

## A teetering bus and a tottering transport sector

### A total chaos

THE picture of a bus swaying on the ramp of the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, published in this daily yesterday, reflects the total chaos in our road transport sector. We are horrified at the sight of the decrepit bus that was carrying 26 hajj pilgrims from a Mirpur hajj agency office to the airport. The accident could have been fatal. But we are relieved to know that no one was hurt in the accident.

Looking at the picture one can see that the bus has no brake lights or tail lights and doesn't even display a registration number. How could the hajj agency deploy such a dilapidated bus to transport the hajj pilgrims to the airport?

In fact, thousands of such dilapidated buses and other transports for public use can be seen in all the major highways all over the country. Also, most of these buses are driven by unskilled drivers. But regrettably, the BRTA, BRTC and the police seem to be turning a blind eye to the problem. And the owners and drivers of these buses almost always get away with impunity. It is wanton lawlessness – and lawlessness in one sector breeds lawlessness in all other sectors, as the tendency to break law is very infectious.

The government must crack down on these run-down, unfit buses and other vehicles and bring in discipline in the transport sector as well as all other sectors where indiscipline is rampant. Because, at the end of the day, it's a question of good governance and rule of law. If such lawlessness continues, it's the government's credentials that will suffer.

## ISP fees could rise exponentially

### Will adversely affect internet usage

THE proposed increase in fees structure for internet service providers (ISPs) by the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) defies imagination. Nationwide license fee has been proposed at Tk 25 lakh, which is 25 times the current Tk 1 lakh. Not only will new providers have to pay this charge, but the existing 590 operators too will have to make a one-time deposit. The zonal fees for ISPs (urban area clusters) are proposed to go up 30 times from Tk 50,000 to Tk 15 lakh! We find it ironic for BTRC to comment that the new rules may be reviewed if it will end up raising the burden at end-user level.

The manifold rise in regulatory fees in one go is simply unheard of. Such a move will most definitely hurt consumers who will be getting less speed as ISPs will be forced to spread existing bandwidth to cover more users. Also, the retail pricing of existing internet connections may well be raised that will be beyond a large portion of existing consumers at retail level. When the government is trying to take the country into the digital age, we find the proposal that has been sent to the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology to be a step in the opposite direction. Where steps are being taken to increase internet coverage to reach more people across the country, a huge leap in fees like this could effectively kill the market. A rethink is very much a need of the hour and hopefully the concerned ministry will see the folly of such a regulatory change.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Why this delay in holding DUCSU election?

The students of Dhaka University have been deprived of their rights because of the dysfunctional Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and the absence of student representatives in the Senate. The students recently held demonstrations demanding the long-pending election of DUCSU. The students of Dhaka University played a significant role in our Liberation War and other democratic movements of the country. Holding DUCSU election is necessary for creating new leadership which will



strengthen the foundation of our democracy. In the absence of a representative body to look after the welfare of about thirty-seven thousand students of DU, student cadres of different political parties are ruling in the campus. The general students have no say on anything that matters in their campus life. They are at the mercy of these cadres in the residential halls, most of which are under their control. The university authorities must take necessary steps to hold the DUCSU election and restore the democratic environment of the campus.

Zubair Khaled Huq  
By e-mail

## BANGLADESH-JAPAN TRADE RELATIONS

# The promise beyond tragedy



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

IT was super easy wearing a "geta", the iconic wooden Japanese footwear that Japanese women effortlessly wear with their kimonos. So I bought one last week for only USD 10 in Mitsukoshi, the Japanese version of Harrods in Tokyo, and was followed out by a saleswoman, who waited with her head bent in respect till my elevator left the floor. In the store, I noticed our own Nakshikantha products, designed and imported from Jessore by a young designer couple, and our very own jute "shatranjee" under the brand Aji. Somehow, deep down inside, it felt great to be standing there. Even beyond the store, I discovered "Mother House", another Japanese brand of bags that is sourced from Bangladesh and quietly flaunts the lovely lungi lining inside. The leather looked impeccable and the Bangladeshi workmanship was exquisite. The bags were selling at USD 400-1000 range per piece. The importer was a woman.

How visible are women in Japan? Japan is a country with a gender equality ranking sliding to 111 (out of 144 countries in World Economic Forum

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ratings) in 2016 while Bangladesh leads at 72nd position, beating all the other South Asian countries. Naturally, I am curious about Japanese women. Two weeks ago, in an international forum where I was hosted by UN Women, I had the opportunity to meet an amazing woman, Hiroshi Koike, the first-ever female governor of Tokyo, elected in June 2016. In July 2017, the same woman had floated a "political school" with 50 candidates (many of them first-timers in politics), who had contested in Tokyo assembly election and won 49 seats. Today, Koike San ("san", meaning respectfully), still a member of the LDP, is in charge of one-third of the Japanese budget that runs into trillion and is most



enthusiastically planning the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. It is widely rumoured that this woman is set to be a leading figure in Japanese politics in a short while. According to Koike San, it's important to be the "first penguin", to take the first leap of faith. That message is clear. Japanese women are just getting ready for a new era of freedom and fulfilment.

I was further enlightened to learn a critical point from a friend, Kathy Matsui (who has been credited by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for having coined the term "womenomics"), that by 2030, Asia would drive the consumption growth with consumption rising in

China and India and shifting from basic to discretionary. With a fast-aging Asia, she said, it was time to use more women in Japan and invest in gender diversity, because gender diversity was not about CSR, but rather about profitability. But along with this came another realisation: the disparity in Japan wasn't just being caused by simple male mindsets, it was actually stemming from most men having vested interests in money and authority. So, the game there is more complex than ever.

Thanks to our brilliant ambassador in Japan, Rabab Fatima, who not only hosted me over fusion meals that Anguri, her star chef from Bangladesh, had prepared for the 48 hours that I was in

Tokyo, but also facilitated my meetings with Japanese businessmen and generously contributed to my food for thought. Through her, I ended up meeting a number of happy Japanese businessmen including one who was already sourcing readymade garments from Bangladesh and had set up his own factory in Narayanganj, attempting now to export dried tomatoes to Japan. Interestingly enough, though "Uniqlo" import from Bangladesh was done, the company has continued supporting a noble cause of funding Asian University for Women, which is attended by over 50 female workers from readymade garment factories in Bangladesh.

A critical examination of our trade balance with Japan brings in a few interesting statistics. While the Japanese import of apparel had shrunk to JPY 2,910 billion in 2016, Bangladesh remained amongst the top four exporting countries in both quantity and amount. At a glance, Japanese export had increased 7.5 times between 2005 and 2015. In 2016, our export to Japan had grown at 12.57 percent due to relaxation of rules of origin from April 2015, enabling the way for knit garments to be exported to Japan with ease. In 2016-2017, Japan ended up being Bangladesh's 9th largest export market.

While on the one hand the Holey episode in July 2016 took its own toll, we also need to understand that a drop in export to Japan is reflective of the overall downward trend for exports from Bangladesh to most major destinations. On the other hand, export from Japan is growing and the two-way trade even with a drop is over USD 2.5 billion. To top it all, the 38th ODA loan package signed on June 28 was JPY 178 billion, which was the highest ever. This includes Matarbari, Metro, Kanchpur bridge, airport extension, etc. We also need to understand that in spite of security, infrastructure (land, energy), logistics, red tape, tax concerns that bug the Japanese investors, the trade between the two countries continues to flow in a positive direction. On a more positive note, our government has already awarded one Special Economic Zone to the Japanese in Arahazari in Narayanganj. The second SEZ handover is yet to happen. And apart from Bangladeshi traditional export niche with readymade garments, leather and footwear are also in demand, with additional possibilities of collaboration in all other sectors including food, real estate, deep-sea fishing and IT. The next big dream can very well be automobiles!

Therefore, a last note of caution to all of us who read, write and rip news apart on a daily basis: while we cover tragedies like Holey Artisan, we have to grow hopeful about what awaits us in the bigger picture. While, after Holey, the Japanese have continued to support us, let us seize this opportunity and move beyond tears with a renewed faith and pledge to be their best partner ever.

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## Everyone isn't corrupt



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE finance minister would have us believe that corruption has so pervaded the entire society that it has rendered all of us more or less corrupt. Our finance minister is known for his broadsides and interesting utterances at various times during his long tenure in the job, which sometimes have been a cause of embarrassment for him and his party. This may be one such comment.

In the past, apart from dismissing with a single sweep of his hand as peanuts the bad loans of some public banks amounting to more than Tk 4,000 crore, he had also redefined the word 'rich' to justify the imposition of tax on holders of accounts with Tk 1 lakh and had made a very innovative list that included donkeys and horses as items exempted from VAT. All this had evinced various reactions from many quarters. And now he has termed the entire society corrupt while inaugurating an ACC hotline number to receive complaints on corruption, as 'our veins' have been infiltrated by corruption. If that be the case, what is the use of a toll-free number? Would a purification programme not be a better option?

But to the more mundane issue of corruption. Most people would reject the finance minister's characterisation of the society as being corrupt, and not without reason. Not all people are corrupt and in fact one can say with conviction that only a few are, and they reside in the higher rungs of the society, among the rich and powerful. And it is they who command the order of things in the society. And this is very well-known to the finance minister who has acknowledged the reality and said so in as many words on that particular occasion.

If corruption is rampant, it is because people are forced to grease palms as speed money for every little service they are entitled to but do not get without it. But what is that compared to the CNG scam, the share market scam, the Basic Bank or the Hall Mark scam. 'Societal corruption' had nothing to do with those. It was greed that was the motive. For all that we can say, not much of that cash has been utilised in the country but siphoned off to buy 'second homes' in Malaysia or 'posh houses' in 'begumpara' in Canada, or may have been stashed away in some banks in Switzerland.

However, that is not to say that other

segments of the society, the many among the less affluent, do not indulge in corruption. That is what compels us to look at the phenomenon of corruption itself. We should appreciate the gross difference between greed-based corruption and need-based corruption and the adverse impact of corruption as a consequence of the powerful and the mighty indulging in it. What the comments of the minister convey to the ordinary person, apart from a sense of deep resentment for making so light of a most vital issue, is an effort to justify corruption.

The anatomy of corruption cannot be a mystery. It is upsetting to see that, having topped the list of the most corrupt for several

corruption is fuelled by a nexus of corrupt officers in the administration, a few politicians and the unscrupulous businessmen. Were it not so then we would have not seen the parliamentary inquiry into the infamous CNG scam scuttled by a powerful minister, or there would have been a thorough enquiry into the share market scam and the guilty would have been brought to book. The Basic Bank chairman would not have been allowed to roam freely even after causing the most debilitating damage to public sector banking.

Neither being apologetic about corruption nor justifying its prevalence as a fait accompli behoves a government that wants to bring



years, we are still formulating strategies to fight its endemic influence. And one finds it difficult to agree with those who argue that it might not be possible to eliminate the scourge entirely, and in the short term we may have to keep it at an endurable level till there is a pathological transformation in us.

Let us not hide behind the façade of intractability. And the Anti-Corruption Commission must be complimented for initiating steps to combat corruption. But it cannot be for the Commission alone to fight the bane. Let us also not be shy of exposing the fact that in our country, and perhaps in most countries beset with corruption,

good governance. Doing that amounts to endorsing a most culpable pastime—of a few rich and powerful. Getting rid of corruption would involve looking at the mirror and some sort of introspection instead of blaming the entire society for it. Corruption has escalated primarily because of the culture of impunity and it being a low-risk-high-return venture. As a wise king had said thousands of years ago: "Because sentence against a bad work has not been executed speedily, that is why the heart of the sons of men has become fully set in them to do bad." That still holds good today.

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