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Better economic and diplomatic relations with the US is welcome

But we don't want to be in the middle of any geopolitical spat

WE welcome the visit of US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Beigun's visit that reinforces strong ties between Bangladesh and the US and greater cooperation between the two countries. We hope that this visit will bring enhanced economic benefits to us in terms of greater US investments and better opportunities for export of Bangladesh goods to the US market. There is also hope that the US will help in the ongoing Rohingya crisis that Bangladesh has been unfairly burdened with and the solution to which necessitates international involvement.

According to foreign relations analysts US's new interest in Bangladesh for stronger ties stems from the latter's sustained growth and stability over the last decade and its geopolitical location.

In fact Stephen Beigun has mentioned the growing interest of US companies in various areas including trade, investment, agr-oprocessing industries, IT, pharmaceuticals, energy and Covid-19 vaccine cooperation. He also said that the US has been trying to influence Myanmar regarding the treatment and restoration of the rights of the Rohingyas and commented that all countries should work together to end this crisis.

This is of course reassuring news for Bangladesh. What is a bit worrying though is the increasing tensions between the US and China and India and China. Stephen Beigun's visit also coincides with the US's advancing into Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and he has specifically mentioned, during this visit, Indo-China tension over the Line of Control in Galwan Valley as well as alluded to tensions (no doubt between US and China) over other countries in the region. The US Deputy Secretary of State has said that Bangladesh is a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region and that it will be "the centrepiece" of our (US's) work in the region.

We must emphasise here that Bangladesh does not want to be drawn into US's policy regarding China or any conflict between India and China as we are interested in having the best of relations with both India and China as well as the US, amity that we would like to continue to maintain as part of our traditional "friendship to all, malice to none" foreign policy advocated by Bangabandhu. In a world that is still reeling with the devastating human and economic costs of the Covid-19 pandemic, we hope that all countries will refrain from escalating political tensions that will only do more harm than good to the global community. The world is far too interconnected and collectively vulnerable to enemies like Covid-19 and climate change to afford geopolitical spats that can spiral into destructive conflicts.

Govt needs to make a decision on getting Covid-19 vaccines

We have the funds, what is stopping us?

WHILE countries around the world have been making desperate efforts to get Covid-19 vaccines, Bangladesh's initiatives to get the vaccine, unfortunately, is not that visible. Our government has refused to co-fund the trials of a Chinese Covid-19 vaccine at a time when a number of countries have already made investments to get vaccines from companies that were conducting phase-III trials. According to health experts, such a decision has only narrowed down our options for getting vaccines when they will be ready. Although the government is saying that it is in talks with makers of five front-running vaccine candidates, we are not aware of any progress made in this regard.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), a vaccine for the coronavirus disease could be ready for registration by the year end or early next year. Which means we do not have much time left to make a decision about getting the vaccine.

As China's Sinovac's CoronaVac's phase-III testing in Bangladesh is now uncertain, the government has two options left for getting vaccines. It could get 20 percent of the vaccines it needs from the WHO and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) under the COVAX Facility, a mechanism designed to guarantee rapid, fair, and equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines worldwide. The second option is to make deals with pharmaceutical companies or governments. While the first option is complicated because of the number of countries in queue and massive global demand, there is also no visible efforts by the government for the second option. So, we are just not sure what the government's plan is regarding the vaccines.

Bangladesh should not lag behind in the global race for vaccines. Since the government has enough funds for the vaccines, it should not sit idle with it. We must remember that Bangladesh is currently the 16th worst hit country in the world in terms of the number of Covid-19 cases—people are getting infected and losing their lives on a regular basis. And since a number of countries have already been grappling with the second wave of Covid-19 infections, we might also experience a new wave in the coming winter. Time is running out. If we do not arrange for a vaccine now, we might have to pay a much higher price for them later.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Who will ensure our safety?

We have seen how often news about sexual violence, rape and gang rape have been making the headlines recently. My mother was voicing her concerns over the safety of women, girls and even children, both at home and outside. And I am sure many more mothers across the country share the same concern.

The other day, while I was out walking by the lakeside, I came across a group of boys and suddenly I felt a shiver run down my spine. I was shocked at the way I felt, as I have never felt anything like it before.

Even though it was daytime and there were plenty of people passing by, I couldn't help but ask myself one thing. If anything goes wrong, who will ensure my safety? And it's not just me, many more girls I know feel the same.

Anika Masud, by email



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

ON October 10, 33-year-old Rayhan Ahmed walked out of his house at 10 pm. At around 4:23 am, Rayhan called his mother from an unknown number and informed her that he had been picked up by the police who were holding him at Bandarbazar Police Outpost. He asked her to send someone with Tk 4,000 so that the police would free him.

His step-father, upon hearing this, rushed to the police outpost with the money, whereupon he was told that Rayhan had been injured in an "accident" and was sleeping. He was then told to come back around 10 am, this time with Tk 10,000. When Rayhan's step-father returned in the morning, he was told to go to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital where Rayhan had been admitted after his physical condition had "deteriorated". It was at the hospital that he learned that Rayhan had died and the police there said that Rayhan had been beaten by a mob.

Rayhan's family naturally did not believe this. Why would they, when there were so many unanswered questions. Questions such as, when did the mob beat Rayhan? It couldn't have been after 4:23 am, since he was already in police custody by then. Then why didn't Rayhan say anything about the beating or him not feeling well physically to his mother over the phone? Why did the police demand Tk 4,000 to set him free, instead of immediately taking him to a hospital—which they finally did at 7 am in the morning, according to the medical registrar of the hospital. Why didn't the police mention the seriousness of Rayhan's injuries to his step-father the first time he arrived at the police outpost (at which point he could have taken Rayhan to a hospital, and possibly saved his life)? And if he was beaten by a mob,

why did they initially say that he had an "accident"?

After protests erupted in Sylhet following Rayhan's death, an internal probe body of police was formed and it found that the outpost's police personal were involved—although to what extent is not yet clear, however, four policemen have so far been suspended in connection with the incident. Interestingly, on October 15, this newspaper reported that the sub-inspector in charge of the Bandarbazar

inhuman, or degrading punishment or treatment) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh—in 2019 several rights organisations in their presentation to the UN's Committee against Torture alleged that 348 prisoners had died in jail custody in Bangladesh since the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act-2013 was enacted. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, 74 people died in jail custody in 2018, 58 people died in 2019 and 58 again died



Police Outpost (among those who were suspended) was on the run.

Will the law enforcers manage to apprehend him? Will we ever know what really happened to Rayhan and who were involved? And will Rayhan's family ever get justice for his untimely death? It is the responsibility of the state to give us the answers to these questions. However, if past records are anything to go by, one should not be holding onto their breath.

Despite custodial deaths and torture being illegal and unconstitutional—violating Article 31 (right to protection of the law), Article 32 (protection of right to life), Article 33 (safeguards in case of arrest or detention) and Article 35 (protection from torture or cruel,

between January-September 2020.

What these figures show is that like many other terribly grievous crimes, custodial death, too, has become normalised in Bangladesh.

Another way to look at it is to see how the media—including this newspaper—reacted to the first ever verdict given in a lawsuit filed under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013, earlier this year, on September 9. An editorial published on that verdict by this newspaper on September 11 carried these words in its title, "a monumental verdict". For obvious reasons the verdict was, indeed, quite monumental. But out of the hundreds of people who have died in jail custody, why has there been only

IMF report on Bangladesh surpassing India's per capita GDP: What does it reveal?

In episode 592 of #CutTheClutter, Shekhar Gupta explains how India lost a 40 percent per capita income lead to Bangladesh in the past 5 years

THE International Monetary Fund Global Economic Outlook report, which projected that Bangladesh is set to surpass India's per capita income in 2020, has exposed "India's Achilles' heel", said ThePrint's Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta in episode 592 of "Cut the Clutter".

The report states that this year, the Indian economy will be among the steepest declining economies in the world. After Italy and Spain, which were infected by Covid-19 early on, and maybe even France, India's economy will suffer the most this year because of coronavirus, said Gupta.

According to the IMF's projection, the Indian economy will fall anywhere between 10.3-10.6 percent, while Bangladesh's economy will grow by 4 percent. If this happens and the projections are correct, Gupta said, then by the end of this financial year Bangladesh's per capita income will be higher than India's.

He made a disclaimer and said that IMF's projections are not always correct and said, "Frankly, it's for us Indians to prove them wrong. There isn't much time left in this financial year, but you can still try and prove them wrong."

Decline did not happen in just 1 year

Gupta explained that if Bangladesh's per capita income exceeds India's, then the latter will be the fourth-richest country in South Asia after Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh.

This would be an eye opener and a very rude shock due to the common perception among Indians that Bangladesh is a basket case, especially in the current political atmosphere and in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), he added.

Explaining the economics of the situation, Gupta said that even if India improves in the next year with a projected growth rate of 8 percent, it would be on a base which has already been lowered this year by the 10 percent fall. He also cautioned that this over 10 percent decline is not something that happened in just one year.

According to Gupta, five years ago, India's per capita income was 40 percent higher than Bangladesh's.

Therefore, to potentially be below Bangladesh now would have required a lot of work, in the wrong direction. Gupta explained that data from the last five

years showed that Bangladesh's economy had grown at 9.1 percent compounded whereas India had grown at only 3.2 percent compounded.

Need to ask what happened in last 5 years

Looking at the figures and data, Gupta said that India needs to raise questions to its leadership and Prime Minister Narendra Modi about what happened in the past 5 years.

Leave aside this year as it was a different story, but we need to ask the government what happened in the last five years that the country lost its growth

powerhouse today, something India no longer is. And while Bangladesh's exports have boomed, India's exports have stalled and declined, he said.

India needs a reality check, dose of humility

Speaking about India's position in the neighbourhood and previous equation with Bangladesh over the years, Gupta explained that India has had the best relations with the country in the past 10-15 years.

It has had the most important strategic equations with the country, Bangladesh also de-Islamised their governance and



Bangladeshi farmers harvest rice in a field in Manikganj on the outskirts of Dhaka on August 27, 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

momentum to such an extent, he said, adding that Covid was only an excuse for this year.

Decisions like the nationwide lockdown and demonetisation are examples of a decisive government, which was not going through any debate or discussion.

Gupta said, "India has gone back to protectionism, India has gone back to weaponising the tax agencies and India has gone back into a trade aversion, foreign trade aversion."

Furthermore, if Bangladesh was growing fast it was because it is an export

cooperated with India "beautifully and marvelously" on control of terrorism. The latter also supported India in its "tussle" with Pakistan.

However, despite all this and because of India's domestic politics, with respect to CAA, India started a completely "madcap" campaign to malign Bangladesh, said Gupta.

He then referred to an article by Swati Narayan in *The Indian Express*, which said that on all major indices such as global hunger index, gender development index, world happiness index, immunisation, infant mortality, etc., Bangladesh was

one verdict given in only one case in so many years?

When we have more than 300 people dying while in custody of law enforcers, why must we celebrate justice being delivered in the case of only one of them? Mustn't the law enforcement agencies take responsibility for the rest? Mustn't we say that those deaths, too, are on their hands?

This brings us to the subject of accountability—or the lack of it. Over the years, we have repeatedly heard law enforcers and law enforcing agencies dismiss off-hand the idea of foul play in case of custodial deaths. And more often than not, other members of the government—including lawmakers and other public servants—have sung from the same song-sheet.

While they denied that any (and all) state agents or agencies could ever do such a thing, case after case of people dying in police custody went ignored and uninvestigated—bringing us to this point.

While one can only hope that Rayhan's family succeeds in getting justice, and that those who have caused such terrible injustice upon Rayhan and his family are ultimately held to account, one cannot help but ask: what about the hundreds of others whose truths will never be heard or discovered? How many hundreds more must perish before the systemic absence of accountability is finally addressed? And, finally, when will the right to protection of the law (Article 31), protection of right to life (Article 32), safeguards in case of arrest or detention (Article 33) and protection from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment or treatment (Article 35), as enshrined in our constitution, finally be recognised in practice in Bangladesh?

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is: @EreshOmarJamal



Join us for a Star Forum on 'Accountability for custodial deaths: Lessons from the landmark Jonny case' on October 17 at 7pm from The Daily Star's Facebook page.