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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Bangladesh and India’s relations must go to the next level

Stumbling blocks in the friendship have to be removed

AS Bangladesh approaches its 50th year and observes the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Bangladesh-India celebrate 50 years of their friendship, the virtual summit between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Narendra Modi bears special significance. Many of the commitments made anticipate further strengthening of this close friendship. This includes India’s promise to promptly deliver to Bangladesh the Covid-19 vaccines it is producing and the commitment to strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation on trade and connectivity, especially by removing non-tariff barriers. Thus relations between the two countries, especially at the political level, are very amicable and positive. There are, however, certain issues that stand in the way of taking this friendship, which has great strategic significance to both countries, to a deeper level of trust, mutual understanding and cooperation.

Bangladesh is anxiously waiting for certain crucial issues to be resolved. PM Sheikh Hasina has sought early signing of the interim agreement on Teesta water sharing that had been agreed upon a long nine years ago. Although PM Modi has expressed India’s sincere commitment to address this, the people of Bangladesh would like to see a concrete resolving of this issue as quickly as possible.

There are also some trade-related thorns in the economic relationship of the two countries that need to be removed. We would, for instance, like to see the anti-dumping tax on jute products removed. The implementation of the Indian Line of Credit to Bangladesh aimed at boosting infrastructural development, among other things, has been delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles that need to be addressed. The condition of around 85 percent of materials to be sourced from India for infrastructural projects (which has been relaxed in special cases) needs to be revised as it may hurt Bangladeshi industries, such as those producing cement and rods. What is the logic of sourcing materials from India when they are abundantly produced in Bangladesh?

We are also less than happy with India’s role, or lack thereof, in the Rohingya refugee repatriation that Bangladesh has been burdened with. A more active role is sought from India, one that will be prioritised over its economic interests in Myanmar. The continuous border killings of Bangladeshi nationals by BSF despite India repeatedly promising to address this issue, has been cause of great disappointment for Bangladesh. A more sincere effort is needed from the Indian side to put a stop to these killings.

At this important juncture of their relations, the most important element is trust and sincerity. India must show greater understanding towards Bangladesh by letting go of its unnecessary prickliness regarding Bangladesh’s relations with China. Bangladesh, in its endeavour to develop and progress, will continue to reach out to other countries as it has to Japan, the US, China and the European countries. It will do so for its own interests. This in no way affects its close ties with India with which it shares a most important and emotional history—our Liberation War. Therefore, India must be rest assured that Bangladesh will not do anything that will in any way compromise India’s security concerns.

We hope that this auspicious milestone of relations between the two countries will usher in a significantly more meaningful height of mutual cooperation by removing all the stumbling blocks that keep coming in the way. Most decidedly, the ball is in India’s court.

Shipbreaking workers paid half of minimum wage

How are we allowing wage theft on such a massive scale?

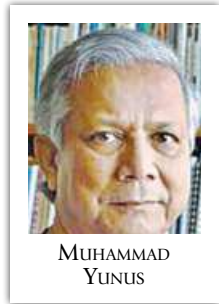
WE are alarmed that tens of thousands of workers in the shipbreaking industry—which remains one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, with disturbing levels of fatalities, injuries and work-related diseases—are being denied their rightful wages by employers. Although the government declared Tk 16,000 as minimum wage in 2018, a recent investigation by *The Daily Star* reveals that many workers are receiving only half of what they are legally owed. This essentially means that over the last two years, employers have robbed workers of crores of Taka. Workers and labour leaders report that the wage structure and labour laws are ignored in every single yard of the country, depriving workers of any semblance of dignity. As a result, an overwhelming majority are struggling to make ends meet, despite risking their lives on a daily basis.

Earlier this month, a 35-year-old man died after falling from the engine room of a ship in Chattogram. According to non-profit Young Power in Social Action, about seven shipbreaking workers have died this year, while another 24 died in 2019. Many more were temporarily or permanently disabled in the absence of sufficient protection gears or safety protocols. Meanwhile, with no enforcement of existing labour laws, workers are forced to work long hours, during holidays and without work contracts.

It is now well-documented how ruthlessly workers are exploited in the shipbreaking industry. But why is there so little monitoring of the industry from the government? What is the point of legislating minimum wages if there is no mechanism to ensure implementation? How have employers gotten away with such massive wage theft for the last two years?

We urge the government to take urgent steps to rectify this serious violation. It should ensure that employers not only pay minimum wages to workers going forward, but also back wages for the past two years. It is abhorrent that it is allowing exploitative employers to rob desperate and destitute workers of their dues under the government’s nose. This must end now.

People’s lives must matter more than pharma companies’ profit



THE history of human beings is a history of being driven basically by collective interest, not by personal interest. Economists made us believe that we are driven only by personal interest, and act accordingly through profit maximisation. It is time to restore our core identity by making businesses serve society’s needs first and foremost; profit cannot come at the expense of human well-being, and human life. Nowhere should that be more true than our health—which was enshrined by our leaders as a fundamental right when I was merely six years old, in the 1946 constitution of the World Health Organization.

It is tragic today that the pharmaceutical industry—which has been appropriately lauded for producing safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines in record time—has been pursuing secretive monopolistic deals with the fruits of taxpayer-funded innovation, rather than volunteering to hand over intellectual property rights and know-how for the next great task facing humanity: getting those vaccines to everyone, everywhere, at the lowest cost possible, at the fastest possible time.

Make no mistake: unless we collectively take on this task with single-minded determination, the consequences will be dire and long-lasting. Already, richer countries in Europe and America have locked up most of the global supply of vaccines for their own populations, pushing lower income nations to the back of the queue. As we emerge into 2021, rather than having a sense of possibility of a vaccine-led ending of the pandemic, many in the global south is gripped with a sense of dread and anger at the big new social chasm that’s about to open: between the vaccine haves and have-nots. The longer the pandemic goes on

anywhere, the more people will continue to die and the more the virus will have a chance to mutate and become vaccine resistant, threatening new waves everywhere. Meanwhile, under current mechanisms such as COVAX, which are commendable, there simply will not be enough vaccine doses to go around by the end of 2021. The Global North is hardly in a mood to listen to WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom’s solemn warning—“No one is safe until everyone

technologies, with South Africa, a country where the tragic history of needless lives lost to the HIV/Aids pandemic looms large, as a leading co-sponsor of the proposal.

A simple declaration to allow the vaccine to be patent-free will transform the situation dramatically. Instead, we see a clear emergence of North-South divide on this very issue of saving human lives in countries where most of the global population live.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

is safe.” To face this long year ahead, countries urgently need to ramp up diagnostics tools, get access to potentially effective treatments at the lowest cost, and vaccinate their most at-risk as rapidly as possible—such as healthcare providers and the elderly. That’s why nearly a hundred countries are supporting a proposal at the World Trade Organization this month to issue a broad-based general waiver on patents to all Covid-19 vaccines and medical

Rich countries, such as the US, Canada, Australia and Japan, have so far remained together to oppose the resolution, which will allow low income countries the ability to focus on getting life-saving Covid-19 medical technologies to their people at the lowest cost without the fear of being sued for infringing intellectual property rights getting in the way. What’s perhaps sadder is that Brazil has abandoned its long-held positions and joined the group of countries which oppose patent free production of these

On shared and contested histories



should have been given to the universities from the start and not to the politicians. In other words, he maintained that there should have been an objective academic archival process for the history of the Liberation War, rather than the repeated and passionate changes in the versions of history whenever there is a change in the political landscape.

Successful post-1975 military governments who tried to silence and overshadow their predecessors ended up obliterating the contribution of Bangabandhu and the movements that ultimately led to freedom. Their version of history, where the enemy could not be named, uncannily resembled that of Pakistan. My generation (and I am as old the country), grew up learning about the Liberation War in mixed metaphors: the perpetrators were “unnamed enemies” represented by symbolic hyenas, vultures or thunderstorms and the victims were nothing more than simple farmers or fishermen in dance dramas. For 21 years, the general undertone had been to “let bygones be bygones” and move on without engaging with history.

The octogenarian professor is among the fast fading first generation of intellectuals who both witnessed and archived the birth of the nation. He was one of the few with a camera in 1952 to photograph many of the images of Ekushey that we now see. While listening to his account of how he was arrested by the Pakistani Army on March 25 along with 14 others from the Dhaka University campus, who were put in a temporary jail in the second capital (the National Parliament House); how Professor Rehman Sobhan and some other expatriates in the US went to Senator Edward Kennedy to make him call Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and barter their release, it dawned on me that there are not too many of such individuals around to reflect on the nuances of the War. Once these individuals are gone, we will be left with simplified national and ideological narratives.

Hence, now more than ever, it is important that the academics undertake serious scholarly projects to record and preserve history for the posterity. It is our sacred duty to preserve the details of the sacrifice of our fellow human beings, which has made our existence possible. The intelligentsia was the first “national group” that was targeted for “systematic killing” on March 25, 1971 and the same group was targeted again on December 14, 1971. The circularity is no coincidence: for the Pakistanis, the spirit of freedom originated in the brains of these public

intellectuals. From their perspective, shooting at the brain of the freedom loving beast is the easiest way to handle the situation. Removing Bangabandhu from the scene was another strategic ploy on their part. They also targeted another “national group”—Hindus who were depicted as the agents of India, a country that they felt was involved in a political intrigue as a result of the 1965 War and was instigating insurgency in their eastern province.

There were three main actors in the Liberation struggle. Pakistan tried to put forward a version that focuses on a secessionist movement led by India-sponsored terrorists who killed many non-Bengalis. Their propaganda machinery during the war brought in a number of journalists to tell the world

a colony for 30 years.” This is an echo of General Yahya Khan, who on February 22, 1971, is reported to have said, “Kill three million of them, and the rest will eat out of our hands.”

Then there is India, a country that went around the world to gain diplomatic support in our favour against the backdrop of the Cold War, a country that sheltered 10 million refugees during the war, and a country that trained the guerrillas and helped them with military resources before resisting and overpowering the final blow of Pakistani attacks in December, thus expediting victory. The dominant narrative in India, however, has presented the war as an India-Pakistan war that somehow relegates the role of our freedom fighters. Their big-brother like arrogance, for the lack of a better word, in the post-Liberation



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

of the “atrocities” committed by the MuktiBahini. Anthony Mascarenhas, the author of *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, could not believe what he saw. He fled to London and published in *The Sunday Times* an article titled “Genocide”. Before he published it on June 13, 1971, Mascarenhas had to arrange the escape of his family members through the Afghanistan border to avoid Pakistani retaliation. In 2011, BBC credited the piece as “an article that changed history”. Mascarenhas told the world about the “GENOCIDE (that was) conducted with amazing casualness”. He quoted West Pakistani senior military officers saying, “We are determined to cleanse East Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing of two million people and ruling the province as

period has caused many in Bangladesh to interpret Indian involvement along religious lines, going back to the two-nation theory surrounding Partition.

As the third actor, we have been a stage for contesting narratives where versions of history are constructed, accentuated and omitted (albeit selectively remembered). Depending on who is telling the story, the viewing lens has been conveniently changed. Our textbooks were manipulated in such a way that many who attended schools in the late 1970s and 1980s did not even know of the Liberation War. Anam Zakaria, a Pakistani oral historian, in 1971: *A People’s History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India*, mentions research done by Yvette Claire Rosser on the textbooks of the three countries. “Based on [Yvette’s] interviews with Bangladeshi students,

vaccines. It is the right time for G20 leaders to show that they mean every word when they declare their policy of “sparing no effort” to leave no one behind. They have to rise up to show that their actions speak louder than their own words.

European leaders have a choice before them as they head into the EU Council meetings led by Chancellor Merkel—whether to look only within their own borders and put the financial interests of their pharmaceutical companies first, or renounce vaccine capitalism forcefully and stand in solidarity with the world’s most vulnerable people. If Europe joins the Global South to put people above patents and enable countries to waive intellectual property rights, then it will decisively tip the scale to pass the resolution with three-fourth of the votes at the WTO.

The climate crisis has already created a global emergency, posing a huge threat to all human beings on the planet. Now, the pandemic is set to escalate this by leaving the South with no vaccine, and worse yet, with a flood of fake vaccines, unless we care to protect them with one simple decision to cancel intellectual property rights on vaccine production, the way it was done in the case of the polio vaccine.

Joining hands for a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine to reach all corners of the world, as fast as possible, at the least cost possible—could launch humanity into this new decade with a foundation of renewed trust in our ability to survive together. I hope European leaders do not miss this historic chance.

Professor Muhammad Yunus launched a call for the Covid-19 vaccine to be a Common Good, which has been joined by 24 other Nobel Laureates and another 100+ eminent global figures. Nearly one million people globally have also joined him on this call to make Covid-19 vaccines and medical technologies available everywhere without barriers related to intellectual property and know-how.

Professor Muhammad Yunus is Nobel Laureate for Peace, 2006.

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she writes, ‘there may be a generation of young adults who are partially unaware that Pakistan was actually the enemy’, and many mistakenly believe that the ‘Bangladesh army fought the Indian army’. Children in Pakistan read about the infidels, children in India read about the final days of the war in which their army got involved—instead of talking about the guerrilla war that weakened the enemy. Only now, we are finally reading a history that glorifies the role of our national heroes.

We need a national history that will speak of the emergence of Bangladesh in a way that negotiates with the narratives of the two other actors of this political history. We need a history that is connected with the formation of our national, cultural and political identity, and protect ourselves from the exploitative and hegemonic discourse promulgated outside our national borders.

Then again, we should not insist on having a single truth. We need to academically engage with the contesting versions and tackle them with historical evidence. We need to establish before the Pakistanis that our desire to have a land of our own was not an act of treachery; it was conditioned by their apathy and atrocities. We need to establish before the Indians, we are not ungrateful for your support—then again, it is time for you to withdraw your shadow for us to grow. We need a smart young generation who will look into the eyes of their Pakistani counterparts with pride and demand an apology for their misdeeds, and will tell their Indian counterparts to respect our boundaries. Above all, we need to tell our people: rejoice, you are a 50-year-old nation who has made the most of your freedom to give the other actors a run for their money; our niche in the Global Development Index speaks for itself. Let our history be our source of strength. Let us not reduce histories into simplistic binaries of pro- and anti-; let us listen to all, and have the scholarly competence and academic confidence to deal with the sociopolitical dynamics that shaped our nation-state, and have the genuine curiosity and open-mindedness to learn and reinterpret past events against present contexts.

Shamsad Mortuza is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.