

PM's call to OIC to hold Myanmar to account

The Organisation should do more

THE prime minister's powerful call at the 14th OIC Summit is very appropriate—both in terms of the timing as well as the forum. And we strongly reiterate her views. Although it is not the first time that the PM has called upon the second largest international organisation to bring to bear its weight to resolve the issue, this time her call was to carry forward the Gambial-led initiative introduced in the OIC foreign ministers conference in March to hold Myanmar to account for its genocidal acts against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine. It called for taking legal recourse to establish Rohingya rights and seek justice for them by taking Myanmar to the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

Given the adverse potential of the Rohingya crisis for Bangladesh and for the region, it is disheartening to note that the Rohingya issue finds no mention in the Mecca Declaration issued after the Summit. It is surprising that a million or so persecuted Rohingyas, evicted from their country, would merit no mention in the final communiqué. It only sends the wrong signal to Myanmar.

We expect the OIC to do more, both in the diplomatic as well as the humanitarian front, to ameliorate the condition of the Rohingyas and relieve Bangladesh of the huge burden it has endured over the last two years. Regrettably, OIC's action so far has been confined largely to making occasional statements. The matter being of a very serious nature, involving a member of the OIC, its efforts so far has been fragmented at best. Merely urging a halt to violence and reminding the Myanmar's government of its responsibility to protect its citizens is not enough. Given a most obstinate, arrogant and highly insensitive government in Naypyidaw, homilies and hopeful wishes would cut no ice.

The 57-member organisation should do more, particularly in the diplomatic front to help early and safe repatriation of the refugees to their own country and ensure accountability and justice for gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the military junta in Myanmar against the Rohingyas. And side by side, it must be more forthcoming with its material help for the nearly one million refugees camped in Cox's Bazar.

Bangladesh should welcome Chinese investment

Do everything to cash in

WITH the ongoing US-China trade war and because the Chinese economy is also currently undergoing some structural changes, a number of Chinese garment makers are looking to set up factories in Bangladesh under joint ventures. Because of rising production costs in China, Chinese textile and garment industry owners have for the last two decades invested heavily in Vietnam and Cambodia. And this apparently has led to overinvestment in both countries. As Bangladesh is still relatively new ground, Chinese entrepreneurs are looking to relocate their "sunset industries"—old and less successful in terms of profitmaking—to Bangladesh in order to take advantage of its low labour costs. However, Bangladesh isn't the only country these investors are looking at, as Myanmar, too, is on their radar. This means that Bangladesh, despite having the advantage of cheap labour, will have its work cut out if it wants to be the main beneficiary of Chinese investments.

So far, Bangladesh has not allowed foreign investment in basic apparels, limiting their presence in high-end and value-added textile and garment items. But given that investment—other than public—has remained stagnant for years, the possibility of the Chinese investing in the sector should not be dismissed without carefully analysing the opportunities that it may present us.

What also needs to be thought out is how we can make the best of this opportunity. Simply having a comparative advantage through cheap labour is not a prudent long-term strategy. And as the Chinese have said, they are worried about the high lead time in Bangladesh's garment sector—much of it being the result of weak infrastructure and poor transportation facilities. These are things that the government must take into account and actively work to overcome.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Weak performance by Pak and SL

The performance of the first two openers of ICC World Cup 2019 from the Asian subcontinent—Pakistan and Sri Lanka—was utterly disappointing for the fans. Both the teams were bowled out even before scoring 150 runs. The two respective oppositions West Indies and New Zealand dominated the game from the very start and made their wins look effortlessly easy. It was heartbreaking for fans all around the world to witness such a downfall of these once-giants of the cricket world.

The two games clearly exposed the batting weaknesses of both the teams against quality fast bowling in Britain's bouncy wickets. The front-line batsmen of the teams looked unnerved and were clearly daunted by the pace and the tactical attacks of their respective opponents.

There was a total lack of discipline and commitment on the part of top-order batsmen who meekly surrendered without offering any meaningful resistance. Most of the batsmen threw their wickets away in such a fashion as if it was a mere practice session—displaying no seriousness or grit. Their underwhelming performance should serve as a matter of serious concern to both the teams.

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Why are bumper crops such a headache for Bangladesh?



It is an irony of fate that the bumper harvest in recent months has only brought hardship and destitution for our farmers. Bangladesh now has had two back-to-back bumper harvests—Aman last year and Boro this year—and government godowns are brimming with rice stock. Rice production amounted to 3.62 crore metric tons in fiscal year 2017-18, and the total production is expected to hit a new high during the current fiscal year, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), rice millers and traders. Estimates from the US Department of Agriculture attaché in Bangladesh indicate that the production for 2018-19 is expected to increase by 6.3 percent year-on-year.

All this is good news. However, a complex set of circumstances including nature's bounty, government policy, and an alleged entente between the politicians, rice-mill owners, and traders have now resulted in a crisis for the government just before the Eid holidays and the upcoming budget session of the new parliament. News reports indicate that this year's bumper Boro crop has created a condition of excess supply leading to downward pressures on the price of paddy at the farm level. Small farmers and those with limited resources borrow heavily during the entire planting season to buy seeds, fertilisers, and irrigation water, as well to tide over the lean months before harvest-time, and often resort to "distress sale" during and immediately after the crop is cut. This glut creates havoc for the farmers who are not only short of cash but also have obligations to meet.

Accounts of farmers setting fire to their harvest, protests organised by farmers' organisations, and confusing and conflicting statements by the agriculture minister have rocked the nation over the last month. In sum, the prosperity of our agriculture is not necessarily good news for the farmers.

It must be conceded that Bangladesh has reached an enviable milestone of food-grain self-sufficiency. However, it now appears that this cornucopia or abundance is actually not a blessing, particularly from the growers' point of view. How can we protect our poor farmers, who apparently are going bankrupt while trying to grow this crop which is vital for our economy, so that in future we never have to face this same situation all over again? Why can't we guarantee that both the agriculturalists and the consumers are assured of price stability that works for each?

The genesis of the current debacle can be traced to the flip-flop in our policy arena and lack of vision on the part of the various ministries involved in procurement, trade, and distribution of food grains. Our policy on import and export of rice lacked consistency. Bangladesh banned sales of some common rice varieties in May 2008 when there was a spike in domestic prices. The government has relaxed the ban in recent years, but given the lack of experience of our exporters, the availability of the export market is probably not going to ameliorate the condition of the growers. As can be expected, the current situation has led to an interesting tug of war between the government, the opposition, and outside observers.

The government announced that it will procure paddy at Tk 1,040 per maund from the farmers. But many farmers were forced to sell the paddy at Tk 500-600 per maund, which is well below the production cost, to the middlemen as the government's procurement is delayed.

"The Boro crop production cost is estimated at more than Tk 600 (per maund), excluding the labour cost. But if the labour cost is included, the selling price should stand at Tk 1,200," said Prof Abul Barkat of Dhaka University. "Only fixing the government's procurement rate



The upcoming Eid will not bring any joy to farmer Mantu Miah of Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila as the staple is now priced well below production cost.

at minimum 20 percent more than the production cost will not work. It must be ensured that the real farmers get that market price without any trouble."

If only things were that simple. The lack of real-time fact-based government policy on procurement, exports, guaranteed price, and export tariffs has added to the confusion. The government has failed to listen to its own advisers. In a policy paper on procurement policy, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and Steven Haggblade advised our government to learn from past experience, which "suggests one final lesson: clear, written policy statements may serve as an important aid in cementing a reform."

Obviously, the increased production has created a headache for the government. The price of paddy in the open market is low and hurting the growers, and the agriculture minister rued that even if the government buys rice at Tk 36 per kg, the actual farmers are not benefitting from the purchase since the middleman are taking their cut and leaving the growers in ruins. He blamed the middlemen and their political influence for the farmer's sorry plight and for frustrating the government's desire to buy directly from the peasants.

How do governments cope with this phenomenon which we see in Bangladesh? A common short-term response is to buy the crop from the farmers at a guaranteed minimum price. Unfortunately, a thorn on the side of the government is the interference of the politicians, the officials, and the "syndicate".

Our policymakers have been advised time and again that procurement prices of rice, which are much higher than market prices, favour rent-seeking opportunities

leading to further increase in costs for the government. "Since the bulk of rice that is procured is bought from millers or other traders, any rents would disproportionately benefit millers and traders," said a group of researchers.

Others have warned that there is often an unholy alliance between officers of the Food Department and the millers: "There appears to be widespread abuse of public resources through collusion between millers and public officials. The current system of procurement, therefore, does not affect market prices as much as it could."

Finally, an earlier study done by IFPRI on rice export emphasises that its feasibility depends on a set of policy measures. First, our policy should create favourable conditions for the development of export markets. In addition, the process of export should be kept simple to avoid inordinate delays in completing paperwork. Second, existing infrastructure and equipment affecting transportation, storage, and milling should be updated and expanded. Third, a grading system should be introduced to raise the average quality of rice consumed domestically and to enhance the likelihood of exporting successfully in the international market. Fourth, there should be research to continuously improve productivity and quality. Finally, the international market should be opened gradually so that negative effects can be absorbed smoothly. Tax and subsidy policies at the point of external trade may be effective in handling the instability of prices arising from this step.

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ICC World Cup and our expectations

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IN his book titled *The Tao of Cricket* (2000), Ashis Nandy wrote that "cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English." His remarks refer to the passion and emotion demonstrated by the spectators of the game in the cricket-playing nations of South Asia such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, most recently, Afghanistan. In order to claim cricket as their own game, the English were conventional in celebrating the ICC World Cup 2019 inauguration ceremony, where they displayed their national symbol and pride—their monarch Queen Elizabeth II, as well as the Buckingham Palace, instead of common festive features such as singing, dancing and so on.

Queen Elizabeth II is not only a source of British pride but also the monarch of 53 Commonwealth countries. Interestingly, among the 10 participating teams in the ICC World Cup 2019, nine are from Commonwealth countries, Afghanistan being the only exception. Therefore, although the English inauguration ceremony has been criticised by many for its failure to meet their expectations, most of the captains were excited to meet the Queen, and the one-hour ceremony has reminded us to take things slow because there is still one-and-a-half-month left to party.

Like other team sports, cricket is a game of stamina, skills and strategy. One of the most significant differences between cricket and other team sports is that it is highly influenced by the environment, such as the condition of the soil and the weather. As soil and weather vary from one country to another, we can see that the conditions of the cricket pitches also vary across different countries. Cricket is perhaps the only game determined by the weather. Therefore, it could more likely be that we will see cricket matches being easily abandoned because of the rain, in compliance with a rule called the Duckworth-Lewis method in one-day cricket matches.

As weather plays a critical role in cricket, it would be important to know the weather forecast during this one-and-a-half-month event. With the start of

British summer this week, BBC Weather's Monthly Outlook suggests that "low pressure is expected to be the main weather feature until mid-June, keeping things a bit cooler than average and more unsettled." Due to the unpredictable nature of British weather, it is presumed that rain will interrupt some of the cricket matches during this World Cup, which will dishearten many. As a result, many people question why cricket stadiums do not have a roof to cover them from the rain. One of the obvious answers to the question is that cricket would lose some of its characteristics, such as the impact



PHOTO: SAEED KHAN/AFP

of weather on the game, in a covered stadium.

Thanks to their skills and strategy, the Indian cricket team has been praised by cricket veterans over the years, and the country has become a hub for professional cricketers and fans from all over the world. With the Indian Premier League (IPL), Indian cricket has evolved dramatically over the last decade to reach a new dimension. The success of the IPL would not have been possible without the help of the media.

In an article titled "Television and the Transformation of Sport," published in 2009, Prof Garry Whannel identified that

sport plays a significant part in the growth of television and helps television yield its revenues from commercial sponsorships, presentations, and cultural forms in the age of new media. This just might be the case in India—reports from the *Times of India* in 2017 showed that the media giant Star India won IPL media rights worth 16347.50 crore rupees for the period between 2018 and 2022.

The popularity of Indian cricket, however, has been overshadowed to some extent by the current no. 1 position in ODI rankings and recent performance of the English cricket team, meaning

there are talented bowlers like Mustafizur Rahman. In making Bangladesh one of the least favourite squads, some of the cricket commentators including former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum have failed to realise that Bangladesh team includes the number one ODI all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, along with the talented Mushfiqur Rahim, Tamim Iqbal, Soumya Sarkar, and Mahmudullah Riyad, who can become game-changers at any stage. Besides, Bangladesh has a charismatic captain, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who is not only inspiring for his team members but also strategically challenging for many opponents.

As a devoted supporter of the Bangladeshi team, I believe that our cricketers have the skills and experience required to beat top-ranked teams like India and England, which has been proven many times before. Over the years, we have built our expectations through analysing the performance of the Bangladeshi team at big events such as the ICC World Cup. Evidence shows that the Bangladeshi cricket team won over Scotland and Pakistan in 1999, played with pride during the Super Eight Stage in 2007 and performed very well in the 2015 quarter final. In terms of our history with winning, our current cricket team is more experienced than ever and has the potential for creating ample opportunities to reach the semi-final stage in this World Cup. Because of this, our expectation of seeing the Bangladeshi cricket team in the semi-finals is quite realistic.

Therefore, we as Bangladeshi cricket supporters expect more from our team and want them to reach the semi-finals. In response to our expectations, Bangladeshi skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza warned us to control our whimsical wishes. However, because of the glorious uncertainty in the game of cricket, we are eagerly waiting for an unexpected outcome, such as a win at the ICC World Cup 2019. As spectators, we have the complete right to wish for this and we hope that these wishes, contrary to what Mashrafe indicated, will not turn into a pressure or burden for our cricketers.

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