

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY MARCH 29, 2021, CHAITRA 15, 1427 BS

Myanmar's 'Day of Shame'

The rampant killing of civilians must be brought to an end

IN a recent brutal crackdown on unarmed, civilian protesters, on March 27—also the country's Armed Forces Day—the Myanmar military junta killed 114 people, including many children. The killings came as protesters in Yangon, Mandalay and other cities took to the streets demanding restoration of democracy in the country following the infamous February coup. We condemn the killing of civilians by the Myanmar junta in the strongest possible terms. The spiralling violence in Myanmar is a grave concern not only for Bangladesh but for the region as a whole, as protracted political instability in the country will have ripple effects on the stability of the region in the medium to long run. Case in point: the continued exodus of the Rohingya to Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and other countries, to escape persecution at the hands of the Myanmar military.

The killing of the protesters on the country's Armed Forces Day and with foreign delegates from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, visiting Myanmar to mark the parade, is a reflection of the belligerent ruthlessness of the Myanmar military. Dr Sasa of Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, called it a "day of shame for the armed forces". In view of the escalating situation in Myanmar, the world powers must take proactive measures to get the Myanmar military to come to the negotiating table to end this mayhem.

The sanctions imposed on the two major conglomerates of the Myanmar military—Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company Ltd (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation Ltd (MEC)—by the US and the UK is a significant development. The sanction by the US not only freezes the assets of the holdings along with those of the top military generals, but also prohibits US citizens and companies from conducting financial transactions or trade with these two conglomerates. We hope the targeted sanctions on the main economic lifelines of the Myanmar military will curb their financial muscle and force them to rethink their political strategy. We also urge the major regional players including China and India to play a more proactive role in taking initiatives to diffuse tensions in the country before the situation gets out of control. The Myanmar military needs to be engaged in dialogue with the political leaders of the country and the people to restore democracy by accepting the election results, as this is the only way out of this conflict. The Myanmar military has over the decades repressed its people and persecuted the minorities. Even during the regime of a civilian government, the Rohingya community could not be protected from the wrath of the country's military. The brutality of the Myanmar junta must be brought to an end for an inclusive and thriving Myanmar and a peaceful, prosperous region.

Sharp rise in Covid-19 cases

Urgent measures needed to curb the wave

THE fact that the rate of new Covid-19 cases has increased by 85 percent and the deaths by 42.5 percent in the last week highlight that this deadly infectious disease is on a fast moving upward trajectory again. A report published by *The Daily Star* on March 28, 2021 shows that a total of 39 people have died in a single day from Covid-19, which is the highest rate of casualties in the last three and a half months. Among the number of Covid-19 samples that were tested on March 27, 2021, 14.9 percent came out to be positive, which is also higher than the previous day's result.

According to data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), a total of 201 people have died in the last week while the number was 141 in the week before. Within the same timeframe, the new number of confirmed cases were 23,100, which is almost double that of the previous week. More shocking is that there are only 574 ICU beds scattered all over the country, among which, 291 are situated in Dhaka city. And among the ICUs of Dhaka city, only 50 are vacant at present.

The aforementioned report mentions two health experts suggesting the same solution to the problem in discussion, which is maintenance of health safety guidelines. Also, just four days ago, another report published by the same daily mentioned a Bangladeshi-born British scientist claiming that the Oxford-Astrazeneca coronavirus vaccine name "Covishield" is completely safe, as it does not create blood clots in the human body after being injected. Thus a higher rate of vaccination is essential for infection rates to subside.

The government has to take up strict measures to make sure that people are abiding by the health safety guidelines at public places at all times and also, carry out awareness-raising campaigns so that people feel obliged to do the same once they return to their homes from outside. Also, the government has to invest highly in setting up new ICU facilities both in the capital and the outlying areas for emergency purposes. Most importantly, the concerned authorities have to ramp up their vaccination campaign, as in a country of over 160 million people, only 5 million have received the vaccine shots so far. The registration process must be more accessible and provisions must be made for those who do not have NIDs. The respective government agencies have to carry out the necessary activities to eradicate fear from the peoples' minds about the negative side-effects of the vaccine and persuade them to come forward to protect themselves by taking it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Violence is not the way

It is a great shame that the golden jubilee celebrations had to end amidst such violence. While the details are still unclear, it seems that both Hefajat protestors and Chhatra League cadres on the opposing side had resorted to violence over the last couple of days. In the meantime, buses were torched and highways were blocked, causing all sorts of suffering for the common people. All this, from both sides, were uncalled for and unjustified.

Ishiaque Hossain, Dhaka

A centenary, a golden jubilee and a vision for South Asia



SHAMSHEER M. CHOWDHURY, BB

THE presence of no less than five South Asian heads of states and governments in Dhaka to celebrate the twin events of the centenary of the birth of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh was the most visible manifestation of the global respect for this great man and the journey of the nation he founded. It was also a most graphic recognition of the march of Bangladesh since its painful birth five decades ago. The series of video messages from global leaders like US President Joe Biden, Canada's Justin Trudeau, Pope Francis, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Britain's Boris Johnson and China's Xi Jinping, Congress Leader Sonia Gandhi, Pakistan's Imran Khan and others in between, added further flavour to the 10 day long celebrations and gave the events a global character. That the arrangements were conducted seamlessly in the midst of a resurgent corona pandemic without compromising on either the ceremonials or the health protocols, is a major credit to the government of Bangladesh. Staggering the arrival and departure of the high level guests was part of that.

Bangladesh has maintained close relations with The Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and India, bilaterally, regionally and on the international stage since the very beginning. Signing of a series of instruments between Bangladesh and the governments of Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, some in the form of MOUs and others more as promissory notes, will serve to further strengthen the bilateral ties between Bangladesh and these countries in the areas of connectivity, trade, tourism and people to people contact.

With India, of course, there is the major historical context of the relations; India having played a direct and a decisive role in our Liberation War in 1971, where Indian soldiers fought and sacrificed their lives for our freedom. The presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the 50th anniversary of the Independence Day of Bangladesh itself mirrored the special nature of that relationship.

The visit of the Indian prime minister has understandably drawn the biggest attention among political and diplomatic observers and the media on both sides of the border. The last time the two leaders interacted was virtually back in December

last year as part of the observance of the Victory Day, a moment in history the two countries proudly share.

Highly reputed Indian political analyst and journalist C Raja Mohan, in an article in the *Indian Express* on the eve of the visit described the bilateral ties between Bangladesh and India as one of a "Steady improvement". He cautioned at the same time, "Delhi will be unwise to take the relationship with Bangladesh for granted".

One couldn't agree with Mr Raja Mohan more; indeed, the basket of positives has grown exponentially, the timely supply of Covid-19 vaccines from India is the latest addition. But there is still much more that needs to be done, bilaterally and in the context of the dawn of a multi-polar Asia. Dr Sreeradha Data,

especially on sharing of the waters of common rivers. One also expects delivery on past commitments on reducing the instances of deaths of Bangladeshis in some of the border areas to zero. On the former, the reactivation of the Joint Rivers Commission at the Secretary's level to work towards a basin wide approach looks promising. The latter remains a work in progress, given the divergent interpretations of the causes of the deaths. Assurances are welcome but it is the delivery that makes the difference.

On the whole, the optics during the visit were good. In addition to handing over the "Gandhi Peace Prize" awarded to Bangabandhu, Prime Minister Modi in his speech at the official event was superlative in paying his tribute to Bangabandhu

Some other decisions were taken to commemorate the history of Bangladesh's Liberation War. The Bangladesh side said discussions on the sensitive issues of water sharing, including an agreement on Teesta, was also discussed but there was no concrete outcome. But then, none was expected.

Looking at the entirety of the 10 days of observance of the two historic events in the physical and virtual presence of regional and global leaders and the sound bites coming out of it, its potential ramifications for Bangladesh as a country and for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself, warrants close study. Needless to say, the events have given Bangladesh huge visibility on the world stage. For Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, it has created for her the stature of a consequential regional leader. The sense of her call "upon the political leaders and policymakers of South Asia to work hand in hand to build a peaceful and prosperous South Asia" signalled that. The prime minister re-iterated this at the end of the ceremonial programme of the Independence Day itself in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, significantly, calling on all for a "pledge to forget all the divisions, work for the development of people and establish a prosperous South Asia", calling on India as the largest country in the region to play a leading role in building a stable and politically and economically vibrant South Asia. The not so veiled message in these statements were lost to the discerning ears. She was addressing all those who turned up at the historic events and also those who could not. Prime Minister Modi in his response echoed the sentiments albeit, in a more nuanced language.

At the virtual meeting with her Indian counterpart in December last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in reference to the new challenges thrown up by the coronavirus pandemic, floated the idea of setting up a SAARC Medical and Public Health Research Institute. On the 50th anniversary of the independence of Bangladesh, she seems to have taken that a step further by calling for a more inclusive institutionalised regional cooperation, with emphasis on "forgetting past divisions". It may not be wrong to presume that the prime minister has set a vision for a regional role for Bangladesh and for herself as a strong advocate for meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia. If the events of the last 10 days are any indication, Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina are perhaps best placed to move that process forward.

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, BB is the former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana hold high the Gandhi Peace Prize-2020 awarded to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman posthumously by the Indian government. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seen applauding next to them.

PHOTO: PID

of the Delhi based Think Tank Vivekananda International Foundation, and one who knows Bangladesh well, believes that among other things, geo-strategic interests make India and Bangladesh politically vital to each other. While briefing the media in Delhi the day before the visit, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a former High Commissioner to Bangladesh, described the relations between Bangladesh and India as being one of "comprehensive strategic partnership". This is welcome news. The contours of such a partnership, however, can indeed be broad and have major connotations.

Visits of Indian leaders, especially the prime minister, to Bangladesh, gives rise to expectations among the people on this side of the border for a visible forward movement on unresolved issues,

and was in glorious praise for all those who had made the supreme sacrifice from both sides of the border for the freedom of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first foreign leader to visit Bangabandhu's Mausoleum in Tungipara to pay respect to the Father of the Nation. He also talked of a shared prosperous future for all.

At the official talks between the two sides, a list of MOUs were inked covering multiple areas, significant of which was establishment of a framework of cooperation to address trade remedial measures and another on disaster management, resilience and mitigation. Connectivity was further enhanced with the launching of the Mitali Express connecting Dhaka with Jalpaiguri. Another 1.2 million doses of Covishield vaccines were formally handed over.

Matching skills with the jobs: The only way to sustain growth



FAHMIDA KHATUN

BANGLADESH'S economy has been on a fast-paced journey in recent years, except of course during the ongoing pandemic. With high growth, the country has achieved several positive economic and social milestones. However, the economy is performing below its full potential. One of the reasons behind this is our inability to fully use the talent and capability of the country's human resources. Not only has the economy been unable to create adequate jobs for its labour force, but the employed people are also not being able to give their best and earn more due to the poor quality of education and lack of appropriate skills. Therefore, the lack of access to jobs could hamper further progress of the country, since human resource is key for any economy. Hence, the materialisation of Bangladesh's aspiration to become a developed country by 2041 will also depend on maximising the potential of its people.

Among Bangladesh's many strengths, the availability of a large young population is an important one. Despite tremendous population pressure on a small area of land, Bangladesh is in a unique position to reap from its "demographic dividend". This is a situation when the size of the working age population is larger than its number of dependents. Bangladesh has a large number of working-age people who can contribute to increased income, more savings, higher productivity and faster economic growth. This gives Bangladesh a competitive edge among other countries which are aging fast. But it has been projected that the demographic dividend will diminish by 2040. So, a post-demographic dividend situation will not be easy. It has been suggested that because of a large share of the aging population, many advanced countries are experiencing economic slowdowns.

Harnessing the full potential of the large young population is challenging. To realise the demographic dividend, all working age population has to be accommodated

into the workforce. This requires creation of enough jobs in the economy. A major boost has to come from the private sector through higher investment. But from the supply side, these people will have to be educated and trained to meet the needs of the job market. The employability of our young workforce is low. They lack hard skills. They also lack soft skills as our education system does not teach them those skills including critical thinking, problem solving, communication,

Though the number of job seekers is much higher than the actual capacity of the job market, the recruiters often find it difficult to get the right person for the job.

negotiation, inter-personal exchanges, leadership, decision making and adaptability. Students at educational institutions do not learn what is needed for a job. So, they are not job-ready when they come out of the colleges or universities.

Though the number of job seekers is much higher than the actual capacity of the job market, the recruiters often find it difficult to get the right person for the job. This is because there is a mismatch between the demand of the employers and the supply of graduates from the educational institutions. The skill requirements of the recruiters are not met by the educational institutions. Hence, a large number of youth find low paid informal jobs while the others remain unemployed.

Thus, for increased opportunity for the youth, the quality of education and appropriate skills are fundamental requirements. So, higher investments in human capital are critically important.

Such investment should be from public, private and non-government sectors. Apart from higher investment, a number of concrete measures should be in place.

First, we have to recognise that the nature of tasks is changing fast and evolving with time. It is becoming increasingly digitised. Technology is replacing many jobs. Technology is also creating new types of jobs. Technology is essential for improving efficiency and productivity. However, without technological skills, the job seekers do not get this opportunity. IT industry experts indicate that there is a huge demand for technologically skilled human resources for the emerging IT enabled services but their supply is inadequate. Therefore, the curriculum should be reviewed and revised constantly keeping in view the emerging world of work.

Second, bridging the gap between the academic institutions and the industry is critical. The courses at colleges and universities should be redesigned so that they have practical application in the real world. Designing of courses should be done in consultation with the representatives of the industries who know what kind of knowledge and skill sets they look for in a graduate who they would recruit.

Third, universities should also have the system of having "Practice Professors" from the industry itself. This is common in advanced countries. These are the professors who come from the private sector with vast knowledge and experience they gather from the industry. They are the chief executives or high officials of reputed global companies who have solved problems on the ground. In Bangladesh, there is a reluctance in the universities to hire them as faculty. Absence of such practices deprive students of having a valuable exposure to the job market.

Fourth, universities should also provide executive education since continuation of learning is essential in the fast-moving demand of jobs. Bangladeshi universities can collaborate with some of the reputed educational institutions of the world so that mid-level professionals have the opportunity to access some of the relevant courses even by staying in the country—both offsite and onsite. This will be affordable and will provide opportunity to a larger section of on-the-job professionals.

Courses and training modules for the executive programmes should also be evaluated and redesigned regularly.

Fifth, the existing government training institutes should be improved with adequate and qualified trainers and practical training modules. As it happens often, the public sector initiatives focus more on the physical infrastructure and less on quality of services. So, the objective of such infrastructure, that is, imparting quality training, remains unfulfilled. Training modules are not forward looking and dynamic. Even the quality of many private training and skills development centres is questionable. The number of training centres for professionals is mushrooming like coaching centres. But most of them do not provide quality training and the participants do not learn anything to add to their workplaces. There should be a mechanism to oversee the training modules and methods, and the quality of trainers to ensure that the trainees can learn to solve practical issues in their workplaces.

Sixth, access to quality internet will help the youth, particularly outside the large cities to access online courses. These days, plenty of online courses and training programmes are available and students across the world are benefiting from those offers. Now they have the opportunity to find employment both in the physical job market and online beyond the boundaries of their own countries. They also become entrepreneurs and begin start-ups.

Finally, the sustainability of our growth momentum will largely depend on the productivity and quality of the growth. If businesses and institutions continuously suffer from lack of qualified human resources their efficiency declines. They also cannot grow. They do not want to invest in innovation and technology due to a lack of skilled and specialised workforce. Their competitiveness in the global market declines. This, in turn, discourages them to invest and expand. It is like a vicious cycle. And, in the end it affects growth and prosperity of the country. We must prepare ourselves to avoid this situation.

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