

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## 36 percent of tax amount equivalent laundered

*Take steps against tax evasion, mis-invoicing*

THE latest United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report was unveiled on November 20 and we are told that mis-invoicing and tax evasion are some of the reasons responsible for illicit outflow of money equivalent to 36 percent of total tax collected in 2015. In fact, economists believe that the amount has increased significantly over the last four years. According to the ministry of finance data, total tax revenue in Financial Year 2014-15 was Tk 1,40,676 crore. Hence, by UNCTAD estimates, at least Tk 50,000 crore was laundered abroad.

The scourge of mis-invoicing must be tackled if we are to put a reign on tax evasion that is bleeding the government coffers. While the government has done a commendable job at increasing income from tax sources, illicit outflow has also kept pace. As long as there is scope to make money by illegal means, it will be possible to bypass existing legal processes to send money abroad. As pointed out by some economists, the country has been identified as the top South Asian nation with highest instances of bribery.

More initiatives need to be taken to target mis-invoicing because that is where 80 percent of the total money laundering takes place. The National Board of Revenue has taken some steps to plug the holes in the system and we have seen the books of some big business houses involved in import and export being investigated. This is a good start, but the drive must be widened to apprehend and punish those found guilty of money laundering. Only when there is stringent punishment will it compel a change in behaviour of money launderers and discourage this tendency.

## Rohingya crisis: Is reconciliation realistic?

*Myanmar must be held accountable for its crimes first*

THE permanent representative of Bangladesh to the UN has presented to a Security Council Open Debate the idea of reconciliation as a critical enabler to resolve the Rohingya crisis which is noble yet rather optimistic in the otherwise dismal reality. Referring to various successful models in other countries, Bangladesh has urged Myanmar to adopt reconciliation strategies in a transparent, objective manner and by including the whole of society. The permanent representative has talked about a dialogue between the Rohingyas, the rest of Myanmar society and the Myanmar authorities. He has also called upon Myanmar to promote active participation of women and young people and ensure accountability and justice for serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

While this would be the most desirable conclusion to this man-made human catastrophe, we cannot help but wonder how realistic it is given the fact that Myanmar has shown no sign of getting off its high horse and even trying to find a reasonable solution to the crisis they themselves have created. Bangladesh has done way more than its fair share in tackling the Rohingya crisis. Apart from hosting close to a million Rohingyas for over two years at huge environmental and economic cost, it has also complied with whatever demands Myanmar has made including providing a list of Rohingya refugees. The international community has provided huge funds and humanitarian aid to the refugee camps in Bangladesh. The Kofi Annan Commission, endorsed by Bangladesh, has given clear conditions under which repatriation will be possible. Now a case has been filed with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to try Myanmar's genocidal campaign against the Rohingya. Yet all this has fallen on deaf ears as far as the Myanmar authorities are concerned.

So far Myanmar has not shown any sign of being sincere about a safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation of the Rohingya refugees nor has it been able to convince the international community that conditions in the Rakhine State are any different from the time of the Rohingya exodus. On the contrary, the head of a UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar warned last month that "there is a serious risk of genocide recurring." Myanmar, moreover, has denied the atrocities and has audaciously stated that it will contest against the case filed at the ICJ.

Considering such an obdurate stance by Myanmar, a reconciliation strategy does seem a little farfetched. At this point consistent pressure on Myanmar to accept its culpability in committing genocide and sincerely creating a safe, conducive environment for the Rohingya refugees to voluntarily return, seem to be more realistic.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Scarcity of playgrounds

Gone are the days when many of the residents of a community would all gather at the playing field. That sense of "attending" such social gatherings are a rarity today, especially in the capital.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC), only two percent of children have access to playgrounds. The lack of playing fields have had a tremendous outcome—children are turning to digital devices more and more! The impact of such activities will be devastating in the long run.

It is extremely alarming the rate at which young people are using digital devices, with many of them already addicted. The World Health Organization (WHO) advised that children under the age of 5 to 10 years should spend at least one hour a day on the playground for their proper growth.

But kids who are living in urban areas don't have that opportunity. As they continue to distance themselves from the community, their ability to mature mentally is harmed.

Naymur Rahman, East West University

# The mounting pressure on Myanmar and its sum total effect

## AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

LAST week, for the first time I heard an eminent Burmese citizen and a former advisor to the military government admit that massacre and atrocities were committed against the Rohingyas. He also acknowledged that Rohingya villages were burned in Rakhine.

Thant Myint-U, a historian, former diplomat, and presidential advisor, and the founder and chairman of the Yangon Heritage Trust was speaking at Harvard University at a book launch ceremony. His new book, "The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century" was just released, and he talked openly about the changes currently taking place in his home country from his vantage position having worked with the generals during the transition to "democracy".

Turning to the larger context, it appears that the Rohingya crisis has now reached a very interesting milestone. Firstly, the Bangladesh PM has escalated the war of words with Myanmar and declared that the current stalemate with Myanmar has become a threat to regional security. Secondly, the Bangladeshi plan to move the refugees to Bhashan Char has stalled and the visit of a UN technical team to the island has been postponed. And finally, the international community is taking some baby steps to hold the leaders of Myanmar accountable for the latter's crimes against humanity.

The prime minister's clarion call to the global community seeking its assistance to resolve the lack of progress on the Rohingya repatriation came on the opening day of "Dhaka Global Dialogue-2019" held from November 11-13. She said, "In terms of regional security, I would like to say that more than 1.1 million Rohingya citizens of Myanmar fled to Bangladesh in the face of persecution and they are a threat to the security not only for Bangladesh but

also for the region". All this is part of a concerted effort by Bangladesh to put pressure on the Myanmar government to act with sincerity and do its part to repatriate the Rohingyas. More on that later in this commentary.

Bangladesh's plan to resettle some of the Rohingya refugees from the Cox's Bazar area to Bhashan Char suffered a minor setback in the face of opposition from various corners, particularly international human rights advocates. The proposed November 17-19 visit by a UN technical mission to vet the safety measures in the housing facility on the char has been postponed. The team had planned to look at the risks of natural disasters, water supply, access to basic services, including health and education,

declared Gambian Justice Minister, Abubacarr Tambadou, at The Hague where ICJ is based.

On November 14, the pre-trial judges of the International Criminal Court authorised its Office of Prosecutor to launch an investigation into the alleged crimes against humanity across Myanmar-Bangladesh border, and other criminal acts against the Rohingya population.

According to UN News, "this is the second strike against the alleged crimes this week" and complements the lawsuit filed at ICJ. This is so because ICJ or the World Court settles disputes submitted by sovereign countries, the ICC is the world's only permanent criminal tribunal with a mandate to investigate and prosecute individuals who participate in

accountability irrespective of the race, ethnicity, nationality, religion or political affiliation of either the victims or the perpetrators... It sends a message to potential future perpetrators from all armed entities in Myanmar—we are watching and those who commit crimes may someday be brought to account."

Last week's meeting with Thant Myint-U provided a great opportunity for educators and thinkers based around Harvard to take a peek into the mindset of Myanmar's civil society. Myint-U is the grandson of U Thant, former Secretary General of the United Nations, and was part of the momentous changes that pulled Burma toward democracy, working with the ex-generals.

So, we asked Thant Myint-U if the



Aung San Suu Kyi (L) and General Min Aung Hlaing (R) are among several top Myanmar officials named in a case filed in Argentina for crimes against Rohingya Muslims.

PHOTO: LILLIAN SUWANRUMPHA/AFP

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and the freedom of movement within Bhashan Char and to and from the mainland, according to a UN official. There is a little uncertainty now on the latest timeline to relocate the Rohingyas and the revised schedule of the visit by the UN agencies.

There is some good news on the international front both from the Rohingya and Bangladesh points of view. We have seen in the last few months three UN bodies take up the cause of Rohingyas. On November 11, the Republic of The Gambia filed a lawsuit at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar for violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention. This historic lawsuit seeks to ensure Myanmar's responsibility as a state for the genocide committed against the Rohingya.

"The aim is to get Myanmar to account for its action against its own people: the Rohingya. It is a shame for our generation that we do nothing while genocide is unfolding right under our own eyes,"

international atrocity crimes, including genocide and crimes against humanity.

However, there has been a third strike against the bad actors in Myanmar. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) established by the Human Rights Council, became operational last August 30. IIMM is mandated to gather and preserve evidence for criminal prosecution; prepare criminal files for national, regional or international courts to "conduct fair trials of individuals for crimes committed in Myanmar", including in Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan States. The criminals can be tagged making use of the information handed over to it by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IFFMM).

The newly-appointed head of IIMM, Nicholas Koumjian, an American and a former prosecutor in Cambodia, expressed his determination to bring the bad guys in Myanmar to face justice. "The IIMM will vigorously pursue

recent events might finally push the powers that be in Naypyidaw to read the writings on the wall and mend their ways? While he was not very optimistic, he predicted that two things will happen. Obviously, if the generals were indicted in international courts, it would strengthen the hands of the pro-democracy forces in their struggle against Tatmadaw and accelerate political reforms. Secondly, it might trigger a national dialogue in Myanmar on various outstanding issues and lead to a change in the attitude of the average citizen towards the ethnic minorities in the northern and western states. Hopefully, in the long run, all these influences, if sustained, would help to bring about a realignment of political power in Rakhine State and a shift in the world view of the Buddhist majority in Myanmar.

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## To Cut or Not to Cut

### HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

WHEN a cyclone is named Bulbul, chances are people, at least in Bangladesh, won't take it seriously. And we are Bangladeshis—what freaks us out is not a number 9 signal, but the lowest number 1 signal on our mobile phone. Perhaps that is why nobody pays attention to the urges to go to cyclone shelters. The only way to lure them to the shelters is through offers of 5 GB data for free. Uhm, how about making it more attractive and throw in, gratis, 5 kg onion? For onion lately has graduated from being a commodity to a novelty.

But like many, I also decide to engage in a war of attrition (onions are perishable items, don't forget) with the syndicate and the hoarders. So I make a nice omelette without onions. I then do exactly what I hate seeing others do—I put up a picture of my breakfast on social media while sporting #OffOnion.

Sure enough, amidst the flood of congratulatory comments, there is a troll: "Yeah right! Just zoom in and you'll see the onion."

Never fall in the trap of answering a troll, for the toll you pay is giving a faceless invertebrate the platform he is otherwise incapable of attaining on his own. But I am jittery from being in onion rehab, so I respond while leaving the expletives off the keyboard: "Those are tomatoes, by the way, not onion. And I really don't recall seeing you in my kitchen this morning." He replies back with large circles akin to onion rings on the original image and labelling them as onions. I suppose when you don't know how to cook, you really can't tell the

difference between onions and egg whites.

The onion withdrawal gets me to do another thing that I usually don't do. I look through his profile. He is a Bangladeshi doctor in Maldives. Wow! Doing an autopsy of my omelette from 2,000 miles away. Doc, just don't use the same technique to identify a gall bladder stone, ok?

This is how the whole onion has had us wrapped around its fingers—through toll and through troll. The onion has left its cohorts of garlic and ginger and entered the class of the apple, so much

insatiable and our imagination for onion-less dishes is limited to custards. So, the local onions are given the opportunity to meet their distant cousins from China (no, not made of rubber) and the Pharaonic ones flying in business class from Egypt, given the dread carpet welcome amidst a 21-tonne salute and starred of honour. That explains the heavier than the usual heavy traffic, thanks to the VIP movement of these precious items.

Sigh, the psyche of our country—make



so, that Apple may just change its logo from the half-eaten apple to a half-eaten onion (lucky person who gets to take that precious bite, or, byte). Had the casinos not been busted, they would have seen a new currency, so much so, that having more than 5 kg of onion in the house would warrant a declaration in our tax returns.

So, to cut or not to cut the onion, that is the question—slicing up an onion with the dexterity of slicing up a pizza, comes with tears not only from the sulfuric acid, but also the price.

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a fast buck when there is a crisis. Oh, it's a cyclic matter anyway, isn't there the month of Ramadan for that—testing the true patience of the pious while the unscrupulous enjoy their bonanza?

Not anymore. There is #OffOnion. Hoarders, go ahead, stash away your onions till they rot. Meanwhile we will try to enjoy the onion-less *jhaal moori*...yuck!

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