

We must end human trafficking

Addressing root causes of trafficking needs concerted efforts by all

It is disheartening that human trafficking still poses a serious threat to Bangladesh despite the progress made in combating it in recent times. There are a number of special tribunals to deal with trafficking-related cases, and as per the US State Department's 2023 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, 94 traffickers were convicted in 35 cases in the latest reporting period, whereas 18 were convicted in 11 cases in the previous period. Legal instruments are vital in the fight against trafficking, so the rise in convictions should convince us of the effectiveness of ongoing measures. However, as experts have pointed out at a recent event, significant challenges remain.

While legal consequences do serve as deterrence, trafficking will continue to occur unless we address its root causes such as poverty, inequality, and lack of education. These factors often make individuals vulnerable to exploitation and entrapment by traffickers, who also take advantage of poor social and administrative safeguards that are in place. For a multi-dimensional problem like this, the response needs to be multi-dimensional, too. Experts at the event highlighted a number of areas where the authorities must intervene simultaneously and redouble existing efforts.

The first challenge is to "cut off the source", which the government can do by implementing comprehensive socio-economic policies aimed at uplifting marginalised communities – where the victims usually come from – and providing them with better opportunities for education and sustainable livelihoods. This is a big task, of course, but eradicating poverty can help address a lot of other critical challenges as well. Continuously raising awareness is also crucial, as many potential victims and their families may not be aware of the dangers of trafficking or may lack knowledge of available support services.

The next front is institutional. Ensuring proper institutional safeguards requires a thorough review of related manpower and law enforcement agencies and plugging any hole that exists. A vital part of this is strengthening the justice system, including enhancing the capacity of investigators and prosecutors. While the numbers provided by the TIP report are encouraging, the rate of convictions in general is still frustratingly low. An analysis of the convictions shows that the courts sentenced most traffickers to just fines. The imposition of fines rather than jail time weakens deterrence and likely creates security and safety concerns, particularly for victims cooperating with officials. We must, then, build a strong legal framework with well-trained investigators and prosecutors that can ensure that traffickers face appropriate consequences for their actions. We also need to ensure every victim gets the support and protection they deserve.

Finally, collaboration among all the sectors and stakeholders is vital to a successful anti-trafficking strategy. Everyone must play their part so we can make it impossible for the traffickers to commit the crime, or get away without punishment.

End the stalemate in Ruet

Appoint a VC urgently to run all academic, administrative activities smoothly

It is nothing new that public universities in Bangladesh are plagued with various irregularities that often hinder their academic and administrative activities. From the falling standard of education to nepotism and corruption in appointing teachers and staff, from unhealthy student politics to rampant seat trade by the BCL – the list of problems they face seems never-ending. The ongoing stalemate at the Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology (Ruet) is a case in point. According to a report by Prothom Alo, the university has been running without a regular VC for a year now, which has been hampering its activities. Many departments, for example, are failing to hold regular exams, while the promotion of more than a hundred teachers has also been stalled. Many teachers are unable to go outside the country even after receiving scholarships, while some are not getting NOCs from the administration to go overseas for emergency treatment.

Reportedly, after the term of the last VC expired at the end of July last year, the Ministry of Education appointed the dean of the Faculty of Applied Science and Humanities as acting VC. Although he handled the day-to-day responsibilities of a VC, he was not mandated to take care of the appointments, promotions, or take many major academic decisions. After he resigned on May 28 this year, in the face of a movement from teachers, the university has been literally limping along. Last month, the students waged a movement demanding the announcement of exam dates. Although they were assured by their teachers that the exam dates would be given soon, many departments have still not been able to do so because of the absence of department heads. The situation is as bad as it can get.

The question is, should a public university run like this, and for such a long time? What could be the reason for not appointing a VC in this vital university? What role are the education ministry and UGC playing to solve the crisis? What will happen to the thousands of students whose academic life is being hampered due to these administrative problems? How will the university address the issue of session jam that will follow after a year of such a stalemate? We urge the government to take the issue seriously and immediately appoint a VC at Ruet following proper procedures. It must not allow the crisis to linger anymore.

‘Gladiatorial’ street contests and prospects of free, fair elections

WHAT WE SHOULD CELEBRATE, WE ARE BEGINNING TO FEAR



THE THIRD VIEW

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From the looks of it, our two major political parties are preparing for “gladiatorial” street fights as a part of their election preparation. Can this be democracy? There is some logic to mass mobilisation, but having a demonstration each time the opposition has one, and on the same day, how logical is that? Will it lead to a free and fair election or jeopardise it further? As the election is getting nearer, the possibility of a nightmarish pre-election period is driving fear and panic among the people.

We may have dug the first under-river tunnel in South Asia, built a bridge over one of the mightiest and toughest of rivers in the world, made virtual revolution in agriculture and other sectors, caught up with modern cities in building metro, elevated expressway, etc., yet we have not progressed even an inch with our democracy. This is where we have failed ourselves most miserably. The sad state of our parliament, which has transformed from being the “House of the People” to nothing more than an extension of the government of the day, exemplifies this failure most dramatically. Democracy remains totally under the thumb of the party that forms the government and defines what is and what is not democracy. It remains violence-ridden where freedom of expression is totally compromised by the fear of laws like the Digital Security Act and where the culture of dissent is demonised to an extent that dissenters are seen as enemies rather than as integral to the democratic process.

Election is when voters are supposed to be “the king”; it is a time when political leaders literally genuflect before the “court of the people,” either begging forgiveness for mistakes made, or explaining why voters should trust them or plead for support in the upcoming election. It is the time when power reverses and the common people have – once every five years in our case – the upper hand. It is the moment when the “Republic” shows its true colour and the people get to feel, in both collective and personal terms, what a democratic state is really like.

Nothing like that is happening in our case. Instead of feeling like “kingmakers,” we feel just as threatened, as intimidated and as dominated by the powers that be as we did during the



When AL and BNP both take a position of no dialogue and no compromise, the implication is that it will be settled by force on the streets.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

past. Nothing has changed in terms of voters feeling empowered because it is election time.

As we mentioned at the beginning, when AL and BNP both take a position of no dialogue and no compromise, the implication is that it will be settled by force on the streets.

When politics becomes nothing more than fighting on the streets, the question arises: which type of workers – on both sides – get the upper hand? The ones who are decent, sober, politically conscious and somewhat culturally-oriented are usually sidelined. It is those who are crude, given to muscle power, used to violence and adept at using weapons who emerge more in leadership roles. They, in turn, preach more street fights because it brings them increased clout, power and money. The more the street fights, the more the goons take centre stage, and the more the exchanges between the two sides get violent. Soon the violence acquires its own dynamics and goes up in degrees of ferocity and frequency. Political activities, especially movements, get more and more dependent on “muscle” rather than

(BCL) – some may argue that they are already an extinct species – gradually lost influence and leadership.

A prolonged process of street violence leads to a deterioration of quality of politics in general and in the quality of political leadership in particular. We are a good example of that.

As to the consequences of their actions, both parties are in denial – denial of the reality that their respective positions have already led to a backsliding of democratic culture and to the rise of violence and with more of it in the coming days. Their denial cannot be good for the country that they pretend to speak on behalf of.

Why should we – the voters – be forced to accept this situation? We wait five years for the chance to vote, to express our judgment on the incumbent, to examine the credentials of those who are vying for power, to evaluate the plans and policies implemented, to express our displeasure on things that we really hate and also share our own vision on how we see our future. This is what happens when the people are allowed

their thinking loses touch with the facts on the ground. They inevitably fall victim to their own propaganda which results in shutting down any authentic feedback mechanism that could have brought them back into the real world. This is when the civil society, grassroots level NGOs, professional think tanks and independent media become the “enemy,” whose views are not only rejected but also suppressed and their institutions demonised. As propaganda needs to hold sway over facts, state “agencies” are called into action who subtly and not so subtly get into the act of controlling the narrative. Paid agents of the state become peddlers of the truth and the truth tells a victim of the state.

This blurring of the reality and gradual dominance of propaganda is one of the most dangerous post-truth realities that developing countries are facing and of which we are an integral part. From gladiatorial street fighting to controlling the narrative, democracy in Bangladesh is facing an existential challenge which none of the major actors seem to be aware of and, more sadly, concerned about.

Disaster risk financing is the way to go



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In the face of a rapidly deteriorating climate situation, a framework or system that allows countries and developmental organisations to prepare funding in advance has become almost mandatory. It is largely seen that funding that is prepared after a disaster strikes is neither timely nor wholly successful.

A study conducted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) mentions that the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance due to climate disasters is projected to double to 200 million by 2050. Another study conducted by START Fund Bangladesh mentions that around 12.10 million people, belonging to some 2.71 million households, could potentially be affected by different climate-induced disasters such as monsoon floods, flash floods, river erosion, cyclones and landslides annually. Research has also found that a minimum of 18.33 million people may get exposed to climate-related hazards in all 64 districts of Bangladesh a year between 2021 and 2025.

Between 2000 and 2013, natural disasters cost Bangladesh more than \$10 billion in economic losses. Available

funding for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, however, stood at \$2 billion only. Measuring the value of non-economic losses such as health hazards, losses to education, etc is more difficult; experts predict those losses to be valued at much higher.

Another study by Start Fund, spanning the last nine years, calculated that 1,053 lives were lost and 9.4 million people displaced during different climate-related disasters in 58 districts of the country since 2014. The existing finance mechanisms are not comprehensive or anticipatory in nature and create more barriers for vulnerable countries. Funds for climate-induced disasters are mostly raised at events, whereas disasters, when they strike, may not give responders enough time to arrange fundraisers to raise funds. They are neither sufficient nor efficient to deliver finances of the speed or scale necessary to respond to losses and damages. We need to shift the focus from response to protecting people ahead of shocks. Relying on pre-agreed plans and finance is a faster, more dignified and cost-effective approach to disaster and crisis.

The solution? Disaster risk financing. The concept is expected to

reduce losses and damages associated with the sudden onset of climate disasters. The United Nations says that for every \$1 invested in such a fund, \$6 can be saved, with additional benefits of up to \$4. Investing in climate resilience projects even creates jobs and saves money. Just a 24-hour warning before a storm or heatwave can curb ensuing damage by 30 percent. It was calculated that spending \$800 million a year could translate into savings of \$3-16 billion, with additional benefits of \$66 billion annually.

The key actions should consider: i) investing in early warning systems and capacities to support anticipatory action; ii) investing in local capacities to disseminate and act on early warnings at the community level; and iii) investing in preparedness capacities at the local level to ensure actors are able to rapidly implement anticipatory actions.

Before one can truly conceive of an up-and-running anticipatory fund programme, there must be proper data analysis – reviewing history, consulting community wisdom, and identifying causes and concerns. Many organisations – i.e. IFRC, WFP, Friendship International, ADPC, etc – in Bangladesh and abroad are moving to create these models, through which it is possible to predict disasters, get central approvals taken prior to a disaster, and go for fund mobilisation on site as soon as the warning signals are visible. The more localised the model, the more acute the impact.

The model being proposed must include extensive scientific data, which lies dormant in files and

folders most of the time. Utilising it, analysing and interpreting it, bringing it to the forefront of the disaster, and designing programmes around it are crucial to building these models. Rather than waiting for aid to come through, low- and middle-income nations need to gradually come out of disaster risk management and ensure that budget allocations at each level include anticipatory funding instead.

A significant benefit of such a research-based climate awareness and disaster finance model is a stellar early warning system, interpreted differently for different locations. The wider the area it covers in terms of safeguarding people and their livelihoods prior to a disaster, the more successful it would be considered. This could also help spur local action, catalysing a proactive approach in the local people to safeguard themselves. The beauty of such models is also that these can be developed remotely, by young people and those that have the technological know-how to do this.

Governments, development partners, the private sector and civil society should all come together through COP28 and UN-GPDRR 2024 to co-create such efficient and accountable mechanisms that would keep communities on the frontline, considering loss and damage impacts. Engaging transboundary facilitators and partners like Global Network on Disaster Reduction (GNDR) and Climate Action Network (CAN) can also work synergistically if certain disasters are common in a few neighbouring countries. This would give the issue both national and international traction.