

## Dhaka commuters made to suffer

### Will BRTA act on its threat?

FOR the second day in a row till April 17, thousands of commuters were left stranded as the BRTA kept the pressure on buses with reserved, seating services to withdraw the practice. These buses charged their customers extra for a seating service that allowed no extra passengers beyond seating capacity, which goes against the rules of business. In protest, these bus owners have kept their vehicles off the roads triggering this transport crisis. The brunt of this unofficial strike is being borne by the thousands of people who must use buses to travel on Dhaka roads daily as buses are the only form of mass transport in the capital city.

Residents are naturally angry and frustrated at this culture of impunity that the transport sector seems to enjoy. Back in February the transport unions enforced a nationwide strike protesting against a court verdict that was mired in violence and cost significant loss of property and untold suffering to people in general. The BRTA mobile courts are well within their rights to press charges and fines against errant bus owners who, it would appear, believe that it is their God-given right to fleece people as and when they please, ply on whatever route or charge "extra" for services that go beyond what is allowed by law.

The transport owners need to understand that they are not above the law. It is time for BRTA to start enforcing the law and we expect it to act on plans to cancel route permits for transport owners who have kept their vehicles off the roads. For too long, ordinary people have been made to suffer and it is time for the authorities to take firm action.

## Marjia's suicide

### Child marriage claims another life

IN yet another tragic incident related to child marriage, a teenage girl from Akkelpur upazila of Joypurhat committed suicide by hanging herself from the ceiling in her living room. Fifteen-year-old Marjia Sultana killed herself finding no other way out of being married off by her family.

While many of us cannot even imagine the anguish Marjia must have been feeling there are millions of girls in the country who can. According to UNICEF, 52 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married off before the age of 18 – one of the highest rates of child marriage globally.

Marjia's suicide must be seen in the context of the dangerous extent to which child marriage has been normalised in our society today. Although the Bangladesh government aims to end child marriage by 2041 the new law that allows for child marriage to take place under "special circumstances" is completely contradictory to the government's global commitment. Despite protests by activists and rights groups that the new law will encourage and legalise child marriage, the law was passed. The least that the government can do now is ensure that the special provision in the law is not misused.

Furthermore, the role of civil society today is more important than ever in the fight against child marriage. Awareness campaigns need to be vigorously carried out, especially in rural areas, and committees in schools should be created to disseminate information about legal help and lend support to students regarding child marriage.

# PM's visit to India

## Modi failed to walk the extra mile

 FROM A  
BYSTANDER


MAHMOOD HASAN

MINISTER Narendra Modi at the personal level is, indeed, positive. But beneath this optimistic political façade there exists distrust due to two unwholesome realities — the RSS-rooted BJP's 'Hindutva' and a latent antipathy towards Bangladesh at the bureaucratic level.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi walks with his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi, India, April 8, 2017.

PHOTO: AP

Statements from senior BJP leaders regarding Bangladesh in the recent past were anything but friendly. Add to this the enduring perception in the South Block (Ministry of External Affairs) that the small neighbouring Muslim majority Bangladesh is a source of security threats and cannot be wholly trusted. Bangladesh is also a politically divided country, with neither a credible opposition nor any serious debates in parliament. Despite its large majority in parliament the government is basically weak. Bangladesh is, on the other hand, a rapidly growing economy making it a lucrative market and profitable investment destination for the Indian business community.

Given India's hostility towards

Pakistan and strained relations with Nepal, there are good reasons for India to cultivate friendship with Bangladesh. But Delhi's procrastination in solving bilateral issues lies in Bangladesh's weakness.

It is in this backdrop that the just concluded 4-day visit (April 7-10) of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Delhi has to be viewed. A lot of excitement, emotion and expectation surrounded the visit, as usual, particularly in Bangladesh.

Let's focus on two issues that dominated the discourse both in Bangladesh and India. The first is the Teesta water sharing treaty and second are the Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on defence

The Teesta treaty has been high on Bangladesh's agenda for the past 20 years, but with no signs of any solution. Hasina is now caught between the petty vote politics of BJP and TMC over the forthcoming West Bengal elections. The Indian constitution empowers Modi to overrule Mamata Banerjee and sign the treaty. Letting Sheikh Hasina negotiate with Mamata was an unprecedented move. It was Modi's job to settle the issue with Mamata and deliver it to Hasina. Delhi will now use this precedent every time issues related to states bordering Bangladesh come up.

What was most outlandish is that Mamata Banerjee, going back on her words to Sheikh Hasina "to keep faith in her and to not worry", told her that

comprehensive defence cooperation agreement. This was mooted by the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar when he rushed to Dhaka in November 2016, soon after Bangladesh acquired two submarines from China. Clearly the proposal was driven by India's anti-China policy. Bangladesh needs to maintain equal partnerships with India and China. Bangladesh cannot afford to be drawn into great power rivalries in Asia, or elsewhere.

The signing of the 4 MoUs will remain a source of concern until full details of the "Defence Cooperation Framework" are known. On the USD 500 million line of credit, PM Hasina, in her press briefing on April 11, said that Bangladesh will decide what kinds of equipment will be procured from India. The point here is that India is heavily dependent on imports from various sources, as it does not produce high quality military hardware. Only last week, India signed a USD 2 billion agreement with Israel for weapons technology and procurement of military equipment.

The other concern relates to the meaning of the MoU on "cooperation in the field of strategic and operational studies". Defence force of every nation develops top secret strategies and operational plans to defend its sovereignty. Bangladesh's defence establishments must also have such blueprints. One hopes that Bangladesh will not be required to share these secret policy documents with India.

Bangladesh has walked the extra mile and addressed all of India's security and connectivity concerns. Hasina, this time, went even further to honour Indian soldiers who died fighting in Bangladesh's Liberation War. Despite all the upbeat rhetoric from Narendra Modi, the fact remains, Sheikh Hasina came back with promises only. However, Bangladesh can probably take comfort in the fact that PM Hasina was accorded head of state protocol by the Indian government. Cynics may say, by being extra nice, Modi had tried to make up for the botched Teesta deal.

One expected Modi to be sensitive towards the needs of its neighbour and walk the extra mile for Bangladesh. It seems that the element of distrust still exists, as BJP leaders are unable to translate their supposed goodwill into action because of the 'Hindutva' ideology and the lagging bureaucracy — examples: border killings, massive trade imbalance, violating the Ganges treaty, no initiative in water sharing of common rivers, etc.

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cooperation.

Hasina returned with 22 MoUs — legally non-binding loose instruments — signed on different issues. MoUs can eventually lead to legally binding agreements. The 62-paragraph joint-statement also defined the trajectory in which relations are to progress in future.

The Prime Minister's press briefing contained more political rhetoric than actual achievements. A careful look at the list of MoUs shows that many of these documents could have been signed at functional levels rather than be brought up at the summit level. This was presumably done to give the media something to talk about.

there was no water in Teesta to share with Bangladesh. Surprisingly, the joint statement does not mention anything about the Joint Rivers Commission, which was supposed to sort out all the sticky issues related to the treaty. The JRC has not met after 2010 and is presumably dead. Prime Minister Modi, however, assured an early settlement of the treaty.

It took 24 years to get the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty signed (1996). That too is not being respected by India — Bangladesh does not get her share of water from the Farakka barrage. One wonders, after all the hullabaloo, will Bangladesh get its share of water from Teesta even if the treaty is signed?

On the defence front, India wanted to sign a long-term (25-year)

## ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

# Time to go back to the drawing board

 POLITICS  
OF CLIMATE  
CHANGE


SALEEMUL HUQ

A part of the historic Paris Agreement on Climate Change, agreed in 2015, was the pledge by developed countries to provide a minimum of USD 100 billion a year from 2020 onwards, to assist developing countries tackle climate change through both mitigation and adaptation. They also created a new funding body called the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to manage the funds, headquartered in Korea. The GCF has already received over USD 10 billion and has allocated some of it to a number of mitigation projects, as well as adaptation of infrastructure projects, but is yet to support any adaptation projects aimed at helping the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the least developed countries.

At the last board meeting of the GCF earlier this month, the board ended with an acrimonious decision to formally reject a proposal from Ethiopia for a USD 100 million programme, to support drought affected communities adapt to the adverse impacts. It was the first time the GCF board had formally rejected an adaptation proposal and the members were quite evenly split with developing country members supporting the project and some developed country opposing it on the grounds that it was more of a development project than a climate change one.

Something similar happened at the previous GCF board meeting in regards to another proposal submitted by Bangladesh, through the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), to support communities and women in coastal Bangladesh with fresh drinking water to adapt to the salinity that they are already suffering from (although on that occasion the UNDP withdrew the project at the last minute so there was no formal rejection).

The arguments and division between board members of developed and developing countries were almost identical.

These two examples clearly demonstrate that the GCF, despite its laudable intentions to spend half their funds to support adaptation in the poorest and most vulnerable countries, is unable to deliver on this promise.

It is, therefore, clearly time to go back to the drawing board.

Without laying blame for this failure, I will make a

few suggestions for ensuring the fulfilment of the objectives of providing adaptation funds to the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

First, the GCF board needs to develop clear guidelines on what kind of adaptation proposals it will approve. Lack of clarity is a major cause for the failures we have already seen and is putting off others from applying.

However, making clear theoretical distinctions between what is development and what is adaptation

through multilateral agencies such as the UNDP. This is penalising such countries from accessing the funds for adaptation directly. Allowing the countries to have enhanced direct access would also solve this bottleneck.

Finally, developing countries preparing adaptation proposals also need to be mindful when making the case to show that the projects are, indeed, genuinely responding to adverse impacts of Climate Change and are not just development projects dressed up as climate adaptation ones.



Green Climate Fund (GCF) headquarters in Songdo, Korea.

to climate change is far from easy. Hence, my own advice would be to use the board approved mechanism of enhanced direct access to allow countries to make project-by-project decisions at the national level and provide good guidance on how measurement, reporting and verification of the investments can be made (instead of trying to evaluate proposals on paper as they do now).

Another aspect of the systemic failure is that the poorest and most vulnerable countries are not being able to access funds directly and have to apply

In conclusion, it is important for the GCF Board to pause and reflect on strategic changes right now, before proceeding as it has done so far, or else it will face more failures. One possible option would be for the GCF board to designate the existing and well functioning adaptation funds, such as the Adaptation Fund and Least Developed Countries Fund, as windows for channelling their adaptation funds.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Thanking the High Court for prompt justice

We applaud the High Court's decision of death sentence for the four convicts who brutally tortured Rajon to death.

Such incidents of child abuse have become a regular phenomenon in our country, but most of them are never exposed. Along with judicial punishment, stronger social awareness should be raised regarding these issues, so that such criminals cannot take the law into their own hands.

 Mir Mohammad Minhan  
Tangail

### Direct train service schedule

I thank Mawduda Hasnin of Rajshahi for her concrete and worthy proposal of a Dhaka-Rajshahi direct train service, printed on April 17 in your Editorial page's 'Letters to the Editor' column. It was especially impressive how she cited the example of her friend's journey in the UK to highlight the poor standards in our own trains. As a developing country, it is about time that we improved our transport services.

The problems Mawduda Hasnin highlighted in her letter are also common among other train lines. Once I had to wait until 1.30 a.m. at night for a train that was due at 8 p.m. for the Kamalapur – Dinajpur route. We may have limitations, but we are also seeing great strides in development in our country. These problems can all be solved if the authorities take appropriate measures. I therefore join Mawduda Hasnin in urging the authorities to set up high quality Dhaka – Rajshahi train services. I would like to add that such services should be added for other train routes across the country as well.

 Dilip Kumar Das  
Dhaka