

## Deals with China moving at snail's pace

### No signs of urgency palpable

**D**ISAPPOINTINGLY, out of the 26 deals that were signed between China and Bangladesh during President Xi Jinping's visit, three-fourths of the deals have shown no signs of progress even after a whole year has passed. The soft loan that China has committed is yet to be released mainly because of bureaucratic tangles and so, most projects are yet to even get off the ground. Among the agreements was the Karnaphuli Tunnel Loan Agreement which the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and President of China had even inaugurated the construction work of, through a video conference. But project work could not start as the Chinese Exim Bank did not release the necessary funds; the reason being that a manual on how the tunnel would be used was sent to the bank from Dhaka without the signatures of the appropriate authorities. This is indicative of a shocking level of unprofessionalism on the part of government officials. Beside the bureaucratic problems in Bangladesh, many of the major delays are being caused by bureaucratic issues in China. However, what is troubling is not which side the problem is on, but rather that there seems to be no clear-cut method to overcome them quickly. There needs to be some modality of work or a written mechanism to make the process easier. We are a nation already cash-starved and in desperate need to move forward with the development projects agreed on with China. The administration, thus, should shake off its current nonchalant attitude and take the necessary steps to implement the projects on an urgent basis.

## Dhaleshwari going the Buriganga way?

### CETP in Savar tanneries still not complete!

**A** picture in the backpage of this paper's Friday issue says it all. Untreated waste from a tannery in Savar's tannery estate, being dumped into the Dhaleshwari. This is because the much-promised central effluent treatment plant (ETP) that would treat waste materials has not been completed. A report in this daily states that although the construction of the ETP is almost done, work on the solid waste-dumping yard has not even started as per the plan. Yet tanneries have relocated from Hazaribagh and are operating in full swing, disposing toxic waste into the Dhaleshwari, threatening its ecological balance. This disturbingly resembles the way our Buriganga River has been rendered practically dead thanks to the indiscriminate dumping of toxic waste from the tanneries of Hazaribagh. Now it seems to be Dhaleshwari's turn. Despite court directives to build the central effluent plant in Savar, there has been unexplained dilly-dallying regarding its construction. Now that the main ETP is almost complete, we are mystified as to why the other crucial components that would make the waste treatment system operational, have not been finished. How much longer will this take? Until Dhaleshwari reaches a point of no return?

Even a simple instruction from the court asking the BSCIC authorities to run the ETP 24 hours a day and submit an hourly chart for the court to see whether it would function properly round the clock, has not been followed.

We hope that the High Court's directive to complete all relevant structures including the central ETP within four weeks will be honoured and not ignored as in the past. The authorities must also ensure that all factories have salt removal devices as instructed by the court. Dhaleshwari must not be dumped with Buriganga's fate.

SHERAJUM MONIRA FARIN and ESTIAQUE BARI

**T**HE food security situation in Bangladesh has been in troubled waters all through the year. The metaphor stands true in the literal sense as well, since the recent threats to food security are largely a result of the damage caused by two successive floods: the flash flood during April and the monsoon flood since late June.

Today, World Food Day, is an opportune time to talk about where Bangladesh stands with regard to the overall food security situation, and the actions or inactions which have led us to this position.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in the context of food security. Bangladesh has achieved self-sufficiency in rice production (self-sufficiency ratio of rice being 99 percent), but it is vulnerable towards production loss caused by natural calamities. The self-sufficiency ratio is lower for other non-rice crops (FAO 2015). This improved production of rice has helped Bangladesh increase its Global Food Security Index from 34.7 in 2012 to 36.8 in 2016, but is still in the vulnerable category. Bangladesh has managed to improve its average dietary energy supply since the mid-1990s—108 percent as reported in 2015 (FAOSTAT).

However, Bangladesh, like most other South Asian countries, is dependent on cereals, roots and tubers (especially rice, the staple food), indicating unbalanced nutrition intake. Bangladesh has made strides in reducing the prevalence of undernourishment from 34.7 percent in 1993 to 16.4 percent in 2016 (FAOSTAT). Furthermore, the prevalence of wasting and stunting and of underweight children under five years of age has also gone down at varying degrees from their mid-1990s level.

Thus, one can conclude that even though the achievements as regards food security in Bangladesh have been somewhat satisfactory, the records are wanting and unstable. As a country vulnerable to natural calamities like flood, ensuring food security on a sustained basis is a huge concern for Bangladesh. This year, the challenge has been intensified by the influx of an estimated 5,36,000 forcibly displaced Rohingyas of Rakhine State of Myanmar.

The most evident threat to food security is the recent price volatility in the rice market. Already much has been said and done to identify and alleviate the reasons of the recent hike in rice price. The production loss of mainly Boro during the flash flood in the haor and low-lying areas in the northeast region and of crops during the monsoon flood which affected 32 districts can be deemed as the primary reasons of the obstinately high rice price.

Another major factor is the incompetence of the responsible authorities in handling the initial uncertainties in the food grains market, which was taken advantage of by opportunistic groups in the market. Information asymmetry regarding the export of rice by the Indian government; the government's lack of vigilance as regards the depleting stock of rice in the public granaries; and phased reduction of import duties on rice (from 28 percent to 10 percent and then finally to two percent) have fuelled the upheaval in the rice market.

As a result, the lack of availability of food grains at reasonable price will afflict the marginally non-poor

households and households below the poverty line. There is a possibility that even a marginally non-poor, food-secure household could find itself falling into the poverty trap with no (or inadequate) access to food. During urgent situations like this, the possibility of high pressure on the balance of payment due to import bills and food price inflation cannot be ruled out.

Although the government has opted for market-based procurement policies, it has been able to attain only one-fifth of the targeted procurement for Boro. Besides, the trade negotiations for importing rice were

with India as the highest contributor. A country can avail support from the SFB and later, when the emergency food shortage is settled, it can replenish the SFB stocks as per agreement with the SFB Board and member countries.

This year, Bangladesh was eligible to seek support from the SFB as the estimated loss of Boro rice production alone was 1,600,000 MT, which is about eight percent of the previous three fiscal years' (FY14–FY16) national average of Boro rice production (CPD IRBD analysis).



Farmers bring whatever they could save from their flooded Boro fields in the haor area. PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

not fruitful enough to achieve market price correction.

Looking beyond national-level mechanisms towards regional-level collective mechanisms, the government of Bangladesh could have made use of the regional institution, the SAARC Food Bank (SFB). SFB can be viewed as a regional collective initiative to reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. It is an institution backed by the SAARC authority, set up in 2008, with the aim to ensure a regional food security reserve for the SAARC. This is a ready mechanism in place which can be made use of quite effectively only if the SAARC nations are willing and enthusiastic enough.

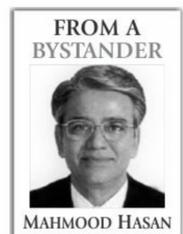
To put it simply, the SFB acts as a regional food reserve for rice and wheat (food grains) from which withdrawals can be made by the SAARC countries upon experiencing *food emergency* (a state where an affected SAARC country is unable to tackle a manmade or natural calamity with its national food reserve) or *food shortage* (a state caused by storage shortfall and/or production shortfall of eight percent from the average of previous three years' production). The current quantum of reserve in the SFB is 486,000 metric tonnes (MT)—contributions made by all member countries

However, as a CPD study points out, the SFB could not be brought into action despite some of the subsequent amendments to facilitate its operationalisation due to certain institutional bottlenecks. In recent times several of the impediments have been addressed, e.g. the removal of the stringent rule for withdrawal of food grains from SFB (the "eight percent production loss" condition of food shortage mentioned above), but this is yet to be finalised. Other problems like inadequate quantum of reserve, absence of agreed pricing modality, and lack of dedicated funds for SFB can and should be addressed in order to make SFB functional. The political willingness of the SAARC leaders in turning the provisions in the SFB Agreement into actions can help the countries prone to natural calamities in times of need.

A society free of hunger is now a global aspiration—enshrined in the 2030 global sustainable agenda. In order to achieve this goal, national and regional efforts must go hand in hand.

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# Catalonia's bid for independence Doomed to failure?



FROM A BYSTANDER  
MAHMOOD HASAN

**E**UROPE'S woes do not seem to end. Over the past several weeks, the news about Catalonia's independence referendum has severely shaken Europe. This time it was Spain facing

secession of Catalonia—one of its wealthiest regions. It is a classic case of sharing the national economic pie that has provoked Catalans to take to the streets to demand independence.

Catalonia pays more taxes to Madrid than other regions, but feels the redistribution of these revenues is grossly unfair, as the money goes to subsidise other poorer regions. Catalans believe that they have put more money into Spain than they have received in return. This sense of unfair treatment is the cause for widespread resentment in Catalonia.

To this was added Spain's economic recession (from 2008 onwards) and cutbacks in public spending. As Catalonia's public debt rose, it demanded bailouts from Madrid, which never came. Madrid itself was neck-deep in debt and was looking for bailouts from European Central Bank. Actually, economic pressures drove angry Catalonians to increasingly call for independence.

Catalonia is the richest and most productive of Spain's 17 regions, with its own language and traditions. The historic city of Barcelona hosted the Summer Olympic Games in 1992. With its 7.5 million people (16 percent of Spain), it is economically as powerful as Denmark, producing 20 percent of Spain's GDP. It contributes over one-fourth of Spain's exports and attracts huge foreign investments. Catalonia has its own parliament, and the president of the Generalitat (government) is Carles Puigdemont of the centre-right Convergence and Union (CiU) party.

The broad autonomy, which Catalonia enjoyed before the Spanish Civil War, was ruthlessly suppressed by Spain's dictator Gen Francisco Franco (1939-75). After Franco's death, Catalan nationalism revived and under the 1978

constitution, the region was granted autonomy. The 2006 statute gave Catalonia greater financial power and described it as a "nation". Trouble began when in 2010 Spain's Constitutional Court overturned that status, leading to calls for secession.

Over the past seven years, instead of addressing the resentment, Madrid only warned that Catalonia's bid for independence was unlawful and against the constitution. But these warnings did not stop the Catalan government from stoking anger against Madrid. In November 2014, the then regional president Artur Mas called for an unofficial referendum, whence 80

The fracas between the police and supporters of independence left several hundred people injured, including policemen. More than 2.25 million supporters turned out to cast their ballot on October 1. Puigdemont reported that 90 percent of the voters were in favour of split. However, the low turnout of 43 percent was blamed on Rajoy's determination to stop the vote.

On October 11, President Puigdemont announced in the parliament in Barcelona that Catalonia "earned the right to be an independent state." However, a sudden change of heart led him to pull back from the brink of a full-blown unilateral declaration of independence,



Catalonian independence supporters in Barcelona on September 11, 2012—also known as Catalonia's national day—amid a protest sparked by Spain's financial crisis.

percent backed independence, though the turnout was low (34 percent). The move was supported by the Republican Left of Catalonia party.

The latest stand-off between Barcelona and Madrid came on September 6, when Catalan parliament passed a law for referendum. President Puigdemont promised to hold the vote on October 1, 2017. During all this period, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy described the move as illegal and warned of serious consequences. As the determined Puigdemont prepared for vote, Madrid sent its police force to stop the referendum, which ended in high drama.

calling for negotiations to resolve the crisis. "If everybody acts responsibly, this conflict can be resolved calmly," he declared. Clearly, Puigdemont is troubled by the economic viability of Catalonia as an independent state. Catalonia's debt to Madrid runs into €52 billion, and since the independence movement gathered steam, banks, big businesses, wineries, and utilities had started shifting their headquarters out of Catalonia.

Interestingly, while the vocal minority Catalans were overjoyed at the prospect of independence, the silent majority were vehemently against splitting from Spain. Hundreds of thousands of anti-

independence Catalans, dressed in white, took to the street on October 8 to protest against the decision to push for independence and called for dialogue with Madrid. These demonstrations came as a source of strength to Prime Minister Rajoy, who warned that he would suspend Catalonia's autonomy and that there would be no negotiations if Puigdemont did not step back.

In hindsight, it is clear that Mariano Rajoy has mishandled the Catalan issue. Spain's King Felipe VI sided with Rajoy instead of taking the role of a mediator. Rajoy's government should have assessed the import of Catalans' sentiment and should never have allowed the problem to reach crisis point. There are hints that negotiations may ultimately help resolve the demands of Catalonia, although Rajoy is holding back till Puigdemont ceases his "illegal" activities. Observers say that the whole spectacle of Puigdemont's independence referendum is to compel Madrid to listen to the grievances of Catalonia.

Surprisingly, the European Union has all the while stayed away from this standoff between Madrid and Barcelona. It has come under criticism for not intervening to restore stability and safeguard the rights of EU citizens in Catalonia. EU budget commissioner warned that the escalating crisis posed a risk of "civil war" in Europe.

If negotiations with Madrid fail and Catalonia ultimately declares independence, it may spark off several similar separatist movements in other parts of Europe such as Basque country, northern Italy, Flanders in Belgium, Northern Ireland, Scotland, etc. Balkanisation of the Iberian Peninsula would ensure the demise of the European project.

For the disgruntled people independence struggle is always a passionate romantic dream. But the viability of small states in Europe, particularly when its population is aging and declining, would not seem to meet the economic realities. Hopefully, Puigdemont would not pursue the independence project further.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Donald Trump's ten months in power

Since assuming the US presidency about 10 months ago, Donald Trump has spent much of his time trying to repeal or reverse achievements of his predecessor Barack Obama. In addition, the US' withdrawal from NAFTA, Paris Agreement on climate change and UNESCO illustrates that the US foreign policy under his watch will be protectionist, at best. Trump's policies and decisions are even disliked by his own party men. His attempt to replace Obamacare, the Obama-era healthcare policy, has met with stiff resistance from the top Republicans. His immature handling of the diplomatic row with Cuba or decision to 'declassify' Iran nuclear deal has raised eyebrows among the US allies abroad. His action has made him a laughing stock before the international community and weakened the US position as the leader of the free world. AKM Ehsanul Haque, *By email*

### Stop extortion by Hijras

I was disappointed to see a photo published in the front page of *The Daily Star* on October 13. The photo shows a group of Hijras (transgender people) forcing a bus passenger to get off and pay them money. This is so irritating and quite common in this city. Their disturbing way of extortion often creates panic among the commuters.

Though the government recognised Hijras as the 'third gender' in 2013, their condition has hardly improved. The government must take effective measures for their welfare, and enforce laws strictly to restrain them from harassing people. Md. Mehedi Hassan Munna, *Jagannath University*