

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Victims of trafficking deserve justice

Why is the conviction rate in human trafficking cases so low?

A new assessment of the state of human trafficking cases in Bangladesh has once again highlighted concerns about the optics of efforts vs. meaningful interventions to prevent such crimes in the country. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, which quoted "updated information" from the Police Headquarters, a total of 7,517 cases have been registered under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act over the last 18 years, with Dhaka division registering 40 percent of the cases. And of the total cases, only 247 – or 3.28 percent – were settled. There have been other trafficking-related disclosures as well, including information on numbers of arrestees, victims, rescued victims, and on convictions. Of those convicted, eight were given death sentences and 299 given life sentences during this period.

The dismally low conviction or settlement rates are supported by other recent findings. In early October, for example, *The Daily Star*, analysing data from the Anti-Human Trafficking Offence Tribunal of Dhaka, found that it disposed of some 858 cases from March to August 2020, with only 13 cases – or 1.5 percent – ending in convictions. Bangladesh has seven such divisional tribunals dealing with human trafficking cases. Together, according to the home ministry, they have had a total of 5,781 cases pending as of June 2022. The apparent mismatch between these two sets of records can be a point of contention. But more concerning is the lack of impact of these special tribunals formed in 2020.

The specialised legal infrastructure, which was built amid a then-looming threat of US sanctions, was indeed a good initiative. But as subsequent developments show, the government's focus seems to be more on ticking boxes that can improve its standing in the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports than on actual reforms in terms of prosecution, protection and prevention. This has led to a jumble of poorly designed and haphazardly executed programmes, including special tribunals. The appallingly poor conviction rate is its outcome. The challenge is to make these programmes work, by empowering victims to take legal course, swiftly disposing of their cases, and ensuring that most result in convictions rather than out-of-court settlements, which victims are often forced to choose. In many cases, there has been no trial even after a decade, with the accused criminals let off the hook through bail. This is most unfortunate.

Conviction is an important step towards justice. But for the state, it can be a very useful tool to prevent human trafficking. It can send a powerful message to transnational trafficking gangs that no one guilty of committing or abetting such crimes will get away without punishment. For that, the authorities must recognise factors that are hindering the justice process, including lack of evidence, lack of protection for victims, lack of initiative from prosecutors and investigators, and other factors that may be helping accused criminals to dodge justice. To end human trafficking and the suffering of victims, the authorities must make conviction their number one priority.

We need socially responsible corporates

CSR Awards recognise firms, individuals for improving lives

The idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been gaining popularity in the business world for the last few decades. It has evolved from being a mere PR exercise, or a means of getting tax benefits, into a strong social agenda. The Daily Star CSR Awards this year has shown how corporate entities are developing a clearer understanding of what the community needs and designing projects to meet them.

Four companies, a bank, a mobile financial service provider and five remarkable individuals have won this year's awards. Together, they give an idea of the innovative spirit of altruism.

A fully-funded medical centre built in 2001 by LafargeHolcim for marginalised communities of Chaatak won the award in the healthcare category. In the education segment, bKash was selected for an initiative that distributed over 2.6 million books among schoolchildren and included reading programmes with Bishwo Shahitto Kendro. Best CSR in environment was taken by HSBC for planting around 42,500 mangrove trees and conducting awareness programmes to combat the effects of climate change. Coca-Cola Bangladesh won an award in the financial inclusion category with its support to people during the pandemic, including vaccination for day labourers and relief supplies to around 3 lakh people.

The most special aspect of the CSR Awards was the recognition of individual endeavours through the "Young Humanitarian of the Year Award". Of them, Adnan Hossain's Humanity Foundation provides free quality education to over 2,000 students along with free meals, medical camps and skills training to marginalised communities. Shekh Mohammed Moinul Islam's Human Aid Bangladesh Foundation has provided free medical treatment to over 8 lakh people and over 2 lakh free Covid screenings. Shanjidul Alam's EcoVation has trained over 3,500 volunteers to develop technologies that help communities, and has set up solar-powered water systems in remote areas. Azwa Nayeem's Alokito Hriday Foundation has already trained over 15,000 teachers in rural and low-income areas in modern teaching methods, while Md Sahariar Hasan Jiisun's Bloodman connects blood donors to patients and has already helped more than 5 lakh people find donors by partnering with Facebook and Meta.

It goes without saying that the private sector has been the main driving force in boosting the economy and keeping it afloat. The government, meanwhile, is responsible for providing basic services of healthcare, education and skills training. With a huge population such as ours – the majority of whom are struggling to survive amid endemic corruption in almost all public services as well as the punishing financial crisis caused by the pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war – basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education are becoming even more inaccessible to the vulnerable sections of society. This is where the corporate world can step in. It can make a difference through projects that are innovative, practical and serve marginalised communities in the long term.

Why sleepwalk into more sanctions?



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkhal

KAMAL AHMED

Our foreign ministry, reportedly, has informed a parliamentary standing body that Bangladeshi expatriates involved in "anti-government activities" abroad will be brought under law. One report published in this newspaper on October 28, titled "Expats involved in anti-govt activities to face music," noted that the report submitted to the committee by the ministry officials said, "Sadly, besides playing a positive role in protecting the interests of Bangladesh and sending remittances, many of the expats are engaged in propaganda against Bangladesh and the government. The government is working to bring those who are engaged in anti-government activities and giving provocative and completely fabricated statements to book."

Apparently, it may sound like a patriotic duty of the government to counter anti-Bangladesh propaganda. However, the word "anti-government" in the statement clearly implies that it has nothing to do with patriotism, but to silence critics of the government. And the efforts or actions would be taken beyond its own territorial boundary, thereby outside its sovereign jurisdiction.

How can a government prosecute or crack down on its critics in exile? To do so, it needs cooperation from the host countries where its critics or dissenters have taken refuge or sought asylum. Apparently, some of the monarchies and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have agreed to extend their assistance in this regard. Most of the vocal critics and political activists of our government, however, have settled in Western democracies. The so-called anti-government propaganda that comes out from Middle Eastern countries are mostly comments or items shared on social media platforms by expatriate workers who are usually unaware of any consequences of their actions, and are not part of any organised campaign.

Other methods that authoritarian regimes use to reach their political opponents abroad include harassment of and intimidation to family members left behind. In the past, there have been reports of state-sponsored assassinations of opponents abroad against former



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Iranian regime and the Russian spy agency. One of the most sensational killings was of the Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko, in England in 2006. The 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul at the Saudi consulate was another chilling example of such overreach of an authoritarian regime.

Besides, a US agency known as the Helsinki Commission has identified what it says is the politically motivated abuse of the Interpol by autocratic states, who wish to harass and detain their opponents overseas, often in the hopes of trying them on bogus criminal charges.

Human rights groups describe this strategy opted by authoritarian regimes as transnational repression. Freedom House, a non-profit organisation that works "as an independent watchdog organisation dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world," says transnational repression is no longer an exceptional tool, but a normal practice for dozens of countries that seek to control their citizens abroad. It has started listing incidents of such repression around the world and produced two reports: one in 2021

latest report contains 735 cases where attacks originated from 36 countries and they are spread through 84 countries.

Freedom House lists these attacks in four categories: direct attacks, long distance threats, mobility controls, and co-opting other countries. Direct attacks include assassination, assault, intimidation, abductions or unexplained disappearances and renditions. Family intimidation, digital threat and spywares are marked as long distance attacks, and passport revocation, denial of consular service, including issuing or renewing passports, and reporting passports as lost or stolen in order to detain individuals in transit are identified as mobility controls. Co-opting other countries involves deportation, detention, rendition, and abuse of the Interpol's "red alert notice" mechanism.

Rights groups, as well as politicians in some Western countries including the United States, Britain and Sweden, have already taken some measures to ensure safety and security of dissidents who fled persecutions for dissent. In the US, the FBI now publicises transnational repression as a crime. Its definition says, "When

or other foreign connections, which violates US laws and individual rights and freedoms. The FBI lists political and human rights activists, dissidents, journalists, political opponents, and religious or ethnic minority groups as likely targets of such repression.

In recent years, the US government imposed targeted sanctions against some foreign officials it thought responsible for such illegal acts. Chinese and Iranians dominate its sanctions list. Freedom House has called for holding perpetrators accountable for transnational repression, increasing resilience within democracies, and better protecting vulnerable individuals and groups.

Our government's approach seems seriously misguided and likely to harm its image even more. It must be understood that in a democracy, citizens within and outside the country are entitled to express their opinions freely, though such opinions may not be palatable for the government of the day. But threatening them or attempting to silence the dissent is simply counterproductive. Here's hoping good conscience will prevail and policymakers will shun sleepwalking into any more sanctions.

The pollution made in China



RMG NOTES Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

I followed with interest the recently concluded COP27, which seemed to carry an air of urgency. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this year's climate conference was the announcement of an agreement by rich countries to finance the loss and damage fund to vulnerable countries suffering the impacts of climate change. This would account for issues such as the severe floods in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and other parts of South Asia, which many believe were the result of a changing climate.

Such a fund would have been unthinkable five years ago; it is a surprise that Western governments have finally agreed to contribute finance to alleviate the climate issues faced by developing countries, especially as many of these governments are facing financial woes of their own.

Other than this ground-breaking development, COP27 did not seemingly end with tangible progress, although there was a lot of talk about "urgency," the "need to act now," and other well-meaning words.

The discussion on holding the largest emitter to account was notably lacking at the conference. For many years, the US has been the largest carbon emitter in the world, but that place has been taken over by China in

recent years, its emissions now being nearly three times that of the US. In fact, China produces around one-third of all carbon emissions on its own. The country has been increasing its use of coal at a rate scientists say will push global warming disastrously beyond the 1.5 degrees Celsius target. Anybody who has visited any of China's major industrial cities and witnessed the smog covering the sky for large parts of the day knows how bad things are in this part of the world.

This has implications for global fashion supply chains. China is still the world's largest exporter of textiles, a mantle that Bangladesh aspires to take on, but is still some way from achieving.

Many major fashion retailers are trying desperately to reduce their supply chain emissions, but this is proving extremely difficult in China, where coal-powered production is not frowned upon in the same way it is in other countries. The result is that global emissions for fashion retailers – 90 percent of which occur in supply chains – are heading in the wrong direction. They are going up, not down.

One US-based political adviser told the Western media in the wake of COP27: "If we don't get hold of China's emissions, the climate will spin out of control."

This is not an anti-China article.

China is said to be making huge progress in the development of renewable energy technologies, and the Chinese government has said it is taking sustainability challenges seriously.

The problem is one of scale. There was a recent report in British daily *The Telegraph*, a well-respected news

illustrate the rate of development in China over the past decade.

The issue is that China is still considered a developing nation. There are talks of the East Asian country winding down some of its manufacturing bases. Textiles is viewed as a sunset industry, but the sheer scale of that sector means it will take many years to wind down. Meanwhile, China's emissions continue to grow, while other countries slow the rate of growth or turn the rate of growth negative.

These are confusing times we live in. The message seems to be that we will have to make major sacrifices to hit climate targets. Many people say this will entail de-growth. In fashion supply chains, emissions are simply not in line with targets being set by global policymakers, and so fashion brands are being told either to decouple emissions from production – financially challenging, technically not possible in many cases – or simply slow down.

Slowing down – even if a multinational business was prepared to do so – has huge ramifications for supply chains. The social consequences in terms of lost jobs and economic hardship would be significant. But if that is the road we need to take to protect the planet where we can still run our businesses, then so be it.

All of that said, it would be a bitter pill to swallow if we were to make these sacrifices and they didn't amount to nothing – which is what we might face if China continues along its current path and refuses to play ball. The figures are staring us in the face; unless the country is on the top of the table at events like COP27, we might all be wasting our time and efforts on climate issues.