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Starved, tortured, forced to scam

The plight of Bangladeshi 'cyber slaves' in Cambodia must be addressed

The digital space is notorious for traps and scams that require users to be extremely careful. But how much do we know about those behind the scams? While online fraudsters are by design secretive, an investigative report by *The Daily Star* has thrown an unlikely twist into the mix, as it revealed how Bangladeshi victims of trafficking in Cambodia – where scam operations proliferated during the pandemic – are being forced to work for transnational cyber-scam gangs. The report highlights the plight of several such victims who shared their experiences, with hundreds more feared to be still trapped, doing the bidding of their captors.

These victims form an unlikely community of scammers rounded up from a number of Asian countries, including Bangladesh, representing what is being called "cyber slavery". One of them is 25-year-old Foysal Hossain who, after visiting Cambodia in early 2021 for the job of a receptionist, found himself sold to cyber-scammers. As he narrated to this newspaper, he was held captive in a fortified complex called The Crown College, and equipped with digital tools to syphon off money from unsuspecting US citizens. He refused initially, but relented after seeing that it only led to beating, electric shocks and solitary confinement in a toilet for days.

Apparently, there are many prison-like compounds like The Crown College, the conditions of which were likened to a "living hell" in a 2022 report by Vitit Muntarbhorn, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia. Thousands are kept in these heavily-guarded compounds after being lured with enticing job offers, and then sold at what appear to be marketplaces for humans. Extortion and violence are two of the methods of abuse used by criminal syndicates against victims who refuse to become scammers. Poor performers are sold multiple times, many dying in torture.

This paper talked to a number of victims who shared horrifying details of their ordeal as they worked for criminal networks linked to online gambling and fraud. Lured, sold, tortured and forced to scam, they all had similar stories, and were lucky to have escaped. What was equally hurtful for them was non-cooperation from the Bangladesh embassy in neighbouring Thailand (Bangladesh has no embassy in Cambodia). Some of the survivors alleged that they had to pay bribe for papers/permits, and faced negligence when they approached embassy officials for help. When contacted, representatives at the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and the ministry of foreign affairs claimed that they were not aware of the enslavement of Bangladeshis in Cambodia, which is hard to believe.

Clearly, the authorities are still in a state of denial, which can be costly for those still trapped. The importance of proper response in this regard cannot be stressed enough. We urge the higher authorities to step up their anti-trafficking activities. They must raise awareness among aspirant migrants, take firm action against fraudulent recruiting agencies/brokers, especially those operating online, and ensure quick rescue of victims with the cooperation of the authorities in destination countries, including Cambodia. Bangladesh must up its game to address the growing threat of trafficking and cyber slavery.

Sara's gift to humanity should inspire us

Popularising posthumous organ donation can save many lives

A 20-year-old woman has shown us how generosity can go beyond a person's death. By giving instructions to donate her organs after her passing, Sara Islam, who was suffering from a debilitating disease, has saved the lives of two people with kidney failure and may have given back the sight of two other individuals. For Bangladesh, this is the first successful transplant of organs from a brain-dead person, thanks to an amended law that allows collection of organs from clinically dead individuals with the consent of relatives. In Sara's case, it was her mother who helped to fulfil her daughter's noble wishes.

The significance of this selfless act cannot be emphasised enough. In Bangladesh, there are more than 20 million people suffering from some type of kidney disease, with about 40,000 estimated to suffer from kidney failure every year. More than 20,000 of them die as they cannot afford the continuous dialysis that they need to stay alive. The plight of those struggling with the high cost of treatment has recently come to the fore after patients and relatives protested a hike in kidney dialysis fees in Chattogram. Against this backdrop, Sara has given hope to many individuals who face death or years of painful dialysis that comes with risks.

Kidney transplants have taken place since 1982, but until 2018, when the organ donation law was amended, it was illegal to take kidneys from a clinically dead person. While living-donor kidney transplants do occur in the country, the law states that it has to be from a relative. The costs of kidney transplants are also very daunting and beyond the financial capacity of most patients. The law was passed after reports of desperate people selling kidneys for money. This means many patients have to wait indefinitely or give up their chance to get a kidney.

The two persons who have received Sara's corneas are recovering in hospital, and doctors are hopeful that their eyesight will be restored. With such miraculous consequences, why is organ donation so scarce? While cornea donation has gained certain acceptance, the practice of donating other organs has not caught on. Religion and cultural taboos have made people reluctant about organ donation. But as other countries have shown, thousands can have a second lease on life through this practice. Just as successful campaigning has made blood donation popular among people, the concept of organ donation after death has to be made acceptable and well-received. We commend BSMMU, National Kidney Foundation and Sandhani Eye Hospital for the success in these life-changing transplants, and for making Sara's wishes come true.

We express our heartfelt condolences to Sara's family for losing such a remarkable young member. But we also applaud Sara and her mother for their love of humanity. May their example inspire others to donate similarly so that many lives can be saved.

Who really benefits from higher electricity prices?

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KALLOL MUSTAFA

The government has recently raised the electricity price for consumers by five percent on average, bypassing the procedures of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC). Not only that, the State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid said that, from now on, electricity prices will be "adjusted" in the first week of every month by executive order.

The concern is that, since the single buyer Power Development Board (PDB) continues to suffer huge losses while purchasing electricity from the private sector, it will practically be price hikes in the name of adjustments, at a time when people are already under huge pressure due to rising prices of daily commodities. Last August, the government increased fuel prices (diesel, kerosene, petrol and octane) by Tk 34 to Tk 46 per litre. After widespread criticism, it was later reduced by Tk 5 per litre, but it did not have any effect on rising prices of goods. So, past experience indicates that even if the price of electricity is reduced in any month, it is unlikely to reduce pressure on prices of goods and services. Rather, this monthly adjustment is only likely to further disrupt prices.

It has been reported that electricity price was raised to fulfil IMF conditionalities of reducing power and energy subsidies. But why do these subsidies have to be paid in the first place? Where does the money go, and who benefits? The subsidies exist because the PDB buys power at high costs from privately owned power plants that are dependent on imported liquid fuels.

On top of that, a large part of Bangladesh's power generation capacity remains idle, but the PDB is contractually obliged to pay rent (capacity charge) to power plants. In the last 12 years, from FY2010-11 to FY2021-22, the PDB has spent Tk 90,000 crores on capacity charges only. Every year, with the increase in private sector power generation capacity, capacity charges also increase. In turn, PDB's losses go up, and there is pressure to hike prices. While electricity prices for consumers have gone up 11 times in 14 years, losses and subsidies have not decreased.

If there is a leak at the bottom of a water tank, no matter how much water is poured, the tank will not be filled. Private power plants are the holes in the tank of the power and energy sector. In 2020-21, the average generation cost of per unit electricity was Tk 6.61, which increased by 43 percent to Tk 8.84 in 2021-22. But the PDB's own power plants cost Tk 5.02 per unit, and state-owned power plants cost Tk 4.47, whereas private sector rental power plants cost Tk 9.80 and independent power producers (IPP) cost Tk 11.55.

It is clear that PDB is incurring losses by buying electricity from private sector IPPs and rental power plants. Due to capacity charges, it costs up to Tk 55 per unit to buy electricity from some IPPs, and up to Tk 27 per unit from rental power plants. Excess expansion of power generation capacity on one hand, and increasing dependency on imported primary fuels such as LNG, diesel and coal, without giving due importance to local exploration and extraction on the other, is also responsible for PDB's losses.

For example, in 2012-13, when the power generation capacity was 8,500 MW, PDB's loss was Tk 5,430 crore. In 2017-18, against production capacity of 15,410 MW, PDB losses increased to Tk 9,310 crore. In 2021-22, against production capacity of 21,680 MW, the loss was about Tk 28,000 crores.

The government has to provide this money as loans or subsidies so that PDB can pay private power producers. And in order to reduce this amount, an arrangement has been made to private owners at higher prices, while keeping the losses bearable.

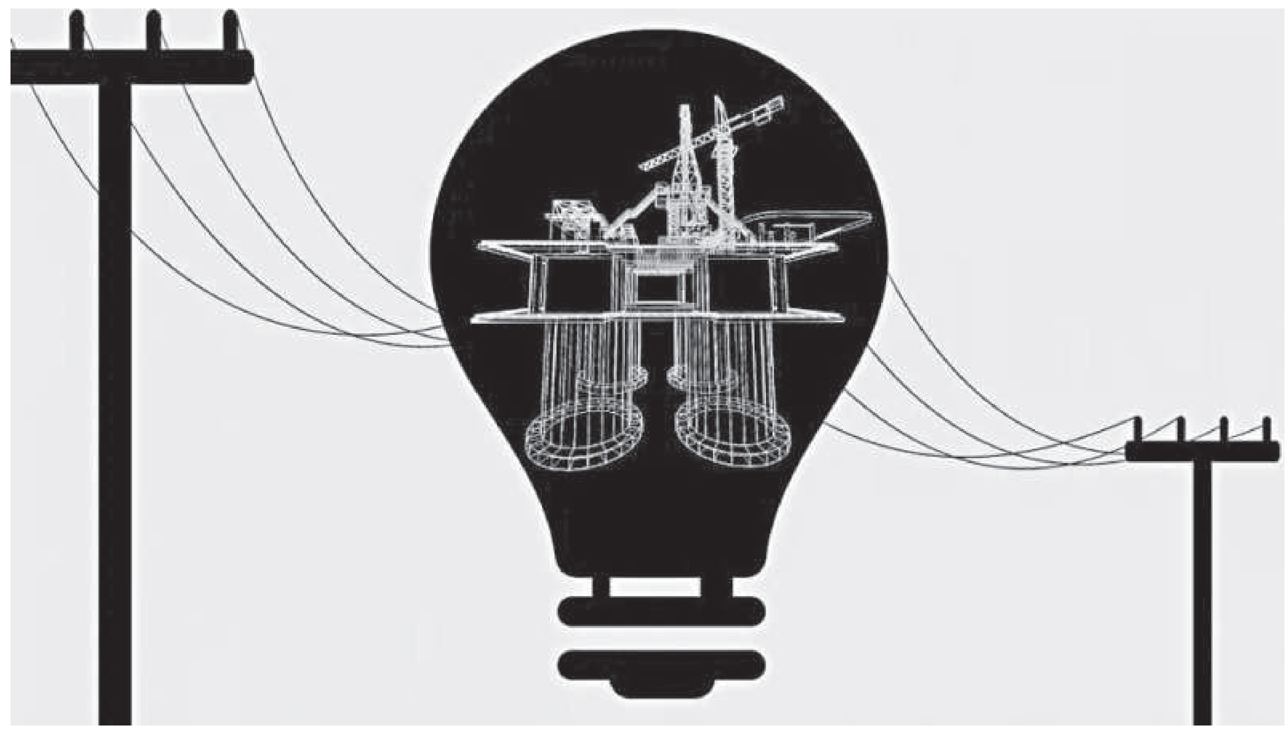
The IMF sets many loan conditions for reforms, but it has no position against private sector profiteering on public money. Nor did it give any conditions to scrap the undemocratic Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act 2010, using which the government is giving lucrative contracts to local and foreign investors without any competitive bidding. The IMF agenda is to either privatise the country's public sector, or operate the public sector with profit-oriented policies by reducing subsidies, so that they become open to private investors. So, it is expected that if a country seeks an IMF loan, it will receive conditions to reduce subsidies.

The question is, why did the economy fall into a situation where dwindling reserves forced the government to seek an IMF loan? Although the Russia-Ukraine war has been blamed for the ongoing economic crisis, in reality, the growing budget and trade deficit, money laundering through bank loans and transfer pricing, construction of expensive debt-based infrastructure, and increasing dependency on expensive energy imports had been there long before the war started. By giving excuses about IMF conditionalities, the government cannot avoid responsibility

take that extra money from people's pockets. Whether it is to comply with IMF conditionalities or to reduce government losses, the increase in electricity prices will increase people's losses. More money than ever will flow from public pockets into the pockets of private producers. Ultimately, the power price hike means saving the mechanism of PDB buying power from

for increasing electricity price, because it is their mismanagement that led to Bangladesh's economy falling into the trap of IMF conditions.

Finally, it needs to be clarified whether it is mandatory or beneficial for the overall economy to increase the price of electricity if there is a shortfall between the generation cost and selling price of electricity.



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Initiatives should be taken to keep the cost of generation low to reduce the deficit. Increasing prices while keeping all the mechanisms that increase the cost of production does not reduce the deficit. Rather, the deficit continues to grow, leading to a need to increase the price again and again. This is evident from the continuing deficit of thousands of crores of taka, despite repeated price hikes during this government's tenure.

If there is still a shortfall due to some unavoidable reason, then subsidies have to be given. Due to the multiplier effect of electricity price hikes, the price of other commodities increase, as do the people's sufferings from inflation. So, a portion of the tax-VAT paid by the people should be allocated for subsidies to prevent public suffering.

In such a scenario, public money is used for public benefit if subsidies go to the public sector. But if the power sector is privatised, the public money is given to the private sector, guaranteeing them extra profits. Regardless of whether that money comes from subsidies or higher prices, it is still public money. To utilise public money for public benefit, the power and energy sector needs to be freed from the domination of vested private interests, and must be in the hands of the public sector instead.

With the right policies, we can be cautiously optimistic about 2023

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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Earlier this month, The World Bank came out with an upbeat forecast. Emerging markets and developing economies are expected to grow at the rate of 3.4 percent, maintaining the steady growth from 2022's expansion. And while Bangladesh's projected growth rate of 5.2 percent for 2023 is 1.5 points less than what was forecast last June, it is expected that, in 2024, the growth rate will accelerate to 6.2 percent – one of the highest among South Asian countries.

Is this too optimistic? After the poor performance of 2022 in terms of inflation, GDP growth and shortages, how can we be sure that 2023 will be any better? Inflation is still raging in many parts of the world, particularly Bangladesh, and the threat of recession is still serious. We haven't yet turned the corner on supply chain issues and the resurgence of COVID, and there is plenty of evidence that global economic demand weakened towards the end of 2022.

Recently, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva also cautioned that most of the world economy will face "a tough year, tougher than the year we leave behind. We expect one-third of the world economy to be in recession." She added that "even [in] countries that are not in recession, it would feel like recession for hundreds of millions of people."

We know that, recession or not, the poor of Bangladesh will need continuous support to overcome uncertainty and rising prices. In 2022, Bangladesh slipped from 76th to 84th position in the global hunger index (GHI).

We must now ask, what does the government of Bangladesh need to do to build resilience during a possible recession? If the global recession gets worse in the coming days, what steps could Bangladesh take to cushion the blows from rising prices, shortage of fuel, and a possible decline in foreign exchange reserves?

First, the government needs to realise that what Bangladesh needs is a determination at the highest levels to help our under-served masses. We must go beyond our obsession with GDP growth and strengthen social safety nets and healthcare services.

The PM recently said, "I believe and I can assure everyone that we will be able to achieve our targeted growth rate." But around 30 percent of people in Bangladesh are facing food scarcity. Research suggests the number of people who went to sleep hungry almost doubled to 13 percent in May 2022 from seven percent in June 2021. Whether we get a seven or five percent growth rate really doesn't matter to the vast majority.

Secondly, the government must make coordination among various government agencies an immediate priority. In the run-up to elections, it would surely be in the government's interests to alleviate the sufferings of low-income voters.

Thirdly, the forthcoming global recession will affect our exports and remittances, since most of our export earnings come from Europe and the US. A recession will decrease their purchasing power, which will then reduce purchase orders in the RMG sector. Economists have singled out our "unbalanced" balance of payments as a vulnerable issue, and advised the government to keep an eye on controlling capital flight and delays in paying import dues.

There are three policy areas we must focus on. The Bangladesh Bank is facing multiple pressures – banking sector reforms, interest rate dilemma, remittances through unofficial channels, and compliance with the Basel-III regulatory framework. State-owned banks have consistently exhibited capital inadequacy, and this has raised its own set of problems.

The government is increasingly losing its credibility, as it appears to be inflating its GDP growth rates. Recently, it lowered GDP projection from 7.5 to 6.5. It appears that the government is in a state of denial since there is a gap, currently exceeding 1.5 percentage points, between its claims and those reported by international agencies.

The real income of the majority of the population appears to be in free fall. Food and energy prices are going up, but income growth has not kept pace. The government decided earlier this month to hike electricity price by five percent to Tk 7.48 per unit and the new rate came into effect from January 1, 2023. Globally, the prices of many goods are coming down, such as gasoline, air travel, and new and used cars and trucks. However, our kitchen markets are showing no signs of winter price declines, despite a good harvest.

However, I think inflation has peaked and we could expect to see some decline in the year-to-year rate. But getting from nine percent to five percent is a much easier task than getting from five to three percent. Inflation is cooling off, but the fire isn't out yet.

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