-pronged approach might be helpful in alleviating the plight of migrant workers. First of all, the government needs to take a hard look at the issues of recruitment syndicates and middlemen extorting money from migrant workers, and the trafficking rings luring innocent, hard-working people in with false promises of lucrative jobs. The relevant government bodies need to review the existing policy frameworks so that any loopholes there can be closed.

In addition, law enforcement agencies

The backbone of Bangladesh's development

The Bangladesh United Nations Network on Migration reflects on the continuing benefits of migrants and migration in these uncertain times

ON December 18, 2021, we observed International Migrants Day.

This year in particular—when Bangladesh celebrates the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as well as 50 years of independence—we should take pause and reflect on the significant contributions that Bangladeshi migrants have historically made to the country, as well as the good they continue to do.

Bangladesh is poised to transition from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category, largely owing to steady and peaceful development throughout the first 50 years of the country's existence. In 1972, Bangladesh's GDP was USD 6.29 billion; now, it stands at around USD 324 billion (2020)—more than a 50-fold increase. Bangladeshi migrant workers have played a critical role in the country's achievements, and with some support, they can play an even bigger role in the next 50 years.

The theme of this year's International Migrants Day was "Harnessing the Potential of Human Mobility." With the Covid-19 pandemic and associated forced immobility dominating the global agenda over the last year and a half, it is easy to forget the vital role Bangladeshi migrants still play in defining the country's development trajectory. These facts are captured in this year's World Migration Report, where it is noted that Bangladeshis represent the sixth highest number of migrants in the world, and the country received the eighth highest amount of remittance in the world. While Covid-19 has impacted global supply chains and migration corridors to some extent, the development impact of Bangladeshis overseas remains remarkably constant.

It was heartening to see Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina articulate this point so well at the UN General Assembly in New York this year. In clear terms, she recognised the contribution of migrant workers in the economic growth and prosperity of home and host countries. Her call to the international community and migration-receiving countries to treat

migrant workers fairly and with empathy, and to help them regain employment in the post-pandemic job market shows great foresight. It reflects a sound commitment from the Government of Bangladesh. This is further cemented by the government's allocation of USD 361 million to support returning migrant workers.

This year's theme is reflected in Bangladesh's Eighth Five-Year Plan, which explicitly recognises the vital importance of migration in the development of Bangladesh and the need to have ethical, safe and transparent recruitment processes in place.



Migrant workers have a significant contribution in Bangladesh's progress.

Bangladesh has always been a great advocate for the rights of migrants and their families. In fact, the country was the one who initially proposed the Global Compact for Migration itself at the UN General Assembly in 2016. The compact represents the first-ever globally accepted migration framework based on international cooperation and is a major step towards global recognition of the importance of well-managed migration for development. While the developmental benefits of migration are well-recognised academically and by practitioners, politically around the world, migrants are

often used as scapegoats and unjustifiably blamed for challenges in other countries. We congratulate Bangladesh for raising migration issues to the highest global fora and defending the rights of migrants and the good they bring at home and abroad.

Bangladesh continues to play a pioneering role in implementing the Migration Compact—and has been officially recognised as a GCM "Champion Country." The Bangladesh United Nations Network on Migration remains committed to supporting Bangladesh to govern migration for the benefit of all. This includes ensuring maximum



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benefits for migrants and for Bangladesh at every stage of the migration cycle. Before migration, it is essential that aspirant migrants, including vulnerable women and men, are empowered to make informed migration decisions and are not left to be taken advantage of by smugglers or traffickers. It is also important that Bangladesh has the frameworks in place to protect labour migrants while abroad, including smuggled migrants in vulnerable situations. Much of this can be done through ensuring bona fide and ethical recruitment practices are in place. Still, work must also continue with labour

need to be on alert to monitor trafficking rings and hotspots—some of which are already pretty well-known, thanks to constant media reports—and bust these gangs. They also need to keep an eye on the activities of the recruiting agencies and their agents, and ensure that they are not overcharging the migrant workers. If these agencies or their agents cross the line and extort money from migrant workers, they should be brought to book and held accountable for their deeds. More importantly, law enforcers need to take a closer look at the supply chain of manpower export, and pluck out the middlemen from the system.

The second factor is the education and skills development of aspiring migrant workers. The government needs to focus on providing basic education to the migrant workers about their rights and safe migration, so that they can identify the pitfalls of blindly trusting the so-called fixers and agents, and make informed and wise decisions about going abroad.

Secondly, the government needs to initiate mass-scale skills development programmes for underprivileged communities so that these people can secure decent jobs both at home and abroad. Technical skills development alongside soft skills development can greatly improve employability of the workforce, and enable them to negotiate better in the job market.

Workers from the Philippines and Sri Lanka, for instance, get higher wages compared to workers from Bangladesh, because they are better skilled. If we can turn our unskilled or low-skilled workers into a skilled workforce, then it will increase their chances of securing better-paying jobs, which in the long run would also help in the economic growth of our country in the form of higher remittance.

The third factor of the three-pronged approach is the government's proactive involvement in negotiating better wages for our workers abroad. The relevant agencies and ministries need to talk to the countries recruiting Bangladeshi workers, and push for decent and fairer pay for our workers.

If the government can bring all these factors under one umbrella, and take a comprehensive approach towards creating a better migration ecosystem for our migrant workers, then all these problems can be eliminated once and for all. However, for this, the government needs to demonstrate strong political will—especially as some of the recruitment agencies are well-connected.

Our migrant workers are one of the major contributors to our unstoppable economic growth. We must give them the education, facilities and support that they need to have a better and safer life in distant lands. This is the least we could do for them.

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