

Resurgence of violence may destabilise an already conflict-ridden Afghanistan

Taliban government must demonstrate their ability to govern by rooting out terrorism

WE are deeply saddened to hear of the suicide bomb attack at a Shia mosque in the Afghan city of Kunduz that killed at least 55 people on Friday. Many more were also wounded in what is being called the bloodiest assault within Afghanistan since the exit of US forces, and for which the Islamic State (IS) group has already claimed responsibility.

Ever since the takeover by the Taliban, there have been widespread concerns over the rights of women and minority communities within the country. This is especially because of the Taliban's terrible track record with Hazara Shias, who were one of the most persecuted groups when the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan and faced mass killings, torture and executions. On top of that, there have been predictions of an impending conflict between the Taliban and IS that will further destabilise the already conflict-ridden nation. This latest attack from IS only confirms these fears.

And it seems, regardless of whether it is the Taliban or IS, the victims are always ordinary Afghans, especially Shia Muslims, who have suffered some of the most violent assaults in Afghanistan. Even in May this year, a series of bombings outside a school in the capital killed at least 85 people from the Hazara community—mostly young girls. Such attempts to stir up sectarian violence in Sunni-majority Afghanistan is part of an age-old strategy of Sunni extremists—the revival of which should cause the entire region much concern.

Renewed insecurity and greater instability within Afghanistan is not only against the interests of the region, but of the recently-established Taliban government as well, since it is yet to convince its neighbours and major donors and trading partners of its ability to govern effectively and peacefully. Although the initial tone taken by the Taliban seemed reconciliatory, they have already taken huge steps backwards by violating the rights to work and to receive an education of Afghan girls and women. When the Afghan government's ability to deal with an impending humanitarian and economic crisis is already in doubt, the last thing it needs is a resurgence of these disturbingly familiar patterns of violence.

The international community must not abandon the Afghan people in this great time of need. Simply making open-ended statements are not enough, there must be a serious push to ensure that the Taliban government holds terrorist groups like the IS to account and prevents them from operating within Afghanistan's borders. Failure to do so may lead to an escalation of violence that may ultimately cost them their seat of power. If IS is allowed to operate in Afghanistan, the repercussions for Pakistan, India and even Bangladesh can also be huge. We must be vigilant and ensure that the far-reaching arms of sectarian violence do not leave an impression within our borders as well.

Amazing progress made in Karnaphuli tunnel's construction work

Other infrastructure development projects should follow its example

WE are delighted to learn that the construction work of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel under the river Karnaphuli, the first of its kind in South Asia, has been progressing at such a rapid pace that the authorities are hoping to open it to traffic well ahead of the project's deadline. Although the original deadline of the project was December 2022, the project authorities expect they will be able to open the tunnel for use much sooner, as 73 percent physical work of the 3.32km tunnel has already been done. According to project officials, boring, the most difficult part of the tunnel's construction, is already complete and the authorities are now constructing the 5.35km of approach roads, building the road inside the tunnel, and setting up utility lines, which we hope will not take long to get done.

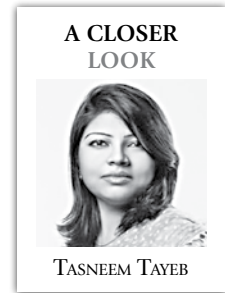
Over the years, delays and cost overruns in our major development projects have become the norm. In the last few months alone, this newspaper published a number of reports on project delays and cost overruns, mostly due to inefficiency and corruption in project implementation. One recent example of this is the Dhaka-Sylhet-Tamabil highway project, which will take another two and a half years to complete, while its cost will also double, according to a report published in this daily last September.

Under the circumstances, it is really encouraging that the China Communication Construction Company Ltd., which is constructing the tunnel, has not wasted any time after the tunnel's physical work started in February 2019, while the project cost has also stayed within its limit.

It needs to be mentioned here that once the tunnel becomes operational, it will have an immense effect on the country's economy. It will connect the southern and northern parts of Chattogram, creating economic opportunities for people in the region. It is also supposed to reduce congestion on both sides of the Karnaphuli and shorten travel time, and play a greater role after the construction of the deep-sea port and economic zone in Cox's Bazar's Maheshkhali and Matarbari are complete. Needless to say, the tunnel will improve the Asian Highway Network, strengthening connectivity between Bangladesh and its neighbouring countries.

Since the most difficult part of the project has been completed well ahead of time, we now hope that the remaining work will also be finished in time. And while we express our satisfaction at the pace of the tunnel's construction work, we also hope that other big infrastructure development projects in the country are worked on with the same sincerity and efficiency and are completed on time.

Pandora Papers: What does it reveal about the shadow economy?



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

THE biggest journalistic partnership in history—consisting of more than 600 journalists from 150 media outlets, including the BBC, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, *Radio France* and *Indian*

Express, among others—has recently exposed the financial misadventures of 35 prominent world leaders, more than 330 politicians and influential public office holders, from 91 countries and territories.

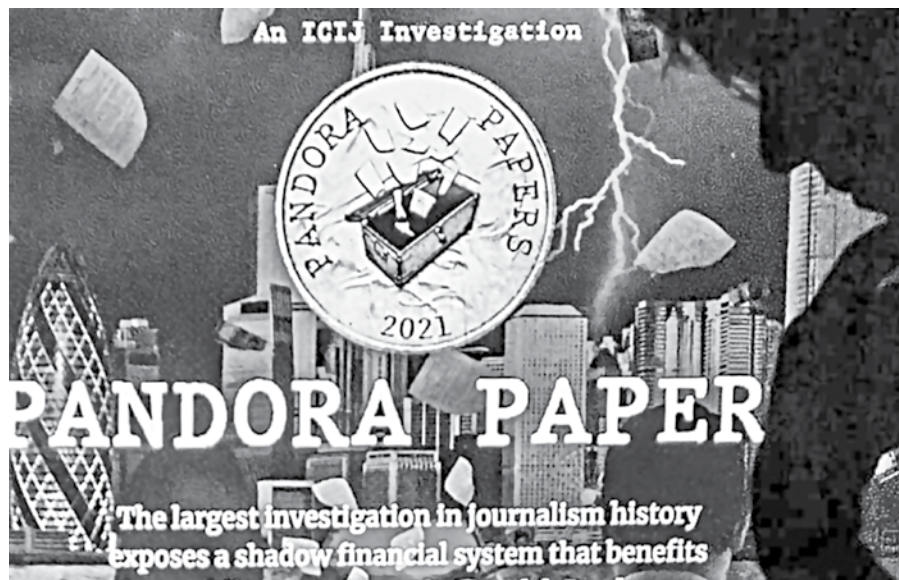
The two-year investigation conducted by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ), involving scrutiny of 11.9 million leaked confidential files from 14 offshore service providers, has resulted in the Pandora Papers—one of the biggest revelations of financial misconduct of influential national leaders in recent history.

The Pandora Papers investigation has linked the names of Jordan's King Abdullah II; Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati; Hassan Diab and his predecessor, governor of Lebanon's central bank Riad Salameh, who is also undergoing investigation in France for money laundering; Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, along with six members of his family; former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his spouse; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian and a beloved figure in the country; and other influential leaders, with dubious offshore investments.

Some of the names have caught the world by surprise, because these leaders in the past has been very vocal in condemning tax abusers in their countries, including their political opponents. "We should not make our tax rules a playground for... tax abusers who pay little or nothing while others pay more than their share", Tony Blair had suggested earlier. Andrej Babis, the millionaire Czech Prime Minister, had expressed his desire to create a business environment in the country where "entrepreneurs will do business and will be happy to pay taxes." Kenya's Uhuru Kenyatta in 2018 had told the BBC, "Every public servant's assets must be declared publicly so that people can question and ask, what is legitimate?... If you can't explain yourself, including myself, then I have a case to answer."

These same leaders are now at the centre of the Pandora Papers scandal.

So, how come these prominent world leaders—many of whom have advocated for stricter tax rules and punishment for tax dodgers—find themselves embroiled in a scam like this? The answer perhaps lies in the fact that these leaders themselves are involved in the making of



Allegations in the Pandora Papers range from corruption to money laundering and tax evasion. PHOTO: AFP

such laws.

Pandora Papers could be the largest such revelation, but it is not the first one. There had been LuxLeaks in 2014, Panama Papers in 2016, Paradise Papers in 2017 and FinCen files in 2020. While there have been some positive result of these exposures connecting influential national leaders, politicians, businesspersons and celebrities with the shadow economy—former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had been disqualified from office by a Supreme Court verdict in the aftermath of the Panama Papers leak—the shadow economy continues to operate smoothly with the blessings of its beneficiaries.

The reason being, the people who are responsible for safeguarding the money of the common people are making personal gains at their expense. These people hire expert tax lawyers who are well versed in manipulating the loopholes in the existing system and allow their clients to circumvent the rules—all at the expense of the common people's interest.

For instance, Tony Blair and his wife brought a British Virgin Islands (BVI) company, through which they became owners of a Victorian building worth USD 8.8 million. This enabled the couple to evade paying a property tax of more than USD 400,000. The building currently houses the law firm of Tony Blair's wife.

Similarly, while on the one hand the Lebanese people are struggling to cope with one of the worst economic meltdowns in recent history—with stores shutting down and people not being able to buy the daily essentials because of a sharp spike in inflation—the current Lebanese Prime Minister, his predecessor, the country's former minister of state and the chairman of Al Mawarid Bank, have all been linked to offshore wealth.

On the one hand, these revelations

expose the sheer apathy of the politicians towards the interests of the common people who elect them to power. On the other, they also raise questions about the system that allows these individuals to get away with amassing illegal wealth while the people suffer. And they can do it because they have the money and the means to access expensive lawyers and their unethical services.

These revelations have become a norm now—more like a leitmotif in a drama. It is the same plot, the same cast, the same act and the same scenes playing out again and again with no result.

When the revelations of the global shadow economy began to unfold in 2014, governments around the world promised to take strong measures to stop the practice of hiding disclosed wealth by the rich and the influential through offshore investment mechanisms. Unfortunately, not much has changed today.

While offshore investment is not illegal itself, using this mechanism to hide illegally amassed wealth and or evade taxation is. But this practice continues—the repeated failed attempts by journalists and investigators to break this system only reveal the strength of the underground economy that is growing in size. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimate, the volume of money laundering every year is around two to five percent of the global economy—or about 800 billion to two trillion in US dollars.

And the volume of this will increase, unless world leaders see the folly of their actions and acknowledge their role in nurturing it. Those who are involved in illegal offshore financial transactions should acknowledge their misdeeds and step down.

The Financial Action Task Force on

Is it all blah blah on climate action?



ANDREW SHENG

AT the end of this month, the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26), under the presidency of the United Kingdom, will begin. This time round, expectations are high that something must be done to improve on the commitments made by governments at Paris COP21 in 2015.

On September 28, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg threw down the gauntlet to world leaders and the media in her opening speech to the Youth4Climate summit in Milan: "We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah blah blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action."

Climate action optimists welcome US President Biden's commitment to double US aid to developing countries on climate action. Chinese President Xi agreed to stop financing new coal projects abroad. This week, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam promised in her Policy Address to spend USD 30.8 billion and create a Climate Change and Carbon Neutrality Office to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. For Hong Kong to finally address climate threats is welcome news.

Climate pessimists like Greta Thunberg are justifiably disillusioned by more green talk and less real deliverables. They feel betrayed by public leaders who repeat electoral promises that result in widening social inequalities, growing debt and planetary damage that coming generations have to clean up. They see businesses pushing consumerism that ends up destroying the planet through more carbon emission, pollution and biodiversity loss. At long last, more corporate leaders have moved from the denial phase to greenwashing their corporate strategies through Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting. Funeral directors at least see calamities and deaths as profit opportunities.

Under lockdown during the pandemic, I zoomed with six experts who have deep experience in epidemiology, finance, complexity science, urban planning,



Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg arrives at the Youth4Climate pre-COP26 conference in Milan, Italy, September 28, 2021. PHOTO: REUTERS

water and food disciplines to collectively think through how we can help the young tackle the looming climate change crisis. Coming from different disciplines enabled us to cut through the silos in thinking, arrive at less technical jargon and move from theory towards a practical approach to speeding up real Climate Action.

The 2021 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC6) published recently basically signalled that time is running out. If no serious action is taken by 2030, the world would witness temperatures rising more than two degrees Celsius, with the poorer countries bearing the brunt of the losses. The faster the planet heats up, the greater the losses, the less time to mitigate and adapt to worsening conditions. Climate damage has moved from crisis to catastrophic proportions, with melting of Arctic permafrost, loss of Amazonian rainforests, and rising sea levels. By 2040, 700 million people are likely to face droughts of at least six months duration, double the historical average. The world would have another 1.4 billion people to feed.

Our group therefore focused on "Buying Time for Climate Action", a forthcoming book to map out the key barriers to climate action and think

through how to act. Given the complexity of climate change at different geographies and national and local conditions, there is no silver bullet or one-size fit all solution. Complex problems do not always have simple solutions, but the general principles to tackle these complex problems must be simply understood simply for effective implementation. God takes care of elegant principles, but the devil is in the details.

Finding human solutions under complexity and uncertainty is therefore less about theory and all about experimentation and practice through diversity, exactly how Nature copes with profound change.

We must learn to live with Nature and fight less with each other.

The worst pandemic in a century required mobilisation at all levels of government and society. There may be more disasters and conflicts to come. Thus, we must move out of war against each other to mobilisation like a war on climate action. Everyone, especially the young, should be motivated to change their consumption patterns and behaviour.

The stumbling blocks to action that we identified—finance, talent, vested interests, bureaucracy and political will—

Money Laundering (FATF), an inter-government body with 39 members, responsible for developing standards for Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT); and United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) should be empowered and strengthened so that they can continue to fight against the financial crimes of the political elites by formulating policies and standards to make money laundering more difficult.

The US banks and financial institutions also have a major role to play here, since the majority of these transactions are carried out in US dollars. "Because of the US dollar's status as the *de facto* global currency, most international transactions flow in and out of New York-based banking operations", the ICIJ report mentioned.

While the US has over the years coerced other banks, especially the Swiss banks, to disclose the names of US nationals involved in wealth hiding through offshore accounts, the US itself is rather unwilling to share "information about money moving through US bank accounts, companies and trusts... The US has refused to join a 2014 agreement supported by more than 100 jurisdictions, including the Cayman Islands and Luxembourg, that would require American financial institutions to share information they have about foreigners' assets," the ICIJ report added.

This attitude of the US is also a hindrance in addressing the issue of illegal offshore investments. Many US States, including South Dakota and Nevada, have emerged as major destinations for hiding illegal wealth—in South Dakota alone, assets in trusts have increased four times to USD 360 billion in the last 10 years, according to ICIJ. This is hurting the global economy and in the long-run will be harmful for the US economy itself.

By dismantling this system, the US can contribute significantly in curbing the illicit flow of money through offshore account transactions, and as an international power, it should prioritise global interests over national gains though illegal means.

While the international community together has a role to play in curbing illegal offshore investments, the common people should also wake up to the stark reality of the corruption and financial crimes of their leaders and raise their voices for justice. They must also create pressure from the bottom to end this economic and social injustice that continues to plague economies. In the long-run, this will yield disastrous consequences for both the culprits and the victims. Such an outcome would not be palatable for any party involved.

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can be overcome. Many climate activists complain that money and talent are in short supply. Ironically, central banks were able to print USD 9 trillion in 2020 alone, whilst there are millions of young who are willing to work passionately to innovate our way towards a green and inclusive future. We simply need to build the social media platforms that are able to deliver the necessary technical know-how and resources (crowd-funded if needs be) to the thousands of projects and programmes at the grass-root level to help deliver change.

The vested interests that stand to lose from change are resisting action, whereas bureaucracies designed for status quo are reluctant to change. Change cannot come without political will and public support. Brexit and the pandemic showed that scientific solutions are not enough when a significant proportion of the population react emotionally to oppose change.

In short, technology, science and knowhow exist for *technical* climate solutions. Money is also available, but not channelled to where it is needed, because as economists say, climate change creates market failures. The state needs to work with markets, namely businesses and the community, in a whole-of-society effort. Getting the political will and support therefore is a *mindset* barrier.

This book's conclusion is that we should think globally within the concept of OneEarth, but act locally NOW. We must act locally because climate mitigation and adaptation projects are only implemented at the local level, but they may need national technical assistance and resource allocation, supplemented by global aid.

The British Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees, who gave the keynote and opening chapter to the book, understood well that "we can be technological optimists, but the intractable politics and sociology engender pessimism." The young will not wait for fatalistic pessimism. They want action today.

Greta Thunberg is right. No more time for blah, blah, blah. Up to leaders like Biden, Xi and Lam to prove that she is wrong, fast.

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