

# INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

## Sans civil and political rights, development is incomplete

### Rohingyas deserve justice

#### International Court of Justice set to hold genocide case

**T**HE alleged genocide case against Myanmar at The Hague begins today, after the Gambia filed a lawsuit against Myanmar on November 11, accusing it of violating the UN Genocide Convention on behalf of the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Conference. The world has not sufficiently held Myanmar to account for its genocidal acts. Very sadly, geopolitical and narrow national interests have determined the decisions of some countries who could have played a vital and effective role in the matter. And the UN itself was effective only to an extent; the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission's report and its very comprehensive recommendations were not implemented by Myanmar, ultimately resulting in no solution being reached to the crisis. This is the first time that a court is going to be exposing Myanmar for what it has done to the Rohingyas. We are putting a lot of hope in the proceeding of the ICJ—and that those responsible will be held accountable for their crimes against the Rohingyas. We also hope that our government's delegation and the assistance it provides to the Gambia for this case will have the weight that it deserves. The Netherlands and Canada have said that they are going to provide information to assist the Gambia in this case. Likewise, we would like to urge other countries to step up and do the same. The very egregious crimes committed by Myanmar against the Rohingyas are, by now, very well and widely documented. It would be a travesty should those responsible for such serious crimes be allowed to walk away from being held accountable for them. We hope the ICJ and the international community recognise this and work to ensure that the Rohingyas can finally get their long-awaited justice.

### Save Buriganga at all costs

#### HC directives must be followed through

**W**E commend the High Court for passing an order to the Department of Environment (DoE) on December 8 to shut down all illegal industries, factories, and organisations on both shores of the Buriganga and submit a complete compliance report to it. The court has also ordered the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) to seal off all its drains and sewerage lines connected to the river and file a progress report every month. Reportedly, the government has shut down or shifted a lot of tanneries and factories that were dumping untreated waste into the Buriganga. But still there are many that have been polluting the river defying the HC directives. The DoE's recent report submitted to the HC has found that 52 fabric washing plants have been operating on the south shore of Buriganga without any environmental clearance certificate (ECC) and effluent treatment plant (ETP). The situation on the north shore of Buriganga is no better. Moreover, a recent BIWTA investigation has found 68 underground drains and sewerage lines of Wasa to be connected to the Buriganga. Besides, there must be many such waste disposal lines connected to the river. Therefore, it needs all-out efforts from the government to stop the operation of illegal factories and industries on the shores of Buriganga and seal off the sewerage lines linked to it. Sadly, the High Court on many occasions in the past gave directives to save the river but the authorities concerned and those responsible for polluting the river did not comply. Saving the Buriganga as well as all other rivers must be a priority for the government. Thus, the government should act on the HC directives. At the same time, we urge the HC to keep watch on the state agencies concerned so that they comply with its directives.

SULTAN MOHAMMED ZAKARIA

**T**HE traditional notion of development encompasses a set of economic development indices that can arguably create enabling conditions for the fulfilment of many economic and social rights. However, development thinkers have gradually embraced a broader definition of development that includes people's civil and political rights. Nevertheless, some people, including politicians, continue to insist on a narrow definition that ignores or even denies the aspects of civil and political rights.

In recent years, several leaders including some from Bangladesh have been implicitly making an argument that some rights are more important than the others. For instance, in an interview with *The New York Times* in December 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina argued that, "If I can provide food, jobs and health care, that is human rights. What the opposition is saying, or civil society or your NGOs—I don't bother with that." This is indeed a very contentious position on the question of what development means.

The real question one may ask though is: does development only mean progress on some economic and social indices? Is the concept distinct from civil and political rights? Those who define development as an economic concept argue that there are countries that are making breath-taking economic progress, thereby improving many economic and social entitlements of their citizens—even if they restrict civil and political rights. It's a popular line among the Bangladeshi political class. The countries that are usually referred to this category, China foremost among them, are outliers. Many more countries that systematically deny civil and political rights could not develop economically.

However, the problem with this argument is a question of definitions. The traditional concept of development mainly focuses, narrowly, on economic aspects, with an emphasis on growth, median income, consumption and other economic indices. Since the early 1990s, however, the mainstream discourse of development gradually observed a paradigmatic shift—broadening to include notions of social justice, human development, human rights and well-being. In his seminal work *Development as Freedom* (1999), leading development thinker Amartya Sen redefined development as an idea that "consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency." Together with Sen, academics, experts, and development thinkers have also embraced this broader definition, one that has since influenced the United Nations, many governments, non-government organisations, and other multilateral agencies. For instance, the Sustainable Development Goals, which Bangladesh and other countries explicitly accepted, include political freedoms as one of the key development goals (SDG 16).

As development now becomes an inclusive concept consisting both of elements of material progress and those that are needed for the realisation of human agency, politicians and leaders must step up and commit themselves to a development agenda that is both inclusive and meaningful. This is necessary to respect the concepts of human rights, as reflected in international standards. Any cherry-picking of the idea of development to serve a partisan political purpose would constitute an abandonment of the human rights commitment.

with this corrosion, several important aspects of economic development, which are directly related to economic, social and cultural rights—for example, the rights to education, health, and livelihood—are likely to be affected. There may be outliers, but these are the most probable outcomes. There is a growing sign that this may be manifesting in Bangladesh in different forms. Civil and political rights in the country have been eroded in the recent past. For example, since October 2018, according to media reports, nearly 400 people were indicted under the newly

cases of alleged extrajudicial killings between 2012 and 2016 did not even elicit a response from the authorities in Bangladesh. This lack of accountability is the result of people's voices being restricted, leaving a lack of compulsion to act within. In the current state, Bangladesh has much to reflect on. While Bangladesh should continue to strive to progress in economic and social spheres to advance rights to health, adequate standards of living and education, it must not create a false choice between development and



**Adiba Hridi breaks down in tears at the Jatiya Press Club as she talks about her father Parvez Hossain, an activist of BNP, who disappeared after being allegedly picked up by law enforcement officials in 2013. Enforced disappearance remains a prickly issue for Bangladesh authorities, and a concern for civil and political rights defenders.**

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

There are implications when leaders compartmentalise development to a set of economic objectives disregarding the political freedom aspects. When citizens are not free to hold an opinion, to express it, or to organise to press their demands, they lose their human agency—their capacity to make choices and pursue them. In the absence of a functioning human agency and protected civil and political rights, institutions of accountability are likely to suffer, for their mandate would be redefined to protect their arbitrary powers instead of protecting people's human rights. This corrodes the rule of law. And

enacted Digital Security Act 2016—merely for expressing their opinions on Facebook and other social media platforms. It's a draconian law that criminalises the right to freedom of expression, and it must be amended. The continuous retreat of the civil and political liberties regime in several countries, including in Bangladesh, and the inability of the system, especially the institutions of accountability, to arrest the drift may be a sign that the restrictions on civil and political liberties are taking their toll on the system. For instance, the National Human Rights Commission's attempts to seek clarification on 112

freedom. The two are inseparable, more so for a country premised on an idea of a shared vision of freedom, equality, and justice. Politicians must not forget that the struggle for independence in 1971, in which three million lives were lost, was stirred by a demand—as the preamble to the Constitution says—for "a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens." Bangladesh must hold true to these founding aspirations.

Sultan Mohammed Zakaria is a South Asia Researcher for Amnesty International. He tweets @smzakaria

### DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN ASIA-PACIFIC

## Riding the wave of technological innovation

**R**ECENT economic developments in Bangladesh have been remarkable. Over the past decade, GDP per capita has almost tripled, reaching USD 1,700 in 2018. The annual

GDP growth has averaged 6.5 percent and is forecast above 8 percent in 2019. Good progress is being made towards achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly towards crucial goals such as ensuring that everyone has access to clean water and sanitation and clean and affordable energy. Bangladesh's economic dynamism enabled the country to meet the criteria for graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status last year. If, as expected, the country meets the criteria again in 2021, Bangladesh will be recommended for graduation in 2024 by the United Nations General Assembly.

This phenomenal achievement brings new challenges. Graduation from the LDC status means the loss of special treatment under the WTO. Bangladesh will lose preferential market access for its goods in many developed markets. It will no longer be able to tap dedicated development cooperation mechanisms such as the LDC Technology Bank, the LDC Fund for climate change financing or Aid-for-Trade. Yet the experience of two Asia-Pacific countries that have already graduated, Maldives and Samoa, demonstrates that this challenge could be an opportunity—one for reforms to improve the business environment or to strengthen the financial system to support economic development beyond graduation.

Strengthening financing for development mechanisms is essential if countries are to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

by 2030. On its current trajectory, our region will fall short of achieving all the SDGs. To accelerate progress, developing countries need to invest an additional USD 1.5 trillion per year, or 5 percent of their combined GDP, if the SDGs are to be met. Yet there is much variation between countries. The LDCs in Asia and the Pacific are estimated to require an additional annual investment of 16 percent of the GDP, an investment which can only be achieved through a combination of innovative public and private sector financing.

for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), is supporting several initiatives to deliver the roadmap's objectives. An Infrastructure Financing and Public Private Partnership Network for Asia and the Pacific has been established to facilitate the exchange of best practice on public-private partnership (PPP) projects. In the future, the network will connect private investors with national PPP units and infrastructure projects in member countries. To help deepen capital markets, technical assistance is being provided to the Royal Government

employment among large sections of the population, contribute to poverty reduction, improve income distribution and the dissemination of technical skills throughout the economy. MSMEs are known to provide opportunities for women's economic empowerment, with positive knock-on impacts for families, societies and economies.

To enhance MSMEs access to financial services, digital financial services hold great promise. Here, Bangladesh is leading from the front. Through the Digital Bangladesh initiative, information and communications technology (ICT) is being leveraged to support socioeconomic change. Recent data shows the country's 3G network now covers 94 percent of the population. Since 2017, 13 Bangladeshi banks have provided agent banking services through an extensive network of 2,224 agents serving 870,000 account holders, including in remote rural areas. The use of mobile payments, particularly for utility payments, salary disbursements and person-to-person transactions, continues to increase. The share of the population with mobile money accounts has exploded from 2.7 percent in 2014 to 21 percent in 2017.

The regional conference on "Financing for Inclusive and Sustainable Development: Exploring a New Financial Landscape for Asia-Pacific", held in Dhaka this week, will be working to build on these foundations and ensure our region rides the wave of technological innovation. Bangladesh has valuable experience to share. Working with the Bangladeshi authorities every step of the way, ESCAP is committed to seizing this opportunity to give the financing for development agenda the pace needed to support Bangladesh's LDC graduation process and deliver sustainable growth in Asia and the Pacific.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana is the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).



To help countries mobilise the necessary additional resources, the United Nations has outlined a three-year Roadmap for Financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with three main objectives. It aims to align global economic policies and financial systems with the 2030 Agenda; to enhance sustainable financing strategies and investments at regional and country levels; and to seize the potential of financial innovations, new technologies and digitalisation to provide equitable access to finance. The development arm of the United Nations in our region, the Economic and Social Commission

of Bhutan for the development of a sovereign bond market. Exchanges among regulators and private investors are being supported to foster enabling environments and to scale-up green, renewable energy and energy efficiency investments. Yet still more is needed. The financing of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) is particularly crucial. These companies represent the great majority of enterprises, provide a high percentage of employment and make a significant contribution to GDP. By placing MSMEs at the heart of development strategies, countries can create opportunities for

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

#### Heritage sites must be preserved

While it is a matter of pride that our nation has seen significant economic development in the recent past, it is however disappointing that, in the midst of this rush for development, many historical and heritage sites were not given due importance. Instead, more often than not, they were demolished to make space either for multipurpose complexes, high-rise apartments or simply for economic gain.

It is important to know that it is precisely because of such traditional archaeological sites that we know of the rich ancient history of our motherland. The Moghuls, Portuguese and British, among others, all built many structures on this land during different time periods. To demolish those structures is equivalent to erasing a vital part of our history and thus, it must not be allowed. It is of utmost necessity for the authorities to preserve whatever little of the heritage sites that are there today, as they have indeed stood the test of time but are in dire condition due to our negligence.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

