

Outrageous lies by Myanmar at the UN

It exposes its unwillingness to start Rohingya repatriation process

We are dumbfounded by Myanmar's despicable lies at the United Nations General Assembly alleging that Bangladesh was harbouring terrorists in Cox's Bazar's Rohingya camps. Myanmar also claimed that more than 350 Rohingyas from Cox's Bazar camps had returned to Rakhine State. Myanmar's continuous attempts to distort the truth—as part of which it presented fabricated facts to the UN—just expose its unwillingness to take back its own nationals with safety, security and dignity. Bangladesh made its position clear at the UNGA that it didn't allow terrorists to use its territory and also raised questions over Myanmar's claim of repatriating 350 Rohingyas.

Bangladesh has been sheltering over 1.1 million forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals. More than three years have passed, but not a single Rohingya could be repatriated and more are entering Bangladesh amid violence in Rakhine. During these three years, two repatriation attempts failed—one in November 2018 and another in August 2019—because Myanmar had no intention of implementing the repatriation deal signed with Bangladesh. Myanmar made “concocted and misleading” statements on the development in Rakhine State, particularly regarding the repatriation process. However, in reality, the conditions in Rakhine were so bad that not a single Rohingya wanted to return to Myanmar. Myanmar must let Bangladesh know the whereabouts and conditions of the 350 Rohingyas who they claim have returned.

Myanmar has said at the UN that bilateral cooperation was the only way to effectively resolve the Rohingya repatriation issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. We strongly disagree with Myanmar on this issue because the Rohingya issue is not a bilateral one—it is Myanmar's internal problem. Our prime minister has rightly said at the UN that “the problem was created by Myanmar and its solution must be found in Myanmar.”

We urge Myanmar to shun its policy of lies and propaganda and demonstrate genuine political will to take back its own nationals with safety, security and dignity. Clearly, Myanmar's unsubstantiated claims and undue accusations against Bangladesh were part of their efforts to avoid their obligation of Rohingya repatriation. Myanmar must move away from such shameful practices, and work sincerely to start the repatriation process. It should open Rakhine to international organisations, UN and the media to observe the situation on the ground. The international community, especially countries that have good relations with Myanmar, should continue to exert pressure on Myanmar to improve the conditions in Rakhine for voluntary return of the Rohingyas. Most importantly, the Myanmar authorities must face justice for the atrocities they committed against a section of their own population. Only then will the Rohingya people get confidence to return to Rakhine.

A parliament's effectiveness reflects the health of democracy

How are we doing so far?

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh, while unveiling its study report “Parliament Watch”, expressed disappointment and concern at the lack of effectiveness of the Jatiya Sangsad. Our parliament at present is bereft of any real opposition. The Jatiya Party, which contested the 11th parliamentary elections under the banner of the grand alliance led by the ruling party (AL), has become a showpiece opposition. Thus, in the absence of any meaningful opponent, whose main role is to ensure government accountability, the power monopoly of the ruling party has been further strengthened in parliamentary activities, especially in law-making, budget formulation, and parliamentary standing committees. This ultimately does not bode well for our democracy.

According to the TIB study, only nine percent of parliament's time during five sessions was spent on law-making—compared to 45 percent in the Indian Lok Sabha in 2019. And it took an average of 32 minutes to pass each bill, including the time the ministers concerned took for their statements—compared to an average of 186 minutes to pass each bill in the Lok Sabha.

This clearly demonstrates a lack of serious debate (or any debate for that matter) in parliament about the laws that are passed. Most of the parliamentary committees have not played their role of ensuring accountability of the ministries concerned. When legislations waiting parliamentary approval are barely discussed, the chances of identifying problems with them before being approved are minimised. And that is what we have been seeing. Despite the outcry of citizens and others concerning various legislations (such as the draconian Digital Security Act), the concerns and controversies surrounding such laws have barely been discussed in parliament. And if they are discussed, the discussions are usually self-congratulatory and lop-sided.

The fact that out of the 350 MPs only 14 discussed bills by submitting notices—while the role of the rest of the MPs was restricted to simply voting yes or no—is telling. Moreover, Article 70 of the constitution, which prohibits members of a party from voting against his/her own party in parliament, has handicapped the Jatiya Sangsad, especially given the current circumstances.

A properly functioning parliament is an essential part of a democracy. Can we say that our parliament is functioning properly? Despite the disappointing history of our parliaments over the last two decades—especially due to the boycott culture long established by all main opposition parties—the state of our Jatiya Sangsad has perhaps never been worse.

We urge the government to heed TIB's recommendations to make the parliament effective, including through amendment of Article 70, so that members can freely express their voice and if necessary take a position against the party line except a no-confidence motion against the government and the budget. The membership of any standing committee member with conflict of interest should be cancelled. When legislations being passed in parliament are not discussed, when budgetary formulation is carried out without question, and when the Jatiya Sangsad lacks any opposition to hold the government and ruling party to account, democracy ceases to exist. This contradicts the principles upon which this nation was born.

The plight of children of a lesser god

Capricious internment, harassment and negligence



C R ABRAR

It took only a few weeks for the authorities in Bangladesh to enact the third episode of a series that could be aptly titled as “Hatching conspiracy, tarnishing image”. Quite like the previous two instalments, the script remained unchanged and so did the principal protagonists representing the state and the performance sites. The rest of the cast was replaced by 32 returnee migrant workers including two women from Lebanon, a country ravaged by civil war in the midst of a devastating pandemic.

This latest group of migrants came back to Bangladesh on September 13 after they were detained in Syria. Quite like their predecessors from the Gulf states and Vietnam, who were housed in Diabari quarantine centre and subsequently Kashimpur jail, they too were transferred to the detention facility without prior notice following a magistrate's order. They were charged under the nebulous Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The police convinced the magistrate that the crimes they committed were grave and the details of that would soon be unearthed. Sticking to the script, the police argued that for the greater good of the society, the accused needed to remain incarcerated.

Desperate to escape the violence-prone Lebanon, these migrants tried to go to Italy. Returning home (if indeed it was possible under the Covid-19 circumstances) was not an option for them, as they had already spent fortunes to migrate. They turned to human smugglers to facilitate their travel to Europe. Little did they know that they still remained under the spell of god *Shonee*. Thus not only were their attempt to migrate to Europe botched, upon return home they were detained too. Their eagerness to enjoy the warm hugs of their loved ones remained elusive.

Along the lines of the previous episodes, the ordeals of this cohort of migrant families have only begun. To secure their release, they travel to Dhaka and Kashimpur to gather more information, scour for money from relatives and friends to pay for lawyers to arrange bail, and wait out in police station and court premises.

They fail to understand in what way have their returnee family members “tarnished the image of the country” and why would they engage in “hatching a conspiracy” at a time when they were too distraught by their failed migration experience, too eager to share their disappointment with and seek solace from their loved ones. After all, if they had to blame anyone for their predicament, it would be the recruiters, *dalals*, traffickers and perhaps their luck. The families fail to reason what prompted the authorities to think that the accused held grudges against the omnipotent state and, even if they did, why not even an iota of evidence was produced before the court and the people. They wish someone in the administration would care to respond to their queries. After all, it is too trivial a matter to be an item on the agenda for deliberations in the much-celebrated national parliament.

Empathising citizens both at home and abroad are perplexed about on what

legal grounds the returnee migrants were detained in batches and what gains the state stands to derive in persecuting them. They wonder if this would be the fate of all returnee migrants in irregular status. They speculate the magic wand that police exhibit for the magistrates not only to grant initial order of detention but subsequent extensions without any new evidence for the alleged grave crimes, that too in breach of the High Court's directive allowing a maximum of 15 days under Section 54.

While batches of returnee migrants are assigned new roles in subsequent episodes of the Diabari-Kashimpur play, a new drama has unfolded in Gulshan-Shonargaon Road-Segunbagicha precincts. In this saga, migrant workers wishing to return to work in Saudi Arabia face hurdle after hurdle in accomplishing their goal. At every step of the process—conducting Covid-19 tests, securing flights and renewing their work permit and visa to gain re-entry into the kingdom—they face uncertainty, lack of information and clear guidance from Bangladesh authorities, concerned airlines and the embassy of the concerned country.



People, mostly migrant workers returning to Middle-Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia, wait their turn to get tested for coronavirus at the Dhaka North City Corporation kitchen market, on September 26, 2020.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

A prompt initiative of both governments of Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia led to auto-renewal of the visa and work permits of the workers who got stranded in Bangladesh following the outbreak of Covid-19. The misfortune of the migrants began when Saudi authorities refused to auto-renew visa and work permit after September 30. This meant workers had to secure the explicit consent of their *kafuels* (sponsors) and that entailed submission of a number of authenticated documents at the Saudi end.

This decision put the workers in a quandary. While those working for ethical employers and big companies could meet the criteria with the support of the dedicated Human Relations department of the concerned companies, the vast majority of workers, employed by small companies and individual *kafuels*, were in a limbo. It is little wonder that the *kafuels* of thousands of “free visa” holders—who sponsored the workers and renewed their documents in the past against payment of hefty sums ranging from USD 1,200 to USD 1,700 (an illegal act under the Saudi law but is widely practiced with impunity)—have either refused or been

reluctant to take the initiative for renewal. This is because they feel there is no guarantee of their payment even if the workers landed on the Saudi shores.

The sudden Saudi decision of not going ahead with the auto-renewal arrangement came as a bolt from the blue for the workers. As the September 30 deadline was looming large, those fortunate to secure visa and work permit rushed for air tickets only to find a handful of seats available. Having no other redress, they took to streets demanding government intervention. This appeared to have yielded an immediate result when the ministry of foreign affairs announced that Saudi authorities had agreed to extend the deadline to October 24. Little did the workers know that it was only a verbal arrangement and that until it was formalised, they were required to secure the documents from their *kafuels*.

On advice of the Saudi embassy, those without visa and work permit rushed to embassy-approved visa agents only to be informed that the latter had no advice on the matter. As pressure of the visa-seekers mounted, an ethical agent explaining the circumstances urged workers to wait until

to three hours. In some instances, they found the Mohakhali office closed at 5pm and in other cases, as power supply to the testing facility was disrupted, the reports were handed out many hours later, making passengers miss the scheduled flights. On September 26, 32 passengers were barred from leaving Bangladesh on the ground that their tests were not conducted in designated government hospitals. The passengers claimed that while collecting tickets, the airlines authorities told them that tests at private facilities would be acceptable, only to find at the airport that the information was not correct.

It may be recalled that a hasty decision of the government earlier put thousands of workers in dire situation as Covid-19 clearance certificate was made mandatory for all travellers within a stipulated time prior to their travel, irrespective of the need of the destination countries. Only 14 centres were selected and the fees for testing was raised from Tk 200 to Tk 3500—a staggering 1,750 percent increase. Subsequently, the health minister lowered the testing fees to Tk 1,500 for migrant workers, while for all others it was reduced from Tk 200 to Tk 100.

The above narrative establishes that there is a clear absence of policy coherence with regard to the return of migrant workers both in countries of deployment and origin.

The Saudi government's abrupt decision not to extend auto-renewal of work permit and visa, its reticence to resume regular flights at higher frequency (despite the burgeoning demand) with reciprocal arrangement with Bangladesh, and its Dhaka mission's inability to timely communicate clear instructions with its own approved visa agents have exacerbated the plight of the migrants.

Likewise, through immediate and unconditional release of all migrants who are yet to be charged of any serious crime and have remained incarcerated for an indefinite period, charting out a clear departure strategy for returnee migrants by timely negotiating modalities with its Saudi counterparts, creating a congenial and hassle-free 24-hour Covid-19 testing and report delivery service, ensuring better coordination among various ministries (expatriates' affairs, foreign affairs, home affairs and civil aviation) to effect smooth return of workers and, most importantly, by creating a dependable channel of communication of updated, credible information with the migrants and the media—the Bangladesh government can minimise preventable hardship of the migrants.

Some members of the cabinet have expressed concern that through their collective action, protesting migrants “may be jeopardising their chances to migrate”. Others have advised the migrants “not to be misled by politically motivated vested quarters”. Those in authority need to acknowledge that at a time of crisis, migrants could hardly rely on any state institution for support, guidance and direction, and hence were forced to take to the streets. The ministers must also note that migrants have their own agency and have the ability to think for themselves. Finally, those in authority must internalise the fact that peaceful protest is an integral part of a democratic polity and migrants are merely exercising that right.

C R Abrar is an academic with an interest in migration and rights issues.

Nature-based solutions: The cost-effective climate change mitigation we need



ZAC GOLDSMITH

THE Covid-19 pandemic has exposed our vulnerabilities, on multiple levels. But with any luck, it will also serve as a wakeup call. Grubbing out whole ecosystems and perpetuating the grim illegal wildlife trade—not to mention the worst excesses of factory farming—all contribute to dislodging and facilitating deadly new diseases. And at the same time, our routine misuse of antibiotics has compromised our capacity to cope.

The pandemic is a symptom of our abuse of the natural world, but the science couldn't be clearer; this crisis will be dwarfed by others if we continue destroying the natural environment and destabilising our fragile climate.

Last month, the Living Planet Index showed that populations of key species have declined by 68 percent in little more than my lifetime—an evolutionary nanosecond. Hundreds of thousands of species face extinction, from marine leviathans to chameleons small enough to balance on the head of a match.

Every minute, the world loses thirty football pitches worth of forests, making deforestation the second leading cause of climate change.

It is the Lorax writ large—a tragedy. And it is a human tragedy too. A billion people depend on the forests for their livelihood. Roughly the same number of people depend on fish for their survival. When nature's free services fail, it is the poorest

who suffer first.

Turning this around is surely the principle challenge of our age. We can do it, if governments step up.

As co-hosts of the next Climate COP, the UK is in pole-position to galvanise global action. On emissions, the market is thankfully racing ahead of the politics, with investment in renewable energy now exceeding investment in fossil fuels. But technology alone cannot prevent climate change.

Nature-based solutions like protecting and restoring mangroves, forests and peatlands could provide a third of the cost-effective climate change mitigation we need, while helping turn the tide on the extinction crisis. Despite this, they attract a measly 3 percent of global climate funding.

Nature-based solutions like protecting and restoring mangroves, forests and peatlands could provide a third of the cost-effective climate change mitigation we need, while helping turn the tide on the extinction crisis. Despite this, they attract a measly 3 percent of global climate funding. It makes no sense at all.

So the UK will use our Presidency of COP26 to persuade other countries to put nature at the heart of their climate response.

We have doubled our International Climate Finance and we will increase our spending on nature.

We are rolling out ambitious programmes—a new 100-million-pound Biodiverse Landscapes Fund to connect

critically important landscapes, and the 500-million-pound Blue Planet Fund to restore marine ecosystems. Our Blue Belt initiative is on course to protect an area the size of India around our Overseas Territories, and we are leading the global campaign to protect at least 30 percent of the ocean by 2030.

Money alone won't solve the problem, but governments hold powerful levers to make markets value nature and attach a cost to environmental destruction.

Globally, agriculture causes 80 percent of deforestation, mostly for growing commodities like palm oil, soya, and cocoa. If the top fifty food producing countries follow our lead in replacing their land use subsidies with a system that rewards farmers for environmental stewardship, 700 billion pounds a year—around four times the world's aid budget—would shift to support nature.

And we have launched a world-leading consultation on a due diligence requirement on big companies to remove deforestation from their supply chains. If we can persuade other countries too, this could flip the market to make forests worth more alive than dead.

On September 28 at the UN, our prime

minister signed a Leader's Pledge for Nature that the UK has played a leading role in crafting. An ambitious call to action, it recognises the failure of so many previous declarations, and invites every generation to judge leaders on whether they honour their word.

As governments map out their economic recoveries, we have a choice. We can prop up the status quo, locking in decades of carbon emissions and environmental destruction. Or we can choose this moment to profoundly reset our relationship with the natural world.

I am delighted that Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was among the leaders to sign up to this pledge. I had the pleasure to virtually visit Bangladesh in August and had a virtual tour of the Sundarbans, the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world which plays an extremely important role in protecting communities from cyclone damage, and which also sequesters carbon from the atmosphere. This is a prime example of the natural heritage that needs our protection now more than ever. I also spoke to experts who are developing natural solutions to manage climate change impacts such as salt-water intrusion, flooding, and rainfall variability. The UK-Bangladesh partnership on climate action can help develop expertise and apply these solutions more widely, and is an example of the type of international collaboration Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spoke so passionately about at the United Nations this week.

Lord Zac Goldsmith is the UK Minister for Pacific and the Environment at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.