

Gazipur election postponement disappointing

Remove all impediments to holding polls

THE High Court's stay order on the Gazipur City Corporation election for three months, just 10 days before voting day, has caught everyone off guard as it goes against Article 125(c) of the constitution which says that, "A court shall not pass any order or direction...in relation to an election for which schedule has been announced, unless the Election Commission has been given reasonable notice." Even the Chief Election Commissioner said that he only came to know about the matter from television scrolls.

It may be mentioned that the HC had also stayed the Dhaka North City Corporation mayoral by-polls for six months on January 17, 2018, scheduled for February 26. Thus it is twice now this year that the HC has stayed an election on short notice.

While we understand that there are some concerns surrounding a few technical aspects of the election, these are but minor issues. And any time an election schedule is announced, such minor issues may exist. Despite this, what we look forward to is people exercising their democratic right to freely cast their votes as that is one of the basic pillars of any democracy.

But when consecutive elections are deferred, especially in an important election year like this, there is the possibility for doubt to creep into the minds of people in regards to the EC's ability to conduct timely elections. Moreover, following the recent revamp of the EC, this was a test case for the commission to prove itself. This is why the Gazipur election had drawn the attention of the whole nation, as we eagerly waited to see how well the EC could acquit itself in conducting a free and fair election, especially with the next parliamentary election being around the corner.

With that in mind, we hope the EC will take all necessary steps to remove every obstacle so that voters can exercise their constitutional and democratic right to vote, at the earliest possible, and so that their confidence in the electoral system is restored.

Lowest SSC pass rate in eight years

Highlights the weaknesses of our education system

FOR the second consecutive year, the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) pass rate has suffered a decline. This year, the total pass rate of the eight education boards came down to 79.40 percent — the lowest in the last eight years. The results in 2018 again showed poor performance particularly in two subjects: English and Maths.

Explanations have been put forward to explain the decline: from the quality of teachers to the modified evaluation system. But the overall result reflects the shortcomings of the education system more than of the students. Educationists have long pointed out the glaring faults in the system and the lack of qualified teachers.

This year we also saw the widespread SSC question leaks. According to the government's investigations, questions of 12 out of 17 exams were leaked prior to the exams. Failure to stop these leaks tarnishes the examination system as a whole—an insult to the hard work of the students who performed well without resorting to leaked questions.

On a positive note, the number of students who attained GPA 5 has increased. Rajshahi and Comilla boards have performed extraordinarily well, and overall girls have performed better than boys. We congratulate all of them.

The education ministry needs to analyse the reasons behind the differences of results in the different boards. Based on expert recommendations, we need reform and see what more can be done in terms of teachers' training, question paper formats and evaluation methods—not for the sake of higher pass rates, but to make sure that the students passing SSC are getting quality education. It is also time to put serious thought on the matter of higher education: the seats available in our universities fall far short of the number of passing students. The state must ensure that those who wish to continue their studies have the opportunity for doing so.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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CHT deserves peace

In the wake of the killings of several people belonging to regional political organisations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, citizens are concerned. The relative peace that existed in the hills since the peace accord was signed in 1997 is now under threat, with the aforementioned organisations violently vying with each other for dominance.

The solution does not simply lie in law enforcement restoring order. We cannot call on those parties to dissolve either. Opposition and dissent should prevail but they should work hard to find common ground to advance their collective cause. By promoting debate and discussion, they could achieve what mainstream political parties have not been able to. But arms or violence is not the language of debate. They must understand that the violence they often resort to is harmful to their cause.

I urge the civil society members, whom most of those parties' high-ups trust, to mediate peace among them. The Chittagong Hill Tracts has endured too much pain and blood. We all have a responsibility to work together to not inflict agony on the people of this region anymore.

Kabir Ahmed, Chittagong

The crippling effect of slow development

NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

DESPITE interest shown by foreign investors in country-specific Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) taking steps to

acquire and allot land to that effect, it appears preparatory work on most of these zones is lagging far behind schedule. Of the zones, Mongla and Bheramara in Kushtia district are for Indian use exclusively, while Araihaazar in Narayanganj and Anwara in Chittagong are for the Japanese and the Chinese, respectively.

It appears that the slow pace at which the authorities are moving on clinching soft loans for development and awarding contract for international developers has taken a laid-back approach given the



Land acquisition and development has emerged as a major stumbling block in establishing the Special Economic Zones.

Land shortage remains a crippling area since there is no zoning in the country that demarcates what land is to be used for what purpose.

problems associated with land acquisition. The Chinese SEZ has made progress as BEZA has handed over 778 acres of land to Chinese developer China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd. But even there, progress has been slow. According to media reports, land development has emerged as a major stumbling block as most of the SEZs are situated on difficult terrain such as char, low-lying or hilly areas. Preparing such

land for industrial use is a challenging task and one that requires both expertise and acquiring filling materials that are not readily available.

When we take into account legal complexities involved in acquiring land, especially in a country where the bulk of land is agricultural, and couple that with our slow rate of getting any infrastructure project off the ground, it opens up the possibility of missing deadlines on project completion. The government has set a target to set up 100 SEZs by 2030. While the process started back in 2010, only about 6 to 7 percent progress has been made. There is no shortage of interest, as an estimated USD 17 billion have been received in commitments (with about USD 8 billion in FDI). The government has so far spent Tk 3.95 billion on land and infrastructure development, but what is now increasingly apparent is that we have not done enough to improve the capacity of state-run entities involved in the process to expedite work on SEZs.

Preparing the land to make it fit for industrial use requires filling up low-lying areas with sand or marine

sediments that require dredging with pipes. While for hilly areas, contractors need to level the land. All this requires investments in manpower and equipment, but given the state of one contractor on the Mirsarai interrelated industrial city, only a third of the dredging to fill 880 acres of land has been completed in the last 18 months. What it all points to is a lack of planning on where the materials needed for the job are going to come from; how finance will be clinched; and whether the contracted parties are in a position to get requisite manpower and equipment in place to speed up the process.

Land shortage remains a crippling area since there is no zoning in the country that demarcates what land is to be used for what purpose. And in a densely populated country where land ownership is both fragmented and agricultural in nature, these are problems that will keep recurring. We certainly need to get our act together on a number of issues if these projects are to be kept on track.

First and foremost, we need to secure financing for off-site infrastructure that includes access and road links to connect

zones. Utilities including gas, electricity, and water have to be established. There should be inland container terminal and customs facilities (bonded warehouse, etc.). Equally importantly, there must be specific deadlines for on-site infrastructure development: acquiring and developing land, power generation, demarcation of commercial and non-commercial areas.

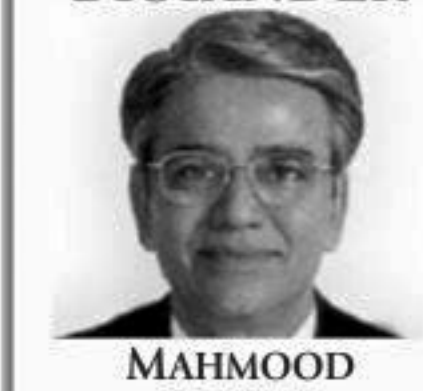
While securing finance, the focus should be on getting soft loans with a repayment period of around 40 years and an annual interest rate of about 0.01 percent (as offered by the JICA's ODA finance). All these activities must go hand in hand. Caution should be exercised not to overstretch BEZA (a relatively new institution) with too many projects. Our efforts should be concentrated on the country-specific SEZs for now, since those are the ones that hold the promise of serious investments from FDI. We need to get a move on in all the areas highlighted above to avoid missing deadlines, which will have repercussions on our national credibility.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

45TH OIC COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS (CFM)

Some takeaways from the conference

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

THE 45th OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) met in Dhaka on May 5-6, 2018 with the theme "Islamic values for sustainable peace, solidarity and development." The two-day conference came in the backdrop of tremendous pressure on Bangladesh created by the influx of one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. The CFM is the

second-tier decision making body of the organisation after the summit of Heads of States, which meets every three years. The CFM meets every year and formulates policy implementation strategies, reviews programmes and financial matters, and addresses issues that concern

people by Myanmar. She conveyed PM Justin Trudeau's invitation to Sheikh Hasina to the G7 summit in June 2018 to raise the Rohingya issue.

The chair of the 44th CFM, Marcel Amon-Tanoh, foreign minister of Ivory Coast, while handing over the presidency of the 45th CFM to his Bangladeshi counterpart AH Mahmood Ali, underscored the need for strong and cohesive Islamic position to meet current challenges. Accepting the new responsibility, Mahmood Ali made concrete proposals to reform the OIC and stated that the Muslim world is confronted with tremendous challenges including Islamophobia, extremism, inequality, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and terrorism. He also indirectly proposed that India be granted observer status at OIC because it had a huge Muslim population.

The 39-paragraph Declaration, released at the end of

the face of huge Rohingya influx with its humanitarian and security consequences for the country and with the Rohingyas, victims of state-backed violence in Myanmar. While calling for the implementation of the Kofi Annan Commission recommendations, the ministers formed an ad hoc Ministerial Committee headed by The Gambia to address the accountability issue for the violation of human rights against the Rohingyas in Myanmar. The ministers also lauded Bangladesh's efforts to provide shelter to these persecuted people.

OIC Secretary General Dr Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen called on member-states to channel part of their humanitarian assistance for the Rohingyas through the General Secretariat. Al-Othaimeen's call came following a brainstorming session organised by the Department of Cultural, Family and Humanitarian Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the side-lines of the CFM.

In another document released on May 6, the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission of OIC urged the Myanmar government to take immediate steps to end violence against the Rohingya population; bring the perpetrators of violence to justice; stop all discriminatory policies and ensure safe return of the Rohingyas to their homeland in the Rakhine State. The recommendations came after a three-day fact-finding visit by the IPHRC to Cox's Bazar.

It is significant that the council has called these refugees "Rohingya"—which is now accepted in international forums as a Muslim minority race of Myanmar. This is a substantive development as Myanmar authorities deny any racial identity to these people.

On the issue of Palestine, the council squarely rejected Washington's recent recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and condemned its decision to move its embassy to the city on May 14. It is against international law and the international community's collective will as expressed at the OIC Extraordinary Summit held in Istanbul in December 2017, and the UNGA Resolution of December 21, 2017. The ministers called upon all states not to move their embassies to Jerusalem as such moves will be in violation of the historical, legal, natural and national rights of the Palestinian people and undermine the peace efforts. The Declaration condemned the illegal policies of Israel against the Palestinian people and demanded complete cessation of all Israeli violations of international law.

The conference was not without fireworks. According to reports, the Saudi-Iran rivalry cropped up at the working sessions when Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir criticised Iran for its meddling in Arab affairs. Iran strongly protested his remarks.

At a time when the Rohingya issue was slowly being pushed to the back burner, Bangladesh needed to host this Islamic conference to raise international awareness over the plight of the Rohingyas and find a solution to the problem. Dhaka shall be satisfied that the 57 member-states of OIC have fully backed Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue. The Declaration will certainly help Bangladesh in building moral pressure on Myanmar, which is increasingly becoming a pariah state.

Mahmood Hasan is a former ambassador and secretary of Bangladesh government.



The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemned the state-backed violence against Rohingyas in Myanmar in a declaration made during the 45th session of the OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in Dhaka on May 6, 2018.

PHOTO: OIC

the member-states.

The Bangladesh government made arrangements for attending heads of delegations to visit the refugee camps at Kutupalong in Cox's Bazar on May 4. Significantly, the Canadian Minister for Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland and Canadian Prime Minister's Special Envoy to Myanmar Bob Rai also visited the camps, though they are not part of the OIC.

Inaugurating the conference, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina focused on the condition of the Rohingyas and called upon all member-countries to firmly stand in solidarity with the Rohingya people. Hasina also called for sustained international pressure on Myanmar to honour their obligations for solving this problem. Chrystia Freeland, while speaking at the inaugural session, stressed her government's firm stance against ethnic cleansing perpetrated against the Rohingya

the conference, highlighted several issues including durable peace and stability in Afghanistan, nuclear disarmament, preservation of the ecosystem and biodiversity, condemning terrorism in the name of Islam, solidarity with the people of Jammu and Kashmir, implementation of Program of Action by 2025, etc. The highlight of the unanimous Declaration was indeed the paragraphs on Palestine and the Rohingya issue.

On the Rohingya issue, the foreign ministers expressed deep concern over the systematic brutal acts perpetrated by Myanmar security forces that have reached the level of ethnic cleansing. The OIC shall remain engaged with UNGA and Human Rights Council and other UN agencies to address the massive human rights violations of Rohingya Muslims. The conference reaffirmed full solidarity with Bangladesh in