

Don't disregard Japanese firms' dissatisfaction

Let the survey be a wake-up call for our economy

We're extremely concerned to learn that a recent survey by the Japanese External Trade Organisation (Jetro) found that 71 percent of Japanese firms operating in Bangladesh are dissatisfied with the general business environment. The findings are particularly distressing, given the fact that Japan had stated last year that they view Bangladesh "as a frontier for foreign investment," and had expected more investment flowing into our nation in the coming years. Japan also happens to be our biggest bilateral development partner since the inception of our nation. So, if Japanese firms are now increasingly dissatisfied, will we be wrong to glean that the alarm bells posed in this survey also apply to *all* foreign investors?

The Japanese firms in the survey stated that, compared to other ASEAN countries, Bangladesh's exchange rate volatility, difficulties in procuring local raw materials, shortage of electricity, frequency of power cuts, and complicated customs procedures pose significant barriers to their business operations. The reasons cited by the firms undoubtedly undergird core issues prevailing in our economy today. But the tragedy of the situation is that these issues are indeed easily addressable.

Since the dawn of the crisis, experts have shown great concern regarding the free-falling depreciation of taka. Yet, Bangladesh Bank has repeatedly failed to undertake key measures to pull the brakes on ongoing exchange rate volatility. On the other hand, the ongoing energy crisis fuelled by the authorities' unwillingness to deviate from import-dependent energy policy has put further pressure on the foreign currency reserves, posing various roadblocks for both domestic and foreign businesses to thrive to their full potential. And, needless to say, ease of doing business, such as seamless customs procedures are integral to attracting foreign investment. We need to dramatically shift our current approach and work towards mitigating significant bureaucratic delays and red tape that detract our foreign investors.

The truth is, the lack of necessary adjustments in our economic policies has debilitated our industries and the resulting adverse impacts are becoming increasingly inevitable. We know all too well that the government has a track record of brushing over such surveys that reveal alarming macroeconomic indicators. But in the current global crisis, and with our ambitious aims of economic growth with abundant foreign direct investment, the Jetro survey must be taken seriously. We urge the government to pay attention to the concerns underlined by the Japanese firms and introduce policy reforms to ensure a favourable climate for all foreign investors.

Killing us slowly but surely

How long before the government actually does something to curb air pollution?

We are alarmed by yet another study report of the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC), which has found that the average life expectancy of people in Bangladesh is being cut short by 6.8 years due to their continuous exposure to polluted air. And this is not the first time that we have come across such worrying reports. Earlier this year, a World Bank study found that air pollution was causing about 20 percent of all premature deaths in Bangladesh. Another study has found that poor air quality is contributing to the rise in premature births and babies born with low birth weight in Dhaka. Over the past few years, different global organisations have published regular reports on air pollution, in which our capital city Dhaka has often been ranked as one of the top polluted cities. The question, therefore, is, what steps have the authorities taken in all these years to reduce air pollution, which has become an existential threat for all of us?

The EPIC report has identified some major sources of air pollution in Bangladesh as well as other South Asian countries, including smoke from brick kilns, fumes from the vehicles, dust from construction sites, industrial pollution, etc. While government sources claim that some initiatives have been taken to reduce the number of brick kilns using old technology in the country, not much has been done to reduce other factors contributing to air pollution. The number of vehicles on our roads tripled between 2010 and 2020, and between 1998 and 2017, the amount of electricity production fuelled by coal and oil also increased threefold. And the numerous ongoing development projects have also increased the level of dust pollution.

Will the government continue to treat air pollution as a non-issue or will it take some effective measures? China could be our example in this regard, which declared a war against air pollution and eventually reduced it by 42.3 percent between 2013 and 2021. It is said that if such improvements are sustained, the average Chinese citizen will be able to live 2.2 years longer. The EPIC report suggested that Bangladesh could also increase its people's life expectancy significantly by lowering its PM2.5 levels. But the question, as always, remains: will the government really act now?

New Message

To

Subject

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DSA to CSA: A sham of a reform

Journalists' fate is again being determined in the dark



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I like our law minister for his one extraordinary habit: he answers all calls on his mobile phone personally. It is a superb courtesy that he extends to all and for which I thank him most profusely. However, I so earnestly wish I could thank him just as profusely for the way he prepared the Cyber Security Act (CSA), which is slated to replace the hated Digital Security Act (DSA). Regrettably, I cannot. In contrast to the openness he demonstrates by receiving calls from all and sundry, the secrecy with which he prepared the CSA is inexplicable. There were media reports of his meetings on the CSA with some stakeholders, with relevant UN bodies, and heads of some civil society bodies. They were listened to and repeatedly reassured that the revised law would live up to democratic norms – but were never shown the draft, not even its outline.

What was inexplicable was that our law minister did not meet any representative of journalist unions, editors' bodies or any other representative institutions of journalists. As journalists were among the biggest victims of the DSA and it was they who were at the forefront of protesting against the DSA, not talking to them while formulating the CSA boggles the mind.

It is our view that it was the media's activism, along with strong protests by civic bodies, that triggered the reform process of the DSA. The law minister repeated ad infinitum that the DSA was not meant to curb freedom of press or freedom of expression. And yet, journalists, dissenters and rights activists continued to be jailed, harassed and intimidated. He repeatedly assured that measures had been taken not to arrest journalists immediately upon the filing of a DSA case. And yet, arrests continued. In the recent past, as the draft CSA was being finalised, the law minister assured all concerned that the new law would make us happy.

Tragically, happiness is still eluding us and, in its place, nightmare seems set to be replayed. Those who have seen the CSA draft cannot but conclude that change has been more in name than in substance. It was tweaking at best. Few sections have been made bailable and, in some cases, jail terms – which were already absurd and totally disproportionate – have been reduced. But fines have been hiked to a level that most media houses cannot afford, leave alone individual journalists.

When the DSA was formulated five years ago, the public was told

that it was to prevent cybercrimes. In reality, the law became an instrument in the hands of the government to suppress its opponents, critics, and the independent media. To put it bluntly, the DSA is a political instrument in the garb of a law.

So, will the CSA turn out to be the same? Its draft clearly indicates as much. It is just as anti-freedom of speech, anti-freedom of expression, and anti-freedom of press as the DSA. As Transparency International



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Bangladesh (TIB) has stated, "The draft contains all provisions of the DSA that curbed freedom of speech, dissent, freedom of thought and conscience, and particularly the freedom of the press and independent journalism."

The very process of formulating the CSA gives us some idea as to the government's sincerity of purpose. After years of protest by journalists, rights bodies, and civil society, the government opened itself up to amending the DSA. Following repeated commitment to various UN fora, in June last year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a technical note to the government recommending a revision of the DSA. The note was detailed and suggested point-by-point reformulation. The

from stakeholders were either not taken note of or were ignored totally, making the whole exercise a sham.

On August 30, the law minister said there was still time to make inputs as "stakeholders will be called to the parliamentary standing committee meetings and the matter will be discussed." We recall the same exercise being done while finalising the DSA. Last time, too, those of us from the media were not consulted while the DSA was being drafted – or, should we say, crafted. When we finally became aware of it, we raised our legitimate concerns and, like this time, were assured that all our objections would be heard and duly responded to as the draft DSA was being considered by the parliamentary standing committee.

Well, this writer had the honour

The concerned minister, while introducing the DSA bill to the parliament, said the whole world was waiting with eagerness and excitement to see the new law being enacted in Bangladesh and, upon seeing it, would flood us with eulogies for the wisdom contained in our law. We now know how the world reacted and judged us. It is our view that whatever gains Sheikh Hasina's government made at the international level for its success in economic growth were eroded significantly due to this repressive law. Nothing eroded this regime's international image more than this single law.

Should the government repeat the same mistake, it will face stronger criticism and suffer greater erosion of its status as a democracy.

Are you looking for a pet or an accessory?



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In recent years, keeping pets has become much more common in Bangladesh, particularly amongst the middle- and upper-middle classes. While there is no specific data, according to the National Board of Revenue, Bangladesh imported Tk 285.21 crore worth of live animals and birds in the 2020-21 fiscal year, the highest since FY 2016-17.

Bazlur Rahman Shikder, general secretary of Aqua and Pet Association in Katabon, had noted to *The Business Post* in 2022 that the annual turnover at the Katabon market alone was over Tk 30 crore. There were more than 2,000 pet shops across the country at the time, and the market was growing by 10-12 percent annually, according to Shikder.

Similarly, when you look at the animal- and pet-related groups on Facebook – which have tens of thousands of members – it becomes

evident that the craze of owning a pet has taken over the country.

While all of this might seem exceptionally wholesome, there are some causes for concern.

In Bangladesh, cats and dogs are people's favourites. And when you look at the situation of street or stray animals in Dhaka, it becomes quite clear that animal lovers don't need to look too far to get themselves a pet. Despite this, business is booming for pet shops in Katabon and also for private breeders.

So, why is it that some people are still paying money to get a pet, when our streets are filled with cats and dogs that desperately need a home? And are places like Katabon or the private breeders themselves contributing to animal abuse?

If you have ever been to Katabon or even seen pictures of the shops there, it is quite obvious why these places

are ground-zero for animal rights violations.

Scores of cats, dogs, rabbits, and birds are crammed inside cages in these tiny shops taking up the length of the road. Cats and birds are not meant to be kept inside cages. While dogs can have kennels or cages where they sleep, the cages in Katabon don't even give them enough space to stretch their legs. At night, when the shops are closed, these animals remain trapped inside in the darkness. The screams and howls coming from the shuttered shops echo through the streets. On top of that, the country has experienced significant heatwaves in the last few months, with no one seemingly worried about the suffering of the animals in Katabon.

Similarly, breeders have small kennels in which they keep exotic breeds of cats and dogs, forcing them to procreate over and over to sell off the litter for huge profits. You will often hear horror stories about how the animals there contract diseases but are not given any sort of veterinary care. Instead, when some of the babies in a litter are sick, the breeders simply throw them away to protect the remaining litter from illness.

What further aggravates the issue is that these breeders are usually supplying breeds of dogs or cats that are not meant for a climate like ours.

For example, in recent years, the

Russian Neva Masquerade breed of cats and Huskies have become particularly popular in Bangladesh. From what I know, people often pay between Tk 50,000 to Tk 1,50,000 for these specific breeds.

Sadly, these animals aren't meant to live in Bangladesh's heat and humidity. This summer, when the heatwaves were quite extreme, I heard countless stories of these dogs or cats, many of which were exotic, suffering heat strokes and dying.

When reflecting on all this information, the only question I am left with is: why?

While an endless number of local stray animals die on the streets from accidents and starvation, why do we need to *buy* a pet? Are we not culturally well-known for being prudent with how we spend our money?

The sad reality is that more and more people are becoming "clout chasers," looking to spice up their Instagram feed with an exotic animal, rather than give a home to a local one that desperately needs it.

Those who have their own *bideshi* cat or dog may even refuse to acknowledge this. But this is the reality. By buying an animal from Katabon or from a breeder, one is financially supporting corrupt organisations that treat animals like products, not pets that deserve our love.