

## Why the delay in compensating Covid-affected workers?

### Such inefficiency and apathy toward victims is unacceptable

It is inconceivable that three years since the coronavirus wreaked havoc on the lives of workers in export-oriented industries, the government is yet to disburse the total amount received from foreign donors as compensation for affected workers. Following widespread cancellation and postponement of orders from global buyers, which led to mass layoffs of Bangladeshi workers at a time of great economic vulnerability, the European Union (EU) and the German government jointly provided assistance of 113.5 million euros, equivalent to about Tk 1,135 crore, to workers who lost their jobs in the garment, leather, and footwear industries. In addition to the initial aid, the government contributed an additional Tk 365 crore, bringing the total fund to Tk 1,500 crore. A recent Prothom Alo report revealed that workers have only received Tk 9 crore of the fund so far.

What can possibly explain this delay in providing much-needed assistance to the workers? Respective factories and four owners' and manufacturers' associations were primarily responsible for creating the list of eligible workers, and the Department of Labour, under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, was in charge of implementation. During the pandemic, the owners as well as the government cried themselves a river highlighting how workers had been left at the lurch; yet it appears that once the funds came to the country, none of the above-mentioned stakeholders took the process seriously. Labour representatives who could have helped identify affected workers and guide them, for reasons best known to our policymakers, were left out of the whole process.

The authorities tasked with disbursing the funds claim it was difficult to find affected workers to receive compensation based on conditions specified by the government. If the policy was too stringent, then why, in the past three years, was it not re-evaluated and revised? Why were labour representatives not consulted, when it became glaringly obvious that the owners could not, or would not, do their due diligence? What does it say to our foreign donors if this is how we fail to utilise their funds? Millions of workers in the export-oriented industries were affected during Covid, but our government's lacklustre attitude in finding those in need speaks volumes about its commitment—or lack thereof—to workers. The failure to include labour unions in the process also raises serious concerns about transparency of the implementation process.

We urge the Department of Labour to address the issue urgently, keeping in mind that the money belongs to the workers. Any further delay will be a great disservice to them and undo the goodwill of our bilateral donors.

## Save Gangamati forest before it's too late

### Authorities must prioritise forest conservation

Despite the government's emphatic commitments towards forest conservation, the rampant destruction of the environment continues unabated. The tragic case of Gangamati Reserve Forest in Kuakata, Patuakhali, as reported by this daily, stands as stark evidence of this persistent threat. This forest is allegedly being devastated by a syndicate with the support of local politicians and forest officials. Crimes such as this raise the question—are the authorities indeed as earnest as they claim to be in protecting forests?

The reported devastation is staggering: over 10,000 trees that covered 13 acres of the reserve forest have been felled. Soil from five acres was excavated and sold for an embankment project in the last couple of months. It is important to note that, besides being an important ecological resource, this coastal forest has been one of the most crucial natural shields against tropical cyclones, including Cyclone Sidr in 2007. Locals are pointing to an Awami League activist and a range officer, among others, for this destruction; the accused, however, are deflecting blame, stating that the district office has leased out the land, and that it's not them but other perpetrators who are breaking the law. We have seen this pattern of scapegoating and evading accountability countless times, while forestlands continue to get ravaged.

At COP26 in November 2021, Bangladesh signed the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use, pledging to end deforestation and increase forest cover by 25 percent by 2030. Yet, concrete actions to that end remain elusive. Our reports over the years have revealed numerous instances in which government institutions disregarded forest conservation laws, or individuals exploited their influence for personal gain, leading to rampant deforestation. Our forests are threatened by reckless projects, like those undertaken to build a safari park, prison, and even a training facility for the Bangladesh Football Federation. Roads and railroads are being constructed without due regard for environmental impacts. And cases like Gangamati highlight the disturbing reality of individuals tasked with protecting forests allegedly contributing to their destruction.

As a nation at the forefront of the climate crisis and a prominent voice for climate action and justice, Bangladesh cannot afford to condone deforestation. While projects like "Elephant Overpass" for wild elephants on the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar railway, and the country's first urban forest in Purbachal are commendable, these cannot compensate for the environmental consequences of rampant deforestation. We urge the government to treat every case of forest destruction, including that of Gangamati, as a threat to the entire nation and make forest conservation a top priority.

## INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION DAY

# Corruption, zero-sum politics and democratic decline



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The International Anti-Corruption Day (IACD) is being observed today to mark the adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2003. The purpose of this day is to highlight the importance of concrete and collective action against corruption involving all stakeholders. Bangladesh acceded to the convention in 2007, and its government in 2017 decided to officially observe IACD annually.

As we mark the day this year, the Bangladeshi media platforms—print, electronic, online—are flooded with mind boggling, though unsurprising, stories of exponential growth of wealth and income, even by hundreds of times, of numerous candidates aspiring to become MPs. The data revealed so far are unofficial, though unlikely to be much different when uploaded to the Election Commission (EC) website.

What is most likely, and widely believed to be, is that although submitted under oath, barring some exceptions, many of these statements are far from credible to truly represent the actual state of wealth and income accumulation. Why such disclosures fail to garner genuine scrutiny by relevant authorities, to ensure accountability for possible under-reporting, is anyone's guess. More importantly, no action is taken to determine if the accumulation has taken place through legitimate sources and following due process.

This is just one example of how we have failed to make any substantive progress to control corruption, following national and international pledges to do so—nationally, through the political pledge of zero tolerance against corruption coming from the highest level, and internationally, through our accession to the UNCAC. Meanwhile, this massive growth of wealth and income of power-holders, thanks to their status of being MPs or relatives of lawmakers, is widely considered to be attributed to the privileges that being a public representative bring along.

This explains how the scope of abusing power is central to the zero-sum game of politics that Bangladesh is trapped in. While being in positions of power at all levels of public representation and governance



ILLUSTRATION: ABDULLAH AL ZUNAED/TIB

structure—direct, indirect or even fabricated—is treated as a licence to enrichment, remaining outside power means being deprived of this golden licence. It also means that while power-holders treat this monopolised and sustained licence as their legitimate right to unlimited opportunities to promote personal and group interests, for those who remain outside power, it is not only a matter of lost opportunity but also a high-intensity, high-cost struggle for survival. The premium of being in power is too high to relinquish, while the cost of being outside power is too painful to bear.

This is not the first time that stories of alleged illicit enrichment have been in public domain, nor can it be generalised, as there are cases of legitimate acquisition of wealth and income following the due process, without abuse of power and free from conflict of interest. But since the provision of disclosure was created, no credible action has ever been taken by the EC or other authorities, including the Anti-Corruption Commission. No relevant institution validates the submitted data against reality; none ensures accountability for accumulation of the reported or unreported wealth and income, which

injustice. The cost of corruption in Bangladesh is at least 2.3 percent of GDP, as stated by a former finance minister. This, however, is only a part of the loss incurred by corruption. Money laundered out of the country is estimated to be at least \$12 billion a year, about three times higher than the amount borrowed from the IMF to face the financial crisis.

Corruption breeds inequality and exclusion. According to the latest TIB national household survey, corruption imposes seven times more burden upon the poorer and low-income earners when compared with higher-income households. The marginalised sections of society suffer more than the average victims. Women are more vulnerable to corruption, so are the rural people as opposed to the urban. Approximately, 80.3 percent of households headed by persons with disabilities are victims of corruption, while the national average is 70.6 percent. Ironically, sectors that are mandated to control corruption like law enforcement, justice and public service are more bedevilled by corruption and bribery than other service sectors.

More than 17 percent of Bangladesh's GDP is held by only the

one percent super rich. Corruption, grand or petty, is a major impediment to inclusive development and democratic governance. Corruption is promoted and protected by biased policy regimes and faulty governance practices that favour the rich and well-connected. It provides opportunities to the powerful for policy capture, procurement capture and undue personal gain out of almost everything that happens in the name of development. Accordingly, the more pervasive corruption is, the higher the income inequality and social exclusion. Bangladesh has also experienced the brutal reality that corruption kills people, mostly women and the marginalised, as was the case in the Rana Plaza, Tazreen Garments, and Nimtoli tragedies.

Research also shows that corruption, conflict and insecurity are interrelated, and feed each other. In addition to discrimination and injustice, corruption also leads to erosion of trust and legitimacy of the government. Governments that score low in corruption indexes are more prone to use force and violence to control and suppress dissensions and protests. For this, a key role is played by politicised and dysfunctional state institutions often run by beneficiaries, colluders and protectors of corruption.

Corruption contributes to an unsafe climate for human rights and defenders of those rights. Credible analysis of relevant data shows that out of 331 cases of murdered human rights defenders in 2020, 98 percent occurred in 23 countries with high levels of public sector corruption. Restricting freedom of expression, association and assembly is a popular tactic to protect and promote corruption and weaken the scope of societal checks on corruption.

Corruption reduces the capacity of the state to hold power to account, which enhances the scope of impunity. It leads to democratic decline, retards peaceful transition of power, facilitates kleptocratic capture of institutions, leading to more corruption. Given the state of violent suppression of dissent, intimidation and criminalisation of free speech and independent media reporting, lack of redress for violation of human rights, and widespread politicisation and dysfunctionality of state institutions, there are reasons to be concerned about the future of democracy in general and accountable governance in particular. The importance of effective action against corruption involving the whole of the society cannot be any clearer.

## AI, AI, Captain: Will machines end our creativity?



BLOWIN' IN  
THE WIND

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I walked into the office only to find a slice of sunlight had settled onto my desk even before I could. The rays had already touched two figurines on my table, one of the comic knight Don Quixote and the other of his squire Sancho Panza. Their elongated shadow under a golden globe made me think of the adventures that this duo had undertaken in the novel of the seventeenth-century Spanish author Miguel Cervantes. As I reclined on my chair and powered up my laptop to brush up my class notes, I had a sudden urge to respond to the chiaroscuro. Then again, with technology at my disposal, I felt rather less equipped to express my thoughts.

Why don't I ask my machine to respond to my philosophical quandary? I wrote a prompt for the AI generator. And within seconds, a rhymed sonnet appeared. While the first stanza poetically renders my prompt, the poem ends with the AI's take on my thought:

"In the dawn's tender embrace,  
light tiptoes through the pane,  
Extending shadows, a waltz of tales,

a poetic terrain.

Two figures emerge, Quixote and Sancho, in grand,  
Beside a golden globe, in a dance across the sand...

Don Quixote's quest, Sancho's laughter, forevermore.

A celestial performance, nature's grand ballet,  
Whispers of adventure, as the sun heralds the day.

Through the window's portal, where time seems to suspend,  
A tapestry woven, where fiction and reality blend."

I was excited about my first ever AI-generated poem. I shared it on social media with my friends, who seemed to be equally impressed by the machine's ingenuity. Then there were experts with a better understanding of machine learning. The agency that I attributed to the machine in articulating my thoughts was questioned by some.

Will artificial intelligence end human creativity? Or will it complement and expand it? Only recently have I started using ChatGPT

to learn what tools our students were using to outsmart us teachers in exams. For me, it was more of a utility tool. But after using it for a creative purpose, I began to see it in a different light. That night, my wife and daughter, all three of us being English literature majors and occasional poets, revelled in our new-found toy. The laptop kept on changing laps, and the machine produced poems about all the people we hate. The artificial poems became so therapeutic, and I don't think the three of us shared such genuine laughs in recent times. The machine was making us human.

The machine had me convinced that I was having some intellectual communication with a higher being. But there was a glitch. It was almost like a déjà vu experienced by Neo in *The Matrix*. Most of the poems were written in couplets. The forms and styles were rather repetitive. It changed only when I specifically asked it to write in free verse or other forms. I asked the AI generator to explain. It confessed that the structural similarities were due "to the underlying patterns and conventions that the model has learned during its training." Then, in an almost anticlimactic manner, it dented my enthusiasm, saying, "It's important to note that while ChatGPT can generate creative and contextually relevant text, it doesn't have consciousness, personal experiences, or emotions. It draws on statistical patterns learned from data and aims to generate responses that are contextually

appropriate based on the input it receives."

The poetic output is nothing more than a fleshing out of my input. In this mode of production, both the machine and I are commodities, an idea that Karl Marx preferred in his *Das Kapital*. In a capitalist regime, any form of utility suffices to make anything or anyone an official member of the world of commodities, Marx wrote.

So will machines make us creative people redundant with their word salad? Our fun family poetry drill made me realise one thing: it was homogenising creativity. Certain words and concepts were repeated. I think I will recognise an AI-produced poem the next time I see one. Nevertheless, the rise of the machine does create an automation anxiety. Many creative writers, especially in the media market, might soon find themselves out of jobs. Machines will always be a cheaper commodity, which can cause a decline in the demand for human creativity. Am I feeding the data to the machine that will one day outpace or outdo me in my own game?

Is there going to be a time when the poet's profession will die? And is there going to be a sequel to the movie *Dead Poets Society*, featuring the loyal Sancho Panzas of the future to condone the blackboxing and commodification, and say in a parody, "AI, AI, Captain!"

The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.