

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Curbing corruption demands government's proactive intervention

ACC recommendations should be implemented

ONE needs to hardly repeat the ill-consequences of corruption on the country's moral, social and economic fabric. While Bangladesh no longer ranks at the bottom of the list of most corrupt countries, corruption remains widespread and pervasive. It is not a comforting thought that Bangladesh is only above Afghanistan in South Asia in the list of most corrupt countries. The country loses around two percent of its GDP annually due to corruption. More than USD 10 billion are siphoned out of the country through corruption, and the agencies seem powerless to do anything about it.

While corruption is a pervasive phenomenon ailing all sectors, and requires the participation of all responsible citizens to be curbed, the lead role must be that of the government, since it is the government ministries and agencies that are most affected by corruption. But the comment of the Chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, that government organisations and departments are "not serious enough" about curbing institutional corruption, betrays the sincerity of the administration in fighting corruption, which has assumed an endemic form. This is disheartening. It has been conclusively established through various media reports, particularly in the last one year, that without a deep nexus between government functionaries and private individuals, corruption would not be able to thrive in the country. The pandemic has exposed the deep-rooted corruption in the health sector, for example. We cannot believe that the state of affairs was unknown to people in positions of responsibility.

Regrettably, timely and appropriate measures are not put in place to detect and identify the culprits and sever the link between government officials and private individuals. Most often, those that are caught somehow manage to escape through the loopholes in the law. Many are not even held to account. May one ask as to why the authority did not blacklist 14 contractors for misappropriating more than Tk 100 crore from the coffers of various government medical colleges and hospitals, as recommended by the ACC nine months ago, but only did it when the High Court asked them to do so?

The ACC has made some timely and relevant recommendations, all of which are not new, but which the government should consider seriously. The suggestion to set up an ombudsman and place the Assistant Superintendent of Police in charge of police stations deserves immediate attention.

## Brick kilns in dangerous proximity to schools

Govt must protect health and environment from these air pollutants

IT'S unfortunate that despite a tough law on the operation of brick manufacturers, brick kilns and residential areas continue to stand in uneasy proximity in many parts of the country, posing serious risks to health and environment. A recent report by this daily presents the latest example. It shows how a brick kiln is being operated close to a primary school in a residential area in Jalalia under Kamalganj upazila, Moulvibazar. While it poses health risks to the entire neighborhood, the students of Begum Jebunnesa Government Primary School are particularly vulnerable, with the kiln located just a few yards away. Parents have talked about various health problems facing their children. Local authorities, however, sought to defend the operation of Mohsin Brick Field saying it was established there before the school, as if that justifies its presence in a residential area, an act explicitly forbidden by the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kilns Establishment (Control) Act, 2013.

The disturbingly high number of such cases across the country should be a cause for serious concern. Authorised or not, brick kilns remain a major source of pollution. In 2019, the Department of Environment unveiled the findings of a five-year survey on the quality of air in seven major cities that showed that 50 percent of pollution is being caused by kilns resulting in all sorts of health hazards for the residents. A host of reasons including political patronage, administrative inaction and lack of enforcement of official guidelines are responsible for their continued operation. Even the relevant law, which some experts called impracticable given how it fails to provide a realistic solution to the operation of brick kilns in an ever-expanding residential landscape, is partly responsible for why there has been no progress in this regard.

Bangladesh must find a solution to its brick kiln problem, and must find it fast. Adding to the urgency is the fact that only recently, it has topped the list of the world's most polluted countries in terms of PM2.5 exposure, for which emissions from brick kilns were mostly responsible. Few kilns in the country have been constructed following rules and regulations, and fewer still saw modernisation to make them environmentally friendly. But even if the law is amended to make it better reflective of the ground reality and offer better solutions, it will still fall short of solving this problem if it is not enforced properly. We must ensure the rules are followed properly, regardless of how powerful and well-connected the owners and operators of brick kilns are.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Need to protect teachers

Recently, attacks on primary school teachers in the country have increased. Teachers are being harassed by school management committees for taking decisions on school and financial matters. If this is not stopped, the overall prosperity and development of the nation is bound to stumble. It is time to enact a Teachers' Protection Act to stop such unforeseen and tragic incidents in the future. It is also necessary to bring the culprits to justice after proper investigations.

Abu Faruk, Banarupa Para, Sadar, Bandarban

# New horizon in US-Bangladesh ties visible with Biden administration



A K ABDUL MOMEN

BDANGLADESH'S bilateral ties with the United States are wide-ranging and have historical roots. The Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman aptly emphasised the enormous importance of bilateral relationship with the US when he visited the country in October 1974 and met President Gerald Ford. Bangladesh continues to follow Bangabandhu's foreign policy principle of "friendship to all, malice to none"; and thereby maintains a cooperative and comprehensive economic relationship with countries in the neighbourhood and beyond. Bangladesh has been a leader in regional cooperation and connectivity initiatives, and we welcome US involvement in existing and new initiatives. We will continue to pursue economic diplomacy pro-actively with neighbouring, regional and global players, including and particularly with the US.

Our bilateral relations with the US are based on the strong foundation of our shared values of democratic principles, peace, prosperity and personal freedom. The US has been one of our most reliable development partners, and has contributed generously to the country's socio-economic progress. The relations between the two countries have been flourishing since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formed the Government in 1996, and more so since 2009. Besides the annual Partnership Dialogue and the Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA), we are holding regular dialogues on a wide range of issues, including trade, investment, security, military and counter-terrorism.

The new US administration appears to be more supportive to the causes of the developing world, including in areas like climate change, trade facilitation, Covid-19 response and migrants. Thus, our expectations from the Biden administration are indeed reasonably higher. Under the visionary policies of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh is fully confident of further strengthening its ties with all development partners to facilitate economic and political cooperation and people-to-people ties. Regular bilateral visits and political level engagements between the two countries at the highest level will elevate the Bangladesh-US partnership. The following are some of the major outlooks related to Bangladesh's upcoming engagement with the new US administration.

First, while we are thankful for the US' principled stand and steadfast humanitarian and diplomatic support to Bangladesh in dealing with the Rohingya crisis since August 2017, we also firmly

believe that it is essential to take an effective and well-calibrated intervention on the part of the international community to convince Myanmar to create a safe and conducive environment in Rakhine state for the dignified return of 1.1 million Rohingyas to their homeland. The Rohingya issue was created by Myanmar, and the solution also lies with them. The good news is that there are indications that the new US administration will look into the issue of genocide in Rakhine and hopefully will proactively take action for their safe return.

Secondly, as we all know, Bangladesh is committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and is also moving forward to achieve its national development agenda, articulated in Vision 2021 and Vision 2041. Our growth trajectory over the last decade has been very impressive, but lately the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed progress and

be a game changer in the Bangladesh-US partnership. We also have an extradition treaty pending with the US side for a long time.

Fourth, we believe that trade and investment can be one of the strongest bonds of partnership between Bangladesh and the US, Bangladesh's single largest export destination. With an upward trend of export and import, the total trade volume with the US jumped to USD 4.1 billion in 2009 from USD 1.5 billion in 1996, reflecting a 59.4 percent increase. Since then, the figure shows an increasing trend, amounting to USD 6.4 billion in 2014 and USD 9 billion in 2019. Despite the pandemic, until mid-2020, the trade figure with the US was USD 3,405.4 million. In 2018-19, Bangladeshi exports to the US were worth USD 6.8 billion. Now, we need to diversify our products portfolio away from single items. We already have our traditional strength in the RMG

technology, including biotechnology, to help meet the agricultural challenges and consumer needs of the 21st century. In fact, Bangladesh-US technical cooperation has grown substantially over the last decade, although its full potential is yet to be realised. More scientific cooperation between research and academic institutions of the two countries, as well as technical capacity building of government and private institutions, are necessary. Our two countries already have close liaisons concerning global peacekeeping efforts. The US government could take some seasonal workers from Bangladesh to work in their agricultural sectors as well.

Sixth, Bangladesh remains committed to promoting connectivity in the region. The concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific would help Bangladesh promote the Blue Economy and connectivity, bring improvements of the investment climate, and strengthen measures against terrorism and other organised crimes in maritime spaces. We request US investment in the infrastructural development of Bangladesh to enhance the effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific strategies. We have joined the Belt and Road Initiative of China from the same aspiration of receiving investment in our infrastructure development, aimed at the socio-economic development of our people.

Finally, climate change is an immediate and growing threat to the whole world. Bangladesh has been recognised worldwide as one of the most vulnerable countries in this regard. It is a matter of relief that President Joe Biden has already signed the Executive Order to rejoin the Paris Agreement. I believe that the contribution of the US will help Bangladesh to fight against climate change as the current President of the 48-member Climate Vulnerable Forum.

There are reasons to be hopeful about the steadily growing Bangladesh-US relations, which are expected to achieve newer heights during the Biden administration. There are so many avenues to be explored, and Bangladesh is keen to reap the full potential. We look forward to continuing our critical work together to further strengthen our enduring relationship, address mutual challenges, and build on the progress and prosperity we have made on so many fronts. Creating a greater consciousness and bringing together all the stakeholders to strengthen Bangladesh-US bilateral relation under a common platform is important. I always believe that, apart from G2G engagements, intense people-to-people contact is always beneficial for bilateral relations. For example, the people of the US assisted us in our Liberation movement. In this connection, as over half a million Bangladeshi-origin citizens live in the US, this large Bangladeshi diaspora can also play a constructive role.

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Bangladesh is keen to operationalise its proposed Economic Zones and high-tech parks, with foreign investments from public and private sectors. PHOTO: COLLECTED

hindered SDG implementation, not just in Bangladesh but across the globe. Therefore, Bangladesh underscores the necessity to strengthen further bilateral and multilateral cooperation and take collective actions to tackle the evolving dimensions of health, as well as the economic crisis, during this pandemic as well as in the post-pandemic period. The collaborative efforts of our two friendly countries have already produced some noteworthy outcomes. The supplying of 6.5 million high standard PPE by Bangladesh to the United States in the shortest possible time during the pandemic is a great example of this cooperation.

Third, the issue of the deportation of Rashed Chowdhury, a convicted fugitive and killer of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has remained pending on the US side for more than a decade. We have requested the US government to speed up the return of Rashed Chowdhury. In light of the two countries' shared spirit of establishing justice and the rule of law, I believe that the new US administration should look into this matter seriously. In fact, this could

industry. In fact, despite high import tariffs, nearly 15.6 percent on average, Bangladesh is the second largest apparel exporter to the US, after China. Due to the pandemic, to assist hard-hit US consumers of garments, the US may put a moratorium on tariffs on Bangladesh exports for a period of three years. We are also ready to commence free trade agreement negotiations with the US.

Fifth, Bangladesh reviewed its post-Covid-19 recovery strategy to expand domestic demand through public investments in infrastructure and service delivery to create job opportunities, and to improve the rate of foreign direct investment into export diversifying sectors. Bangladesh has emerged as a lucrative destination of foreign direct investment today, and is keen to operationalise its proposed 100 Economic Zones and 28 high-tech parks, with foreign investments from public and private sectors.

Bangladesh welcomes US investment in these Economic Zones, including through the relocation process from China. We believe that US support will continue for the safe and appropriate use of science and

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# After Myanmar's coup



SHASHI THAROOR

UNTIL recently, the last time Myanmar's military supervised a general election whose outcome it didn't like was back in 1990. On that occasion, a military junta refused

to recognise the results, arrested the democratically elected leaders of Aung San Suu Kyi's overwhelmingly victorious National League for Democracy (NLD), and continued to rule the country via the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The same thing happened again on February 1, when Suu Kyi, now the country's de facto leader, and other politicians, including NLD ministers, were arrested in a pre-dawn swoop. The military took charge, declared a one-year state of emergency, and promptly transferred power to the army's commander-in-chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. Vice President Myint Swe, a former general, was named president, but yielded power to Hlaing.

Once again, Myanmar's men in uniform, who ruled the country from 1962 to 2011 and had co-existed with civilian leaders in a slowly unfolding political transition over the last decade, have made clear their distaste for democracy. Last November's general election resulted in another landslide victory for Suu Kyi's NLD, which won 396 of 476 contested parliamentary seats and limited the army's proxy political front, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, to just 33.

Although the humiliated military promptly alleged voter fraud, the election result did not fundamentally threaten its power. Myanmar's pre-2011 constitution guarantees the army one-quarter of the seats in parliament, grants it control over key ministries, and disqualifies people with foreign spouses or children from becoming president, which prevented Suu Kyi from assuming the office.

Under these conditions, a modus vivendi of sorts had emerged: the previous elections in 2015 brought Suu Kyi and her party—full of former political prisoners—

to power in a de facto coalition with their former jailers. Myanmar's democracy was thus clearly a work in progress. But that progress has now come to a jarring halt. In fact, the military staged its coup on the very day that the newly elected parliament was scheduled to convene.

Recent events in Myanmar are hardly unprecedented. Since the country gained independence in 1948, the military, now known as the Tatmadaw, has held power

global debates over the persecution of Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority.

Suu Kyi seemed to be growing in power at home even as she fell from grace abroad—notably in the eyes of her Western admirers, and especially those in the human rights community, who regarded Myanmar's brutal military campaign against the Rohingyas as ethnic cleansing and even attempted genocide. In defiant testimony to the International Court of

governments have expressed concern and called for her release and the restoration of democracy. The military, on the other hand, stresses that its actions are constitutional.

Myanmar's neighbours are treading warily in the coup's aftermath, and there may be some curious reversals of earlier stances. For a long time, India unambiguously sided with democracy, freedom and human rights in Myanmar—and not just rhetorically, like the regime's Western critics. When the SLORC violently suppressed a popular nationwide uprising in 1988, the Indian government initially offered asylum to fleeing students, allowed them to operate their resistance movement from within India (with some financial help), and supported a pro-democracy newspaper and radio station.

But then China made inroads into Myanmar, and Pakistan warned to the generals. Chinese port construction and the discovery of large natural-gas deposits in Myanmar, as well as the SLORC's support of ethnic insurgencies in India's troubled north-east, all posed tangible dangers to India. As a result, Indian leaders reached their own accommodation with the regime in Yangon.

Today, China has moved closer to Suu Kyi, while India takes comfort in the wariness of Myanmar's military toward China, long a patron to some of Myanmar's own ethnic insurgencies. While many in India believe the country must stand up for democracy and human rights in its next-door neighbour, others counsel pragmatism and caution as the most effective way of avoiding a repeat of the setbacks of the 1988-2001 period.

"I have a sinking feeling that no one will really be able to control what comes next," the distinguished Burmese historian Thant Myint-U tweeted following the coup. "And remember Myanmar's a country awash in weapons, with deep divisions across ethnic and religious lines, where millions can barely feed themselves." It's a sobering reminder for all in the region.

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Armed police confront protesters on the streets of Naypyitaw, Myanmar's capital, on Monday, February 8.

PHOTO: AP

for far longer than civilian leaders have. Suu Kyi herself spent a total of 15 years under house arrest between 1989 and her release in November 2010, and was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize as a celebrated resistance icon. After her release, she exercised authority under constitutional power-sharing arrangements that entrenched the military's clout and even allowed the army to intercede in government decisions when it judged this to be in the national interest.

It was an uneasy co-existence, further complicated by the contrast between Suu Kyi's goddess-like image among the people and the army's stone-faced unpopularity. But it seemed to be working. Suu Kyi made compromises with her uniformed political partners, even at the price of tarnishing her halo by supporting them in the bitter

Justice in The Hague, she refused to utter the word "Rohingya," thereby implicitly endorsing the majority view in Myanmar that the victims were "interlopers" from Bangladesh rather than an ethnic minority.

Critics accused Suu Kyi of everything from appeasement to chauvinism and racism, while admirers argued that her pragmatism was the only way to advance democracy in a country still under the military's sway. Her acquiescence in arrangements that left hundreds of political prisoners in jail and continued to punish ethnic minorities disillusioned many, leading Amnesty International to strip her of its highest award in 2018, and to call for her to be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize as well.

Following Suu Kyi's recent arrest, the recriminations have ceased. Many