

Finance Minister's frank admission

Make bribery extinct

THE finance minister has made a very frank admission about government officials taking bribe to award contract to a foreign company for expansion of the Dhaka-Sylhet 4-lane Project. We commend him for it and for further taking a very stringent measure by blacklisting the company and scrapping the contract. However, this is not a unique incident in Bangladesh or a one-off case. Bribery is a pervasive phenomenon that has come to be accepted as a way of life and must be uprooted. In such a situation it is praiseworthy that the government is acknowledging corruption and bribery as problematic and taking measures against some of those engaged in this criminal offence. We are also told that the sum paid as bribe has been returned to the Chinese embassy.

The action of the ministry so far is all very good, but the question is what has become of the government officials who took the bribe? We do not know whether they been subjected to the legal process that the severity of the case demands. Taking bribe is a criminal offence and must be dealt with as such, and the errant officials must be made examples of. Moreover, it is necessary also to identify the local agents who have worked as go-between the officials and the foreign company in facilitating the transactions.

This particular deal was one of the 26 projects for which soft loans had been promised by China. Care should be taken that the other projects under the deal where China had promised to give soft loans of \$21.5 billion, are not hampered.

Shipment of cotton suddenly halted!

Must diversify our sourcing

THE country sources nearly half (46 percent) of its cotton from abroad. Bales of cotton are used by local yarn makers to produce the thread used by apparel exporters. So when Indian suppliers suddenly stop shipment of 400,000 bales of cotton because there is a hike in the Indian domestic market, our producers are left in the lurch. There is a chain effect on prices domestically due to such a sudden halting of import from one of the biggest producers of the fibre. Indeed, local yarn prices have apparently gone up by 15 percent since there is a dearth of the raw material and although there are other big players in the international market like the US, it will take a while to negotiate terms of purchase and price before a supply of the fibre can become available to local manufacturers.

The fact that Indian suppliers have signed contracts to supply cotton to the Bangladeshi parties and are now refusing to honour them is a breach of contract. This is an incident which may dent the business relationship between our dealers and their counterparts in India. This intentional supply crunch will undoubtedly put some RMG exporters in a tight spot. This incident has had one positive impact and that is the realisation that we cannot be dependent on one supplier of this basic material. Diversification of supplies from different countries will give our yarn producers and knitwear manufacturers the choice of keeping this essential fibre coming into the country without let or hindrance.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sylhet-Dhaka train

journey: a bitter experience

Recently, I had to travel from Sylhet to Dhaka at night by Upaban express in an air-conditioned compartment. Initially, the compartment and beddings looked good, but as soon as the train started moving, we noticed mice and cockroaches around us. I was feeling extremely uncomfortable, but I had no other choice. I called the attendant and complained, but his vacant look indicated that this was nothing out of the ordinary.

I remember how good the train service was even 15 or 20 years back. We used to enjoy travelling by train. Unfortunately, the most used public transport is now neglected by the authorities.

Motius Samad Chowdhury, Sylhet

The shame of corporal punishment

Bangladesh recently observed the 7th anniversary of enacting the law that banned the cruel practice of corporal punishment in schools and madrasas. Is it not shameful that a law had to be introduced to prevent this horrific practice in the first place? And, is it not even more shameful that this practice continues even after the law came into effect?

The sooner we learn to abolish corporal punishment in our schools, homes and madrasas, the better for Bangladesh. The practice of corporal punishment has no place in a country that claims to have compassion and empathy among its core values.

Eng. Asif Kamal, Dhaka

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

I have an advisory council at home, which has unilaterally elected my son as the president, my daughter as the VP, my daughter-in-law as the general secretary, and my eldest daughter who lives abroad as my remote assistant. This council, in the absence of their father, has decided that their mother is their sole responsibility and that she needs to be well looked after. Hence all my activities are subjected to scrutiny and counsel. Being wise, I listen and follow. This morning, when I read the news of a man in Britain being rushed to the emergency for having ruptured the back of his throat while attempting to stifle a sneeze, my daughter decided that I should sneeze in ease and not hold back when I wanted to.

So here goes her loyal mother. Today's column is my "Achoo" moment, which I will celebrate with a few hashtags that I will use to my advantage:

When I started with my own favourite hashtag #SheforShe, this is what I meant. The ground reality is that we are women, standing too far apart from one another. Be it through supporting each other, or mentoring our daughters, or extending support to female colleagues all over the country.

#SheforShe

BGMEA elections are right around the corner and there's hardly any female participation in the industry. Neither are we represented in the board, nor are there adequate female labour leaders. When women are nowhere, and when even the number of female supervisors is inadequate, what else can we say about the garment industry but that it is suffering from gender bias? Therefore, I urge all our daughters, sisters, female friends to come forward and contribute to the sector constructively in any

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

BANGLADESH plans to graduate out of the Least Developed Country (LDC) status soon. One of major element that is part and parcel of this graduation will be the generation and use of evidence and knowledge.

A good indicator of a least developed country, besides low per capita income, is how much of the research and knowledge generated about the country is done by researchers and scholars in the country versus that generated by outsiders such as foreign consultants or foreign institutions such as the World Bank.

Bangladesh today has well over a hundred universities, including public and private ones, as well as numerous research institutes such as those in the agriculture and health sectors which are supposed to be carrying out research to help decision makers in the country.

While there are quite a few excellent examples of good quality research being done, by and large the quality of research outputs is quite mediocre to say the least.

Hence there is a need for the academic and research sectors in the country to get their act together to enhance their capacity and carry out quality research, and make sure it is useful to decision makers both in the government as well as private sectors.

I will describe one such effort to bring together the research community working on climate change to do this.

The platform is called Gobeshona, which is the Bangla word for research, and it consists of nearly fifty public and private universities and research institutions working on climate change in Bangladesh.

The Gobeshona website (www.gobeshona.net) has over 2,000 publications in a searchable database on climate change in Bangladesh as well as dozens of ongoing research projects by different researchers.

The Gobeshona research community holds a monthly seminar, hosted each month by a member, where researchers share their findings with each other. There is also a Young Researchers programme to help

"Achoo"



A month ago, 16-year-old Ahed Tamimi slapped Israeli soldiers who entered her yard. She is now being tried by the Israelis, while at the same time being honourably equated with the American civil rights icon Rosa Parks.

PHOTO: REUTERS

possible way that we can. If you are not in a management position, work towards it; if you are not a leader, aspire to become one. Become visible and let's work together and make our presence constructive and enrich the industry with more empathy and vision.

#MLK

Two days ago, social media had a perfect #MLK gush when the world celebrated the 88th birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., the American Baptist minister and activist who led a civil rights movement based on Gandhian nonviolence and civil disobedience.

"If the soul of the nation is to be saved, I believe you must become its soul." This quote, however, is not a quote from King, but it's actually by Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s wife who carried her husband's message forward and stood up for women and LGBTI rights while her husband inspired her through the letters he wrote from the Birmingham Jail and later published in his 1964 *Memoirs*. By then, King was not ready to "wait" for a more "convenient season" and give in to the mythical concept of Time, but was demanding immediacy and was voicing out: "Why We Can't Wait" while he critiqued the white moderates.

Till date, legal gender difference exists all over the world, which affects women's economic prospects, and makes it difficult for women to own property, open bank accounts, start businesses and enter some profession. Each year, 15 million girls around the world are married before they are 18. The proportion of women in national

parliament globally: 13.2 percent in 2000 and has risen to only 23.4 percent in 2017. There's only 49.6 percent of women and 76.1 percent of men in the working age population, yet the boost to the global annual GDP by 2025 will actually increase to USD 28 trillion if women played an identical role to men in labour markets.

As for ourselves, as women, if truly we believe that the long arc of our moral universe bends towards justice (paraphrasing King) then we must question the extreme indignities that women suffer around the world.

#HouseofShame

If one were to pick recent events related to atrocity, then two most discussed ones should not skip our attention. A month ago, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl, Ahed Tamimi, slapped Israeli soldiers who entered her yard. She is now being tried by the Israelis, while at the same time being honourably equated with the American civil rights icon Rosa Parks, who was arrested 60 years ago for refusing to give her seat up on an Alabama bus to a white man.

Also, just a few days ago, in Kasur, Pakistan, a serial killer raped and murdered a seven-year-old Zainab Ansari. This was not his first time. He had similarly attacked eight other girls in the same area. Isn't it just like the little girl in our own backyard who was kidnapped in a filmy manner and raped and left by the ditch just a few days ago?

In the Western world, starting from Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual assault, down to our favourite House of Cards star Kevin Spacey's predatory

behaviour towards young women, 2017 was marked by #MeToo moments. This has also prompted a discourse all over the world stressing on the need to determine the spectrum of abusive behaviour and the understanding of "implied consent" to be studied in detail in order for the processes not to destroy a woman or to impinge on her rights and lives. Toxic masculinity must be shunned, remembering that it is also essential to remind commentators and analysts to take full responsibility for their narratives.

Just recently, I read an encouraging piece of news, which I opt to end with. One of the latest leaders of UKIP, ex-cop Henry Bolton, a 54-year-old former soldier has just given up his relationship with his 25-year-old girlfriend Jo Marney, after a British tabloid published a string of racist text messages penned by her attacking the American actress Meghan Markle, who is engaged to marry Prince Harry in May and for Marney going as far as to say that in Britain they did not want a "black king" down the line.

When I started with my own favourite hashtag #SheforShe, this is what I meant. The ground reality is that we are women, standing too far apart from one another. So, be it through supporting each other, or mentoring our daughters, or extending support to female colleagues all over the country, let's all have our precious "Achoo" moments and vent, whenever and wherever.

Your columnist will be right there by your side as and when you desire.

Rubana Huq is managing director of Mohammadi Group.

Enhancing knowledge for research-backed policymaking

young researchers carry out quality research and publish it in peer reviewed international scientific journals.

For the last four years, they have also been holding a big annual conference each January where several hundred researchers from home and abroad come together to share their research and also have a science-policy-dialogue day where policy makers are invited to hear and give their feedback, particularly on what kind of research would be of use to them in their future decision making—thus setting up a positive feedback loop for demand-led research for national policy makers.

The second area of added focus going forward will be how to bring in and support the private sector through research for green and clean investments by the finance and industrial sectors of the country.

The third area was to enhance the provision and use of climate information by all sectors, particularly farmers so that they can make better decisions in a timely manner.

The fourth and final area of focus is on how to enable Bangladesh to access greater amounts of global climate finance as well and make sure that the climate funds are used properly for the benefit of the country.



The annual Gobeshona conference has become a means of benchmarking the state of knowledge about tackling climate change in Bangladesh as well as for measuring progress each year and setting the agenda for further research.

The fourth annual Gobeshona conference was held in Dhaka last week and attracted over 400 researchers from home and abroad. The researchers developed an agenda for going forward which includes a number of key elements.

The first element was the need to take the initiative beyond Dhaka to all the climate vulnerable zones in the country such as the Barind, Haor, coastal, riverine zones and the Sundarbans.

In just a few short years the annual Gobeshona conference has gained an international reputation as a national knowledge management platform on climate change in Bangladesh and we have been receiving participants from other least developed countries to the conference to learn from Bangladesh's experience. This has resulted in the setting up of a LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) which Bangladesh will be leading in order to share knowledge in a South-South manner between all the forty-eight LDCs and other countries.

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