

Why do so many migrants die abroad?

The government must conduct a second post-mortem for unnatural deaths

As the number of our workers going to the Middle East in search of employment increases every year, so does the number of their deaths. According to data from the Wage Earners' Welfare Board under the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, the dead bodies of 18,166 migrant workers arrived in the country between 2018 and 2022. Among them, more than 20 percent – 3,698 of them – died in various workplace-related accidents, including fires, falling from buildings, electric shocks, road accidents, etc. The rest, as cited by the authorities of the destination countries, died of heart attacks, strokes, and other “natural” causes. While such an alarmingly high number of migrant worker deaths should have raised serious concern among Bangladeshi authorities here and in the destination countries, we have hardly seen them raise any questions in this regard.

In the past few years, there have been ample reports in the media revealing the inhumane conditions in which Bangladeshi migrants have to work in the Gulf countries. While the extremely high temperature in these countries often takes a toll on their overall health, many develop life-threatening diseases which eventually cost them their lives. The question is: if our workers die in the Gulf countries, having been subjected to the brutal living and working conditions, can the authorities in the destination countries call these “natural” deaths? And what could be their explanation for the deaths and torture of so many of our female migrant workers in these countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia? According to the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, the dead bodies of 404 women workers arrived in the country from the Gulf states between 2020 and 2022. The death certificates of 227 stated that they had died “natural” deaths. What is most curious is that almost all of them were below 40 years of age and had no prior health issues before leaving the country. The families of migrant workers have many unanswered questions about the untimely deaths of their loved ones, but no one to turn to for the answers.

We join the families and migrant rights activists in urging the authorities to seriously investigate these cases. The Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) has demanded that the government conduct a second post-mortem in the cases of unnatural deaths, which the government should seriously consider. It can no longer turn a blind eye to the ever-increasing death toll and must seriously engage with the destination countries to address the precarious workplace conditions that are systematically putting the health and well-being of Bangladeshi workers at risk.

A record we did not want

Authorities still failing to use effective measures to contain dengue

Despite many reassurances from the authorities concerned, there is no sign of the dengue outbreak letting up in Bangladesh. Since April, the numbers of dengue cases and deaths have been rising consistently, overwhelming our healthcare system to a great extent. So it doesn't come as a surprise to us that the World Health Organization (WHO) has termed the ongoing bout of the mosquito-borne viral disease in our country the “worst outbreak on record.” Between January 1 and September 6 this year, a total of 138,022 cases of dengue infections and 671 deaths have been recorded across the country. For context, last year saw 281 deaths and 62,382 cases reported, and in 2019, the previously worst year for dengue in the country, 101,354 cases and 164 deaths were reported.

The WHO has listed climate change as a major factor behind the fast spreading of dengue. The UN agency sounded the alarm earlier in January as well, when it said warmer weather systems could catalyse a faster spread of the tropical disease, and it could become a “pandemic threat.” Our local experts, too, raised the same alarm in May, saying that timely and effective measures would help control the spread of the disease.

But it seems all these warnings fell on deaf ears. Added to that was an overall lacklustre attitude of the relevant government agencies towards the situation. Even in July, our health minister didn't think the dengue crisis warranted declaring a nationwide public health emergency. The consequence: August 2023 proved to be deadlier than the entire year of 2022, with 71,976 cases of dengue and 342 deaths reported, according to the health directorate.

After years of dealing with dengue, and having access to notable public health and climate experts in the country, the relevant government agencies should have been able to figure out the best course of action to tackle dengue – or better yet, how to prevent it from becoming a public health crisis in the first place. Other countries have been able to control dengue. Did it not occur to our government officials to refer to best practices from those countries? Instead, they floundered with reactive actions to tackle the disaster, and we suffered needless deaths.

This state of affairs is unacceptable. The relevant ministries of the government must answer for their lack of planning and farsightedness and immediately figure out how to take control of the situation. Most importantly, the top brass of the government must do a rigorous assessment of those in charge of public health and disease control, and replace them with more competent people who can make timely and effective decisions and prevent needless public health crises.

The global leaders supporting Yunus are not villains



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It's quite intriguing to see that the attack aimed at Bangladesh's Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus has turned into a campaign against more than a hundred laureates and global figures. It all started after they issued a statement expressing concerns about alleged judicial harassment of Prof Yunus, as well as threats to democracy and human rights. The campaign is particularly at odds with the prime minister's offer to welcome international experts and lawyers to visit Bangladesh and assess legal proceedings centring Yunus.

Following the statement, local authorities condemned the global leaders, saying that the latter have attacked “Bangladesh's legal system and judiciary.” Some of the reactions are hysterical. For example, the vice chancellor of the country's top educational institution, Dhaka University, has gone to the extent of terming those global personalities “people without principles.”

Criticising others is a right we all have, but the criticisms must be based on facts, instead of on hearsay or personal beliefs; they have to be respectful and cannot denigrate others. We seem to have forgotten that questioning outsiders, who are calling to stop prosecution and allow international scrutiny, is as justifiable as recognising their right to criticise us. While we are rebuking the laureates for speaking on supposedly sub judice matters (although they have not spoken about the contested facts), we are taking liberty to convict Prof Yunus through a media trial,

disregarding the judicial process.

For a long time, we have been hearing that he is a usurer, despite the fact that our banking system is based on interests. Now, he is being called a tax evader, even though he hasn't been charged with a tax-related offence.

Disputes over payable taxes are nothing unusual, and it was Yunus who sought legal solution for a dispute over taxes on gifts. There's not a single complaint against his personal income tax, and there's no case pending on this issue in any court of Bangladesh. Calling him a tax evader is nothing but slander.

His greater legal troubles, however, are issues related to labour law. But, once again, despite all his cases being under deliberation at different courts, a large section of the media has already started labelling him as an exploiter of workers. All these concerted campaigns are creating an environment where any possibility of an impartial trial would disappear. In the era of globalisation and technology, no one can be unaware of such a worrying development. Hence,



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it is quite natural that other Nobel laureates and those who admire Prof Yunus' two unique and successful development experimentations – microcredit and social business – would be feeling extremely concerned.

Those who have objected to the term “judicial harassment” should consider a few facts and then decide whether this accusation constitutes interference in the judicial process. For starters, filing multiple cases for violations of a law means multiplying the suffering of the accused, instead of settling disputes based on one verdict. Secondly, it's extremely rare that a court, of its own volition, orders a fresh probe and legal proceedings on a case that has been settled by another court, with all parties having accepted the resolution.

This fresh investigation was ordered on June 29, 2022, after the aggrieved parties received their payments according to the settlement. Although the government claims it has nothing to do with Prof Yunus' legal peril and that all this is the result of litigations brought by affected employees, the facts state a different story. Court documents state that an inspection of Grameen Telecom was ordered by the authorities. Following that inspection, an inspector of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments filed a case with a labour court.

Can anyone blame those leaders – who have excelled in their respective professions and earned global recognition – for seeing the series of

actions initiated by the government as “legal harassment?” No wonder Deputy Attorney General Imran Ahmed Bhuiyan refused to join the frenzy. Imran told the media, “I support the statement issued by the Nobel laureates and world leaders about the trial proceedings against Muhammad Yunus, as I think that he is being harassed.” There's no reason to doubt his sincerity, as he knows it better than all of us that speaking out can have serious consequences.

All these concerted campaigns are creating an environment where any possibility of an impartial trial would disappear. In the era of globalisation and technology, no one can be unaware of such a worrying development. Hence, it is quite natural that other Nobel laureates and those who admire Prof Yunus' two unique and successful development experimentations – microcredit and social business – would be feeling extremely concerned.

It's also perplexing to witness the authorities' silence regarding other concerns the global leaders have raised, namely of human rights and free, fair elections. We need to remind ourselves that our standing in the global index of law and order is at 127th among 140 countries, and Bangladesh has been categorised as an “electoral autocracy.”

Russia's war in Ukraine is destroying global food security

HE Antonio Alessandro, Ambassador of Italy; HE Francisco de Asis Benítez Salas, Ambassador of Spain; HE Alexandra Berg von Linde, Ambassador of Sweden; HE Jeremy Bruer, High Commissioner of Australia; HE Sarah Cooke, High Commissioner of United Kingdom; Jan Janowski, Chargé d'Affaires Germany; Anders B Karlsen, Chargé d'Affaires Denmark; Helen LaFave, Chargé d'Affaires, a.i., Embassy of the United States of America; HE Marie Masdupuy, Ambassador of France; HE Dr Lilly Nicholls, High Commissioner of Canada; HE Espen Rikter Svendsen, Ambassador of Norway; HE Charles Whiteley, Ambassador of the European Union; Thijs Woudstra, Chargé d'Affaires Kingdom of the Netherlands; and HE Young sik Park, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea.

HEADS OF 14 DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS IN DHAKA

On this day 562 days ago, Russia invaded its neighbour Ukraine. Thousands of Ukrainians are dead. Homes have been destroyed. Atrocities by Russian soldiers are widespread and well documented.

But while Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegal war continues, the devastating effects are being felt far beyond Ukraine. His actions are undermining hard-won development gains and damaging global resilience. Before Russia's invasion, the farmers of Ukraine were feeding 400 million people worldwide. Ukrainian farms produced 8-10 percent of global wheat exports and 10-12 percent of corn and barley exports. Ukraine provided over 50 percent of the wheat for the World Food Programme in 2022; a programme that helps some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world.

Putin's military attacks have destroyed over 240,000 tonnes of grain; enough to feed over one million people for a year. This means that Russia has destroyed more grain, in the last month alone, than all of the grain it has promised to give to Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia, and Zimbabwe combined.

But Putin is not only destroying much-needed grain today. He is also targeting Ukraine's ability to export agricultural produce in future years. Since Russia's invasion, and subsequent withdrawal from the UN brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17 this year, Russia's bombs have systematically targeted civilian infrastructure on the Black Sea. Russia has damaged or destroyed at least 26 port facilities, grain infrastructure (including warehouses, silos, and grain elevators), and fuel oil and storage. The Ukrainian government estimates that these attacks have reduced Ukraine's export capacity by 30 percent.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Russia struck Ukrainian ports a day after pulling out of a UN-backed deal for safe Black Sea grain exports in July.

The result of Russia's continued attacks will be long-standing damage to the Ukrainian agricultural sector, a source of food production which has played such a pivotal role in global food supply. Fixing this damage will not happen overnight; the more Russia cuts off Ukraine's ability to export its produce, the more Ukrainian farmers will have to abandon their fields. Russia has committed these acts to hinder the Ukrainian economy, and to ensure the

In our interconnected world, where grain markets are global, the inflationary pressures caused by Putin's actions will be felt in every country. And Bangladesh is no exception: food price inflation is causing stress and misery to many and reversing the hard-won development gains that the country is rightly so proud of. In spite of Russia's claims to the contrary, sanctions do not target trade in agricultural and food products, including grain and

climate change, advance our shared sustainable development goals, and invest in the UN Charter. As they do so, Putin will be working to ensure fewer people have access to food.

Russia's war in Ukraine must end, the bombing of civilian infrastructure must cease, and global food supply chains must be restored. Some of the world's poorest people, including here in Bangladesh, are paying the price for Russia's ill-fated adventurism.