

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

We need skilled workers for higher remittance

Potential there, political will needed

It is disappointing that Bangladesh is unlikely to get the desired amount of remittance despite sending well over a million migrants abroad last year, simply because four out of five of them were less skilled. We have been a victim of this problem for many years, and experts and migrant rights activists have given the government a number of suggestions in the past, urging it to implement those. Yet, the findings of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), based on the government's own data, suggest that whatever little the government has done to address it has been less than satisfactory.

According to the RMMRU's 2022 Migration Trends Report, the percentage of less skilled workers who migrated abroad rose to 78.64 percent last year from 75.24 percent the year before. According to the expatriates' welfare ministry, the percentage of skilled workers migrating abroad has been dropping every year since 2019-2020, when it was as high as 33.3 percent. In the following two years, that figure dropped to 22.68 percent and 20.4 percent, respectively. Because less skilled workers receive lower wages compared to skilled workers, Bangladesh has not been getting as much remittance as it potentially could, at a time when the economy is going through a difficult phase – when we need remittance earnings the most. On the flipside, the migrants themselves are able to send less money back home to their loved ones, and are more likely to become victims of frauds.

According to the 2021-2022 report of the expatriates' welfare ministry, at least 64 technical training centres and six institutes of the marine technology under the ministry's guidance provide training to aspiring migrants on 55 different trades. The ministry's website also said that 86,437 people got training at those institutes in the 2021-2022 fiscal year. Given that more than a million migrants went abroad in the same year, that number seems quite low. Therefore, the government clearly needs to advertise the availability of such training facilities to migrants better, as well as promote the benefits of receiving such training for individuals prior to migrating. It should also find out whether the training it offers can be better targeted, and should include other specialised training besides what is currently being provided.

A leader of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies said that they receive more demand letters for less-skilled and semi-skilled workers than for skilled workers from Middle Eastern countries, where Bangladeshis migrate to the most. However, it is not because of a lack of overall demand, but because the market for skilled workers there is already being catered to by countries like the Philippines and India. The government needs to find out what these countries are doing that Bangladesh is not, and try and compete with them better. At the same time, it should also look into other potential markets to send Bangladeshi skilled workers.

Overall, there is a lot more that the government could do to boost our remittance earnings. And these steps should have been taken a long time ago. However, since the current economic crisis clearly demonstrates how valuable remittance earnings is for our economy, the government urgently needs to take these measures now.

A giver lives many lives

Organ donation pioneer Sarah shows the way forward for many others

Modernity has robbed us of many of our virtues and introduced many vices. Individualism has driven us to a level where we think of the well-being of others only as an afterthought. While we still hear many talk the talk of compassion and kindness, we rarely see anyone walking the walk. In a world so driven by cruelty and self-interest, a 20-year-old gave us all pause with her act of kindness, even in her death.

On January 18 this year, the country's first successful brain-dead organ transplants took place thanks to Sarah Islam's decision to donate her organs after her death, giving new life to four people – two with fully destroyed kidneys and two without eyesight – in the country's first successful brain-dead organ donation. Sarah's contribution was so powerful that MP Mahbul Alam Hanif even proposed that she be given state honour – a sentiment we laud and support. These kinds of generosity should be promoted by the state because such actions are not just good for the direct beneficiaries, but for the society at large.

It seems her brave decision has reminded us of our dormant humanity. She has inspired seven people, including Prof Sharfuddin Ahmed, vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), to also donate their organs. We applaud these selfless people who have responded to Sarah's inspiring call for action. We also wholeheartedly welcome the inauguration of the "Sarah Islam Cadaveric Transplant Cell" at the hospital, which will facilitate the process of donation, benefitting, we hope, countless others in the future.

Sarah's act is especially courageous because various stigmas still exist in our society about organ donation, which discourage people from helping those in desperate need. For example, against an annual need of 20,000-25,000 corneas, Bangladesh's lone eye bank, Sandhani Eye Hospital, is only able to collect 25 to 30 corneas. The demand and supply ratio for kidneys and other organs is similar. More than 20 million people in Bangladesh suffer from some form of renal disease, with an estimated 40,000 dying from kidney failure each year. More than 20,000 of them die because they cannot afford the constant dialysis required to keep living.

Sarah's act of kindness – and that of the seven new donors – should move us all to reflect about the roles we play, as individuals, within a collective. Are we really doing our part for this society, or becoming more and more self-centred in our relentless quest for a better life, all the while forgetting that such a pursuit is counter-productive for us all in the long run? It is high time that we confront our internal biases and hypocrisy and take part in acts of kindness that can actually save lives. We hope that the recent organ donations and the inauguration of the aforementioned facility will inspire a new culture of posthumous organ transplantation in the country.

The long road since 48 hours



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

It is difficult to recall whether any other high-profile murder case in Bangladesh has remained irresolvable for such a long time as that of the murder of the journalist couple Sagar-Runi. Both were senior journalists, Sagar being the head of an electronic news channel at the time of his death. Both had acquired a decent reputation as good investigative journalists. Soon after the killings, the then home minister had assured us that the killers would be nabbed within 48 hours. Alas! Countless 48 hours have passed since then. And after 11 years, the investigators are yet to solve the murder mystery.

Only those who have had to endure the pains of such gruesome killing of their kinsmen can understand the agony one goes through every hour of the day waiting for the case to come to trial and for justice to be done. Eleven years is too long a time to suffer through such pain. But any talk of trial feels redundant when we don't even know what happened to the five or so people arrested at the very seminal stage of the investigation.

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Again, a fresh date has been sought by the investigating agencies, for the 95th time since 2011. After the investigating officer being changed six times, the case has, in all probability, stalled. We believe, it being a high-profile murder case, the progress so far must be made public, at least as much as would not hamper the investigation process.

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Why has the double murder



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

resisted a solution for 11 years? Surely, there must have been some lead pointing to the killers and their motives. Are we to believe that the killers were so methodical that they left no trace behind? Facts tell us that every murderer leaves behind evidence. It defies imagination that our investigating agencies would remain clueless after conducting probes for 11 years. Or are we to believe that the assassins and the mastermind – and I strongly believe that they are not the same – are so very powerful that their names cannot be revealed?

One despairs to see the waning of interest in the journalist community regarding this matter. Initially, there was a robust group of journo's literally breathing down the neck of the government, the information minister's in particular, for a thorough inquiry and quick identification of the killers. But since the person giving leadership to this group of journalists was given an important post, he has not been seen talking much about the case anymore. Little ground there is not to believe that the post was a lollipop to lure him to abstain from lending his weight to the movement

expressing their frustration, till it dissipates from public memory eventually.

The motive of the gruesome murder remains unexplained. We wonder what happened to the High Court hearing on the rule issued by it in 2012 over the government move to identify the motive of the killing, which was scheduled for the first week of April of 2022? It doesn't need a Poirot or a Holmes to surmise that robbery was not the motive, since nothing valuable was found to be missing. Then what was?

Even an ignoramus knows that the first thing investigators try to establish when probing into a killing is the motive behind it. By a process of elimination, they preclude all possible motives till only one stands out as the prime. It is difficult to believe that our highly trained agencies have so far been unable to put their fingers on the motive.

Or are both the motive and the possible perpetrators too hot to put a finger on? Is it that the then IGP's statement of there having been "marked progress in the investigation" a few days after the killings was indeed

damage to said person and/or their business if made public. This is not my personal assumption, but something that has been in the grapevine all these years and is still making the rounds. We wonder whether Rab has probed this area at all?

It is time the matter came to a head. We wonder what the agencies have not been able to find out in 11 years that the investigators will be able to discover in the next few months or years, if at all. What is there to be probed further that has not been done in 11 years?

There can be two explanations. Either the investigators are really out of their depth or in a cul-de-sac (which defies logic), or the findings would rather not be revealed, for whatever reasons.

We believe it is up to the government to prove wrong those who label this country as having an "appalling and pervasive culture of impunity" by completing the probe into Sagar and Runi's murder without further ado and bringing the killers and those behind the killings to justice, whoever they may be – or live with the contemptible tag.

Right to information at home and abroad

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

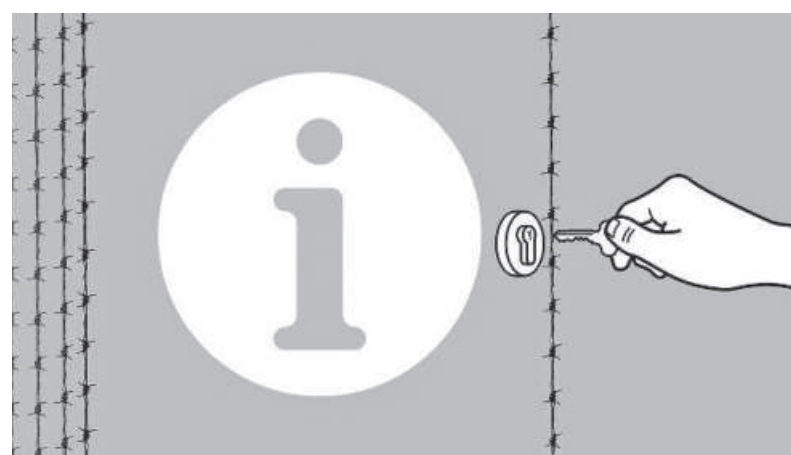
One of the reasons we write this column is to show our readers how people here and abroad make use of Right to Information (RTI) legislation. Today, we look at two examples each from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. All four demonstrate the vast range of ways in which RTI can push for government transparency and accountability. The Sri Lankan examples show the use of the law at the state level, while the Bangladeshi examples show its use at the lowest level of administration.

A group of RTI activists in Sri Lanka asked the highest-level police authorities for information on detainees on remand under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The activists wanted to know how many detainees were held, the condition of their mental and physical health, and how many were released without any charges. This application for information was refused. In October 2022, the Sri Lankan Information Commission directed the police to provide the information.

The police authorities had denied the request claiming that the release of the information would undermine the defence of the state, national security, or territorial integrity. The Commission, however, was incredulous as to how the requested statistical information (such as the number of arrestees, expectant mothers, individuals receiving treatment) could cause harm to the state. In regard to the detainees who were earlier released without charges, the Commission

opined that, "If persons indicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act are released, it is evident that such persons have not committed any offence; consequently, the release of information thereto cannot in any way endanger the defence of the

had been drawn by Litro Gas executives during the presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, all while the company was charging Sri Lankan citizens exorbitant prices for its gas cylinders. The Commission directed Litro Gas to disclose the requested information,



VISUAL: STAR

State, national security or territorial integrity."

The Commission not only ordered release of the information within two weeks, but also warned the police that failure to comply would lead to prosecution under the RTI Act. The Commission could not have been more unequivocal.

The second Sri Lankan case involves one WKS Karunaratne. He asked Litro Gas, a leading supplier of domestic cooking gas in the country, for information on salaries the company paid its top management and the loans it provided them. The company refused to provide the information on grounds of exemption prescribed by the law, whereupon Karunaratne appealed to the Information Commission. He alleged in his appeal that disproportionate sums of money

stating that since it related to the use of public funds, it was of public interest.

The Sri Lankan tales show how powerful RTI can be on matters of ethical, political, and economic concerns of society and the state.

The Bangladeshi examples we cite below are more mundane, down-to-earth, and elemental. They also underline the fact that RTI use in this country remains at that level and has failed to attract the attention of the elite, educated classes to achieve broader goals.

The first case was brought to our attention by RTI activists promoting the law at the grassroots level in Bangladesh.

Shamim Ahmed, from Moulvibazar sadar upazila, submitted an RTI request to the local union council asking for the list of persons who

had been awarded old-age pension in the union, under the government's social safety net programme for the year 2020-21. Upon receiving the application, the secretary of the union council showed up to the applicant's home and scolded him for having the "audacity" to ask for such information. Shamim had to flee, and reported the incident to a senior member of his RTI group. The latter called upon the secretary and had to promise that Shamim would not pursue a formal response to his request. Unfortunately, such an outcome is not uncommon in Bangladesh.

But the next Bangladeshi example has a happier ending. In November 2022, an RTI applicant named Jahar Lal, also from Moulvibazar, wanted to know whether the Forest Department authority in Cumilla was aware of the damage caused to trees under its jurisdiction by the rampant nailing of posters on them. He reminded authorities that trees are living beings and can feel pain. Mohammad Ali, the concerned officer, agreed that the matter was indeed "inhumane" and promised to take proper action. Ali raised the issue to his colleagues and at a meeting on December 3, 2022, it was resolved that the department will ensure that trees in the district are properly protected and not subjected to such torture.

These four stories from two different countries demonstrate the unique power of the RTI Act to address universal concerns of citizens on matters of governance that affect their lives, whether individually or collectively. They also show how individuals or groups can come together and intervene to remind authorities of their responsibilities under the laws of the land, and how they too can benefit from transparency and accountability in their work.