

A right step in curbing air pollution

Planned regional collaboration must lead to visible, breathable results

We appreciate the initiative taken by four South Asian countries – Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan – to bring down their annual average of particulate matter (PM) 2.5 to 35 microgrammes per cubic metre by 2030, following a suggestion by the World Health Organization to reduce air pollution. At a time when Bangladesh is seriously struggling to contain air pollution in its major cities, particularly the capital, such a collaborative approach seems to be a step in the right direction. According to the roadmap forged by the four countries, there will be both national and regional steps aimed at improving the quality of air.

PM2.5 consists of dust and other matters generally smaller than 2.5 micrometres, and is considered most hazardous to human health. Worryingly, the annual average PM 2.5 in Bangladesh is around 85 to 90 microgrammes (mcg) per cubic metre, which can be severely hazardous. Even a PM 2.5 level of 35 mcg/cubic metre or above in a 24-hour period is considered unhealthy. It can cause problems for people with breathing issues such as asthma. Thus, bringing down the PM 2.5 level is crucial to contain air related health issues.

So far, local authorities have been unable to reduce air pollution largely because the issue has not received the attention necessary for a desired change. Clearly, despite written commitments and official edicts, there has been a lack of interest at the highest level. In the absence of necessary measures, Dhaka city was ranked the second-most polluted city in the world from 2018 to 2021. It is also shocking that High Court directives given in this regard have hardly had any impact. While Dhaka's construction sites and persistent traffic jams have been major sources of PM 2.5, the brick kilns are another big source, which are still operating illegally across the country.

And while we have been talking about only the national-level pollution sources, of which there are many more, a recently published report of the World Bank has identified a rather unusual source of pollution. It has revealed that under the predominant wind direction from the northwest to the southeast, 30 percent of the air pollution in the three largest cities of Bangladesh – Dhaka, Chattogram, and Khulna – originates in India. Therefore, only taking national-level measures will not be enough to reduce the PM 2.5 level; for a bigger impact, it will need coordinated regional policies and activities.

According to the World Bank, air pollution is killing around 80,000 people every year in Bangladesh, and is wiping out around 4 percent of the country's GDP. What's stopping us from taking meaningful action to prevent this? This, certainly, cannot continue. We must remove the biggest sources of pollution inside the country quickly. Working with our regional partners to stop transboundary pollution is also a priority. We urge the authorities to take the regional roadmap seriously and take steps to maximise its impact as soon as possible.

Delayed bail is delayed justice

Why will Bushra have to languish in jail if she's innocent?

It is disheartening to know that Amatullah Bushra, an accused in the murder case of BUET student Fardin Noor, may have to stay in jail for a few more weeks despite being cleared as a suspect by the investigators. On Wednesday, the Detective Branch of police and the Rapid Action Battalion claimed that Fardin had "died by suicide" after jumping off a bridge into the Shitalakkhya River, in a dramatic turnabout from earlier claims made since his body was found on November 7. Bushra, locked up soon after, will reportedly have to wait until January 5 for a hearing on her bail petition to be finally released.

Why, you ask. Perhaps a more fitting reaction would be: why not. In a case that has consistently produced confusion, heartaches, and controversies from the start, Bushra's prolonged incarceration and consequent suffering seem like a "natural" outcome. Her exoneration comes as a welcome relief, of course. But her jail/bail conundrum highlights how, in our floundering criminal justice system, the direction of a case is sometimes influenced by external factors. Often, how quickly or belatedly a bail is granted, an arrest is ordered, or a verdict is reached, is decided by how high up the priority list a case is. Only recently, we've had a case where two BNP leaders were promptly sent to jail by a magistrate court, on a Friday no less, ahead of the party's December 10 rally. We have had cases where high profile victims, like Major Sinha, got unusually swift justice.

Conversely, we have victims like Tanvir Mohammad Toki, a student from ordinary family backgrounds, whose body was found in the same Shitalakkhya River, but who has yet to get justice even after nearly a decade, despite one of the accused issuing a confessional statement implicating influential people. In Bushra's case, the reason for the delay seems to be administrative. It can certainly be fast-tracked. After all, it is a failure of the judiciary and, by extension, the state when a falsely accused person continues to suffer behind bars. The bitter taste left by such delays that are witnessed in judicial proceedings – starting from investigation to conducting a trial to reaching a verdict – is hard to erase.

Fardin's murder case, up until this point, has been all about bitter taste. For over a month, the investigators, including the DB and the Rapid Action Battalion, have failed to establish the cause of his death, or a plausible motive, which will be acceptable beyond doubt. Even their latest conclusion of suicide has been questioned by many, including Fardin's father. We do not know if this failure is because of incompetence or if there are ulterior motives at play. Whatever it is, we urge the higher authorities to address it, take steps to get to the bottom of this case – and all such cases – and ensure speedy justice.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

The sickening silence over Bangladeshi migrant worker deaths



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SHARIFUL HASAN

Nazmul Biswas (28) of Khulna went to Qatar, hoping to change his family's financial condition.

With the same dream, Golam Mustafa (26) of Cumilla went to Saudi Arabia, and Rabiul Awal (31) of Narayanganj went to Dubai.

But last year, in December, all three returned to Bangladesh as corpses. Nazmul died in an accident, and the other two died of a stroke and of a heart disease.

Additionally, 43,196 migrant corpses arrived in Bangladesh between 2008 and June of 2022. Of these, 27,231 bodies (63 percent) arrived from six countries in the Gulf. Among them, 12,930 came from Saudi Arabia alone. Besides, 5,123 corpses came from the United Arab Emirates, 3,776 from Oman, 2,724 from Kuwait, 1,011 from Bahrain, and 1,562 from Qatar. Many more Bangladeshi migrants who died abroad were buried locally for various reasons, especially in Saudi Arabia.

Before this, between 2003-2007, 6,017 dead bodies of migrant workers had arrived. Earlier, in 2002, the airport had information about the arrival of 3,613 dead bodies. In total, 52,826 migrant worker corpses are estimated to have come in so far.

The death of migrant workers in Qatar, the country hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, has been globally criticised. But there has been overwhelming silence over the deaths of workers in the other Gulf countries.

According to data from Dhaka's Shahjalal International Airport, an average of 8-10 bodies arrive daily. According to documents, most migrants who are middle-aged or young, die of brain stroke – other causes include heart disease, accidents at work, road accidents, suicide, etc.

However, there has been no national inquiry into why so many migrants die of brain stroke or heart attacks at such young age.

According to migrants, relatives of the dead, and experts, the temperature in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

countries is too hot for the migrants to handle. Unskilled or low-skilled Bangladeshis are involved in risky and difficult laborious jobs in harsh weather. The hostile environment, 12-18 hours of inhumane daily work, poor living conditions, separation from relatives for a long time, and mental stress, usually cause stroke or heart attack.

Anyone can observe the cargo gate area of Dhaka's airport, where bodies in coffins are handed over to the families. There are no seating arrangements or toilets for the waiting families. And when they finally see the dead bodies of their loved ones, many cannot handle it. Thus, their suffering has no end.

Qatar spent more than USD 200 billion on eight new stadiums, airports, roads, and modern public transport systems for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. For this, the country needed a large workforce; almost all of whom were migrants, including from Bangladesh.

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), 1,121 migrants went to Qatar in 1976. After that, it increased gradually,

but was limited to 10,000-12,000 migrants per year until 2011. Due to the enormous development project of the world cup, 28,000 migrants went to Qatar from Bangladesh in 2012, 58,000 in 2013, 87,000 in 2014, 1,24,000 in 2015, and 1,20,000 in 2016. In the following years, the flow of workers to Qatar decreased. In 2021, 11,158 workers went to Qatar.

relatives in the country, constant pressure to send money home, and the monotonous life they lead without their families are also contributing factors.

In most cases of death, the entire family lost their only source of income and became destitute. And their families suffer because the families spent a lot of money to send them abroad – not to mention that their deaths leave many women without a husband, and many children without a father.

But the corpses that are returning are not only of men, but also of women. After Saudi Arabia started taking large numbers of women workers from Bangladesh in 2015, corpses of women have also been returning. From 2016 to 2021, nearly 600 female corpses arrived in Dhaka. Suicide is a significant cause of death for women, along with stroke, heart disease, or accidents. At least 31 percent of deaths are suicides, which is increasing, especially in Saudi Arabia.

Hajera Begum is one such example. From Narsingdi, she went to KSA and committed suicide just 14 days after reaching the kingdom. Her sister, Nadira, said that Hajera faced difficulties with her three kids after leaving her husband. She then decided to go to KSA. But after leaving, communication with her stopped. She could not believe that a strong woman like Hajera could commit suicide. Instead, her sister thinks that she was tortured.

According to psychologists, a person never commits suicide under normal circumstances. What we see in Saudi Arabia is that most women are being oppressed or are facing situations where they feel like suicide is their only way out.

The world cup final will be held on December 18, which is also when we observe International Migrants Day. Of course, migration of workers is very important for a country like Bangladesh in terms of the remittance that it earns. The Bangladesh government has taken a number of positive steps in regards to its migrant workers. However, there is still a lot that needs to be done.

Among them is the need to look into the causes of migrant deaths. If the reasons for their deaths can be properly identified, perhaps the various stakeholders can take steps to prevent them. Ultimately, it needs to be recognised that nothing is more important than life.

An investigation drowning in contradictory findings



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

Fardin Noor Parash, the third-year Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) student and seasoned debater, whose decomposing body was recovered from the Shitalakkhya river in Narayanganj on November 7, had apparently committed suicide. This was revealed by the Detective Branch (DB) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and by Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), in a recent twist in the investigation.

Over the last month and a half, the police and Rab on various occasions came up with different narratives to reach a breakthrough in the "murder" case – especially after it was revealed through post-mortem that Fardin had several injury marks on his head and chest – starting from implying the victim was a druggie and a drug-peddler, to being a victim of misidentification as a police informant, to being killed by the planning of his "girlfriend" or "friend," besmirching his character, and turning this investigation into a mockery of sorts. It has finally been concluded by both the investigating bodies that he died by suicide.

The investigation into the murder/suicide was dramatic from the beginning, with DB conducting an investigation and Rab conducting a shadow investigation, both reaching

their own breakthroughs, and then one party contradicting the other's findings. All the while, Fardin's bereaved family, friends, and well-wishers had to witness this painstakingly slow and often unconvincing act.

If one even considers the previous statements of the investigating bodies as exceptional episodes of faux pas and take the recent revelation seriously, one cannot overlook its loose ends. The information just doesn't add up.

First of all, the investigators' suggestion that Fardin committed suicide because he was under pressure due to his dwindling academic performance and his inability to collect enough money for a debate competition in Spain isn't very convincing. It was claimed that Fardin was under pressure to collect Tk 60,000 to attend a debate contest in Spain, which also contributed to his frustration. But it should be noted here that he did manage to collect Tk 40,000 from his friends, and managing the remaining Tk 20,000 would not have been much of a problem, given that at times universities, faculties and even corporations sponsor meritorious debaters in such circumstances. And, in all likelihood, given that he had been in the debating scene for some time, he would have been aware of such opportunities, too.

Also, if Fardin used to support the education of his two brothers out of the money he earned from tutoring two students and so held that position of responsibility within the household, would he not have thought thoroughly of the consequences of taking his life before going through with such a drastic decision?

What is more confusing is that such decisions are often not taken on a whim. Rather these are well-considered over a period of time. So how did no one know Fardin had been harbouring such thoughts? Not even those friends who lent him the money, or his debating senior with whom he spoke three to four times on the phone in the hours preceding his disappearance? Nor his friend Bushra, who has been, as of right now, wrongly incarcerated and locked up for more than a month?

Also, given the unclear, nighttime CCTV footage showing a falling body cannot be a clear confirmation of events surrounding Fardin's death – in a world where doctoring of video footage is rampant – how can law enforcers come to such a conclusion so confidently? Even for a person with a very vivid imagination, it would be a bit too far-fetched to think that Fardin's body colliding with or crashing into the pillar of the Sultana Kamal Bridge (from where he is thought to have jumped into the Shitalakkhya river) would result in the relatively minor injuries, which could have led to, at most, unconsciousness.

Even the new revelation from the police about the extent of Fardin's head injury is not convincing since the autopsy doctor had suggested that there were several injury marks on his head and body, but that does

not corroborate the recent statements from law enforcers.

How wise is it to come to a conclusion about a possible murder case based on loosely connected pieces of evidence, that do not even fully align with various statements that have surfaced from these same law enforcers at various stages of the investigation?

The precedence set by the law enforcers doesn't help their cause, either.

In the past, we have seen law enforcers succumbing to external pressure. Take the case of teenager Tanvir Mohammad Toki, who was killed almost a decade ago on March 6, 2013, and whose body was found in the same Shitalakkhya river, and who is yet to receive justice as little headway has been made in his case in all these years. This is, ironically and frustratingly, despite one of the accused giving a confessional statement implicating influential people from the locality and also within the ruling party in Toki's death, and the media extensively reporting on it.

It looks like investigation into Fardin's potential murder could also be heading in a similar direction.

The investigation so far needs to be revisited and law enforcers need to come up with solid evidence to substantiate their claims before updating the public in the future. Their constantly changing narratives are not helping their cause, only confusing the people and the victim's family.

Law enforcers hold a very serious responsibility here – of delivering justice and living up to the people's expectations. They should understand the weight their words hold and ensure proper investigation into Fardin's death.