

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

No end in sight to custodial deaths

Strict measures needed to ensure police accountability

We are outraged to learn of yet another case of custodial death in the country. This time, the victim is a 40-year-old woman from Abhaynagar upazila in Jashore. Her family alleges that local police implicated her in a false drug case and brutally tortured her, leading to her death. Police, however, claim that they detained her for illicit drug possession and deny the allegations of torture. Regardless of who is right, the fact remains that a person died in police custody, and it is a grievous blow to law enforcement that cannot be taken lightly.

According to a report by this daily, a team of Abhaynagar police led by Assistant Sub-Inspector Silon Ali detained the victim, Afroza Begum, right outside her house in the early hours of Sunday. Her ninth-grader son said he saw his mother being searched by a female constable, who found nothing. Then ASI Silon started torturing Afroza before police took her away at around 1am. Her elder son also said police had demanded Tk 2 lakh for her release. The Abhaynagar OC, however, claimed that police had found 30 yaba pills on Afroza, and later a case was filed against her.

Besides the allegations of torture and falsifying evidence, there seems to be a case of neglect in addressing Afroza's medical needs as well. Her elder son said they found her in a bad condition when they visited her at the police station in the morning. Police apparently took her to the upazila health complex, but brought her back without running the tests recommended. Hours later, when Afroza's condition deteriorated, police again took her to the upazila complex, and then to Jashore General Hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Unsurprisingly, police are denying any responsibility, saying the victim's family is making false accusations.

But what possible reason could there be for the family to do so? Equally importantly, will there be a fair investigation to get to the bottom of the incident? Over the years, we saw how such cases were often followed by perfunctory probes that hardly brought any satisfactory results. What happened to the young man who allegedly died by suicide in police custody in Habiganj in December last year? What happened to the Jubo Dal leader in Thakurgaon who died hours after being detained by police in April? The glaring holes in the case of Sultana Jasmine, who died in Rab's custody in March last year, also raised a lot of questions.

We keep asking these questions but there are seldom any satisfactory answers. Convictions in such cases are even rarer. Clearly, there is a lack of accountability pervading our law enforcement forces and institutions, which is totally unacceptable. Custodial torture—whether resulting in deaths or not—is a betrayal of public trust, and it must not be tolerated. We demand a proper investigation into the death of Afroza Begum and all such cases by an impartial and independent body.

Insane prices taking food off the plate

Govt must bring down prices of essentials

It is vital to ask—and seek a solution to—why and for how long local consumers will have to spend more on food compared to those in comparable countries. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has recently said that prices of essentials here have surged to such an extent that for many they have become luxury items. We cannot agree more. In 16 countries where GDP per capita is higher than that of Bangladesh, consumers are spending less on food, according to the CPD. The list includes Brazil and Colombia, where the average annual expenditure on food per person in 2022 was \$882 and \$874, respectively, compared to \$924 in Bangladesh. There are also the sanction-hit Iran, war-ravaged Iraq, and crisis-ridden Sri Lanka, among other countries.

If Bangladesh is doing so well economically—as politicians often like to claim—why is it that people are having to spend so much more on food than in countries that are going through serious difficulties and upheavals? In fact, Bangladesh has been experiencing higher inflation for nearly two years now, exceeding inflation rates in many developed and developing economies. And the burden of it has been disproportionately shared by poor and low-income households.

Having analysed the daily prices of 34 essential food items in Dhaka from January 1, 2019 to May 19, 2024, the CPD found that price increases ranged between 10 percent and 310 percent. For example, the price of coarse rice, consumed mostly by the poor, has increased by 30 percent. Similarly, the price of lentils has gone up by as much as 95 percent since January 2019. Prices of unprocessed and processed flour have been going up in Dhaka since before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. And all types of soybean oils are pricier in Dhaka's market compared to the international market. The huge difference in these prices and others does not make any sense, with the CPD rightly calling on the government to investigate the alleged involvement of big importers and business groups in price gouging.

We strongly second that call. As we have been repeating in this column, the government must find out why domestic prices are not decreasing in line with pricing trends on the international market, and take effective steps to check inflation. The people—particularly the poor—can no longer afford for it to fail in that regard.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Dunkirk evacuation ends

On this day in 1940, following a massive rescue effort that included civilian boats, the withdrawal of Allied troops trapped at Dunkirk, France, was completed on this day during World War II; more than 300,000 soldiers were saved.

Break the syndicates, not the dreams of migrants



Kallol Mustafa
is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics. He can be reached at kallol.mustafa@yahoo.com

KALLOL MUSTAFA

Thousands of Bangladeshi workers have been unable to go to Malaysia because they did not get a plane ticket even after completing all the procedures, including obtaining a visa by spending several times more than the prescribed fee. On Friday, several hundred workers waited for hours at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to catch flights, but most of them could not do so.

In fact, no reliable information is available on the exact number of workers who failed to go to Malaysia. According to an estimate of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira), this number is 5,953. Bangladesh government's Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) says that this number is 31,000. And according to the information of the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, this number is about 55,000.

The Malaysian government had earlier announced on March 21 that the labour market for migrant workers will be closed on May 31. This means that the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and Baira had 70 days to make arrangements for aspirant migrant workers to go to Malaysia. But having not taken proper initiative in time, thousands of workers could not finish this journey. Due to the flight crisis, those who were able to go had to pay several times the actual airfare. Fares increased from Tk 20,000-25,000 to more than Tk 100,000.

The government does not have to spend money to send workers abroad. The workers arrange the money by themselves, often by taking loans or selling property, or by contacting brokers, and then through hard work, they send US dollars back to the country. Thus, the government enjoys the hard-earned dollars of these migrant workers at almost no cost. In return, the minimum obligation of the government should be to ensure that these workers can go and work abroad for a fixed fee without being harassed. But it appears that the government is not interested in taking even these minimal responsibilities, as a result of which thousands of workers are being cheated and exploited by local and foreign interest groups, including

recruiting agencies.

According to a memorandum of understanding signed between Bangladesh and Malaysia in December, 2021, a Bangladeshi worker who wants to travel to Malaysia and work there would need to spend no more than Tk 78,990 for the passport, health check-up, registration, welfare, insurance, identity card, clothing, and recruitment agency fees. Malaysian employers were supposed to pay for



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the plane ticket and visa.

In practice, as reported by *The Daily Star*, a syndicate of 100 Bangladeshi recruiting agencies holds monopoly control over sending workers to Malaysia, and this has increased the cost for aspirant migrant workers. If any agency wants to send workers to Malaysia, it has to send them through this syndicate. Recruiting agencies have to pay huge sums of money to syndicate leaders to become members of the syndicate. The agencies, in turn, recoup that money from migrant workers.

The agencies that are part of the syndicate get a huge amount as "syndicate fee" against each worker, and a part of this money goes to those controlling the Malaysian syndicate. Even though the looting of migrant workers in this way is an open secret, there has been no initiative from the

government to break this syndicate.

And why would it take any initiative? According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, several Bangladeshi parliamentarians and their relatives, along with some political leaders of the ruling party, are part of this syndicate. Notables among the members of the syndicate are Awami League MP (Feni-2) Nizam Uddin Hazari's Snigdha Overseas Limited; Jatiya Party MP (Feni-3) Masud Uddin Chowdhury's 5M International; Ahmed International of Dhaka-20 MP Benjir Ahmed; Orbitals Enterprise of Kashmeri Kamal, wife of former finance minister and current MP for Comilla-10, AHM Mustafa Kamal, and Orbitals International of Nafisa Kamal, AHM Mustafa Kamal's daughter.

On one hand, the workers are forced to go to Malaysia by spending several times more money due to the monopoly of the syndicate which exists

experts held some high-level officials in both governments responsible for this situation and called for an immediate end to this exploitation.

It is noteworthy that, although the UN issued a statement on the plight of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, no action was taken by the Bangladeshi government—the principal beneficiary of the remittances

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sent by the migrant workers—to address the sufferings of the workers.

Malaysia has long been an attractive destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Although the government beats the drum of economic development, the reality is that there is a dire shortage of good wage employment in the country. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' "Labour Force Survey-2022," a Bangladeshi migrant worker earns Tk 28,822 a month in Malaysia on average compared to Tk 24,957 in Saudi Arabia, making Malaysia more attractive for Bangladeshi workers compared to traditional markets in the Gulf.

However, the Bangladesh-Malaysia migration has been marred by irregularities and exploitation in the past, which has prompted Malaysia to shut its door on Bangladeshi workers on multiple occasions. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, Malaysia's labour market was closed in 2009 due to allegations of irregularities in sending workers by creating syndicates. Then the market opened at the end of 2016, and was closed again from September 2018 due to allegations of syndication, corruption and irregularities. After four years of closure, the Malaysian labour market reopened for Bangladeshis in 2022. The syndicate was created once more. It is in this context that Malaysia announced that it will no longer take workers from some countries, including Bangladesh.

These syndicates should no longer be tolerated. Recruiting agencies engaged in fraudulent practices in sending workers abroad should be stopped immediately. The workers who could not go to Malaysia even after paying several times more money this time should be compensated properly and the recruiting agencies and relevant government authorities should be made accountable.

Inequity in education is holding us back



EDUCATING EDUCATION

Dr Rubaiya Murshed
is lecturer (on study leave), Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, and recent PhD from the University of Cambridge.

RUBAIYA MURSHED

They called him *boigyanik* (scientist) Gias. He was the son of an honest hardworking farmer growing up in a small village in Cox's Bazar—salt-farms and paddy fields all around, with the sea just 35 kilometers away. He was the eldest of eight siblings, and his thirst for knowledge was unmatched. He was interested in science. It was the early 80s, and a young boy in a village school had little resources to satisfy his yearning to learn. The teachers couldn't do much either. The boy learned the harsh lesson that having an immense curiosity and passion for knowing wasn't enough. Still relentless, he opened a science club in his village.

That little boy, whom I later got to know as my eldest brother-in-law, never got the opportunity to learn science like I did living in Dhaka. I imagine countless more children like him, growing up across rural areas in Bangladesh. I wonder how many of them dream of someday becoming scientists, writers, professors, doctors, or engineers. With sadness, I then wonder, how many of their dreams will be broken soon because we have not been able to ascertain equity in our educational provisions.

Inequality and inequity remain harsh realities in Bangladesh. The

truth is that talent in Bangladesh is in no way limited to the mega cities like Dhaka, but opportunities, in many instances, are limited. If we are to truly ever graduate from our lower-middle income status, we need to first and foremost channel our efforts towards increasing access to the same standard of education across rural and urban areas by investing in education in our villages. We need to support children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and marginalised populations.

It's not that children from these backgrounds don't shine. The point is that not enough get the support they need and those who do make it to the other side are exceptions, not examples. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but the reality is that not everyone has that support, and this is where we need to play a role through education. We need to determine what helps children to achieve intergenerational mobility, that is, what helps them to move beyond the struggles their parents faced.

We also need to be careful of the inherent bias and elitism in our ideas. We think and say things like "Not everyone should go to university, not everyone needs a Masters" without assuring that anyone and everyone

can if they want to. Yes, it doesn't make sense for scores of students to go for a Masters or PhDs if they're ultimately not going into academia, but this thought is biased until we can assure that anyone and everyone—regardless of their background—can pursue these paths if they want to. Otherwise, it's just another elite filtering where the privilege of being born in a city

privilege and connections unethically to achieve their goals, often not even realising that they are robbing someone else's rightful place to make space for themselves. These wrongful practices are, sadly, rampant and evident all around us. No, this is not privilege—it's the misuse of privilege. There's a difference.

Equity is an attempt to make the playing field as equal as possible. This is why many educationists abroad have also been contending for "weighted grades" in assessing students so that we can account for socio-economic background factors. To this effect, demanding adjustments to the quota system at the university level and beyond, as argued by our youth who took to the streets in 2018, is a rightful demand.

Quotas are meant to bring balance and we have several quotas that are arguably unnecessary. For instance, quotas for children of university faculty members. These children already have the intergenerational advantage of growing up in homes where their parents are teachers. This quota is often even harmful because the children of faculty members face prejudice if they end up, on their own merit and without quota, as faculty members—they rarely escape conjectures that they didn't earn their place. Instead, we need quotas for children of farmers from rural villages, for bright enthusiastic children from families where they would be the first to go to university. Our classrooms need this variation. We can only truly prosper if we prosper together and so, we need to ascertain the representation of voices from all walks of life. What's stopping us?

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or into a stronger socio-economic background with more exposure to networks and connections plays a dominant role.

Privilege is power but it's a responsibility too. This is where it gets tricky. Privilege shouldn't lead to entitlement. However, it is also unjust if every achievement of someone privileged is labelled to be a result of their background, hence belittling the person's own talent or hard work. Yes, privilege plays an important role in the person being able to leverage their talent but we must remember that not all privileged make a difference in the world. Just like not everyone with privilege gives proper credit to their fortune, to how it helped. Of course, there are also those who use their