

Banking sector under threat from conglomerate

Why weren't steps taken to contain it?

THE finance minister has a track record of revealing the truth from time to time, no matter how unpalatable the truth may be. We commend his remarks about a certain Chattogram-based business conglomerate having grown all too powerful in the financial sector. That this conglomerate now owns multiple banks and has been taking loans out from them to conduct its operations has been an open secret for some time now. Unfortunately, these revelations by the finance minister bounce back on him, in the sense that the unprecedented rise of this business house took place during his 10 years in office as finance minister.

Hence the question: why is Mr Muhith coming out with the facts now, at the tail end of the government's present tenure? Why could he not take steps to curtail the ominous growth of the group as it gobble up one bank after another? Not only that, when the finance minister talks about banks failing to rein in on default loans, why did he allow for the passage of an amendment to the Bank Company Act that paved the way for four members of the same family to be on the board of the bank? This single act has been touted by banking experts as counterproductive for good governance in the financial sector.

While the finance minister sees only glory of achievement upon achievement, he fails to see that nonperforming loans have reached record highs in the last decade. The facts speak for themselves about the state of governance in the financial sector and merely hinting about a certain business group having grown too powerful is not going to cover up the failure to stop the contagion that seems to have spread far and wide across our banking system.

Reduce dependence on non-renewable energy sources

Take more clean energy initiatives

IT is heartening to learn that the country's largest solar park that started operating in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf last September, has been benefitting over 8 lakh people and thousands of small to medium businesses in Teknaf and Ukhia upazila. This 20 megawatt on-grid park is the first of its kind that has been set up to reduce our dependence on non-renewable energy sources.

The government has a vision to produce 10 percent of its total energy from clean energy sources by 2021. As solar power is environment-friendly and the cost of generating it is low, expanding the use of solar power should be prioritised. Solar-based initiatives such as solar irrigation, mini-grids, rooftop-based solar home systems and solar power plants should be set up all across the country.

Currently, approximately 41 million people (25 percent of the population) in Bangladesh have no access to electricity. As electrification in the remote areas through grid expansion is challenging and costly, focus should be on using solar power in these areas. The government has already taken initiatives to set up solar home systems in many rural areas with much success. According to a report, 17 million Bangladeshis use solar home systems, making it the country with the second highest number of people who avail the system after India.

Renewable energy currently makes up only 2.5 percent of total electricity generation in the country, according to a study of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority. If that has to increase to 10 percent by 2021, the government should take various encouraging initiatives including allowing tax and VAT-free import of the machinery that is needed for green energy production.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop violence ahead of elections

Violence in the days leading up to the election is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. The violent clashes between rival groups and parties happen because they want to establish their own dominance in a particular area.

Ordinary people are the ones who suffer from such clashes. At times, scores are injured and even killed due to such conflicts. In addition to instigating fear, such clashes often get extremely violent and threaten to destabilise law and order in the country as a whole.

In a democratic nation, no political party should condone such violence. But, far from trying to restrain themselves from resorting to violence, parties often, directly or indirectly, encourage their supporters to engage in violent acts in the name of protests. Instead of attempting to maintain peace, law enforcement agencies often take a side which contributes to the conflict flaring up.

We are so accustomed to such phenomena that we consider this as a norm—as if it's normal for such violent incidents to take place ahead of elections. The perpetrators almost always get away with committing such acts which greatly threaten public safety. When will politicians in this country do something about this?

Muktibosu, BSMRSTU

Punitive drug policies don't work

Naomi Burke-Shyne, Executive Director of Harm Reduction International, and international NGO "dedicated to reducing the negative health, social and legal impacts of drug use and drug policy", talks to The Daily Star's Moyukh Mahtab (over e-mail) about the global failure of wars on drugs, and how a health-based approach to drug policy could save lives and promote the well-being of citizens.

Wars on drugs seem to be the most popular approach among governments in tackling drug abuse—we have seen that in the US, in Latin American countries, in the Philippines and in Bangladesh. Yet, many—you included—have pointed out such approaches simply do not yield results. Could you explain what leads you to that conviction?

The "war on drugs" is a failure by its own metrics. For decades, we've seen countries enforce heavy-handed crackdowns in order to achieve "drug-free" societies. And yet, data from the United Nations shows that drug production and use continue to increase.

Not only are these policies a complete failure, they have severely harmed societies throughout the world. Every year there are countless preventable deaths from overdose, HIV and hepatitis C, because of punitive drug laws. This says nothing of the myriad human rights abuses committed in the name of drug control, including people forcibly detained and tortured because of their drug use, or executed for drug offences, a violation of international human rights law.

It is important to highlight that the so-called war on drugs is becoming more isolated as an approach. Fewer governments now opt for scorched-earth tactics to tackle the drug trade. Punitive drug laws are still dominant across the world, but there is increasing interest in grounding drug policies in health and human rights to help build safer communities.

Ultimately, though, most governments continue to state that their tough policies are protecting communities from the "scourge" of drugs—in fact, all they are doing is putting the health and lives of their citizens at risk and tearing families apart.

You have written before that mass criminalisation or death penalties for drug offences often target "the poor and the most vulnerable" and have little effect on consumption or trafficking. Could you elaborate? It's well recognised among policymakers, academics, UN agencies and others that there is no evidence that the death penalty has any unique deterrent effect on drug trafficking or use. In every country that still has this practice, the drug trade (and drug use) persists, and in some cases is intensifying.

Iran is a good example in this case.

The country was once one of the most prolific executioners in the world of people convicted for drug offences, and still had high levels of drug use and dependence. Senior government officials eventually admitted that implementing the death penalty for drugs was not having a deterrent effect and took actions to change the law. As this reform is being rolled out, we're now seeing a significant reduction in the number of executions carried out for drug offences (over 90 percent from 2017 to 2018).

In terms of those most affected by the death penalty and harsh drug policies,

hardship, limited work opportunities, and the need to provide for their families. As is often the case with issues related to drugs, it is not actually about the drugs themselves—it is about people, community and society, and is often tied to poverty, power and socio-economic issues.

An alternative approach to drug policy is to treat it as a social and healthcare issue, rather than a criminal issue. Is that a possible solution towards tackling drug abuse?

Absolutely. Everybody wants healthier,

governments money, improve public health and contribute to safer communities.

This is not a radical approach, and governments can begin to shift toward it quite easily, as some already have done. A first step would be to begin redirecting money from ineffective drug law enforcement spending, to health-based services for people who use drugs. Almost USD 100 billion a year is spent on drug law enforcement. Our research shows that redirecting just a fraction of this money could dramatically improve public health and achieve development goals.

Governments have to stop demonising people who use drugs and treating this issue in a silo. Everything about the dominant punitive approach to drugs is harming the rest of society.

What are possible alternatives, policy-wise, in combating drug abuse in society? Are there examples globally which have been known to work better than others?

Any approach to drugs has to be based on protecting health and human rights. It's not about combating drug misuse—it is about respecting people as human beings.

Removing criminal sanctions for drug use brings better health and economic outcomes, as Portugal's experience shows. The country's model is not perfect, but evidence shows that this policy shift reduced negative health effects related to drug use and dependence and saved the state money. Importantly, levels of drug use did not go up after the reform, another indication of the ineffectiveness of punitive policies.

Countries that still retain the death penalty for drug offences must abolish this practice. It's heartening to see Malaysia's recent announcement that it will move toward total abolition of the death penalty—a decision spurred by an unjust conviction against someone for drugs—because of its ineffectiveness as a deterrent. Globally, there is a noticeable trend toward abolition or lessening use of the death penalty, and hopefully more countries will follow suit.

Ultimately, countries have to acknowledge that the evidence is firmly stacked against punitive drug policies. If governments want to genuinely improve the health and wellbeing of their societies, they have to move toward sensible, rights-based approaches to drugs.



Naomi Burke-Shyne

PHOTO: NIGEL BRUNSDON

the evidence clearly shows that the most vulnerable people suffer the heaviest burden. People from poorer backgrounds can rarely afford legal defence when they are accused of drug offences. This contributes to violations of due process rights, and can often lead to unfair trials. In these circumstances, public officials pursue prosecutions to show the public they are taking action on drugs, no matter how futile or unjust this may be.

Finally, it needs to be recognised that those from poorer backgrounds who do become involved in the drug trade are not doing so out of malice. This is in many cases a choice driven by economic

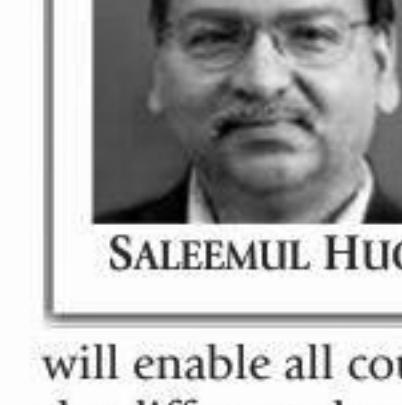
safer communities. In treating drug use (and dependence) as a criminal issue, governments are actively undermining public safety and contributing to health crises like the ones I have already talked about.

The majority of people who use drugs won't experience problems related to their use; however, there are a small number who do and it is well recognised among UN agencies, academics and some governments that providing health and social services for this population is beneficial for the rest of society. There is an enormous amount of evidence

showing that health-based interventions that reduce harm related to drug use save

COP24: Successes and failures

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



After a time extension of an extra day, the Rulebook for the Paris Agreement was adopted at COP24 in Katowice, Poland on December 15. It is a significant achievement as it will enable all countries to implement all the different elements of the Paris Agreement in a manner that can be measured, reported and verified in a uniform manner.

However, COP24 also represents a major failure to rise towards collective action to face the global challenge which has been highlighted by the scientific community in the IPCC's special report on 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The most vulnerable developing countries, including Bangladesh and small island countries, made this a major issue for consideration in the COP. They were also strongly supported by the civil society and by children. In the end they could not succeed due to the intransigence of President Trump's US delegation along with Saudi Arabia, Russia and Kuwait. The battle revolved around a seemingly trivial word of whether the COP should "welcome" (which was supported by 193 out of 197 countries) or merely "note" the IPCC report (which only the four countries supported). In the end these four countries prevailed by simply welcoming the completion of the report but not its contents.

This was a major setback for both science and the most vulnerable developing countries for enhancing collective global action to keep global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Nevertheless there were a number of good decisions on adaptation and inclusion of loss and damage in several tracks of the Paris Rulebook.

The Paris Agreement reached in 2015 has been a major game-changer in terms of enabling all stakeholders to independently implement the different elements of the Agreement without needing government endorsement anymore. This is best illustrated by the fact that despite President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the

US is on track to fulfill the commitments in emission reduction promised by Barack Obama. Despite Trump's attempts to promote coal, investors at the state and city level in the US are moving to renewables because they are cheaper.

Another example is the unofficial US pavilion at COP24, called "We are still in," which was run by states, cities and companies from the US; it was one of the most popular pavilions at COP24.

An amazing moment at COP24 was the speech of 15-year-old Swedish student Greta Thunberg who started a school

end to try to break a deadlock. In the end, an agreement was indeed reached but that was a full day after the official end of COP24.

The Bangladesh delegation this year did not include any ministers as they are busy with the upcoming elections. The delegation was led by the Secretary of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and there were representatives from the Ministry of Disaster Management, Foreign Affairs and Energy along with experts who have been negotiating on behalf of Bangladesh and,



Fifteen-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg castigated world leaders at COP24, accusing them of stealing her and other children's futures by failing to adequately address climate change.

Next year's COP25 will be held in December 2019 in Santiago, Chile and one of the major items for decision-making will be on loss and damage.

However, before COP25 begins, Mr Antonio Guterres will be convening a climate change summit in New York in September 2019 during the UN General Assembly which will be a major opportunity for Bangladesh to highlight its actions to tackle climate change and urge others to do so as well. At this summit, it will be possible to form coalitions of the willing and not wait to achieve consensus



PHOTO: CONNECT4CLIMATE/YOUTUBE

which is needed at the COPs.

There is much preparatory work to do before next September and December if we wish to get some good results from these two major global meetings. It is an opportunity for the government of Bangladesh to work with civil society to make sure we go in well prepared.

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