

## Unfit river vessels spruced up for Eid

Passenger safety must come first

WHENEVER Eid-ul-Fitr looms on the horizon, it is common to find operators of river vessels scampering to meet the high volume of passengers. Every year, we find launch owners get busy repairing defective vessels that gives a new look for a quick profit; but these are actually cosmetic changes. Unfortunately, the repair is skin deep only and unfit vessels end up plying river routes endangering the lives of hundreds, especially at the time of Eid festivities.

The reality is that about half the vessels lack registration and do not bother about the annual fitness certificates that are mandatory. Then of course there are some 30,000 mechanised boats which are not registered with the Department of Shipping (DoS). According to a research study by BUET's Accident Research Institute, at least 1,430 people were killed in 264 riverine accidents between 2005 and 2017. These accidents and the number of injuries and deaths pile up during the Eid festivities.

So why are so many unfit vessels allowed to operate? While the collusion between corrupt officials and vessel owners is well-known, the other major reason is the lack of ship surveyors. It is ridiculous that there only five ship surveyors to check fitness of vehicles. Precisely how these few surveyors are going to inspect and certify thousands of vessels is anyone's guess and it opens up the opportunity of graft on a mass scale. With lax oversight and monitoring, vessels can and are operated by unskilled hands who may not have the right skillset to use navigational instruments like radar, GPS (global positioning system), VHF (very high frequency), etc.

While oversight is a constant mandated responsibility of the authorities, it assumes more importance during festivals when the number of travellers on river routes increases manifold. And this is the time when decrepit vessels are primed up to appear fit. The relevant agencies must ensure that all vessels are river-worthy. Human lives must come before monetary considerations.

## Comply with the HC directives

Form sexual harassment complaint committees

IT is very disappointing to learn that 10 years into the HC directive to form sexual harassment complaint committees at every educational institution and workplace, only 40 percent schools have complied. What is more, the institutions which have the committees have not been able to make them functional. And in many cases, students are not even aware that such committees exist. In the meantime, incidents of sexual harassment in schools, colleges and madrasas are on the rise. Reportedly, in many cases, the predators are none but the headmasters and principals themselves.

In the wake of such a situation, it is absolutely necessary to have such committees at all educational institutions, as these committees are supposed to be empowered enough to deal with the complaints of sexual harassment, conduct investigations and make recommendations. And in the absence of such a cell, students will not have any other way to lodge complaints in case they face any form of sexual harassment. The delay in forming the cells only means that the school or college authorities have not taken the issue seriously. While many institutions believe that if such complaints become public, it will harm the reputation of the institution, others are simply unaware of the HC order, mostly the institutions in remote areas.

After the brutal killing of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) has once again directed the educational institutions to form such committees, and we hope that this time most of the institutions will comply. And the government has to play an active role in forming the committees and monitoring their activities. Forming such cells would not only ensure our children's safety but also help change our society's attitude towards sexual violence.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Why the need for more banks?

The country's banking sector is already volatile and saturated. Yet, three more commercial banks, namely Bengal Bank, People's Bank and Citizen Bank, were licensed this February. With their inclusion, the number of banks stands at 67 including state-owned, specialised and foreign banks. These new banks seem to be connected to the ruling party unlike the nine banks which were licensed back in 2013, whose current financial conditions are already substandard.

Though BB initially turned down the proposals of these new banks, they finally gave in due to the pressure from government high-ups. This approval has raised concerns among economists and banking experts regarding the relevance of these banks. Given the population size and lack of efficiency in the existing banking sector, especially the new fourth generation banks, such an approval is undesirable. Unhealthy competition is prevalent among banks as they desperately seek to attract deposit and investment.

In a nation, the more the opportunity arises for higher investment and financial services, the higher the need for new banks. But in the case of these new banks, financial experts can hardly find any justification, considering the already dismal condition of our banking sector. Sadly, this will only aggravate the situation.

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# Development for whom?

## Rising GDP, rising inequality



NAHELA NOWSHIN

A particular finding in the latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) blows the illusion of GDP growth being the "be all and end all" of development into smithereens. The data shows that we have now reached record high levels of inequality with the Gini coefficient, an economic measure of equality, standing at 0.482 as of 2016, up from 0.458 in 2010, which reflects an increased rich-poor gap.

At first glance, it may seem like a paradox that inequality in our society has reached an all-time high at about the same time as the highest ever GDP growth recorded.

Except it's not. That GDP growth or GDP per capita is not a good measure of "development" is well-known in development studies literature. But not being well-versed with development economics cannot be an excuse for ignorance of this obvious fact. Because economists in the country, for the longest time, have been crying hoarse about the dangers of our collective complacency with high GDP growth rates. Their warnings of course fell on deaf ears.

For a long time now, there has been excessive focus on GDP growth rates in Bangladesh's development discourse. At least that's been the case in the last few years during which Bangladesh went from strength to strength and saw more or less consistent rise in GDP growth. Most recently, Bangladesh's GDP growth touched the eight-plus mark when it recorded 8.13 percent in the fiscal year 2018-19, the highest in the country's history, according to the finance minister who made the revelation while releasing a provisional estimate.

Unfortunately, we seem to have become far too comfortable taking solace in rising GDP growth, even as we remain in the dark about the methodology of the calculation of these growth rates.

It is not to say that achieving higher GDP is fruitless or that we shouldn't have aspirations to increase overall economic activity. But the problem is that at some point along the way, we have ended up reducing the very concept of development to soaring GDP growth rates, and

forgotten about the very purpose of development itself: improving people's wellbeing.

Thankfully though, there now seems to be a growing realisation of our tunnel vision of what development is supposed to be, and more and more people are beginning to see through the veneer of GDP growth and scrutinising, as they should, the quality of this growth. If the benefits of development are meant to reach everyone, then what the Gini coefficient tells us is extremely worrying. The rich are only getting richer. In fact the Gini coefficient only scratches the surface.

A deeper look into the HIES data reveals the urban-rural divide as well as variations in regional poverty. For example, the average monthly household income in rural areas (Tk 13,353) is

rural pockets where these services are available, quality of education, healthcare and infrastructure is far from perfect. There are simply too many problems to contend with. For instance, deficiencies in logistics, staff absenteeism, and poor supervision, among other factors, have seriously compromised the quality of healthcare in rural areas. Numerous upazila and union health complexes suffer from a lack of physicians who are unwilling to live and work in villages. (In fact there is intense lobbying by doctors to be transferred from villages to cities.)

Granted that we have made significant strides since independence: universal primary education, tackling child and maternal mortality, etc. And understandably, we continue to hawk back to these past successes to show

of primary school buildings in rural areas, security of girls and women travelling in buses or studying in madrasas, stability of the banking sector, reduction of corruption in public institutions, or even the quality of roads and pavements.

We must realise that human development (which includes health, education, physical environment, and freedom) is the hallmark of development—not increase in GDP per capita or the increase in the number of ultra-rich individuals—which will ultimately help level the playing field. What we need is a policy framework that can help formulate inclusive policies to address social inequalities. As long as significant investments aren't made in education, healthcare, and physical infrastructure; as long as enough jobs aren't created; as long as institutional corruption remains intact; and as long as nepotism and political clout trump meritocracy, the gaping rich-poor divide will only get larger and the quality of life of the majority will not improve in any meaningful way. Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture with an enormous working age population on the one hand, and millions of youth desperate for employment on the other. Their future, and the country's, is at stake.

One can only hope that the finding of the latest HIES on record-high inequality in Bangladesh will be a wakeup call for policymakers to stop relying on and publicising GDP growth alone to justify the business-as-usual approach. One can only hope that just as ministers don't shy away from boasting about high GDP growth rates, they will take note of this alarming finding about rising inequality, as revealed by the survey conducted by a government body no less, and formulate strategies on what the government is going to do about the unequal distribution of developmental benefits. We, as citizens, reserve the right to know, with full transparency, the government's plans on how this widening gulf between the rich and the poor is going to be bridged. What the government must not do is ignore what the HIES data has revealed.

It's time we went beyond nomenclatures and numbers and percentages that do not reflect the realities of those who have been left behind in the race to development.

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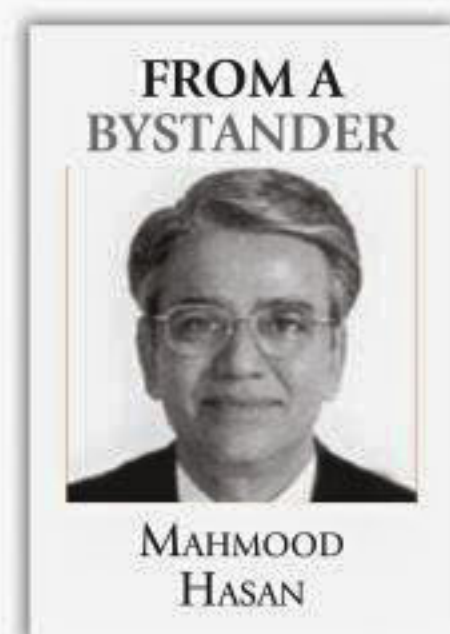
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below the national level (Tk 15,945) while that of urban areas (Tk 22,565) is above the national level. While the national poverty rate as of 2016 is 24.3 percent, the much higher poverty rates of districts like Bandarban, Dinajpur, and Kurigram (63.2 percent, 64.3 percent, and 70.8 percent respectively), in contrast to Dhaka's poverty rate of 10 percent, tell a very different story. An inbuilt Dhaka-centric bias when it comes to assessing development and poverty may help paint a prettier picture but it only serves to distract from the harsh countrywide realities.

The majority of Bangladesh's population still live in rural areas where access to essential services such as healthcare and education ranges from non-existent to limited; and even in the

how much we have progressed. But for how long? When are we going to start looking ahead instead so that we realise how much we should have achieved by now had entrenched corruption not eaten away at our potential? At a time when aspirations of reaching middle-income status have taken centre-stage, the rich-poor/urban-rural/urban middle class-urban slum divide in terms of access to quality education and healthcare is in fact quite shocking and not compatible with a country that is supposed to be on the trajectory of reaching middle-income status. It's ironic that we have no qualms about basking in the glory of GDP growth or talking about graduating out of developing country status when we haven't even been able to ensure something as basic as proper maintenance

## Will the Rohingyas ever return to Myanmar?



MAHMOOD HASAN

FROM A BYSTANDER SINCE the massive exodus of Rohingyas from Rakhine to Bangladesh in 2017, a lot has been written and said about the plight of these unfortunate people. After nearly two years, it appears that the outraged world community has forgotten about this persecuted ethnic minority.

Regarding the repatriation process of Rohingyas, Myanmar has been stalling continuously. Given the fact that majority of Rohingyas are Muslims, whose language is related to Chittagonian and who share similar physical features with Bengalis, with time these people will eventually be assimilated into the local Bangladeshi population. It appears that both Aung San Suu Kyi and her Army Chief Min Aung Hlaing are in a cosy situation now that this ethnic community has been driven out of Myanmar. For them, there is practically no scope for these people to return to Rakhine.

Understandably, the diplomatic démarche that Myanmar has undertaken to thwart the return of Rohingyas is quite well-known. The three big countries that have given support to Myanmar against repatriation of Rohingyas have two arguments: religious antagonism and that Rohingyas are a part of overpopulated Bangladesh. Sandwiched between Hindu-majority India and Buddhist-majority Myanmar, Muslim-majority Bangladesh is in an unenviable situation as far as its population is concerned. Both India and Myanmar look upon Muslims of Bangladesh with great deal of suspicion.

BJP is well-known for its anti-Muslim stance, especially its policies since it came to power in Delhi. Delhi's antipathy towards Rohingya Muslims was more than evident when it threatened to drive out 40,000 Rohingya refugees who took refuge in India, provoking sharp criticism from the United Nations. India has invested heavily in developing the coastal belts around Sittwe to gain access to the northeastern states of India. Furthermore, having a foothold in Rakhine will give India sway over the southern Bay of Bengal. The other aspect that Delhi openly believes is that Muslim-majority Bangladesh is bursting along the seams with its rapidly growing population. The statements coming from Indian Army Chief Bipin Rawat in 2018 and top BJP leaders are not political rhetoric—rather they clearly expose Delhi's worries over overpopulated Bangladesh.

Having served in Bangladesh missions in Yangon and Delhi, I have often come across government officials and journalists

inquiring about the population growth of Bangladesh. The underlying point was that Bangladeshis were spilling across the borders into neighbouring India and Myanmar.

Contiguous neighbour China has high stakes in Myanmar and has blocked UN resolutions against Myanmar. China not only has growing business and military ties but has also invested enormously in Rakhine state as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Here, like India, China wants access to the Indian Ocean through Rakhine and the Bay of Bengal. It is well-known that Beijing is at odds with its Uyghurs Muslims and it is clear that China has consciously overlooked the state-sponsored crimes against

supporting Naypyidaw against Dhaka.

The recent rise of Arakan Army in volatile Rakhine has added a new dimension to the instability in the state. The Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) has suffered serious losses when this unknown insurgent group attacked several Tatmadaw outposts since January 2019. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Arakan Army are cooperating with each other to fight the Tatmadaw.

On the Bangladesh side, there are some disquieting developments. Living in relatively safe conditions in Bangladesh, the Rohingyas are unwilling to return to Rakhine, where the situation is completely insecure. Then again, many international

area have been trying to break out of the camps to either get out of Bangladesh or to get assimilated into the Bangladeshi population. There are reports of police arresting Rohingyas at Bangladeshi airports and from boats in the Bay of Bengal. Having nothing much to do, these refugees are increasingly getting involved in all kinds of criminal activities—drug smuggling, women trafficking and, above all, becoming susceptible to radicalisation.

Myanmar has actually launched a non-military aggression against Bangladesh to destabilise the country socially, economically, environmentally and politically. The only way this aggression can be tackled is to get stringent UN Security Council sanctions against



Rohingya refugees gather near the fence in the 'no man's land' between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PHYO HEIN KYAW/AFP

the Rohingya Muslims by Naypyidaw. Then again, Myanmar's narrative that inhabitants of overpopulated Bangladesh have spilled across the borders into Myanmar has caught the attention of Chinese diplomats.

Strangely though, while China and India are competing for strategic influence over Myanmar, both Beijing and Delhi are on the same page over the Rohingya issue.

Russia is also having difficulties with Muslim-majority Commonwealth of Independent States. Moscow has no love lost for Muslims and probably sees the Rohingya Muslims as a source of trouble in Rakhine. Besides, Myanmar's military procurements from Russia have no doubt played an important role in Moscow

NGOs working to provide succour oppose their return to Myanmar. The longer these refugees are in Bangladesh, the better it is for some of these NGOs. There are allegations that INGOs are engaged in profitable businesses doing little for the Rohingyas. Bulk of the available funds are being spent for the comfort and travel of NGO functionaries.

But the most disturbing development has been the decision of Bangladesh government to relocate some 100,000 refugees to Bhasan Char. This is evidently very good news for Naypyidaw. Aung San Suu Kyi and General Hlaing will take it as victory—that Bangladesh has accepted the Rohingyas as part of its population. Rohingya refugees herded in Teknaf

Myanmar. For that to happen, Bangladesh will have to get all the five permanent members of the Security Council on its side. But China and Russia have repeatedly blocked any statement from the UN Security Council. Fourth Joint Working Group meeting between Bangladesh and Myanmar was held in Naypyidaw on May 3, 2019, but no concrete movement on repatriation was seen.

Procrastinating on the Rohingya problem is favouring Myanmar. Clearly, Bangladesh is caught up in a complicated geo-political game involving big powers and is doomed to host the Rohingya refugees indefinitely.

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