

Safe migration still a far cry

How long will our migrants' rights be exploited?

For a country whose economy is largely dependent on the hard-earned remittances sent by its expatriate workers, Bangladesh has failed miserably to protect the rights of its migrants both at home and in the destination countries. While at home, the high cost of migration and a lack of knowledge about the overall migration process pose major challenges for the aspirant migrant workers, in destination countries, they often face unemployment, lower salaries than promised, harsh working conditions, and physical abuse, which in many cases, even lead to their deaths. Has our government done enough to ease the migration process over the years? More importantly, has it taken any action to hold the destination countries accountable for the deaths, mistreatment and rights violations of our workers?

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), approximately 12.1 lakh of our workers have migrated abroad till November this year, 3.29 lakh of whom went to Malaysia alone. Recently, a telephone survey was conducted by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) on 218 returned migrants, which found that 64 percent of the respondents experienced some form of rights violation in the destination countries.

While rights violations take place in most destination countries, the situation is particularly worse in Saudi Arabia, where a large number of our workers had to lose their lives. Reportedly, bodies of at least 45,301 male and female migrant workers arrived in the country between 2008 and June, 2022, with a staggering 12,930 deaths having taken place in Saudi Arabia alone. Yet, we, as a nation, seem complacent in accepting these deaths as an inevitable byproduct of remittance earning.

Meanwhile, at home, the average recruitment cost for a Bangladeshi migrant worker is Tk 3.81 lakh, although the government fixed rate is Tk 1.66 lakh for 14 countries. This is because the migration process is driven mostly by middlemen who charge exorbitant amounts for their services. Why has the government failed to make the migration process transparent, after repeated promises of doing so?

We urge the government to protect the rights of our workers both at home and in the destination countries instead of simply paying lip-service. It needs to increase the capacity of its missions abroad so that they can stand by our workers in need and hold the countries accountable for any kind of rights violations. To safeguard the rights of our workers at home, our expatriate welfare ministry needs to ensure that the aspirant migrants are not robbed by the middlemen. Additionally, steps need to be taken to upskill our workers so that they can opt for better jobs abroad.

Prison is no place for babies

There must be a better way of taking care of convicts' babies in prison

On Sunday, the High Court shed light on a crucial issue that does not get enough attention. Responding to a writ petition, the court issued a rule asking why there shouldn't be regulations to ensure the physical and mental well-being of prison babies—children forced to live in condemned cells with their mothers. The writ was filed by a Supreme Court lawyer, who acted after seeing a news report on a 10-month-old baby living in a condemned cell of Habiganj district prison.

According to the report, published by a Bangla daily on November 30, 10-month-old Mahida has been in the condemned cell since October 26, when her mother Husna Akter was sentenced to death in a murder case by a Habiganj court. Death row convicts are put in condemned cells—where they are locked up and monitored round the clock—until their sentence is executed following a confirmation from the Appellate Division. The condemned cell that the mother-daughter duo is confined to is a 10-foot-by-10-foot room with its only window boarded up, no running supply of water, and no mosquito repellent. They share the room with two other convicts.

It is heartbreaking to see that a baby who should be growing up in a loving, caring environment has been forced to live in such harsh conditions. It is already taking a toll on her health; reportedly, she lost around 2kg in weight within a month of living in the death cell. As there is no telling as to when the Appellate Division will give the final verdict on Husna's sentence, it would be safe to assume that Mahida's ordeal is not going to end anytime soon.

This state of affairs is completely unacceptable. We appreciate that the High Court is holding the government responsible and is demanding an explanation from the relevant authorities in this matter. We also hope that the authorities will look into not just Mahida's case, but also the cases of all 304 prison babies across the country. A child should not suffer for their parents' crimes. If a child must be kept in a prison cell with their primary caregiver, then proper provisions must also be ensured in the prison to cater to their healthy growth. This must be a priority for our policymakers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Humane TCB goods distribution

There's a photo published on the front page of yesterday's *The Daily Star*, which shows an elderly woman sitting down on the side of the road, unable to withstand the jostling in the TCB queue. It is indeed a praiseworthy initiative to allocate subsidised kitchen essentials for citizens in need, but I believe there's room for a lot of improvement in the way this service is provided. With a limited lot, open air temporary delivery booths on trucks, and no preparation to control a crowd, this setup pushes people to scramble for goods. It's not only dehumanising, but also severely disadvantageous for women, elders, children and those who are physically weak. I hope the authorities will find a more humane way of distributing these goods.

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Bargaining for victory is anything but an election



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Exactly six months ago, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, who is now in prison and charged with subversive acts in nearly a dozen new cases, expressed his apprehension that the government wanted to keep BNP out of the election. Police reportedly filed these new cases after the violent ending of BNP's grand rally on October 28. He already had about 84 cases pending, stemming from his party's campaign for reintroducing an election-time caretaker government since 2013, after the ruling party Awami League unilaterally abolished it, relying on its super majority in parliament and a controversial court verdict.

On July 15, Fakhrul told journalists that by randomly implicating BNP leaders and activists in false cases, reviving cold cases, and fast-tracking trials, the government wanted to ensure it would keep BNP out of the election race. By the time the polling schedule was announced, his apprehension became true, as most of his senior colleagues and thousands of party activists were jailed over the preceding weeks. The number of convictions in a month has already crossed 1,000, which ensures debarring of scores of potential candidates, notably with a prison term of minimum two years, which is a constitutional disqualification.

Anyone observing Bangladeshi politics would struggle to find a single speech made by ruling party leaders in which they don't blame BNP for all the ills of our country. There's little doubt the ensuing election campaign will be anything but BNP-bashing, despite them being out of the contest. It bears testimony that BNP is the only one capable of putting up a real challenge against Awami League. The recent crackdown on BNP lets observers conclude that BNP "could scarcely take part if it wanted to." The ensuing engineered battle among the faithfus of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to get into parliament has already been termed a "farce" by *The Economist* three weeks before the actual voting.

With the screening process of candidates' eligibility ending, including the appeals process, we now know that despite the participation of



The politicians seeking Awami League's reassurance know that without the blessings from 'the powers that be,' none of them has a chance to win.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

29 registered political parties, none of them, neither alone nor combining forces among allies, is capable of posing a nationwide challenge to the ruling party. On an average, each constituency now has about seven contestants, though the number of AL ticket aspirants was about 11, which suggests some of them might have lost confidence in the process.

One of the most noticeable elements of the "staged election", so far, is the fact that every party in the race (except those who only exist on paper) sought some sort of guarantee from the ruling party, that a certain number of its candidates would be allowed a free ride. Astonishingly, those who bargained for such guarantees include well-known top leaders belonging to both the partners of the 14-party alliance and the PM-designated parliamentary opposition, Jatiya Party. The reported scale of bargain not only required withdrawal of the AL's official candidates, but independents authorised by it, otherwise known as dummy candidates, too. This is the first

police in favour of the ruling party. It was the result of politicisation of supposedly independent institutions including the police, civil service and courts.

According to Representation of the People Order (RPO), returning officers (ROs) are entrusted to certify the integrity and results of any election. The Election Commission has appointed civil servants as ROs instead of its own staff, despite considerable opposition to such a move from within the commission and the civil society.

These politicians know that without the blessings from "the powers that be," none of them has a chance to return. We have never seen politicians belonging to the ruling coterie seeking and securing guarantees in this way for electoral success from somewhere other than the ballot boxes.

There was some excitement and curiosity over the week-long drama over Jatiya Party's participation in the election. It attracted extra attention following the reported doubts expressed by the AL chief about

Jatiya Party's intention amid some speculations that it might pull out of the race. But, parleys between the top leaderships of both parties continued throughout the week for a seat-sharing arrangement, under which AL nominees will withdraw from the race in an agreed number of constituencies. This drama was all part of the game, as it makes people curious about

an otherwise uninspiring contest. However, there were some cynical suggestions, too. According to them, the aspersions on JP chairman GM Quader put pressure to restrain himself from pulling his party out of the race. They pointed out the hastily arranged meeting between Sheikh Hasina and Raushan Ershad, who wanted to see her well before the closing of the nomination to intervene in her dispute with GM Quader. This meeting most likely made GM Quader aware about the risk of another split in his party, as most of its MPs are keen to secure their positions through negotiations.

As the most difficult part of sharing seats has been finalised, arranging some visible voter presence won't be that difficult for the government, as it has plenty of tools and resources for such mobilisations. But, there's little doubt that the ruling party will not stop talking about its formidable rival BNP anytime soon, as technically removing the real challenger from the electoral competition does not make it disappear from the field of politics.

Our outdated, inefficient higher education institutions



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Bangladesh's higher education is marred by several key but ignored issues, for which our higher education institutions (HEIs) can neither promote people as "producers of knowledge" nor as "skills developers." Amid this situation, the advent of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) demands urgent measures to change this situation.

The world has never witnessed such unprecedented human-to-technology interactions. Not only industrialised countries, developing and underdeveloped countries are also recognising the importance of using hi-tech gadgets in work life. The application of AI enabled machines, internet of things, big data analytics, and virtual reality continues to transform businesses.

The features of 4IR lead us to pose one question: what should the skills, knowledge, and innovation be like in this revolution? To meet the demands of this new era, countries worldwide are developing and implementing economic and industrial initiatives. Some examples include Germany's Industry 4.0 and the US's Advanced

Manufacturing Partnership, both launched in 2011, and Japan's Society 5.0 and China Made in China 2025, both initiated in 2015.

Before Bangladesh takes any steps towards innovation in line with the revolution, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of global initiatives. In addition, it is important to critically evaluate the role of HEIs in these endeavours. Collaboration with other countries may also be necessary to achieve this goal.

Unfortunately, the HEIs' response to 4IR is slow and requires a significant realignment. For instance, most research is conducted out of personal interest or self-promotion by individual faculty members, not to solve industrial problems or meet societal needs. This conclusion is based on my decades-long experience of working at a reputed Bangladeshi public university and serving two terms as vice chancellor at a well-known private university.

A shift in workplaces—in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies due to the revolution—now requires all educational providers to redesign their curricula, move away from

theories, and be more workplace skills-based to prepare graduates for 4IR job requirements. With the rate at which technological development and advancement takes place, it would be profitable for HEIs to have a strong link with employers to know how to respond to workplace needs. Failing to have such links means failing to prepare graduates for jobs available in the market.

Traditionally, HEIs in Bangladesh have primarily focused on knowledge dissemination through conventional teaching methods, which have not prioritised higher cognitive skills and transformative learning. The institutions must prioritise developing both technical and soft skills. Both technical skills—such as subject knowledge, critical and logical thinking, and complex problem solving—and soft skills—such as professional ethics, understanding of diversity, and self-awareness—are important to equip students with the necessary capabilities to thrive in their jobs.

Meanwhile, education researchers have conducted extensive research on teaching and learning methods, and it is essential for faculty members to familiarise themselves with these practices and apply them appropriately to their courses. If needed, HEIs should provide training to ensure the effective implementation of these practices.

The division between students of STEM, humanities, and social sciences should be dissolved. A higher education system in which subjects such as mathematics, data science,

programming, languages, philosophy, and ethics are basic requirements for every student should be developed. This will help students develop a holistic understanding of the world and equip them with necessary skills to excel in 4IR workplaces.

Two matters require attention: harmonisation of curricula for global competence, and research based on societal needs. While developing curricula, it is important to take into consideration both national and international demands. In this way, graduates will be prepared for both national and international employment. Due to curriculum differences, attempts to establish memorandums with overseas universities failed when I was vice chancellor. The Bangladesh government urgently needs to develop an "Industry 4.0" policy, and HEIs must align their research with societal needs and policy guidelines.

It is essential for HEIs to have a proper understanding of the fourth industrial revolution, as it will help them tackle challenges related to curriculum and skills development, research, and teaching. The fact is that every country has its own standards for education, which obviously differ from those of other countries. As the world is interconnected, collaboration within the various higher education systems is of utmost importance to achieve excellence. Additionally, cooperation between HEIs, the corporate sector, the government, and economists is essential to building a wealthy and smart Bangladesh.