

Israeli atrocities must stop

Palestinians lives matter

WE are appalled at the wanton destruction that Israeli has been wreaking on the people of Palestine and their property over the last seven days. The death toll so far has exceeded hundred including dozens of children and there is no sign of Israeli bombing abetting. We condemn Israeli action in the strongest possible terms and call upon it to stop the wanton bombing of Gaza—which has prompted Hamas to launch missiles towards Israel. Reportedly, Israel is planning for a ground operation. The long and short is that the situation has the potential of escalating into an all-out war—the outcome and consequences of which is unpredictable. Equally obnoxious is the impunity with which Israel is carrying out the attacks.

The seeds of the latest spate of violence in the region were sown a month ago at the beginning of the month of Ramadan when Palestinian movements were restricted, and access to the Holy Mosque was restricted to only those who had got vaccinated with Covid-19 vaccine, a mindless condition when there were not enough vaccines to go around amongst the Palestinian residents. That, coupled with the expulsion of Arab families from occupied territories, under court order, has fuelled the recent violence.

It is regrettable that the recent flare up has not generated the expected international response that the situation demands, particularly from the west, except for the predictable condemnation of the violence and criticism of the eviction.

The Palestine-Israel conflict shall never find a solution till Israel is made to abide by the numerous UN resolutions regarding the occupied and annexed territories that it has continued to flout without any retribution. Israeli occupation of these territories has been declared illegal by the UN and without validity. Yet, not only are the Arabs being evicted from their lands, those are going to Jews, even to those among them who had been living out of this territory for decades.

Double talk and no action will only encourage the Israeli government to continue its racist and apartheid policies in the occupied territories. Israel benefits from impunity lent by the as-usual US stance that Israel has the right to defend itself, overlooking the fact that the Palestinians in the occupied territories have been living without their rights since 1967. Trump's Israel policy has added fuel to the fire. His Middle East plan, which he called, "Peace to Prosperity" reads more like an obituary to the two-state solution—a sine qua non for any Palestinian-Israeli settlement. Peace demands justice and fair play; both are acutely absent when it comes to the Palestinian and their rights to their own sovereign homeland. Without justice there can never be peace.

Metro Rail dream on its way to realisation

Current timeline, costs have to be maintained

LAST Tuesday marked an important milestone for the Mass Rapid Transit Line-6 project, as the country's first-ever electricity-powered train ran its first test on the tracks. We are elated to see the progress on this project as it promises to solve the persistent gridlocks in the capital and make everyday travel hassle-free for citizens. Upon its completion, the metro rail will be able to transport 60,000 people per hour and would reduce the 2-hours travel time from Uttara to Motijheel to only 40 minutes.

However, we also worry about whether the project can be completed within the given deadline of June 2024. Already, there have been many setbacks and not all of them due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The testing phase itself is supposed to take from anywhere between 6 months to over a year, when the early commissioning of the project was supposed to happen in December of this year. Another deadline that was not met was for metro services between Uttara and Agargaon to be open from 2019, and from Agargaon to Motijheel within 2020. Still, the Road Transport and Highway Division is optimistic about meeting the June 2024 deadline of completing the project and we, too, are hopeful. We applaud the authorities for having been able to launch the test run before the deadline (May 24). But we would also urge all parties involved to maintain the current timeline while ensuring that the quality of their work is not compromised. It is also crucial that the costs do not exceed the Tk 22,000 crore budget, as happens often with large-scale projects. While the MRT-6 will surely be a lasting solution to many of the capital's traffic issues, it must be carried out with care so that it is, efficient, long-lasting and safe.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Growth of online business



Online shopping has increased vastly around the world, as well as in Bangladesh, over the past one and a half year.

Covid-19 has severely harmed different business sectors because of extended lockdowns and social distancing. As a result, people have been forced to switch to online platforms to do business.

This is a great time for businesses to increase their online presence, as it would make things easier for customers who are naturally worried about their health. They should also look to make business more accessible and easier for customers.

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE pandemic has pointed out the need for placing the youth issues at the centre stage of policy discourse. Many employed young people have lost their jobs as the economy continues

to be ravaged by the coronavirus. A large section of the youth is also waiting to enter the job market as they had finished their education or training just before the outbreak of the pandemic. Yet, many others are stuck in the "education lockdown" as they wait for their classes to resume and degrees to qualify for job application. Besides, those who are self-employed in small entrepreneurship, lost their income as businesses have been interrupted. A number of surveys in recent times have indicated increased unemployment during the pandemic. This is apprehended to have created multiple socio-economic challenges for them.

Even during the pre-pandemic period, the opportunity of harnessing the youth potential through education, skills and access to finance was inadequate. The high economic growth was not accompanied with enough jobs for the youth who enter the job market. The spread of the coronavirus has impacted the efforts toward economic recovery. This has in turn affected the labour market. Every year, two million youth enter the job market in Bangladesh. However, job creation for the youth lags behind compared to the pace of economic growth. Also, opportunities for those who want to be self-employed are insufficient.

According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2016-17 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the share of unemployed youth is 10.6 percent, though the national unemployment rate is 4.2 percent. The Eighth Five Year Plan of Bangladesh aims at reducing this to 5 percent by 2025 and to 2 percent by 2031. Similarly, the target for the youth who are not in education,

employment or training (NEET) is also high. NEET is currently 29.8 percent as per the LFS 2016-17. This is planned to be reduced to 15 percent by 2025 and to 5 percent by 2031. These are impressive targets in Bangladesh's socio-economic context. The National Youth Policy 2017 also emphasised the need for youth development and their empowerment through employment generation. The policy views that this is important for establishing equality, human dignity and social justice. The recognition of the issue and the planned measures are a welcome move on the part of the policymakers.

Though the government spells out the objective on increasing job opportunities for the youth in its policy document, the progress on more jobs for the youth has been slow. In view of the pandemic this will be much tougher than before as the youth have already lost over a year of their lives. And it is still uncertain when the situation will improve. Given the magnitude of the problem, the issue should be addressed more seriously. However, it is not only about creating job opportunities, but also recovering various tangible and intangible losses that they suffered during the pandemic.

The valuable time which has been lost from the young lives is irreparable in many ways. Educational institutions have been closed for physical classes for over a year since March 2020. Only an insignificant number of institutions are providing online education. The quality of those lessons has been rather low. The vocational training and skills development centres are also closed for in-person sessions. All these may have an impact on the lifelong earnings of many youth as the loss has been on many fronts. These include learning loss, experience loss, employment loss, and disruption of social and professional networks. This has taken a toll on their mental health too as they are experiencing isolation and anxiety in this difficult time.

Young women are facing greater challenges in Bangladesh during the pandemic, like all other countries. In Bangladesh, over 91 percent employed

women are engaged in the informal sector. So, they are the first ones to lose their jobs in times of crisis. At home they are overburdened with unpaid care work. They are also facing higher gender-based violence. Most studies during the pandemic reveal these facts. And it is feared that some of the gender-related achievements over several years may be reversed due to the impacts of the pandemic. Female participation in the labour market has been steadily increasing over the years which has reached 36 percent now. The objective is to gain equal participation in the labour market. So, young women's dropout from the labour market due to the pandemic will affect gender equality in the workplace.

Addressing the challenges of the youth in the above context will require a multi-pronged approach. One of the means to implement these approaches is higher resources for youth development. Taking the multidimensional problems of the youth, the budget for FY2022 should take an intergenerational perspective. The first budget FY2021 after the eruption of the pandemic could not address these challenges. Resource allocation for youth-centric programmes has been meagre and lacked the broader approach in addressing the issue. The upcoming budget for FY2022 should allocate adequate resources, not only for the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MoYS), but also for other ministries which are connected to youth related matters. A few suggestions are reiterated here.

First, the allocation for the MoYS should be increased. Though budget allocation for the ministry has increased over time, a large amount is allocated for non-development expenditure. Development expenditure as a share of total expenditure for the ministry is not significant. This trend has to be reversed.

Second, the government should invest more on education and training. Therefore, budgetary allocation for the education sector should break the cycle of about 2 percent of the gross domestic production. Since we are not in a position to think about introducing programmes such as youth job guarantee schemes in view of

our resource constraint, the youth should receive appropriate education and training to enter the job market.

Third, the youth should have access to finance for starting their own businesses. Everyone cannot get a job. Many also do not want to do an office job. Increasingly, young people are getting interested in entrepreneurship. They are also increasingly being engaged in e-commerce. Therefore, not only should there be more funds for them, but the procedure to receive such funds should be made easy. Information on such opportunities should also reach the youth beyond the large cities.

Fourth, during the pandemic digitalisation has accelerated. A significant amount of economic activities is being performed through technology. This practice will continue to expand in the coming days. Therefore, higher investment is required for skills developments and training of young people. Without upskilling and re-skilling, the digital divide which has been prominent during the pandemic will become far more prominent and enhance inequality.

Fifth, mental health crisis due to the pandemic should be addressed through investment on mental healthcare. In our country mental health is ignored both at family and national levels without realising its long-term impact on society. The budget needs to allocate resources for solutions targeting this problem.

The young population are the drivers of the economy. They are the most energetic and productive group of the society. The country can benefit from the demographic dividend since about 20 percent of its population is in the range of 15-24 years. But due to lack of opportunity they can become a burden for the country. Economic recovery from the pandemic will not be possible without addressing the challenges of the young people. Policies and measures taken for the youth today will have implications for generations to come.

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Political impasse, self-defence and Israel's bombardment of Gaza



TASNEEM TAYEB

ISRAELI bombardment of the besieged Gaza strip continues. In the pretext of "self-defence", Israel has bombed not only military targets in Gaza, but has also targeted densely populated civilian

locations. The country has attacked a Palestinian refugee camp killing at least 10, including eight children. At the time of writing this, the casualty on the Palestinian side stands at more than 150, 41 of them children. More than 1,000 Palestinians have been wounded. According to UN estimates, around 10,000 civilians have been displaced. On the Israeli side, 10 have died. In the occupied West Bank at least 13 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces as they protested against Israeli atrocities.

And invariably as always, Israel has done all these in the name of "self-defence" including the latest air strike on al-Jalaa building, which housed major media outlets including AP and Al Jazeera, destroying it to rubble. The Israeli army said the building was a base for Hamas' military intelligence, without substantiating this claim. This act has significantly reduced the capacities of the news outlets to report from Gaza and has been criticised by many as an attempt to silence the media.

Earlier in May, Israeli forces attacked the Arab Palestinian protestors who were being illegally dispossessed in the Sheikh Jarra neighbourhood by them, in self-defence. They raided the al-Aqsa Mosque, entered its compound and used stun grenades, rubber-coated steel rounds, and tear gas to disperse the worshippers and protestors alike, in self-defence.

And when Hamas fired rockets towards Israel after the expiry of their ultimatum to the country to stop atrocities against the Palestinians, Israel retaliated fast with the bombardment of Gaza, killing civilians and Hamas leaders—in self-defence.

The United States in its response stressed on its "ironclad support" for Israel's right to self-defence.

Germany, in its statement said, "Israel has the right to self-defence against these attacks" condemning, "these incessant rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip against Israeli cities in the strongest terms", adding they "could not be justified".

While of course Israel has the right to self-defence, one wonders why the world is not talking about the basic human rights of the Palestinians, who are being displaced, dispossessed and massacred by Israel—more often than not in acts of "self-defence".

Perhaps the right to self-defence is exclusive to Israel?

What about the right to self-defence of those who had been brutally killed—around 15,000 Palestinians—centring

the first Nakba (meaning catastrophe in English)? At least 750,000 Palestinians had been turned refugees and more than 531 villages and cities were destroyed by the Zionists to create a homeland for themselves. And not one word about their right to self-defence.

Since then, Israel has fiercely fought many wars, annexed lands of the Palestinians and have actively ensured their ethnic cleansing, which continues to this day. And in the recent years, this is being done citing self-defence against terrorism.

Let us take the case of the 2014 Israeli invasion of Gaza, which killed 2,251 Palestinians, including 1,462 civilians. 551 of them were children. Israel lost 67 soldiers and six civilians. The invasion by Israel began as self-defence.

In April 2014, in the wake of the formation of the second unity government

against 'terrorism'. But neither the inhuman and illegal blockade Israel imposed on Gaza nor the periodic murderous 'operations' Israel has unleashed against it trace back to Hamas rocket fire. These were Israeli political decisions springing from Israeli political calculations, in which Hamas military actions figured as a null factor," wrote Norman Finkelstein, in the preface to his book "Gaza: An Inquest Into Its Martyrdom".

Indeed, this idea cannot be discounted in the context of the current situation. The escalation between Palestine and Israel has played very well into the hands of the current Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu—mired in corruption charges and lacking in popular support—who took his staunch anti-Palestinian, ultranationalist narrative up a few notches, in both his firm commitment to

lifeline as violence flares", states that in view of the escalating crisis, Netanyahu's opponents have given up their attempts to form a coalition in favour of a wider unity. The ultranationalist Yamina party's chief Naftali Bennett said that he was abandoning talks with Yair Lapid—who had been tasked to form a unity government by the country's president in view of the political deadlock of the past two years—for a greater unity in the country's interest.

The Reuters report also quoted Israeli journalist, Ben Caspit, who had written in *Maariv* newspaper, "From the moment (the fire) was lit, the government of change was dead and Netanyahu came back to life".

In the context of the faltered coalition talks, Israel is potentially set to witness a fifth election. And there is a good possibility that this time around, Netanyahu might win the support of the nationalist and ultranationalist vote banks and political parties to form a government. All at the cost of Palestinian lives, all in the name of self-defence.

Indeed it seems, Israeli political parties have over the years used the Palestine issue to fuel the existential fear of its own people for their vested political gains. The Israelis will always know that they had exterminated Palestinians from their own land in order to create a land for their own, and till a two-state solution is found, the existential fear will persist among the Israeli population. And this is where Hamas is used as a scapegoat by Israel to both feed the fears of its people and to prevent the possibility of a two-state solution.

A Middle East expert, Aaron David Miller, in his 2014 article, "Israel and Hamas Need Each Other" while writing about the interdependence of Israel and Hamas, wrote that among many factors, "Hamas presents a wonderful bogeyman for those Israelis looking to avoid dealing with the questions of how to make the two-state solution a reality. Hamas's hostile and frequently anti-Semitic rhetoric is a gift to Israeli right-wingers, providing them with any number of talking points about why Israel can never trust Palestinians."

Right now, Israel needs to overcome the political stalemate it is faced with, and the only way is by making sure the majority vote for one leader in the next election. In the wake of the escalating situation, it is Netanyahu who will deliver them from this crisis.

The bogeyman's rocket launch has created the right context for the unity needed in Israel right now and it has also given Israel the ground to legitimise its attack on Gaza as an act of self-defence. And the west needing a strong Israel in the Middle East to keep the regional forces under check-and-balance, has asserted their support for Israel's right to self-defence. In a world of complex geo-politics, self-defence is exclusive to a certain few, and Palestine is certainly not one of them.

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Palestinians walk amidst debris near the al-Sharouk Tower, which housed the bureau of Al-Aqsa television channel in the Gaza Strip, after it was destroyed by an Israeli air attack.

PHOTO: MOHAMMED ABED/AFP

in Palestine with Fatah and Hamas, Israeli premier Netanyahu suspended peace talks with Palestine. In June, three teenage Israeli settlers went missing and their "abduction" was attributed to Hamas, without any evidence. From that point onwards, events took a turn for the worst. On July 2, a Palestinian boy was burned alive by three Israelis. A day later on July 3, the victim's cousin was brutally beaten up by Israeli forces. On July 6, Israel bombed a Gaza tunnel killing six Hamas personnel. Hamas retaliated with firing rockets, and thus Israel began "Operation Protective Edge", in self-defence. "Israel says it launched the offensive on Gaza to put an end to rocket fire and remove the threat of attacks by militants tunnelling under the border," noted BBC in a 2015 report titled, "Gaza conflict 2014: 'War crimes by both sides' - UN".

This time as well, Israel is bombing Gaza in self-defence.

"In the popular imagination confectioned by state propaganda, and dutifully echoed by everyone else in authority, Israel is almost always reacting to or retaliating

the expansion of Israeli settlements and his decisive action against the terrorists: Hamas. "We stand united in the face of a vile enemy. We all mourn the dead and pray for the wounded and stand behind the IDF forces," he said, further promising that "With determination, unity and strength, we will restore security to the citizens of Israel."

It has been suggested by Sami Abu Shehadeh, leader of the Balad party and a Palestinian member of the Knesset that, "In order to survive this political crisis he [Netanyahu] finds himself in now, and in order for him not to lose control and not to lose his seat as prime minister...he is ready to do anything. All the escalation we are seeing now has a clear political target from Netanyahu's point of view, and he is ready to do anything to keep himself in power including this massacre that we are going to see in Gaza...What is happening here is a clear political decision that Netanyahu is responsible for to keep power."

And Abu Shehadeh's warning has not been wrong, indeed a recent Reuters report titled, "Netanyahu poised to gain political