

Why removing 'except Israel' from passport is problematic



WHAT the Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said on May 20 about his ministry's predicament is nothing unique. Expressing his regret about Prothom Alo journalist Rozina Islam's arrest, he said, "As foreign

ministry, we have to face questions over this." Dropping the words "except Israel" from the declaration of validity of the Bangladesh passport, too, made him and his ministry face questions that are quite intriguing and not so easy to brush aside.

The BBC Bangla on May 24 reported that following the publication of the news, the foreign minister called Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal and was told that the decision had been taken six months before. It indicates that this was done without any assessment of any political fallout or legal consequences. Despite his assertion that "there has been no change in Bangladesh's position towards Israel as it still does not recognise Israel," the unintended consequences of the controversial change are quite worrying and should not be ignored.

When I got my first passport in the early eighties, it had a declaration saying it was valid for all countries except South Africa, Taiwan and Israel. At the time, South Africa was an apartheid state and facing a global boycott except in a handful of Western colonial powers. Dropping of South Africa's name from the exclusion list happened only after the abolition of apartheid and end of the boycott.

During the last decade, Taiwan too has been quietly dropped from the exclusion list although we do not have any diplomatic ties with them. It happened due to extensive lobbying by some business groups that even tried to allow Taiwan to open a trade

liaison office in Dhaka. It caused some diplomatic tension with China and, in the end, permission was denied for allowing a trade mission. But those business lobbies have achieved their objectives, as dropping the name from the exclusion list allows them to make business trips to Taiwan.

The explanation given by the government for removing "except Israel" from the passport seems a feeble one as many other countries, who do not have diplomatic ties with Israel, still maintain such exclusion written on their passports. Any claim implying that passports of countries like Malaysia, for example, are not up to the international standard is laughable.

Therefore, a plausible explanation could be that something similar to Taiwan may have contributed to this move. If not, then could it be in the interests of some state entities that have pressing needs for hi-tech services from Israel, as it has very high reputation in sophisticated technologies including in the field of security and defence?

The news of the change, though



FILE PHOTO

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introduced six months before, without any announcement, could not have come at a worst time when Israel faces heavy criticism all over the world for its airstrikes on Gaza, including from some of its long-time allies and backers. The timing of the decision is rather intriguing, which is around November 2020, the month when elections were taking place in the United States. It was the time when President Trump and his son-in law Jared Kushner were pressing Muslim countries to establish direct diplomatic ties with Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Bahrain and the UAE. The Trump administration also succeeded in bringing in Sudan and Morocco, in October and December respectively, to sign deals with Israel for normalisation of relations. Can we rule out a similar move on the part of the Trump administration to push Dhaka towards normalising relations with Israel?

As passports are meant for certifying the holder's identity and citizenship issued by a government, entitling them to travel opportunities under its protection to and from foreign countries, any country excluded in the document is bound to refuse the holder's entry into its territory. So, removal of "except Israel" will certainly make Bangladesh passport a valid travel document for Israel. Despite not having any diplomatic relations, any Bangladeshi will be able to apply for visa at any Israeli embassy in a third country. And, after receiving a visa, visiting Israel will no longer be an offence under Bangladeshi law. Is there any law that can prevent such visits? In the past, visiting Israel was treated as an offence. The assertion by Bangladeshi officials that the ban on travelling to Israel remains in place is perhaps more of a political statement rather than one backed by law.

Understandably, at the beginning, Israel

will be keen on issuing visas, albeit for a short time. Because, any relationship, formal or informal, with a country having the world's third largest Muslim population is something that helps Israel boost its image. The top two countries with the highest Muslim population are Indonesia and Pakistan, with whom Israel has not succeeded in establishing any formal ties. In this context, Israelis have every reason to be elated at the development in Bangladesh as its recent military actions in Gaza against Palestinian civilians have seriously dented its image. The Deputy Director General in charge of Asia Pacific at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gilad Cohen's "Great news!" tweet is not the only one expressing jubilation at this development; Israel's mainstream media too were cheerful, like the Haaretz, which claimed it was "essentially lifting a decades-long travel ban".

The significance of the end of "expressed boycott" of Israel should not be underestimated, as for Israel, the global movement known as Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) has been hurting them for over a decade. The BDS movement's wider impact has been hurting Israel so much that the US has banned this grassroots campaign by law, following the former's successful lobbying, and some other European countries are also considering doing the same.

If there is no other purpose behind removing the words "except Israel" from the new Bangladeshi passport, then the government should immediately recall all new passports and affix those words by putting a stamp or seal bearing the declaration of Israel's exclusion. Now is not the time to change policy about Israel. Emotions among people about the Palestinians' just struggle for freedom and an end to illegal occupation there are running high. And, there's no apparent gain in changing the course that we have been following for 50 years.

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School closure should be a last resort

HYUNCHEOL BRYANT KIM, SUNGSUP RA, and RYOTARO HAYASHI

SCHOOLS have been fully or partially closed for more than a year in many developing countries. As of March 29, 2021, the world's longest full closure was in Bangladesh, at 47 weeks, according to the UNESCO. Myanmar was close behind, at 43 weeks, and the Philippines, at 33 weeks. When partial school closure is included, Nepal is highest (53 weeks) in the world and school closures in South Asia continued, especially long closures in the developing Asian region.

Indeed, as Covid-19 variants surge in some developing countries in Asia, policy makers may even be considering extending school closures. But is this the right approach?

Some policy makers want to keep schools closed until large-scale vaccination is achieved in a given population, which may contribute to herd immunity. Yet, this goal will take time, especially in developing countries, given limited vaccine availability, complicated logistics, and phased deployment approaches. This is particularly true since vaccination for school-aged children has not yet been fully developed.

It is against this backdrop that we ask whether school closures should still be considered a priority option for developing countries.

We argue that school closure should be a last resort. The projected economic cost is huge: A recent Asian Development Bank estimate suggests a present value of USD 1.25 trillion in future earnings losses in Asia and the Pacific assuming that every student loses USD 180 every year from their expected future annual earnings. In addition, many developing countries have struggled to adopt online and distance education, due to variable access to digital devices and internet, meaning many children are simply going without schooling.

Despite these apparent long-term



PHOTO: ADB

School closure should be a last resort, in part because it is expected to cause students in Asia and the Pacific to lose future annual earnings.

economic losses and rising learning inequality, some policy makers still wish to keep schools closed to protect children from Covid-19. It makes sense to introduce strict lockdown including school closure when Covid-19 variants are increasing exponentially, as we have seen in some developing countries over the last few weeks. For those countries with relatively less risk, however, it is reasonable to question whether school closure is the best option to save children's lives.

Looking at ground reality, school closure does not mean children are quarantined all the time. Some might meet their friends at the friends' houses or at the playground, without wearing masks. And even if they stay home, evidence in Bangladesh suggests that even poor households bring coaching and private tutoring from outside the family to compensate for learning loss. These behaviours could bring more Covid-19 risks to children and their household members. Conversely, several rigorous studies

provide evidence of what Covid-19 infection would be like without school closure. Evidence from Australia, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Korea and the United States consistently shows that school closure appears to have limited or no effect on Covid-19 incidence. The exception is Israel, which found a small gradual increase in Covid-19 incidence after schools were reopened, but no observed increase of Covid-19 related hospitalisations and deaths. Policy makers in developing countries

may counter that evidence for developing countries is lacking. This sounds pertinent because schools in developing countries may not have good water and sanitation facilities. Higher density in classrooms and greater teacher absenteeism could also challenge safe school environments against Covid-19 transmission. In addition, policy makers could argue that the above evidence is outdated given new Covid-19 variants, which could cause more paediatric infections resulting into some cases of mortality for school-aged children.

However, where Covid-19 variants are not increasing exponentially, each country could gather evidence through pilot school reopenings in their own contexts, with stringent provision of measures in place to protect student safety. The Covid-19 variants could affect more children. However, Covid-19 infection might not necessarily come more from school reopening compared with the counterfactual scenario of continued school closure. In case it does, the effect of school closure may not be large enough to justify the irreparable damage to children in both the near and the longer terms.

Evidence for developing countries may not get produced fast enough, and many guidance notes and lessons learned are available nowadays for making schools safer, such as wearing masks. Schools that follow good practices could actually be safer for children than keeping them at home.

It goes without saying that if school closures are lifted, situations must be closely monitored, particularly the effect of Covid-19 variants.

As such, we must keep in mind that school closure should not be a first option. The school reopening decision should adopt a risk-based approach and school closure be used as a last resort.

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QUOTABLE Quote



SONIA SOTOMAYOR
Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States (1954—)

If the system is broken, my inclination is to fix it rather than to fight it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

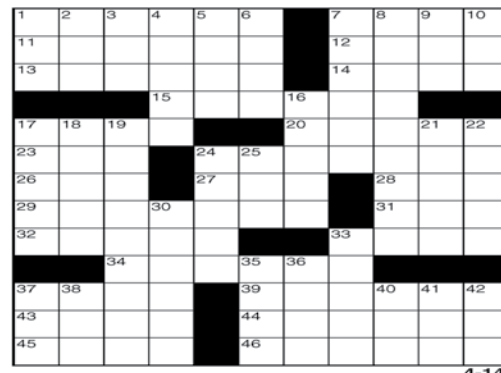
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- 15 Chess piece
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- 18 Mogul
- 20 Really impress
- 21 Verdi opera
- 23 Stoplight color
- 24 Fancy dance
- 26 Funny Foxx
- 28 Homer's neighbor
- 29 Shore flier
- 31 "___pig's eye!"
- 32 Ask out cf

- 36 Illegal searches, in slang
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- 40 Smoker's pipe
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- 43 Director Sergio
- 44 Wise ones
- 45 Slalom curves
- 46 Schooner pole

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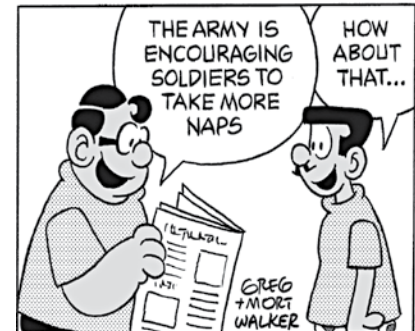
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- 5 Antlered animal
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- 7 Three feet
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- 11 Like some engines
- 17 German conjunction
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- 22 Collars
- 24 City on the Ganges
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- 27 Sch. Subj
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- 35 Banquet
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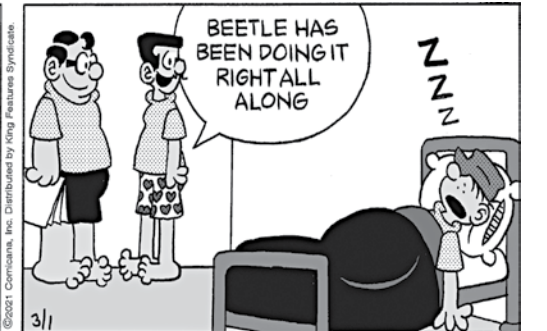
MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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