

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Bring back jailed Bangladeshis

Reunite victims of human trafficking with their families

We are delighted for the families of three men presumed dead after news broke of the mass graves in Thailand in 2015. According to a report published by *The Daily Star* on Thursday, two photos from a prison in Bangkok, hand-delivered to families by another trafficking victim three years ago, provided the evidence of them being alive. Before that, for six long years, the three families had no indication that their loved ones were still living.

The families concerned sold their properties in 2013 to send the three men to Malaysia to earn a living in the hope of a better life. Soon, however, their dreams turned into a nightmare. Months after the men had left, their families received phone calls and heard the terrified voices of their loved ones, who informed them that they were being held captive by human traffickers and tortured. Their torturers had told them to demand Tk 2 lakh from their families in exchange for their release and safe passage to Malaysia. Having sold all their properties only a few months back, the families had no way of paying the ransom, and hence had to abandon their loved ones to fate. With no communication from them since then, and with reports of mass graves in the Thai jungle – where the men were presumably being held – the families assumed the worst.

The families recently came to Dhaka from remote areas in Maheshkhali upazila of Cox's Bazar to submit a letter to the foreign ministry, hoping that it would reach the foreign minister and lead to their dear ones' return. We urgently call on the foreign ministry to take all diplomatic measures to get these victims of human trafficking released from the Thai jails and have them repatriated to Bangladesh. These men and their families have suffered enough cruelty and uncertainty for nearly a decade now. And it is time for them to be finally reunited safely at home.

Additionally, according to various human rights groups in Thailand, many more Bangladeshis are currently being detained in Thai jails. And it is suspected that some of them could have been victims of human trafficking during the time when migration to Malaysia from Bangladesh was suspended. The government should use all its diplomatic prowess to find out how many more Bangladeshi trafficking victims are being wrongly incarcerated in Thailand, and look to negotiate their release and return with the Thai government.

Moreover, the government should take lessons from these cases, and ensure that the official channel for migration is made easy and simple, and take all necessary steps to ensure that Bangladeshis wishing to go abroad in search of better lives are better protected from human traffickers.

Justice still elusive for Ramu victims

Why are the cases still lingering after a decade has passed?

We are deeply frustrated that none of the cases filed in connection with the Ramu violence, which took place in Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazar during September 29-30 in 2012, have yet been disposed of. Reportedly, incited by a Facebook post – which was later found to be fake – from a Buddhist youth (who still remains missing), religious fanatics vandalised and torched 19 Buddhist temples and over 100 houses in Ramu, Ukhiya, Teknaf and Cox's Bazar Sadar upazilas, as well as Chattogram's Patiya upazila. Although as many as 18 cases were filed in connection with the violence during that time, not a single one of them has been disposed of yet. And, reportedly, one of the cases was settled immediately after it was filed. We would like to ask: should it take 10 years to complete the investigations and dispose of the cases?

After a decade has passed since the religious zealots unleashed violence on the minority Buddhist community in Ramu, we have now come to know from the public prosecutor of Cox's Bazar District and Sessions Judge's Court that the cases remain pending as the witnesses don't appear before the courts to testify against the accused. He also said that the victims have little interest in pursuing the cases as the government built them new homes and pagodas. We are deeply disturbed by the simplistic explanation offered by the public prosecutor – it has long been reported that the victims and witnesses were in fear as some of the attackers were local powerful people with strong backing from the administration and the police.

We know that a total of three probes – one by a judicial body, another by the police, and the third by the home ministry – were conducted in line with HC orders, after two writ petitions were filed with the HC by two Supreme Court lawyers, seeking action against the perpetrators and the local officials for their "negligence" in preventing the incidents. The police gave seven charge sheets against 385 people, all of whom are now out on bail. The home ministry report mentioned that 205 people were involved in the mayhem and that it was planned at least 10 days ahead. The home ministry report and the judicial report had not only identified the attackers but also found that law enforcement agencies and local administration did not play their role to prevent the attacks. The probe conducted by the judicial body also made 20 recommendations, which included helping improve the competence and standards of the administration, restricting posts on social media, etc.

But, unfortunately, the HC is yet to hold the final hearing on the writ petitions and deliver a verdict on them. Previously, we heard that the court was overburdened with a high caseload. The reconstitution of HC benches was also cited as a reason why the court could not hear the petitions. We would like to ask: what is stopping the procedure right now? We demand justice for the Ramu victims and feel that there can be no reason for the cases to linger anymore.

'Louha tribhuj' and the political economy of development



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On many development metrics, Bangladesh's performance and achievements have been justly recognised and feted at home and around the world. However, while the 50-year transformation scenario has indeed been robust, near-term trends have exposed systemic weaknesses, making the medium-term outlook decidedly shaky. While the immediate sense of macroeconomic breakdown has been tempered, the micro realities of poor and middle-class households struggling against a relentless cost-of-living crisis, and the meso realities of enterprise-level heightened uncertainty in growth outlook in critical subsectors, signal the entrenched presence of "bad days" for a majority of the population.

In May 2022, the fifth round of the PPRC-BIGD panel survey estimated the proportion of new poor to be 18.5 percent. Last week, the government's statistical agency at last acknowledged that the poverty rate had indeed gone up and now stood at 29.5 percent, compared to the pre-Covid level of 20 percent. But this rise in poverty numbers and the economic despair of an escalating number of the middle classes is only the visible tip of the crisis iceberg. The real worry is in the political economy of the policy landscape impacting both crisis management in the short term and growth management in the medium term.

Bangladesh has a vibrant public discourse on the state of the economy. However, what is frequently missing is a political economy lens and connecting the necessary dots.

Is corruption only a moral failure or does it flourish due to how rule-making, incentives, and sanctions are being politically constructed? Is the reluctance towards reforms only a question of inefficiency or is it dictated by the compulsion of protecting vested interests? Are implementation weaknesses a lack of capacity or are they due to how merit is systematically sidelined to the benefit of sycophancy? What indeed is the reality of economic governance?

We have always had deficits in our economic governance. But over the last decade, the political economy of the policy landscape has morphed into something more structural. A *louha tribhuj*, or an iron triangle, of three tendencies has come to define and limit the policy landscape.

The first part of the *louha tribhuj* is a one-sided vision of development. Infrastructure has become the "be all and end all" of development, with social development pushed to the sidelines. This is not to say that "social" is out of budgetary attention. But even in "social," all the attention is on the hardware, with software out of sight. School-building has become more important than the quality of education. Hospital-building has become more important than the quality of healthcare. Standalone infrastructures without attention to integration with other parts of the infrastructure network is leading to plummeting liveability and productivity of urban centres. Focus is on the concrete only, without commensurate attention to user protocols, maintenance and infrastructure governance.

The consequences of this one-sided focus are all too familiar: shocking lack of road safety and unpredictability of travel; drop in the quality of educational experience; healthcare



The micro realities of poor and middle-class households struggling against a relentless cost-of-living crisis signal the entrenched presence of 'bad days' for a majority of the population. VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

becoming a reality of galloping costs without results.

The second part of the iron triangle is the rampant spread of conflict-of-interest-driven policy-making. Boundaries of public and private interests are constantly transgressed in the policy landscape in favour of private interests closely aligned with ruling groups. Flouting of rules and, in some cases, rules specifically designed for narrow private interests have shockingly become the norm in critical and remunerative sectors such as finance, banking, energy, transportation, ICT, and infrastructure. Such collusive "contact and contracts" have become brazen and become a structural property of today's economic governance.

Some sectoral examples make the above abundantly clear. Quick rental electricity plants were adopted as a short-run option to address load-shedding. But why has it continued far beyond the initial timeline, with a relentless expansion of installed capacity without required investment in distribution infrastructure and primary energy supplies? Why was gas exploration deliberately sidelined for a disastrous overdependence on expensive LNG import? Why has the state agency Bapex been systematically sidelined in favour of a foreign firm in Bhola gas fields, as a glaring example? No wonder capacity charges have emerged as the brazen face of planned inefficiency and corrupt collusion, dictated not by economics but by political economy.

A similar story holds sway in the most catalytic of economic sectors – namely transportation. Primacy of narrow politically-connected private interests have become a structural barrier not only to road governance, but also to the economics of

transportation impacting travel time, onerous formal and informal costs of travel, and rampant failures in road safety. The BRTC has been rendered a perennially sick state-owned enterprise, route permit allocation is dominated by a transport owners' oligopoly standing in the way of both road safety and sector efficiency, and the BRTA is nowhere near rising up

economics of injustice rooted in policy marginalisation of all those lacking political voice, including workers, farmers, small entrepreneurs, and now even the middle classes. Not one member of the common masses sits idle, relentless in their effort and labour for whatever opportunities come their way, but the benefits of policy attention is disproportionately

to its stewardship role. Rule-flouting private interests are effectively being given the immunity to continue the misgovernance stalemate.

Turning a blind eye to glaring conflicts of interest – nay, positively supporting corrupt and collusive rule-making – has also come to cast the darkest shadow over the banking and financial institutions sector. The pillars of finance sector governance are either over-eager to pander to selected private interests, or conspicuously inactive in their regulatory and supervisory responsibilities that has led to astounding levels of fraud and corruption. The case of PK Halder has perhaps become emblematic of such entrenched institutional culpable misgovernance.

The consequence of such corrupt and collusive rule-making is neither vague nor inconsequential with the most serious impact on competitiveness of the economy. Our exports-to-GDP ratio – one measure of competitiveness – has halved over 2012-22, from 20 percent to 10.6 percent. The continued stagnation in the private investment-to-GDP ratio is another cause for worry. Most recently, collusive regulatory moves appear to have unnerved external investors in the stock market. In such an amoral world, the "good entrepreneur" is effectively left adrift with a herculean uphill task.

The grip of the "iron triangle" works differently, but no less negatively in the case of development projects, particularly infrastructure projects. E-tender was supposed to have brought in transparency and efficiency to the whole process of awarding contracts, but reality speaks otherwise. Corrupt, inefficient and collusive practices work here through informal barriers to competitive bids, inflated costs, post-approval cost escalations, and project delays.

The third part of the *louha tribhuj* is the *obicharer orthoniti* – the

faced away from them towards a small number of favoured groups. Public transport, prices of essentials, utility costs, affordable housing, access to quality healthcare and education, access to green spaces – each of these pillars of quality living, central to the welfare of the common people, lacks the level of policy attention that would make a difference. It is as if the common masses have to shoulder the burden of resilience while fruits of growth flow disproportionately to favoured groups.

The second face of the economics of injustice is equally concerning. All our discussions are around macroeconomic imbalances and the ensuing crisis. Yet, we also need to keep in focus our medium-term goal of achieving the SDGs. In at least three areas, there is a real danger of reversal with Bangladesh becoming off track in SDGs: nutritional deficits (with nutritious items disappearing from the household diet due to lack of affordability), rise in secondary dropout level, and rise of youth unemployment (particularly, educated youth unemployment).

Bangladesh may be at an inflexion point in its development journey. Plenty of other initially successful countries fell into the "middle-income trap" because warning signals were not heeded and reform needs were pushed under the carpet. Will Bangladesh be able to recognise the *louha tribhuj* for what it is – a vicious triangle of mutually reinforcing policy tendencies that has morphed into a structural barrier straddling Bangladesh's inclusive and sustainable development aspirations? This cannot be overcome or dislodged merely by technical recommendations and feel-good talk. The need of the hour is a dismantling of the *louha tribhuj* through a qualitative change in political realisation, political approach and political will, and an urgent big push on reforms.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to letters@thedailystar.net

Passengers need comfortable seating arrangement

Tejgaon railway station is one of the busiest train stations in Dhaka. Every day, a lot of passengers use this station to go to different destinations by train. But sadly, there are not enough seats for the passengers to sit and take rest on the platform. Passengers often sit down by the rail lines risking their

lives. Therefore, I urge authorities concerned to increase the number of seats at the station so that the passengers' waiting time becomes comfortable and no one has to take any risks.

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PHOTO: RASEL AHMED/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

