

UN's decision to visit Bhasan Char encouraging

Bangladesh and the UN should work collaboratively to deal with the Rohingya crisis

THE UN's decision to send a delegation to visit Bhasan Char, where the government has built a housing facility for around one lakh Rohingya refugees, is a welcome one. With this development, the year-long impasse between the UN and the government of Bangladesh is finally coming to an end. There had been differences of viewpoints between the Bangladesh government and the UN bodies in relocating the Rohingya to this island of Noakhali. While the Bangladesh government was determined to relocate the Rohingya, the UN expressed its reservations about the move. Now that the government has given the UN a positive signal to visit the newly-built facilities at Bhasan Char and the UN has also agreed to it, we hope it will be a win-win situation for all the parties involved—the Bangladesh government, the UN and the Rohingya refugees, who will be the main beneficiaries of the project.

The government has made it clear time and again that the relocation was necessary to ease congestion, save the environment in Cox's Bazar and to solve some other important issues, such as human trafficking, gender-based violence, conflicts between different factions of the refugee communities, etc. Since the government started the relocation process in December last year, a total of 13,000 refugees have relocated to Bhasan Char. The government has arranged for skills training to create employment for those relocated in the char. It already took the government Tk 3,100 crores to develop the facilities at Bhasan Char, and a lot more funds will be required to feed the one lakh Rohingya there after the relocation is complete. Although a number of NGOs have started working there to support the refugees, that is just not enough. The government needs the UN and other international aid agencies' assistance to successfully implement the project.

We think the UN should be aware of the efforts that Bangladesh has made so far in hosting the 1.1 million Rohingya refugees, and also of the efforts the country is still making to ensure a safe and dignified life for them. We hope it will send its delegation to Bhasan Char soon to see the development and take immediate actions to provide humanitarian assistance. Conversely, Bangladesh must also listen to the concerns of the UN bodies since we have received so much support from them from the beginning of the Rohingya crisis in 2017. One of the major concerns of the UN was the risks of tidal surge and cyclones on the remote island. However, the government has already built 120 cyclone shelters and flood protection embankments in the char, which the UN can now inspect.

We hope that the year-long stalemate between the UN and the government will end with the UN team's visit to Bhasan Char, and that it will remove any concerns that the UN has about the relocation. We expect that both parties will work collaboratively for the safe relocation of Rohingya refugees to the newly built facility and to provide them the support they need.

Govt planning to build 30,000 homes for freedom fighters

A highly appreciated initiative

WE warmly welcome the government's plan to build 30,000 homes for those of our valiant freedom fighters who are insolvent, and for the families of deceased and martyred war heroes. The Liberation War affairs ministry plans to implement this project (aptly named Bir Nibash) by June 2023. Last month, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also announced that the minimum monthly allowance for freedom fighters would be raised from Tk 12,000 to Tk 20,000.

Although it is yet to be presented to and approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council, we believe this project to be a most ideal gift from the PM to mark the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—as well as the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh.

Most of those who fought for our nation in the Liberation War of 1971 are well into their sixties and seventies, and government assistance such as this is necessary for them, now more than ever. Not to mention, it is crucial that the nation pays tribute to them for their contributions, not just in words, but by ensuring that they and/or their families are not living in need, without the most basic requirement of shelter being met.

However, we must also caution the concerned authorities to ensure that only those who truly fought for our freedom are benefitted from this housing project, and that anyone posing as a freedom fighter does not get an unfair allocation through this initiative.

In the past, there have been numerous examples of individuals (whose freedom fighter status was not verified by the Jatiyo Muktiyoddha Council) reaping the rewards meant for our valiant war heroes. No doubt, this is gravely unjust but more importantly, such instances could also be depriving true freedom fighters from the respect and resources that they are owed and are often in dire need of.

Therefore, while we congratulate the government on planning for the Bir Nibash housing project and the incrementation of the minimum monthly allowance for freedom fighters, we also hope that the distribution of this aid will be conducted most fairly and with the highest level of transparency and accountability.

What are our expectations from the newly elected municipality councils?



NAWSHAD AHMED

ELECTIONS to the *paourashava* (municipality) councils are ongoing since December 2020 in phases, and are expected to be concluded by April 2021. The fifth phase of the elections were held on February 28. So far, elections in 230 *paourashavas* have been completed. As per the Local Government (Paurashava) Act, 2009 and Paurashava Election Rules, 2010, the urban local bodies elect new councils every five years through the popular vote.

The people of *paourashavas* have high expectations from the newly elected councils. The council with the mayor as its head bears huge responsibility to manage and make decisions that serve

knowledge required to understand their roles, limitations and authority, so that they are able to carry out their functions smoothly.

The most important aspect that needs to be ensured is for the council to work as a team. The council is usually composed of members from different political parties and independent councillors, although 80 percent of the mayoral posts in the recent elections were won by the ruling Awami League candidates. The mayor has a vital role to play in keeping the council united to serve the interests of the people without any bias. The first thing people of the urban local bodies will notice is when there is dissension among the members of the council.

The *paourashavas*, as urban local bodies, have been created by law and they must follow a set of rules. The council makes decisions through several standing committees that affect the lives of the

1,500 per capita revenue during the same period. Those with better revenue generation capacity provide improved services and make regular salary payments to the municipal staff.

Most of the *paourashavas* lack adequate revenue and access to capital to support urban infrastructure development. The urban areas produce three-fourths of the GDP of the country. Despite the fact that property value and income from property are skyrocketing, the *paourashavas* have been unable to tap the potential revenue from property owners. In most *paourashavas*, property assessment and tax collection are weak, although property tax is the main source of revenue of the local bodies.

The other important source of local revenue is business and profession tax, but the rates of taxation for different types of business and profession are not high enough to yield the necessary resources. Various highly profitable

Inadequate infrastructure and services are perennial challenges in urban areas. Without proper infrastructure facilities, the urban environment will deteriorate, affecting the productivity of the people of the paourashavas.

There has been a high rate of urban population growth in Bangladesh during the last three decades, fuelled by rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which has grown at a rate averaging 6-7 percent per annum, reaching 8.1 percent in 2018-19. The country has now received the final recommendation to graduate from least developed country to a developing country. The Eighth Five Year Plan (2021-2025) envisages sustainable urban development for the country. Effective financing for rapid urban development is also an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

All the above point to the need for improved *paourashava* governance. The government's policy is now to rely on more local resources and reduce inter-governmental transfers to the *paourashavas*. Local government strengthening should thus be a matter of high priority, in line with government policies. The Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021 duly recognises the critical role of local government institutions in establishing good governance and promoting local development, and envisions the devolution of power, functions, and fiscal authority.

Inadequate infrastructure and services are perennial challenges in urban areas. Without proper infrastructure facilities, the urban environment will deteriorate, affecting the productivity of the people of the *paourashavas*. The voters thus want their elected representatives to deliver improved services and infrastructure to the people.

The people expect that the mayors and the councillors will work with utmost sincerity and honesty. The Local Government (Paurashava) Act, 2009 strongly condemns all types of misconduct, including corruption. The *paourashavas* are supposed to collect at least 75 percent of annual defined taxes, rates, tolls and fees, by law. The *paourashavas* should therefore properly assess revenue sources, collect adequate local resources and provide better services to the urban population.

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Voters standing in queues in front of a centre in Jhenidah on February 28.

PHOTO: STAR

the interests of the voters, who have put their trust in the council for the next five years. Therefore, the *paourashava* councils should take their responsibilities very seriously and start to map out plans of action to serve the people in the best possible manner.

Many mayors and councillors who have been elected this time have served in previous terms and gathered experience. However, there are many who have been elected for the first time and thus need to be given an orientation as soon as possible so that they understand the laws, rules and procedures that guide municipal functionings. The mayor should ensure that the council members have the

municipal population. These decisions are critical in delivering different services that people expect on a daily basis. The services are: supply of water and sanitation, roads and drainage, street lights, parks and playgrounds, garbage collection and disposal, public toilets, bus and truck terminals, etc.

There are 329 *paourashavas* in Bangladesh. The size and capacity, however, varies greatly and the challenges faced are not the same. Some mayors, councillors and *paourashava* staff, with strong initiatives, have been able to generate much higher local revenue compared to others. These *paourashavas* collected around Tk 3,500 per capita revenue in 2018-2019 while others generated between Tk 500 and Tk

commercial enterprises, industries, hospitals, private educational institutions and warehouses use *paourashava* infrastructure and services but pay very little taxes. These tax rates need to be re-examined in light of the benefits they enjoy within their areas, and raised accordingly.

It is a pity that about three-fourths of the *paourashavas* cannot pay the salaries and benefits of their staff on a regular basis. The Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has recently warned that the *paourashavas* which will not be paying the salaries of their employees will be dissolved and necessary amendments to the Local Government (Paurashava) Act, 2009 will be made in this respect.

I don't want to be a superwoman

I want a world where success is within the reach of every woman



SHAMMI QUDDUS

MY newsfeed on International Women's Day: "Happy Women's Day to my superwoman! You got promoted to Vice President at the bank, you are an amazing mom to our kids, you make sure a simple guy like me has his life in order and take care of your parents and in-laws with the utmost care. Salute!"

I wonder what the guy is doing since his wife seems to be doing the work of four people combined.

I scroll on.

"We are launching a campaign to celebrate the superwoman in your lives! Your mom, your wife, your sister they do much for us! Send us a recorded video and you can win a special discount for your next order."

This has become standard fare of International Women's Day in social and traditional media. While this type of superwoman hype feels good, it perpetuates certain harmful norms.

First, congratulating women for being superwomen is congratulating them for doing it all—working a full time job and shouldering caregiving for children and

Enough with the superwoman label. It's not helping women. It's hurting women. Yes, there are women who do a million things for us. Thank them in person but have a conversation to figure out how the work can be shared more equitably in the home and workplace.

the elderly. Why are women doing it all? Do they have 36 hours in a day? What are their partners doing? By celebrating this definition of a superwoman, we reinforce



PHOTO: COLLECTED

the idea that women doing it all is the gold standard when in reality, it is a perpetuation of entrenched patriarchal norms that absolves men of taking up household responsibilities.

Second, the superwoman label takes permission away from women to seek help. Women who cannot do it all or refuse to be shamed and shunned. It puts immense pressure on all women to keep up the appearance of having it all together when in reality, many are struggling to balance work and family, and carve out a sliver of time for self-care. If anything, we need to do the opposite and communicate that juggling so many roles is unsustainable. Something has to give and something will give. Many women often end up quitting careers they love or suffer in silence from poor mental and physical health.

Third, it hides the fact that being a superwoman is a class issue. Women who can afford daycare or nannies can keep working with school-going kids. Having a family car makes pickups and drop-offs much easier. Having grandparents who live in the city and look after the young ones is a big relief. These advantages are not available to

the millions of women who work in low-paid jobs. Such women are rarely picked up by media to be superwomen. The prerogative only belongs to the white collar, upper middle class who can afford the extra help.

So what can we do instead?

Enough with the superwoman label. It's not helping women. It's hurting women. Yes, there are women who do a million things for us. Thank them in person but have a conversation to figure out how the work can be shared more equitably in the home and workplace. These conversations need to take place with mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and even the women who work for us—the nannies, the cleaning ladies, the cooks. If you are a leader in an organisation, instead of celebrating the lone superwoman in the C-suite, ask yourself why your C-suite is not half female. Better yet, ask your women.

International Women's Day was established more than a century ago to fight for equality. Let's honour that vision by making sure personal and professional success is attainable not just by superwomen, but by all women.

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