

Evacuate Bangladeshi citizens trapped in Afghanistan

We must be vigilant about wider repercussions of the events unfolding in Kabul

AS the situation continues to evolve from day to day, it is becoming increasingly difficult to assess the current climate of Afghanistan. However, despite the seemingly restrained tone taken by the Taliban spokesperson during their first press conference since taking control of Kabul, it is safe to say that the country's current status is still a highly volatile one. As such, there is a pressing need for the government of Bangladesh to ensure that the Bangladeshi citizens who are currently in Afghanistan are safe, and are able to return home if they so choose.

This Monday, we witnessed chaotic scenes at Kabul's airport, and at least three Afghan civilians were killed as people desperately scrambled to get onto the departing planes. This resulted in a cancellation of all commercial flights leaving from the airport, making it almost impossible for anyone to book passage out of the country. According to a recent report in *The Daily Star*, almost all of the 21 Bangladeshi citizens known to be in the country have expressed an interest in returning home. Of them, eight were working for telecom companies, six for Brac International, two for the sewerage department and one who got out of jail. The eight engineers were scheduled to return Monday evening and the six Brac officials have secured air tickets for today. But since commercial flights have not yet resumed, it is unclear when they might actually be able to travel. We urge the authorities to ensure that this is done as soon as possible. Other countries, including India, have already taken steps to evacuate their citizens using their own airforce's planes—this is an option that we should also explore, as well as the possibility of evacuation via land borders.

At the same time, we also hope the wider repercussions of the upheavals in Afghanistan on our country will also be taken into account most seriously. In a recent interview with *The Daily Star*, the chief of Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit and additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police said the authorities will be vigilant about any Taliban supporters within our borders who may take inspiration from what is happening in Afghanistan and plan subversive activities in Bangladesh. Given that Bangladesh has already been victim to terrorist attacks by militants who had returned to the country from Afghanistan—and even in recent times, the authorities have arrested two militants whose conversation involved plans to travel to Afghanistan—this threat cannot be taken lightly at all.

Stop victimising the passengers

Row between Biman and its online ticket sales partner has to be sorted

THE ongoing row between Biman Bangladesh Airlines and its online ticket sales partner is causing untold sufferings for hundreds of intended passengers. For almost a week now, passengers have been unable to buy tickets online—which is more convenient and also safer during the pandemic—from Biman's website or from other online platforms that usually sell its tickets. Instead, they are having to physically go to Biman sales centres to buy tickets, which is both time-consuming and risky as crowding may lead to the passengers contracting the coronavirus.

The disagreement between Biman and Travelshop Limited—the exclusive service provider to Biman for selling its tickets online—has led to the latter suspending Biman's services. According to the managing director and CEO of Biman, since being hired on a temporary basis in 2019, Travelshop has "repeatedly failed at various stages in the full implementation of the expected activities." Finally, from August 10 this year, the company stopped providing relevant services to Biman "in a completely unreasonable and unethical manner", while creating "confusion in people's minds".

Contradicting his statement, the chief operating officer of Travelshop said that the company had sent at least 20 letters to Biman in the last 17 months to get their dues, worth Tk 37 lakh. Not only did Biman not pay the dues, but it neglected to even respond to the letters—which is what led to the current situation of the suspension of Travelshop's services.

Whatever the reason may be, the fact that intended passengers of our national flag carrier are being victimised in this row is completely unacceptable and humiliating. And for that, whoever is responsible must be held accountable. The authorities need to urgently investigate the matter and find out who is telling the truth here and which side is spouting lies—or if both sides are at fault. Moreover, while that is being done, passengers cannot be made to suffer like this, nor should they be forced to risk their health and safety by physically buying Biman tickets. Therefore, we suggest that some sort of an alternative arrangement be made for Biman tickets to be sold online on a temporary basis, while all this is being sorted. At a time when the e-commerce sector of the country is flourishing and nearly every transaction can be made online thanks to digital services, continuation of this situation cannot be tolerated.

Chattogram desperately needs guardian angels

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

IT is impossible these days to not notice Chattogram's spectacular urban decline. Go around the port city and you will only experience a place plagued by anemia, chaos, a collective greed to commercialise every open space, and overall, a curious lack of aspiration. I only find three things now in this city of my childhood: traffic congestion, incessant storefronts, and the tyranny of mediocrity. What kind of city does Chattogram want to be? The impression one gets on the streets is of a city that has no guardians to ask this question and address it. Chattogram feels abandoned and confused. Even the country's maiden tunnel under a river doesn't seem enough to boost the spirit of the city.

It is a sad deterioration for a city that has so much history, character, and potential to advance the national mission. But nobody seems to be worrying about preserving its rich history and geographic character, and harnessing its full potential. There seems to be no concern to steward its urban agenda on the national stage. The city has been caught in a downward spiral. But, why? Is it a lack of leadership? A weak civil society? A failure to groom and attract local talents? An ill-conceived notion of development? Dhaka's

The use of negative before a verb in chatgaiya, Chattogram's local dialect, is another instance of Arabic contribution to the culture of the port city.

overwhelming primacy? All of the above?

It is unfortunate because Chattogram has all the ingredients—or "imageabilities," to use the American urban planner Kevin Lynch's term—to become a livable and inspiring city. The uniqueness of its geography, its urban origin, its local dialect, its complicated "melting-pot" racial history, its multi-faith social amalgamation, its role in anti-British movements and the Liberation War, its *Porto Grande* global attraction through the ages—all seem to have vanished in a rotting commercialisation of its soul.

Who could tell that a rich kingdom by the name of Harikela thrived on the bank of the Karnafuli River more than a millennium ago? Who could possibly relate today to how the Muslim Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta described this city in c. 1346: "The first town of Bengal

which we entered, was Sudkawan; it was a great city situated on the shore of a vast ocean." The famous Nalapara site of Rabindranath Tagore's civic reception in 1907, Kamolbabu's Theater (established in 1906; later renamed as Bishwambhar Hall and then Lion Cinema Hall) has been razed to create an unsightly apartment building. Until recently, the historic site of Bangabandhu's declaration of the Six-Point Movement in 1966—Lal

and resisted.

Legend has it that the Buddha came to a vihara or *chakrashala* located in Patiya, a southern town of greater Chattogram, employing his miraculous powers for disembodied travels. According to some historians, Buddhism spread to Chattogram during the time of the Buddha himself, over 26 centuries ago, when Socrates was not yet born, and the Parthenon was not yet built in Athens!

seafarers, British colonialists, anti-British revolutionaries, Western development experts, wealthy industrialists, national leaders, and globally-known entrepreneurs. When history becomes a jigsaw puzzle of people, events, places, and narratives, myths thrive, and a city becomes *interesting!* This is why we love to go to Rome, Paris, Athens, Krakow, New York, Kyoto, Siem Reap, Lucknow, Udaipur, and Kolkata, among other cities.



Yes, 75 percent of the country's total export and 80 percent of the total import occur through Chattogram. But what is the state of urban public health in the city?

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Dighi Maidan—the a minivan parking lot with the covert approval of the city administration!

Yes, 75 percent of the country's total export and 80 percent of the total import occur through Chattogram. But what is the state of urban public health in the city? If there is not a single public place where people can go to take a stress-free stroll in the late afternoon and breathe fresh air, what is the point of "75 percent of the total export"?

It doesn't have to be this way for a city with so many stories to tell. Uncharacteristic mountainous terrain in a predominantly flat deltaic country has always been an essential part of Chattogram's mythology. The Chinese traveler poet Hsuan Tsang's 7th-century depiction of the city as "a sleeping beauty emerging from mists and water" was no doubt a reference to Chattogram's hilly idyll.

The epitome of that idyll—Central Railway Building or popularly known as CRB, a picturesque hilly area with centuries-old Albizia Lebbeck or *shireesh* trees—has now been selected for a 500-bed hospital, as if this is the only space available in the entire city for a commercial healthcare facility. This unconscionable intrusion into a rare, oasis-like ecosystem is the result of an entrenched mercenary culture, one in which understanding a city and its history, its geographic personality, its mythologies is not only not valorised, but also ignored

The presence of many viharas in the city lends credence to the suggestion that the name of Chattogram comes from *chaitiya* (a Buddhist vihara).

Within a century after Islamic forces, under the leadership of Tariq ibn-Ziyad, crossed Gibraltar in 711 CE to colonise most of the Iberian Peninsula, Arab sailors began to arrive on the shores of Chattogram. They left enduring marks in the port city's life and local dialect. Names of places, such as Alkaran (*Al Qarn*) and Sulak Bahor (*Sulukal Bahar*), demonstrate Arabic influence. The use of negative before a verb in *chatgaiya*, Chattogram's local dialect, is another instance of Arabic contribution to the culture of the port city.

Portuguese explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries frequently called it the "City of Bengala." Duarte de Barbosa, one of the earliest Portuguese writers to offer a geographical account of the African and Indian coasts in the early 16th century—almost a century before the Mughal subahdar Islam Khan Chishti's arrival in Dhaka—described Chattogram as a natural attraction for traders, missionaries, and fortune-seekers from far-flung places.

This is not a place to belabour a chronological history of Chattogram, except to say that the port city's history is richly crisscrossed by actors of all sorts: Buddhist mendicants, Arab traders, Arakanese kings, Hindu landlords, Mughal governors, European

This interest itself is a driver of economy and culture.

Thus, to imagine Chattogram's future, one must first learn to negotiate its stories. The city's *genius loci* is found not just in its people, hills, *dighis*, rivers, and sea, but also in its stories, myths, fables, and allegories. The fantastical tales of the Buddha's divine voyage to Chattogram, and a Muslim dervish's lighting of a *chati* on Cheragi'r Pahar to drive away demons, are as important as the city's life-giving river, Karnaphuli. These stories are phenomenologically ingrained in its geography. They propel how the people mentally map their city and weave their *monojagot*.

But today, the city is a muddled blob of generic and unrelatable development projects. Indiscriminate commercialisation of land is championed as progress. Empty flyovers (prime sites for mugging in the evenings) hovering over Chattogram are the embodiment of the city's urban vision bankruptcy.

Planning a city is more than creating a "master plan" on the privileged tables of executives, bureaucrats, and planners. It requires the courage and patience to deliberate on a city's complex evolution, geographic pulse, and future potentials.

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WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

The climate crisis is a humanitarian crisis, for women and girls in particular



BJÖRN ANDERSSON

AS we mark the World Humanitarian Day today, we need to take urgent action to engage in climate adaptation, build climate resilience and prepare all the better for the escalating disasters, displacement and cycles of vulnerability that the climate crisis is creating—a crisis that is proving particularly devastating for the health and wellbeing of women and girls.

We know that 80 percent of disaster-related displacements worldwide have occurred in the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade. We also know that women and girls make up more than half of the displaced population globally. The intensification of extreme weather is also creating a crisis for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and for gender-based violence. There is no doubt that the climate crisis is gendered, and the evidence is increasingly coming to bear.

Globally, there were 300 extreme weather events triggered by natural hazards in 2019. This is six times the number of disasters since the 1970s. In 2018, climate and weather-related disasters caused 108 million people to need life-saving assistance, and we can expect this number to continue to increase.

The climate crisis, now compounded as well by the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic, is disrupting the positive trajectory of upholding human rights and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 3 on good health and wellbeing and Goal 5 on gender

equality.

In Asia and the Pacific, a region already reeling under the climate crisis, strategically investing in resilience-building at the national, institutional, community and individual levels is critical to achieve sustainable development, enable equal access to services and realise the rights for women and young people of all backgrounds.

Governments must commit to

Civil society organisations have a key role to play in sharing their skills and knowledge with governments and in shaping gender-responsive and inclusive climate policies. They must be empowered with the resources and opportunities they need to engage with governments to build resilience, boost preparedness and to cope with the challenges coming ahead speedily.

Beyond the network of committed



Governments must commit to including women and young people of diverse backgrounds in discussions on climate change and allocate sufficient budget to carry forward the work.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

including women and young people of diverse backgrounds in discussions on climate change and allocate sufficient budget to carry forward the work. Engaging and empowering women and young people in climate action is a prerequisite for more just, equitable, sustainable and climate-resilient societies.

government and civil society leaders, UNFPA brings decades of experience, innovations and best practice to the discussion on climate change. Lessons about how to use technology to engage young people, and key learnings about the role women and young people play in climate action and humanitarian response

will help ensure sustainable and inclusive outcomes through localised action.

In the Pacific, for example, UNFPA is supporting young people's leadership in climate action to better safeguard the future for the youth of today. In the Maldives, UNFPA is working with women to voice issues that matter to them, weaving gender equality within the fabric of climate policy. And in Bangladesh, UNFPA supports national disaster preparedness efforts by advocating for a gender-inclusive and transformative approach, including ensuring the presence of female volunteers on the frontline.

The lessons we continue to learn from the Covid-19 crisis demonstrate what is possible when we all work together. The world has developed medical solutions like vaccines in record time that have saved millions of lives. We have seen the power of collaboration for the global good. We have also seen the inequities caused by the significant gaps that persist in resource acquisition and allocation between nations, as well as the damaging impacts of unilateral, non-collaborative action. These lessons—reflecting both challenges and opportunities—can also be applied to tackling the climate crisis.

This is truly a transformational time for people on the front lines. Women, men and young people of all backgrounds involved in shaping climate policies, strengthening preparedness or responding to disasters save lives and improve the health, protection and wellbeing of people living the reality of climate change.

Let us use the momentum for reimagining and innovation to better handle the extreme events that lie ahead together—benefiting generations to come.

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