

## Licensed firearms in criminal hands!

### Bring the arms dealers under strict watch

IT has come to light that a section of arms dealers are apparently selling legally imported and licensed guns to underworld criminals. According to a report printed in this paper on April 18, some dealers are filing off the serial numbers that each firearm carries before selling them on the black market. Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism (CT) unit made the revelations after catching a manager at a legal arms-selling shop red-handed.

Several questions pop up on this issue. Is there a database maintained by local law enforcers on what arms are being imported by official arms dealers? If so, is there any system of cross-checking which firearm is sold to whom? Do the agencies responsible for security have any mechanism to keep track of legally imported arms, their sales, and if not, why so? The country has long been a victim of illicit arms and explosives. Illegal small arms proliferation has increased exponentially over the years. These go hand in hand with the illicit narcotics trade and unfortunately, arms have now become the preferred tool for settling scores, political or otherwise.

Now if we have licensed firearms making their way to criminals, then there will be serious ramifications on the law and order situation, particularly in the run-up to the general elections. We feel it necessary that all legal arms dealers are subjected to the checking of their inventories by law enforcers every six months, if not more frequently.

## Public works hostage to crony capitalism

### Wasting taxpayers' money

THE front page report in this newspaper on April 17 depicts the pitiable state of the development works taken up by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) in 44 wards. It shows exactly how crony capitalism is working to waste public money and increase public sufferings. This grim picture, we are afraid, represents fairly well the state and quality of works in most of the wards under most city corporations.

It is a waste of taxpayers' money when various public works such as those related to roads and drainage system, are either carried out shabbily or left half done; and in some cases not done at all with time overrun of nearly a year. And why not! If there is no oversight of the works, if time overrun is rewarded with impunity, and if tenders are hogged by ruling party men who do not own any construction firm of their own but either sell their work order to the highest bidder or sub-contract the work.

Even if we were to accept the project director's statement that the tenders have been awarded as per rules, we wonder what action he has taken against the contractors for the inordinate delay in completion of the jobs, and what has been done to ensure that the work is being done as per the job specifications.

We believe the LGRD ministry must call to account the project directors of city corporations for the money spent on various projects and that somebody is made answerable for the quality of work. Why not involve the respective war commissioners to oversee the works? Public money cannot be frittered away and neither can public welfare and safety.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure quality healthcare for all

Bangladesh's understaffed and underfunded public hospitals always deal with a huge number of patients, exceeding their capacity. As a result, many are forced to go to private clinics or hospitals, which are very expensive. One has to pay Tk 600–1000 just to get expert advice of a doctor in private hospitals. In order to diagnose the problem accurately, doctors often ask the patients to conduct medical tests, which are also costly. In serious cases, many do not even trust the private hospitals and go abroad, mostly to India, for better treatment. But for low-income people, neither of the above is an option.

These people have no other way but rely on public service. Therefore, we urge the government to ensure quality healthcare for all, including those who cannot afford to receive treatment in private hospitals, let alone abroad.

Zabed Wali, By email

Bangladesh cricket team needs a full-time coach

After performing brilliantly for the last five years, Bangladesh has become a formidable team in the cricketing world. The overall revenue of the board has skyrocketed. Yet, the team does not have a full-time coach right now.

Frequent changes in coaching staff may hurt team spirit. To ensure that the team is able to perform consistently, the board should appoint a full-time coach as soon as possible.

SM Imranul Islam Rajon, By email

# Coalition bombing of Syria may serve the ego but not the distressed

STRATEGICALLY  
SPEAKING



BRIG GEN  
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THE civilised world has stopped altogether questioning the legality of military actions of countries mighty and powerful beyond their own

borders since the illegal occupation of Iraq by the US and its coalition of the willing (for some countries the entire world is their area of interest, and thus their intentions and actions, they assert, cannot be circumscribed by political boundaries). However, in this instance one might nonetheless ask whether the aim of the air strike on Syrian targets on April 13 by US, Britain and France, would actually meet the stated US objective—detering Assad.

I use the term “US objective” knowing fully well that an immediate riposte to that would be, “Does the US have any objective in Syria at all?” Because, hardly had Trump finished announcing that the US would commence withdrawing from Syria soon, when he had to announce the bombing of that country targeting the Syrian command centres and establishments involved in constructing chemical weapons (CW). This was in response to the alleged chemical attack on Douma in the rebel held enclave of eastern Ghouta by Syrian government forces.

The different versions of the alleged CW attack by Syrian forces, appearing in the print as well as electronic media, make it difficult to conclude one way or the other who is right in this regard. But the reports appearing in the media lend enough ground to question the veracity of the allegation. Nonetheless, given the past record of the Assad regime of using CW, the possibility of his doing so again cannot be altogether ruled out. But by the same token, the brazen distortion, generation and propagation of lies by the US to justify its aggression on Iraq in 2003, one cannot put it past them the likelihood of peddling fake news of the attack. We have to wait for the OPCW to finish their examination, if only to confirm if any type of CW was used.

And this time too, Trump, echoing



A picture taken on September 5, 2017 shows smoke billowing out following a coalition air strike in the western al-Daraiya neighbourhood of the embattled northern Syrian city of Raqqa.

PHOTO: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP

President Bush's phrase aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in San Diego following the capture of Iraq by US forces on May 1, 2003 uttered “Mission Accomplished.” Given the outcome of US bombing of Syria a year ago prompted by similar circumstances, President Trump and his advisors might be left to rue the statement even much after he has left the White House, much like what his past Republican predecessor is doing even now. Trump's comments will, in all likelihood, reassert the character the phrase has acquired since it was first uttered, a synonym for premature declaration of victory that has gone terribly awry.

The US bombing of Syria in April 2017 following Assad's chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun on April 4 2017, in Idlib province, had done nothing to deter the regime in Damascus as the alleged April 7 attack in Douma indicates. Thus what does the phrase “locked and loaded”, which the US permanent representative in the UN uttered following the UN action on Syria, imply? What does it mean for the

US policy on Syria? Will it help resolve the humanitarian problem in Syria which has been compounded by a regime that has no compunction for its own people, and by the role of the powerful nations with their own conflicting stakes in Syria, which they are resolved to uphold even at the expense of the people of a country that the UN has described as one that is facing the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world. The very poignant but desperate comment of the United Nations Syria envoy's Special Adviser Jan Egeland on February 1, “This is a war where armed men are specialising in suffering of civilian populations,” sums up the real situation in that country.

If the US is so concerned about the lives of Syrian civilians and says that the April 7 CW attack by government forces was to convey a message to a rogue regime, what message does the US send when conventional bombings of Syrian civilians happen constantly, and Assad's is not the only regime that does so. One can question very well the


moral ground that the US takes when it says that its action is to make Assad desist from killing civilians. The world has lost count of the number of civilian deaths not only in Syria but also in Iraq where the so called “mission” is yet to be accomplished, as a consequence of US aerial bombings.

In fact, according to reports of human rights groups, aerial attacks on rebel held areas of Syria, and against ISIS, by the US led coalition, have killed many civilians also. Take for example the period between April 23 and May 24 of 2017, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that at least 225 civilians including 44 children and 36 women had been killed in the one-month period between April 23 and May 23. That explains the US coalition's selective reaction, only after alleged CW attack by Assad. Their action belies their stated intention behind their response. Its reactions are highly parochial.

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## How to benefit more from GDP growth

THE OVERTON  
WINDOW



ERESH OMAR  
JAMAL

A T a recent press conference, representatives of the World Bank (WB) questioned the 7.65 percent economic growth estimate and the estimate of 7–8 percent growth of

domestic demand that the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) came up with for FY17-18. Zahid Hussain, lead economist of the WB's Dhaka office, said there are two causes that could lead to such a spike (growth of employment and labour income and rise in remittance inflows) but that neither was currently visible. Similarly, the Asian Development

general public and the overall economy. For the ADB on the other hand, it was infrastructure deficit that was most worrisome, as it explained that sustained high growth requires an expanded industrial base and a diversified export basket, both of which in turn require commercial access to basic infrastructure such as electricity, roads and railways. And Bangladesh, unfortunately, ranks near the bottom globally when it comes to access to all these.

Though the difference in GDP estimates can be debated, the inadequacies highlighted by WB and ADB cannot. The country's banking sector has performed terribly for a consecutive number of years, and while the government continues to take up one mega-project after another, it often

of a developing country was to strengthen the capital and liquidity ratio of banks and that NPL has been an issue that has severely impacted the capital adequacy ratio of the sector.

According to a Bangladesh Bank (BB) study covering 2012 to 2016, the average ratio of NPLs to total loans was 27.10 percent. Total banking sector loan till September 2017 amounted to Tk 7,52,730 crore, of which Tk 80,307 crore, or 10.67 percent, was bad debt. Once restructured loans were included, NPL went up to 17 percent of outstanding loans.

The ICCB also pointed out that regulators have allowed banks to regularly restructure bad loans which has allowed banks to further lend to the same borrowers. Between 2010 and 2014,

expansion rate is expected to fall by 1.32 percent in the current fiscal year, according to official data.

With the decline of the growth of the country's financial sector, the BBS said that growth will be driven by double-digit growth in manufacturing and construction sectors. Provisional estimate by the BBS showed that the construction sector, which is one of the 15 major sectors that contribute to GDP, is set to grow at 10.11 percent in FY17-18 from 8.77 percent the year before. Industry growth, meanwhile, is forecasted to pick up slightly to 10.4 percent.

What remains a concern for both, however, as with all other sectors, is that with the tremendous misallocation of resources that is taking place because of problems in the financial sector, these sectors are either not growing as they should or are constantly being exposed to great and unnecessary risks. Given that the construction sector employs some 3.43 million workers, it is, in fact, impossible to measure how great the potential risks are.

Lastly, when it comes to export diversification, infrastructure isn't the only drawback. As experts and educationists have repeatedly said in the past, lack of policy support too has remained a major hurdle. But what has not been mentioned as often is, should our main focus really be on exports?

As the ADB itself has estimated, around 88 percent of employment in the country depend on domestic final demand and only eight percent on final demand from advanced economies—what remains is subjected to demand from the rest of the world. While increasing export is important to stabilise our balance of payment, and so is diversifying exports to mitigate risks, isn't it time to focus more on domestic consumption?

If so, the best way of doing that is by increasing disposable income of people across the board, through tax cuts (mainly for small businesses and low-income groups) and reducing corruption, as it is ordinary people who are usually victims of graft, while its beneficiary are almost always special interests groups. This, and similar other measures, may also help reduce the growing income disparity, which too is essential for sustainable high growth, and may, in fact, be more important than debating over what the GDP growth rate may be, as it is only then that Bangladesh's GDP growth, whatever it may be, will, in reality, benefit all Bangladeshis and thus, the nation in the long run.

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Bank (ADB) estimated that the economy will grow at 7 percent, 0.65 percent less than the government's provisional estimate, while concluding that “Bangladesh's economic outlook remains broadly optimistic.” Whatever the actual rate may be, what is encouraging is that both the WB and ADB see Bangladesh's economy growing rapidly compared to other countries of the world.

For the WB, it was the “unattended” banking sector “woes” that was the chief concern moving forward. And it further criticised recent government moves to prop up the sector at the cost of the

ignores basic infrastructures completely as evident from the state of the country's roads and highways. Then there is the fact that even the mega-projects almost always cost way more than initial estimates both in terms of time and money.

Even the International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICCB) has deemed the growing non-performing loans (NPLs) a curse for sustainable growth, calling on the government to combat the menace more proactively. In its bulletin for the January–March period, the ICCB said that the best way to meet the requirements and challenges

an average bank rescheduled bad loans of Tk 10,910 crore annually, according to a study of the Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management.

However, while the finance minister himself admitted that loan defaulters “have gobbled up the money that could be invested otherwise” doing great loss to the country, the pressure exerted by his ministry on the BB, that has compromised the independence of the bank to a great extent as experts have opined, has arguably been the prime cause for why it has failed to do its job of regulating the sector properly. What is the result? The banking sector's