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LATE S. M. ALI

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Stop adding new trains unnecessarily

It will do more harm than good

WITH most trains operating in the country's northwestern and southern regions failing to run on time primarily due to inadequate capacity of railway tracks, Bangladesh Railway is adding new trains in the regions without doing any proper assessment. The BR currently runs 42 trains in Joydebpur-Ishwardi section which has a maximum operating capacity of 22 trains a day. As a result, it has to apply "block system" which permits only one train to run at a time from one station to the next, forcing other trains to wait. This is already leading to schedule problems and regular delays.

In the last six months, the BR added four new trains to the section. Half of them drew lukewarm response from passengers and have simply made the delays worse. Given the existing circumstance, the most obvious question is: why the BR is planning to introduce even more trains to a section already running more trains than it can handle? Experts and insiders say it is for political reasons and because of pressure exerted by certain influential quarters.

And there are examples of politicians persuading railway authorities to run or launch trains in accordance with their election promises. But the problem is, when decisions are taken under such considerations without proper assessment, it leads to large scale suffering for the majority of people—as is currently happening with passengers regularly having to wait for hours on end in order to reach their desired destinations.

Whereas the railway authorities should work to make the situation better, the decision to add new trains will clearly make it worse. Such decisions should be made after assessing the financial viability of such a step and the convenience of the passengers.

Instead of unnecessarily adding new trains, the authorities should replace the worn-out coaches with new ones to make train travel more comfortable for passengers. Simultaneously, it should improve and add to the existing infrastructure so that more trains can be added to the section without it doing more harm than good.

Bandarban's stream—a victim of greed

Again, influentials are the grabbers

IT is heart-breaking to learn of yet another important waterbody—a stream, Bandarban's Myaksi Chhara—being shrunk to a fraction of its original size because of the greed of land grabbers. From a 40 feet-wide stream, Myaksi Chhara is now about to die with a width of only 5 feet. According to sources in the district administration, members of the political elite have been indiscriminately grabbing land on the banks of the stream and have built multi-storied commercial buildings. Large areas of land near the stream have been leased out to ruling party members who have built permanent structures on the banks. The results are predictable: change in course of the stream resulting in blockage of the flow and flooding in the town during monsoons.

It is appalling that protecting the environment of a district as rare (in terms of forest area) as Bandarban is not a priority of the district administration which leased out the land to influential people in violation of existing laws. Did the administration not know what the effect of building structures right on the banks and filling up parts of the canal would have on this precious stream? It is also puzzling why the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) would not include the names of these influential people the local people have identified as encroachers, in the list of water body grabbers they have published.

In January this year, the High Court accorded "living status" to all rivers of the country delineating the importance of these water bodies. The HC also emphasised the role of the State in protecting all rivers, mountains, forests, lakes, ponds and other receptacles of water in the country. The NRCC was declared as the legal guardian of all the rivers of the country.

Despite such directives it is tragic that Myaksi Chhara is about to face the same fate as so many hundreds of streams, canals, lakes and rivers. The government has expressed its commitment to protecting these lifelines of the country. Now it must free them from the greed of individuals who have abused their official power and caused irreparable damage to our water bodies.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Casino business and social degeneration

The recent drives of the government against casino business is commendable. However, it is also a worrying symptom of the degeneration that our society has undergone.

The widespread and unchecked casino business in our society indicate that not only are we losing our moral values, but a section of our politicians is encouraging this practice.

The arrest of Jubo League leaders and a Dhaka North City Corporation councillor suggest that these businesses have been sheltered by a powerful section of our society. One wonders, why had the law enforcers not been able to sniff the problem earlier? What have been our intelligence agencies doing all this time?

It is high time, the government not only dismantled the casino business, but also the corrupt system that fed on this business.

Amena Akhter
Jinjira, Keranigonj, Dhaka



Why are social safety net programmes so crucial?



I have been asked by several close friends recently, why we need social protection measures to address poverty in Bangladesh—a country which has the world's largest microcredit programme. One might ask: is it because the microcredit programme is not fulfilling its promise of alleviating poverty and social protection is therefore going to replace it?

Let me start by briefly explaining the major difference between the two and what these are supposed to deliver. Through microcredit, small amounts of loan are given to poor women and men to help them become self-employed or initiate small-scale income generating activities that would help them come out of poverty. This poor segment of the population is unable to access credit from the formal financial sector due to their inability to arrange collateral. Most microcredit programmes adopt group centred lending approach and they are run by non-government organisations. Bangladesh pioneered microcredit programme since the late seventies which has gained popularity now in many other developing Asian and African countries.

Social protection, alternatively called social security or social safety net programme, is a set of policies and programmes aimed at reducing social and economic risk and vulnerability of the poor, enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and loss of income including under emergency situations. Social protection programme includes conditional or unconditional cash transfers or food assistance to poor families often through public works programme, provision of unemployment benefits, building of skills through training programmes to increase labour productivity and income, investing in more productive agricultural activities to improve household nutritional status and income, and supporting families to access basic education and primary health care services. A comprehensive social protection system covers all segments of vulnerable population including the unemployed, disabled, sick, aged, orphans, women-headed households, street children, etc.

Today, the number of people living below the poverty line in Bangladesh is estimated to be 35 million. A significant part of this population is covered by microcredit programme. It offers a broad-based opportunity to reduce poverty. Over the last four decades, the microfinance industry has come up with a range of options in borrowing, savings and insurance to low income people.

Microcredit is meeting the credit needs of these people who otherwise would not have access to any credit facility other than taking loan from money lenders at high interest rates. The cumulative loan disbursement of nine large NGOs and Grameen Bank together stood at Tk 679,615 crore in 2018-2019. They cover a total of 37 million borrowers.

It is well recognised that microcredit alone cannot pull all the poor people out of poverty. One assumption for microcredit to succeed is the ability of borrowers to invest in income-earning activities—in the context of Bangladesh which are, poultry raising, goat rearing, cow fattening, vegetable gardening, small-scale farming,

widow and destitute women allowance for 1.4 million people; maternity allowance for poor mothers provided to seven lakh women, and a working lactating mother assistance programme which benefited 2.5 lakh women during the same year.

Other programmes include allowance for the financially insolvent disabled citizens, stipend for the disabled students, a health programme to provide free physiotherapy and other treatments to the disabled people, and support to non-government orphanages benefiting 98,000 orphans. There is provision for open market sale of food items for low income people which benefited 12 million people in 2018-19. The Vulnerable Group

Development Foundation helps with poverty reduction of small farmers and landless rural people in 173 upazilas. Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation works for poverty alleviation through social safety net and women's empowerment programmes with the help of 278 partner organisations in 164 upazilas.

Ending poverty, which is the inescapable agenda of today's world, requires action across multiple arenas and should be approached from social protection and microcredit angles— both of which are tested means of poverty reduction. The two approaches can also be combined. Brac in 2002 introduced a new initiative combining these two approaches for the



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PHOTO: STAR/FILE

fisheries, potteries, bamboo products, etc. Most of the borrowers are active women and men. The success of microcredit is based on production and marketing of their produces and therefore, those not so enterprising will not venture at borrowing. The poorest of the poor normally avoid it. Therefore, a significant portion of vulnerable population needs other types of support to help them bail out of poverty.

Bangladesh has adopted a Social Security Strategy in 2015. In 2018-19, a total amount of Tk 64,176 crore was allocated from government budget for social safety net programmes. The allocation was 13.81 percent of the annual budget and 2.53 percent of the GDP.

There are a number of important social protection initiatives in Bangladesh. Some of these are: old age allowance that benefited four million people in 2018-19;

Development Programme, Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme and Gratuitous Relief Programme provide food assistance and employment generation opportunities. The Ashrayan project supports the landless and homeless families through income generating activities like handicrafts, poultry, pisciculture, gardening, agriculture, cattle rearing, etc.

One House One Farm project is for near landless households to develop family farms centring on fisheries, poultry, cattle rearing, nursery, kitchen and vegetable gardening. The Comprehensive Village Development Programme helps the poor in the poverty stricken areas with self-employment. Palli Daridro Bimochon Foundation works in 357 upazilas and has helped 20 lakh rural people with self-employment and income generating activities in 2018-19. Small Farmers

ultra-poor to enhance their livelihood through promotional (assets and skills training) and protective (stipends for students and health services) measures. Those who participated in this programme and demonstrated the potential to borrow were eventually enrolled in the microcredit programme. About 70 percent of them borrowed money and repaid them regularly.

Microcredit is not a panacea for poverty reduction. There are 35 million people still under the poverty line in Bangladesh; therefore, there is a need for a strong and expanded social protection programme alongside the microcredit programme in the country.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed is an economist and urban planner. He worked previously as a UN official in Bangladesh and abroad.

Myanmar's state of perpetual conflict

Who are the beneficiaries?



REPORT after report have confirmed the wave of appalling violence in Myanmar on its ethnic minorities, perpetrated by a well-trained, well-armed and state-sponsored organisation.

Yet the world seems to be incapable of ending this horrifying situation, perhaps unprecedented since the Second World War. Why?

Myanmar is perhaps an ideal battleground for regional supremacy, and Asia's last frontier for plundering natural resources. It has a lot to offer: a strategic location between South and Southeast Asia, common borders with both China and India, a long coast line, abundant natural resources, precious stones and a sparse population. And there is ruling a regime all too eager to join the plunder.

The foremost contender for this much sought-after prize is China, followed by Japan, India and, a distant fourth, Russia. None of these countries have criticised Myanmar for the atrocities carried out by the state, and each has sheltered it from condemnations at the international forums.

China has made good use of the numerous Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO), especially those along the common border, to keep Myanmar on a short leash. It was the only source of help for Myanmar during its long years of isolation until 2011. The Rohingya situation came as a golden opportunity to further tighten this grip, as Beijing conveniently sheltered the Myanmar regime from scathing international condemnations. It is also flooding the country with mega infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), buying up most of the Jade from its murky mining and trading practices, and keeping the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) happy with large supplies of arms, funds and training.

India maintained a distance from Myanmar's Military-backed government until 1993. Later, strategic and commercial interests—such as fighting insurgency in its restive northeast, transit and easy access to the sea—received greater priority. In

2013 it initiated large scale infrastructure development in and strategic cooperation with Myanmar, partly to counter the growing influence of China. The two countries jointly undertook the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Link, a USD 484 million project connecting the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe seaport in Rakhine State in Myanmar by sea. When completed, it will link Sittwe seaport to Paletwa in Chin State via the Kaladan river route, and then from Paletwa by road to Mizoram state in Northeast India. The project also includes Sittwe Special Economic Zone, Sitwe-Gaya Gas Pipeline, and Thathay Chaung Hydropower

developing the USD 1.7 billion Paluzawa coal mine and an associated power plant. Marubeni is a partner in the proposed USD 3.5 billion Myeik coal-fired power plant.

The detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar has only confirmed what was known for a long time. The Tatmadaw seized power in 1962 with the pretext of saving the country from disintegration in the face of ethnic conflicts, but the conflicts have only become more intense and deadly, worsening the human rights situation to a new low, not seen after the Second World War. Tatmadaw reports directly to the



Myanmar State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

PHOTO: AFP

Project.

Japan's affair with Myanmar started during the Second World War when it provided military training to the anti-British youths. After the war, Japan continued its engagement with Myanmar through its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) grants. In 2013, Shinzo Abe made the first official visit to Myanmar by a Japanese prime minister in 36 years and committed USD 5.7 billion for the "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure", in direct competition to China's BRI projects. Major Japanese projects include Thilawa Special Economic Zone, a 2400-hectare industrial area just outside of Yangon that is 49 percent owned by JICA and a trio of Japanese banks. Japanese firms are also

National Defence and Security Council led by the President. As such it has become the supreme authority in the country, enjoying total impunity. Using such unbridled power, it has built up an extensive network of commercial entities under two large holding companies; Myanmar Economic Holding Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). MEHL and MEC and their subsidiaries generate revenue that dwarfs that of any civilian-owned company in Myanmar.

Current and former high-ranking Tatmadaw officials, including those accused of some of the gravest crimes under international law, maintain a tight control over the two holding companies and their subsidiaries. All of Tatmadaw's

top officers are all part of the boards of MEHL and MEC. There is no regulatory control or oversight as to how these companies operate. Billions of dollars generated through MEC and MEHL bypass formal government channels and remain unaccounted for. Tatmadaw and its officials have a vested interest in armed conflict and violence, because it helps them to justify their stranglehold on this conflict driven resource economy.

Remember the famous saying in Sun-Tzu's *Art of War*, "In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity"? In a classic Sun-Tzu style, Myanmar conflicts opened up opportunities for foreign governments and companies willing to reap benefits from this chaos. In return, they are sheltering the Myanmar regime from international condemnations and sanctions. These governments are helping the Tatmadaw in modernising its defence, that serves both their commercial and strategic interests. China, Russia and India are actively supplying Myanmar with arms, transport, equipment and training, as reported by the UN Commission on Myanmar.

Some of the other nations, not to fall behind, are eagerly picking up whatever business is remaining. These include Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Pakistan, Ukraine, France-Italy (possibly through a third party) and Israel. Earlier this year, frigates from Brunei and Vietnam have paid friendship visits to Myanmar ports, indicating that both want to continue their defence cooperation, regardless of the atrocious state of human rights in the host country or international sanctions. Singapore has recently surpassed China as Myanmar's biggest investor, confirming their continued commercial interest in this lucrative market.

Unfortunately, realpolitik is all about trading, commerce, business, influence and hegemony; more so in today's post-truth world. The unprecedented wave of violence goes on, perpetrated by a well-organised, well-armed and well-trained state organ, protected by some powerful nations, with silent support from some others. Bangladesh is the biggest loser in this power game, second only to the ethnic minorities of Myanmar, as it carries on the burden of a million refugees. The rest of the world chases to remain a passive spectator.

Sayed Ahmed is a consulting engineer with experience in infrastructure project management in South Asia.