

Attack on Khaleda Zia's motorcade

Doesn't make for a conducive political climate

TARGETING the motorcade of Khaleda Zia does very little to validate the government's tall talk about the flourishing state of democracy in the country. When it talks about a free and fair parliament election, its contrary actions demonstrate every little signs of the manifest preconditions to achieve what the government consistently brags about – a vibrant democracy. The reluctance, indeed the resistance, of the ruling party to accord any political space to the opposition is deeply worrying.

That the political space for the BNP has been gradually shrinking over the last several years is disturbingly evident. Political meetings and rallies by the party were prevented or not allowed on flimsy grounds. Even protest meetings were blunted. And now attempts were made to force abort a humanitarian effort by the party, by attacking the party chief's motorcade, causing injuries to many and damaging a large number of vehicles. Sure, the BNP wanted to get as much political advantage from Khaleda Zia's visit to Cox's Bazar as possible. And taking the road instead of flying was meant to do exactly that. But there is nothing illegal in it. So why the impediment? Even a rally to protest the vandalism by the BNP was not allowed by the police.

We are afraid the predictable government explanation, that the incident was the result of an internal feud within the BNP, cuts no ice at all. We must register our strongest contempt for the attack. This we think is nothing but to blunt the BNP as a viable opposition. When the BNP is constantly castigated by everyone who is anyone in the Awami League, was a physical assault on the party chief necessary? This does not demonstrate the strength of the Awami League, on the contrary betrays its weakness.

Harvesting of Rohingya crops

Confirms the allegation of ethnic cleansing

THE Myanmar government has reportedly begun harvesting 71,000 acres of rice paddy in Maungdaw, confirming an earlier report by Reuters, which said that the Myanmar government had made plans to harvest, and possibly sell, thousands of acres of crops left behind by the fleeing Rohingyas. If there was ever any doubt as to its intent, this should be proof enough that what the Myanmar government is doing is carrying out an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingyas.

This is why the Myanmar government, while trying to pull the wool over the international community's eyes by talking big on taking back the Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh, is bringing in hired labour on Rohingya land and selling off their crops, so that the Rohingyas have nothing to return to.

Shockingly, the international community continues to remain silent even in the face of such blatant crimes by the Myanmar government. The United Nations too has shied away from responsibility. Moreover, it has compromised its credential and character by withholding one report after another that had stated the graveness of the suffering that the Rohingyas were being exposed to. And this has given a sense of impunity to the Myanmar military.

Through their silence, the international community and UN has completely discredited themselves from being able to fulfil the responsibilities that have been entrusted to them. We worry that this will have horrific consequences for Bangladesh, the region and world in future and that by realising this, both the UN and the international community, especially our friends, should now take immediate steps against Myanmar for its crimes against the Rohingyas that have led to countless numbers of them fleeing to Bangladesh. Clearly, it is no longer only an internal affair of Myanmar.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Political parties must commit to democracy

All the political parties of our country claim that they want a free, fair and peaceful election. However, the fact is that they cannot accept anything less than a victory. If the parties fail to commit to democracy and rule of law, neither a neutral EC nor the deployment of the army would be able to ensure a credible and peaceful election.

For the greater good of the nation, all major parties should sit together and discuss the political problems. Most importantly, the two major parties must reach a consensus about how the election should be held. They must have mutual respect and tolerance towards each other. They all should remember that the interest of the nation is more important than that of the party.

Biplob Biswas, Faridpur

Denying the question paper leak

It has been reported in the media that the question papers of Dhaka University's 'gha' unit entrance test had been leaked beforehand. Subsequently, the law enforcers detained some of the perpetrators who confessed to being involved in the leak. However, the DU administration has consistently denied the allegations without carrying out any probe into the matter. Moreover, it published the results of the test within two days, which was unusual.

This episode reminded us of the health ministry's denial that the question papers of the medical college admission test in 2015 were leaked. The solid allegations of the question paper leak of the SSC and HSC exams in the previous years were also met with similar denial by the education ministry.

Instead of denying it, the authorities should have conducted a comprehensive investigation. Their denial serves no interest of the students or the respective institutions other than the culprits.

Md. Tanzim, Dhaka University

Bearing the economic cost of the Rohingya crisis



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BD has been taking in Rohingya refugees from Myanmar since the 70s, right after independence, and the rate accelerated in the 1990s. Currently, we are sheltering, feeding, and providing various assistance to well over a million refugees and it is possible that the situation might get worse before it gets better.

The current crisis in South Asia is at par with the Middle Eastern refugee crisis that erupted in Europe in 2015. Who could have imagined that Bangladesh, which is trying to lift itself up by its bootstraps and does not have either the resources or the backing of rich neighbours that Greece, Italy and Turkey had, would so willingly take upon this Herculean responsibility?

However, we did, and while the cost to our not-so-rich country is mounting every day, we have put up a good fight to meet the demands of the situation as well as to raise the issue in international forums. It is also time to ask the international agencies and G20 nations to assume a fair share of the financial burden to resolve the humanitarian crisis.

The restraint exercised by the government of Bangladesh is laudable. As is known, international observers have backed us on many issues. The UN Human Rights Office said in a new report two weeks ago that the attacks by the Myanmar army against Rohingyas in northern Rakhine state were "well-organised, coordinated and systematic, with the intent of not only driving the population out of Myanmar but preventing them from returning to their homes by instilling deep and widespread fear and physical, emotional, and psychological trauma among them."

There are multidimensional aspects of the current crisis, and the magnitude of the challenges is huge. There are undoubtedly economic losses for



Rohingyas settled in Teknaf and Ukhia upazilas, who now number over 600,000, are costing us more than USD 4 million daily to feed and shelter. This is excluding the other half a million who came earlier.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

residents of the densely populated areas along the Naf River in Cox's Bazar. Rohingyas settled in Teknaf and Ukhia upazilas, who now number over 600,000, are costing us more than USD 4 million daily to feed and shelter, not counting the other half a million who came earlier. We have come across reports that there has been a 70 percent drop in commerce between Bangladesh and Myanmar since the latest round of Myanmarese military operations. Communities in the Cox's Bazar region have witnessed visible signs of turmoil in their economic life, and any additional influx may even totally disrupt the daily activities of the residents. Harvesting, fishing activities, border trade, service, and daily commerce could come to a standstill. Prices of essential commodities are likely to go up considerably and that will bring hardship for the average family whose livelihood depends on a semblance of normalcy in the ecosystem.

The current situation has already cost us both directly and indirectly. Among

the indirect or imputed costs, we should include the following: infrastructure, government services including security, natural resources, health and sanitation, and the labour market. According to some accounts, the tourism industry in Cox's Bazar has taken a hit.

It is to be noted, however, that there are some countervailing benefits resulting from the crisis. Some sectors of the economy, particularly the hospitality and airline industry, have witnessed a surge in demand from journalists, international observers, and human rights activists who are flocking to the Cox's Bazar region to report on the crisis, observe firsthand the condition of the refugees, and to offer assistance to the needy.

Last week, the UN pledging conference sought a total of USD 434 million response plan to help 1.2 million Rohingyas and the Bangladeshi host community. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, told

delegates on that day that focus would be on mobilising resources "to save lives and protect people". Bangladesh can legitimately expect at least USD 1 billion per annum to provide services to these refugees, and this amount would still be negligible compared to USD 5 billion that the European countries promised Turkey in the wake of the Middle Eastern crisis.

All said and done, resumption of dialogue with Myanmar to facilitate the return of the Rohingyas to their homeland comes at a momentous time. The MoU signed by the two governments and the fact that the Myanmar authorities informed the Bangladesh home minister regarding the formation of a joint working group by November 30—a promise made by the Myanmar government on repatriation of the Rohingyas—are optimistic signs for Bangladesh, the Rohingya Diaspora, and the international community.

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When PayPal didn't come to town

The service introduced is not PayPal, but Xoom



NAZMUL AHASAN

world. Our financial policy does not allow PayPal to function here, because our policymakers are under the impression that PayPal can be used to launder money out of the country—as if the existing system has succeeded in preventing money laundering.

At every glossy event by the relevant ministry claiming to promote the ICT (Information and Communications

such an ambitious goal. Why, you may ask.

Most IT freelancers deal with foreign clients through trusted platforms or marketplaces like Upwork, freelancer.com, etc. For all top marketplaces, PayPal is the accepted and integrated payment method. It is beneficial for both the clients and the workers. Clients can make the payment swiftly online, and the workers can receive it instantly. In the US, the most important client base for Bangladeshi freelancers, PayPal is so popular that Bangladeshis often lose out on opportunities to their competitors just because they do not have a PayPal account.

Now, without PayPal, they resort to more expensive, sluggish and inconvenient methods such as bank-to-

can sell its services and products both domestically and internationally using the system. Its outbound transaction and wallet features would allow our freelancers to buy necessary services and plug-ins from abroad.

Over the years, there has been much noise about PayPal coming to Bangladesh.

In July last year, Sonali Bank said that it would sign a MoU with PayPal, allowing it to launch its operation in Bangladesh. Some sceptics, however, chose to differ with the notion, and have been proven right.

The service which was introduced is not PayPal, but Xoom, an online money transfer system that was recently acquired by PayPal. Xoom, it appears, was touted as PayPal. However, the services are different, because PayPal is a digital payment system and Xoom is a money transfer system more akin to the likes of Western Union. Because of its inherent nature, PayPal has certain features that Xoom or any other money transfer system cannot offer.

For example, many freelancers pointed out, unlike PayPal, Xoom being a money transfer system does allow the foreign clients to claim a refund in case the commissioned work does not satisfy them or is not delivered on time. Similarly, Xoom also does not allow one to make payments in advance, while the nature of some work is such that a portion of the payment needs to be made in advance.

Moreover, it turns out that Xoom has been available in Bangladesh since November 2015, when it launched its operations in collaboration with Social Islami Bank. Therefore, the news of Xoom being "(re)introduced" was hardly a cause of excitement for our freelancers.

Over the last few months, rumours again sprang up of a possible launch of PayPal. In an event organised by the ICT Division, it was claimed that PayPal would officially be inaugurated on October 19. However, PayPal, when contacted, disputed the claim, saying, "PayPal is not currently available in Bangladesh and we don't have news to share right now regarding future plans."

Despite the clarification, the hefty event eventually went through with the title "PayPal+Xoom Connectivity Launch". But, Xoom posted a statement in its blog, clarifying that Xoom is a standalone service of PayPal, and that they do not offer any additional PayPal services in Bangladesh.

Xoom has simply expanded its service to include Sonali Bank in its list of the other 53 banks in Bangladesh. However, the collaboration with Sonali Bank means there will be faster bank deposits

to Sonali Bank customers from now on. Plus, Bangladeshi expats in the US will now be able to send up to USD 10,000—an increase from the previous limit—to family and friends in Bangladesh.

Xoom may benefit many Bangladeshi expats living in the United States and encourage them to transfer money legally because it charges a lower fee, but it is not very helpful for those who need PayPal. Xoom is also not available for sending money from any other country than the United States.

The ICT division implies that since Xoom can be used from PayPal's dashboard, it is essentially a substitute to PayPal. In reality, a user cannot use his PayPal balance to pay for a Xoom transaction. One can only use PayPal's log-in credentials, and thereby, the bank account, credit or debit card associated with it for Xoom transaction. It means that Xoom will exclusively use the bank account or credit or debit card information of the user, which is precisely why many US-based clients are reluctant to use something other than PayPal. Many noted that the use of PayPal is so common and widespread that it is only natural that the US-based clients put their faith in its reputation. They would not take the trouble to create a separate account in Xoom just for Bangladeshi freelancers.

Above all, Xoom is restricted to international transfers of non-commercial nature. If Xoom identifies that any of its accounts is conducting business operations, according to its user agreement it could terminate the account in question. This restriction is enough to restrain IT professionals from using the service.

It is generally understood that our financial policy puts a restriction on outbound transactions, which is incompatible with how PayPal works. No one expects the entrenched impediment to go away overnight. But why present the same old wine in a new bottle?

It is a welcome step that Xoom will offer faster bank deposits to Bangladesh, which will undoubtedly benefit many. One should also note the government's intention to facilitate the process of bringing hard-earned remittance home. However, if the authorities want to make our IT freelancers' life easy, they should continue to work on removing obstacles to allowing PayPal to operate in the country.

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As PayPal as a payment method can be integrated into any website, the local e-commerce sector can sell its services and products both domestically and internationally using the system.

PHOTO: AFP

Technology) sector, IT freelancers have repeatedly voiced their demands to introduce PayPal in Bangladesh.

A study by Oxford Internet Institute of Oxford University, the UK published in July, revealed that Bangladesh is home to 16.8 percent of all outsourced online workers in the world, second only to India. The ICT division says there are nearly 5,00,000 outsourced online workers in the country. They make USD 100 million per year, which the government wants to increase to USD 1 billion by 2021.

The unavailability of PayPal represents a fundamental impediment to reaching

bank wire transfers.

Some high-end online freelancers, who avoid intermediary marketplaces and work directly with the clients on large-scale or group-based projects, believe that the one-man model of freelance work is not the future. In order to realise its ambitious goal, they say, the government should focus on establishing an industry. Such an industry would only emerge if freelancers can use PayPal to directly deal with clients.

The domestic e-commerce sector will also experience a boom. As PayPal as a payment method can be integrated into any website, the local e-commerce sector