

Prioritising inclusive regional development

Govt must address disparities as a matter of urgency

BA NGLADESH'S uneven economic growth is a puzzle that continues to mystify the economists. A new study aimed at charting the development landscape of the country has revealed what was, frankly, known to many of us already: that despite impressive national growth, poverty has increased in the country, with considerable disparities in regional development and per-capita income. While certain regions like Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet saw continued progress, certain other regions like Rangpur, which has three times more poverty than those three divisions, remain backward. The level of disparity in different districts, as shown by the official data, is stupefying. We wonder why not enough policy attention is being given to this even though inclusive regional development has been high on the government's agenda for long.

Part of the blame for regional disparities, of course, goes to the centralised, often politically motivated allocation of development funds and resources. Equitable distribution of resources is paramount for inclusive development. Equally important, however, is to fix our top-down development strategy that favours the rich because unless we do so, even an increased allocation for a certain backward region will end up mostly benefiting those with greater access to resources, thereby depriving the poor.

There is no denying that poverty and inter- and intra-regional development disparity have grown concomitantly in Bangladesh. We cannot address one without addressing the other. Often it is seen that lack of work opportunities in the poorer regions triggers migration to Dhaka and other relatively developed regions (and even outside the country, often illegally). This, in turn, hurts the economic prospects of the receiving regions too. The government must address these issues of inequalities and disparities as a matter of priority because for any development to be inclusive and sustainable, it's important that everyone, rich or poor, gets a fair share of it.

Violators of HC directive should be held to account

Stop stone extraction in Bandarban

IT is disappointing to learn that stone extraction in Bandarban continues unabated despite a High Court directive and calls from the indigenous communities and environmentalists to stop such activities that are destroying the environment and natural resources of the area. *The Daily Star* ran several reports recently revealing the impact of indiscriminate stone extraction, sand-lifting, hill-cutting, and deforestation on the area's environment.

Reportedly, in a span of only five to six years, countless springs and creeks, primary sources of freshwater for the indigenous people, have dried up in the remote areas of Bandarban, resulting in severe water shortage. According to a 2018 report of this daily, at least 200 streams have been affected so far. Many families in the remote areas of Bandarban had to leave their villages because of water shortage created by unrestrained stone-lifting and destruction of forests. Such illegal practices are also endangering the wildlife and biodiversity of the hilly district.

Meanwhile, local influential people, without paying heed to environmental laws and the clearly-spelt-out High Court directives in this regard, are continuing with stone-mining at Sangu and Matamuhri rivers. Amid such a situation, the High Court has again intervened and directed the authorities concerned to immediately stop these disastrous activities. Now, the onus is on the local administration to save Bandarban from desertification. They should heed the High Court's call and take immediate action against those involved and take effective measures to stop illegal stone extraction once and for all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Time to step up for the farmers

In spite of their role in providing food security for the country as a whole, farmers of this land have long been neglected and overlooked by those in power. It seems like the policymakers neither have an understanding of the hard work that farmers do nor do they sympathise with the current situation of the farmers for which bad policies, favouring vested interests, etc. are to blame.

Farmers are now going through a crisis. They are having to sell each maund of paddy for Tk 580-850 whereas they had initially estimated that they'd earn Tk 1,200-1,350 per maund of paddy. They also have to trade via middlemen who further exploit their vulnerable position which only adds to farmers' losses.

While we are busy singing praises of the development of the country, farmers—who work relentlessly to make this development possible and who have an integral role to play in this process—go unnoticed. It is frustrating that despite all the hard work farmers put in all year round, they are not able to reap the benefits of their work, even when harvest is booming.

All these problems could easily be solved if the greedy middlemen were removed from the process. The long-lasting culture of procuring paddy from middlemen is understandable but this needs to change now. The government should see it from the perspective of the farmers and make policies that benefit them.

Shamir Sarkar, By email

Impeaching Trump: 'To be or not to be?'



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

ALI RIAZ

THE opening phrase of a soliloquy uttered by Prince Hamlet in Act 3, Scene 1 of the play *Hamlet*—"To be or not to be?"—was about life and death, not about politics; yet perhaps this aptly captures the current US political scene. Facing a decision of great significance, the Democratic Party leaders of the House of Representatives seem to be in the same quandary.

The question is about commencing impeachment proceedings in the House of Representatives against President Donald Trump. The media pundits are asking the question in various ways: will they do it? Although some Democrats have been suggesting this for a long time, it got more attention in April after Mueller's report was made public. But since the press conference of Robert S Mueller III on Wednesday, the issue of impeachment is now front and centre. Once considered a political taboo, it is now a topic nobody can avoid.

Mueller's press conference was the last act of his almost two-year stint as the special counsel appointed by the Department of Justice to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 election, and possible obstruction of justice by President Trump. Much has happened leading to and after the appointment of Robert Mueller as the special counsel. The 448-page, two-volume report has become an issue of intense discussion, particularly after an initial two-page summary was released by Attorney General William Barr. The summary, as it became evident after the redacted report was released, was far from an exoneration of Trump. Trump, however, continues to claim that he has been exonerated based on Barr's summary. Mueller, on the other hand, said in his press statement on Wednesday that if he and his team "had confidence that the president clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said so." The report has shown in detail that there were "multiple, systematic efforts" by the Russians to influence the election.

The question, which has assumed significance, is whether President Trump should be held accountable for "obstruction of justice". Mueller reminded everyone that he was bound by the Department of Justice policy which is "Charging the president with a crime was...not an option." But he said, "The Constitution requires a process other than the criminal justice system to formally accuse a sitting president of wrongdoing." This is what added urgency and weight to the debate on impeachment. This is as clearly as Mueller could say that the Congress can now proceed to hold the president accountable; in other words, Congress can start the impeachment proceedings.

Impeachment, in short, is a multi-step process: the process commences when the House of Representatives votes instructing the Judiciary Committee to determine whether there are sufficient grounds for Congress to impeach the president. The second step is when the committee, after holding an inquiry including a public hearing and gathering information, writes the articles of impeachment (that is the specific charges against the accused), and votes on whether to send them to the full House for consideration. The third step is a vote in the House on the articles of impeachment, which are then sent to the Senate. The fourth step is holding the trial itself in the Senate with the chief justice presiding. The final step is the conviction which requires two-thirds of Senators' support. Conviction, in this instance, means "removal from the office and disqualification to hold or enjoy any Office of honor."

Procedurally speaking, the Democrats can easily get through four steps as it has the majority in the House, but the

is whether an impeachment proceeding would be helpful for the Democrats in the 2020 election. The dilemma that the Democrats are facing is between their constitutional duty and moral standing on the one hand, and the potential political fallout from a failed attempt to remove Trump from office, on the other. The moral argument is simple: no one is above the law and anyone transgressing the law must be held accountable. This is even more important in the Trump era where the president's behaviour and actions are an affront to any kind of checks and balances. The ego-driven authoritarian bent of the US president calls for an appropriate response from the legislative branch.

The Mueller report contains several instances where the president had attempted to obstruct investigations, albeit unsuccessfully, because, in most cases, his staff defied his instructions. Whether these attempts are enough to prosecute him is a legal matter, but impeachment is more a political matter



The dilemma that the Democrats are facing is between their constitutional duty to hold President Trump accountable for his indiscretions and the potential political fallout from a failed attempt to remove him from office.

PHOTO: AFP

Republican-controlled Senate is unlikely to convict President Trump. Of the required 67 votes, Democrats have only 47 of their own. There is no guarantee that all Democrats will be willing to vote for a conviction; on top of it all, 20 Republicans breaking ranks is wishful thinking at its best.

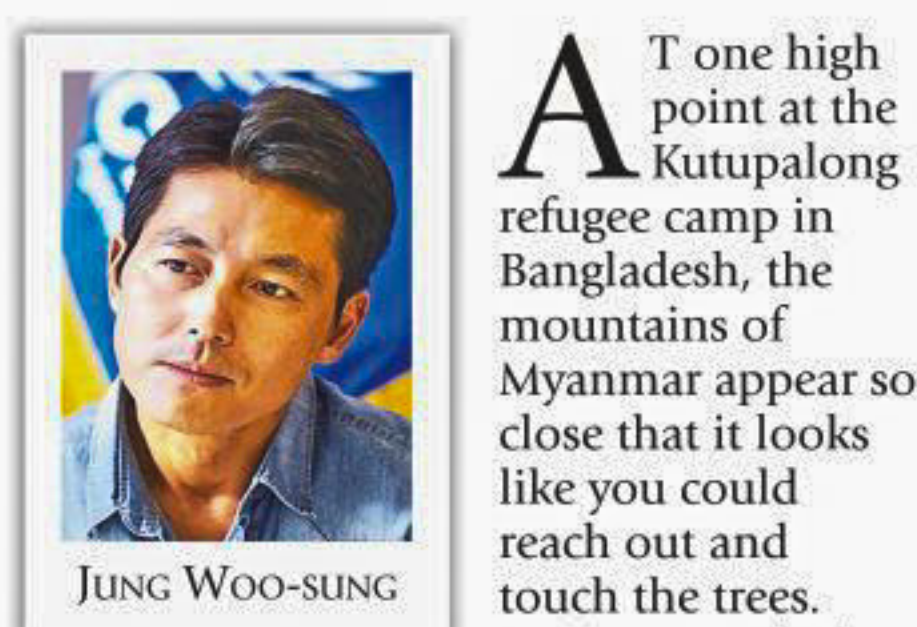
Impeachment was one of the issues dividing the candidates seeking the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nomination until Wednesday. Now, almost all of them have lent their support for such a process, and there is a growing chorus among progressive liberal House members to initiate the proceedings. Many are suggesting that it is not an option, but an imperative. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is yet to entertain the idea, although she has said, "Nothing is off the table."

Notwithstanding the difficulty of securing the required votes to remove the president, the most important question

than a legal one.

The political question, therefore, is whether impeachment is a pragmatic and prudent move, especially before the 2020 election. Previous instances of a failed attempt to remove the president had bolstered the incumbent. Although the impeachment of President Clinton is not comparable to the current situation, we can't ignore the fact that Clinton's approval rating reached a high of 73 percent after impeachment; the Republicans lost House and Speaker Newt Gingrich's political life ended. In the 2020 election, the odds are not against Trump: incumbency and the economy favour him. Incumbents tend to win elections. Nineteen presidents have sought re-election since 1900; of those, 14 have won and five have lost. That includes Gerald Ford, who wasn't elected in the first place. Since WWII, only three have lost their re-election bids. With the economy doing

We must stand with Rohingya refugees



JUNG WOO-SUNG

country that the Rohingya refugees who fled here long to return to. In May 2019, I returned to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh to meet them once more.

More than 740,000 Rohingya refugees fled to the neighbouring Bangladesh due to the violence that broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017. Including the refugees who had previously fled, Kutupalong now hosts more than 910,000 Rohingya refugees, and is now the largest refugee camp on earth.

I visited Kutupalong in December 2017 at the request of UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Filippo Grandi, just a few months after the outbreak of violence. Although their pain continues, the stories of Rohingya refugees are being less and less told in countries such as my own. Someone had to continue talking about them. This is how my seventh field visit with UNHCR was decided.

I had met Nurisha's family at the Transit Centre in 2017. Her two daughters, Moriam and Fatima, had grown so much over the two years. Nurisha's eyes became watery the moment we met. I could feel her gratefulness at the fact that someone had not forgotten about them and had returned.

Nurisha was separated from her husband for over six months as the family fled violence in August 2017. Fortunately, she was able to reunite with her husband in Kutupalong. Nurisha's story shows the importance of UNHCR's registration exercise, which is conducted in family units. Through this process, separated family members can be identified and reunited, which is particularly important for many unaccompanied refugee children.

As a mother, the fact that her two young daughters were unable to get proper education was adding to Nurisha's concerns.

More than 440,000 refugee children in Kutupalong are of school age, like

Moriam and Fatima, but are unable to receive proper education. Basic education is provided at UNHCR's Learning Centres in Kutupalong, but the lack of an official curriculum and certification means these children will face difficulties in continuing education in Bangladesh, and when they return to Myanmar. This is an important issue on which Myanmar's future depends.

Despite the horrible violence the family experienced in Myanmar, Nurisha said that she often talks with her husband about the day when they will be able to return to their country.

"If my children could be safe, and if our family could live ordinarily and be respected like other people in Myanmar, we will return today, any day," she said.

the opportunities to learn, develop skills, and prepare for and dream of a future.

Such efforts are also being made in Kutupalong. One of the ways to empower refugees is to let them identify their own needs and support projects, and lead them. In Kutupalong, refugee volunteers are leading various initiatives—raising awareness about gender equality, prenatal and post-birth education, preparation for monsoon and cyclone, fixing roads and elephant response, among others. Such initiatives are particularly helpful for the refugee youth, who could be sitting idle in the camps with nothing to do.

"No one can better identify the needs of refugees than refugees themselves. All the plans should begin from the people in the camps," according to Marin Din



Amir Ali, 75, plays a violin in front of his house in Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: REUTERS

I was relieved to see that many refugees were striving to rebuild their lives in an environment that had visibly improved since 2017, but my heart remained heavy at the thought of their future. No matter how well-structured or safe life at a refugee camp may be, a refugee is only a guest in the country of his or her asylum. When a guest's visit becomes protracted, the hospitality will inevitably begin to wane. Unfortunately, a permanent solution for the Rohingya refugees appears something to be expected only in the distant future.

One of UNHCR's most important roles is to make sure that refugees do not simply survive, but live with dignity with

Kajdomcaj, head of UNHCR sub-office in Cox's Bazar. He believes that these projects lie at the heart of UNHCR's assistance in Kutupalong.

On the last day of my visit, I met with two families at the transit centre who had arrived in Bangladesh, just one month ago. Although numbers have dropped sharply, some Rohingya refugees continue to flee to Bangladesh to escape oppression, persecution and sometimes to save their lives.

Mahmoud, a father of three children, told me that he stayed in Myanmar despite the continuing difficulties because it was his country. Mahmoud's ultimate dream is, naturally, to return to his home

well and the unemployment rate going down, presidents win. Forecasting models, which predicted the victory of Trump in 2016 based on economic growth, point to a Trump re-election in 2020. Additionally, despite low approval ratings of President Trump, which have hovered around the low 40s throughout the last few years, his support base has remained intact; there hasn't been any defection. There is yet to be a clear Democratic frontrunner and the crowded field of 24 aspirants is sending a not-so-positive signal to the voters.

There are, of course, some positive indicators for the Democrats: Trump's approval rating, including in the states which Democrats lost to Trump in 2016, is low. But most importantly, Trump is vulnerable on several fronts. As David Vo Drehe, in a column in the *Washington Post*, writes, "[Trump is] heading into his reelection campaign minus the trade deal with China that he promised; minus the big infrastructure program that he promised; minus the Mideast peace that he promised; minus the big, beautiful wall that he promised; minus the money from Mexico that he promised; minus the good, clean government that he promised; minus the balanced budget that he promised; minus the revived coal industry that he promised." If the Democrats focus on impeachment, none of these will be the issue. The healthcare and immigration issues, which delivered the House of Representatives to the Democrats, will be pushed to the backburner. These are signature issues for the Democrats. The push for impeachment might be viewed by some voters as "Democrats going too far", and its failure will help Trump portray himself as a victim and claim he has been "exonerated twice". Trump's recent actions—from a temper tantrum in the meeting with Democratic leaders to provocative tweets to attacks on Mueller to making wild remarks about impeachment—may be less impulsive than they appear. Perhaps they are designed to entice Democrats to the impeachment route.

Should the Democrats take the moral high road and fulfil their constitutional duty or focus on a winning strategy for the 2020 election and deal with these indiscretions later? Impeachment is a high-stakes gamble at this moment, but that does not mean that it should be off the table for good and that the Congress should abdicate its responsibility of holding the president accountable.

Instead, the ongoing investigations in the House, particularly investigations on Trump's tax returns, financial records, and potential violations of the emoluments clause, should continue in full force which will annoy Trump, land him in trouble, and allow the Democrats to make a case to the voters in 2020. Perhaps, the money trail will reveal compelling reasons for an impeachment which the Republicans won't be able to ignore.

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country Myanmar. He said that Myanmar is a democratic nation and, therefore, he wants to be guaranteed his basic rights.

"I ask for the same treatment as any other person in Myanmar. We are grateful to Bangladesh for receiving us, but cannot stay here forever. My dream is to return to my own country," he said.

During this visit, I met with the refugee relief and repatriation commissioner, who leads the Bangladeshi government's policy on refugees. Despite its own financial difficulties, the Bangladesh government has never officially closed its border, and has been generously receiving and protecting refugees for decades. The commissioner told me that it is the people of Bangladesh who are the driving force of such tremendous generosity. The people's feeling of pride of being a member of a country that stands in solidarity with refugees was binding the local and the refugee communities closely together.

But one million people is a large number and the responsibility should not fall on a single country's shoulders.

The Rohingya crisis is one that is happening somewhere very close to us in Korea. They have been persecuted for many decades. More than 34,000 refugees in Kutupalong have lived there since the 1990s. Many refugees have been here their whole life, and do not know their homeland or a life outside the refugee camp.

Korea can play an important role in putting an end to this tragedy by showing leadership in setting up discussions to find a political solution for the Rohingya refugees. While the solution is being sought, it is also important that funding and support continue for the refugees and the local community in Bangladesh, so that the refugees can be protected and live with dignity.

Last year's Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya refugees was 70 percent funded. Underfunding naturally leads to the sacrifice of refugees. Too many children, families and ordinary people are suffering from persecution and discrimination without any fault of their own.

No single country or person of authority can put an end to these sufferings. Only you can do it. We can do this together. What makes us human? The choice is yours.

Jung Woo-sung is an actor and a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador.