

# World leaders must heed PM Hasina’s call

*They should put pressure on Myanmar to begin the Rohingya repatriation process without further delay*

We appreciate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s call to world leaders to take the issue of Rohingya repatriation seriously and do more to put pressure on Myanmar in order to start the process soon, particularly in order to avoid any security risks in the region and beyond. She made the call while addressing the fourth edition of the Paris Peace Forum 2021 on Thursday. The recent unrest in the Rohingya camps, following the assassination of a Rohingya leader and the death of an alleged Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) leader in a Rohingya camp, has brought to the fore the rising security issues in the camps. It has become a big challenge for our law enforcers to stop criminal activities like drug peddling, weapons trafficking and human trafficking, and violence, which are now rampant in the camps and the surrounding areas.

Bangladesh has helped avoid a major regional crisis by sheltering more than one million Rohingya people, who fled a brutal military crackdown in Myanmar since August 2017. It was not an easy task for the government to provide food and shelter to this large number of refugees, yet we generously opened our borders. And the government has been working hard to ensure that these forcibly-displaced people can have a safe life in the refugee camps of Cox’s Bazar, despite the fact that we have been facing serious financial, ecological and security challenges.

Four years have passed since Bangladesh signed a repatriation deal with Myanmar in November 2017. But the Myanmar government has hardly done anything for the Rohingyas’ safe return, and the silence of the international community in this regard is also unfortunate. In 2018, the UNHCR and the UNDP signed a tripartite deal with Myanmar for creating conducive conditions for the Rohingyas’ safe return. Sadly, the Myanmar government has yet to ensure that.

In the meantime, the government has built housing and other facilities to relocate the refugees from the squalid camps of Cox’s Bazar to Bhashan Char, an island in Noakhali, to address the issues such as the risk of landslides in the hilly areas of the camp site, drug peddling, human trafficking, gender-based violence, and conflicts between factions of the refugee communities in Cox’s Bazar, as well as to address the environmental degradation in the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp areas.

While our government continues to shelter the Rohingyas, it is extremely disheartening to note the silence of Myanmar as well as the international community regarding the issue of their repatriation. We hope that the world leaders will not only appreciate Bangladesh’s efforts in this regard, but will also play a strong role to push Myanmar to start the repatriation process without further delay for the benefit of the entire region. Our prime minister has rightly said that unless Myanmar takes back their own people ensuring their safety and dignity, “the security risks from the crisis will not just remain confined within our borders.”

We hope the world leaders will heed our prime minister’s call.

# Conservation of history is also part of development

*More investment must be made to help research on ancient relics*

The recent discovery of 10 sculptures in four Sylhet temples, all dating back to the Middle Ages, is exciting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the sculptures’ indication of the ancient practice of Shaivism in the region. The Kali temple—established around the year 1800 by Kalicharan Bhattacharjee—on Amzad Ali Sarak itself houses two of the most intriguing relics: the rare quintuple-faced (five-faced) Shivalinga, and the ancient four-handed goddess. Though archaeologists and academics have yet to determine the identity of the latter, there is little doubt as to the uniqueness of the former, with this latest discovery being only the second of its kind in Bangladesh.

Not only does this latest discovery signal a past presence of Shaivist worshippers in the region, but it also once again points to the fact that more resources must be dedicated to the discovery and study of such relics. As important as our journey to becoming a developing country is, we must also be equally enthusiastic—and alert—about preserving our history and keeping records of what we can, so that our future generations have more to learn about their roots, to identify their individuality with, in a world that is globalised.

Experts have already said how crucial the two aforementioned idols are for understanding the aesthetics and gender politics of the region and religion at the time. Though these relics have existed for many years and have been worshipped in these temples, they have been out of our archaeologists’ and academics’ line of study. There is no mention of them in any books or historical documents in the country either.

We believe that conservation and preservation of such historical finds are crucial in order for Bangladesh to retain its culturally-diverse history. As such, we would urge the government to not only encourage the study of the 10 relics that have just been found, but to also help researchers in any way possible to discover and study more of such artefacts. If these relics have existed for so long without anyone noticing, there must be other such valuable ones like them strewn across the country. It is crucial that we, as a nation, do not let any bit of our rich history be lost to decay or neglect. Preservation and study of these historical relics will also add to our development, as much as high-rises and flyovers do.

# Who is this ‘development’ for?

*Evicting Gobindaganj Santal community to make way for Rangpur EPZ is an unjust, misguided plan*



The first displacement happened in the 1950s. The Pakistani government acquired about 1,842 acres in Gobindaganj, Gaibandha in northern Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan), promising both the local Santal and Bengali communities employment as labourers in the sugarcane farm that would be set up on that land. This was in 1955-56—a time when the subcontinent was still recovering from the shock of Partition and the riots that followed. Perhaps the memory of the killings of 17 Santal refugees, who were shot point-blank by the Pakistani police in March 1950 at the border, not far from Gobindaganj, was still fresh in the minds of the native community. But the pangs of hunger were probably a stronger driver—after almost two centuries of colonial exploitation, North Bengal was, at that time, one of the poorest and most deprived areas in the region, and continued to be so for many decades to come.

We know now that the original owners of the land were duped by the repressive Pakistani regime. According to the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, at least 1,200 acres of the land taken belonged to the Santal community, and the rest belonged to local Bengalis. In 2016, *The Daily Star* checked old land records, the agreement between the Rangpur district administration and the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation signed in 1962, and the report of a cadastral survey completed in 1940, to corroborate this claim, and found it to be beyond dispute.

Reportedly, only two Santals were later employed in the farms. The land was never returned to them again, and the Rangpur Sugar Mill, which was established on what is now known as the Sahebganj-Bagda farm area, continued to operate till about last year. Although many of the Santal and Bengali communities returned over the years to live on their ancestral land in makeshift homes, they effectively had their ownership rights stolen, pushing them and their next generations into poverty.

The second displacement occurred only five years ago: on November 6, 2016, more than 2,000 Santal and Bengali families were evicted from the area following a violent clash between the families, mill employees, and police. Three Santal men were killed and 20 others, including nine policemen, were injured. Their makeshift shacks were set on fire, and almost all of

them lost all or part of their belongings. To this day, the victims’ families have not received justice. In fact, many of them are still being forced to waste precious time and resources in fighting cases that were brought against them after the clashes. This lengthy legal process is also preventing them from travelling to find the employment that they badly need, since most of the community are mainly engaged in low-wage agricultural work.

It is now highly possible that we will soon witness a third displacement, if the government goes ahead with its plan to build an export processing zone (EPZ) on the disputed land. There are currently about 1,500 Santal and Bengali families living in the Sahebganj-Bagda area and in two Santal villages in nearby Madarpur and Joypurpara, who are also under



**This Santal child in Gobindaganj, Gaibandha lives in fear of losing his home, much like nearly 1,500 Santal and Bengali families in the area who face eviction as the government plans to build an EPZ on their ancestral land.**

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

threat from the EPZ. Almost every official involved in this project maintain that the land belongs to the government, with the project director telling this daily’s district correspondent that “the 1,842 acres of land were fully acquired during the Pakistan period and the government has decided to hand it over to the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA).”

Now, the question is: Why is the acquisition of land by a regime whose very purpose was to subjugate the people of then East Pakistan, and who relished in profiting from the sufferings and hardships of the local population, being accepted so casually in independent Bangladesh? Should we not have done everything in our power by now to mitigate the effects of the cruel and repressive policy of the authoritarian Pakistani government in Gaibandha, which made thousands of Bangladeshi citizens destitute and

homeless?

After the 2016 attacks, there were claims from certain quarters that the land did not originally belong to the Santals. As mentioned earlier, *The Daily Star*’s own research, and that of others, have disproved this claim. In fact, the 1962 agreement holds two important clauses that, if taken into account long ago, would have provided the original owners of the land with the justice they deserve. A portion of Clause 3 declares that “the aforesaid corporation shall not change the character of the requisitioned property” and Clause 5 states that “... if it is decided that the land shall not be acquired for the aforesaid purpose, the said corporation shall surrender the land to the provincial government for its release and restoration... and the corporation

be completely different as well, it is high time that the “release and restoration” of this land was taken seriously. It is a great shame that not only have no serious steps been taken to rehabilitate the Santal and Bengali populations living in poverty in the Gobindaganj area, but there are now plans to push them into further destitution. In fact, it seems like they have hardly crossed the minds of those in charge of the proposed EPZ project—on August 24, BEPZA Executive Chairman Md Nazrul Islam visited the farm area and held a meeting at the Gaibandha DC office with stakeholders, but not a single member of the Santal community was invited.

At the meeting, the reassurance was given that 200,000 people would be employed at the new EPZ. How many of the locals will be part of these lucky 200,000? Members of the Santal community have every right to be sceptical, especially since their forefathers’ trust in empty promises of employment turned out to be their greatest misfortune. Earlier this month, Philimon Baske, president of the Sahebganj-Bagda Farm Bhumi-Uddhar Sangram Committee, told *The Daily Star* that without education, and with no experience of work outside of the manual labour expended on agricultural fields, it is highly unlikely that those evicted by the EPZ project will have any opportunity to work there in future.

Questions have been raised on its sheer size as well. Currently, the plan is to acquire the entire 1,832 acres of land for the EPZ, even though the largest EPZ in the country to date is built on around 500 acres of land. So far, no information has been shared on why this entire space is required, and what industries will be built upon it—just that the EPZ will be built on a small area first, and then eventually expanded. The authorities must ask themselves if this is reason enough to make so many marginalised families homeless and landless, without a second thought to their livelihoods and way of life.

Without a doubt, the establishment of EPZs in different parts of the country has created much-needed employment and developed previously poverty-stricken areas. But who exactly is this development for, if it does not reach the local population—especially if that population not only lives in one of the poorest regions in the country, but consists of landless agricultural labourers belonging to a historically marginalised indigenous community? What is the point of all this development, if inequality continues to grow, and the poorest end up slipping through the cracks?

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# Strengthening zila parishads can accelerate rural prosperity



Zila parishad or district council, the highest tier in rural local government, is the oldest local government agency in Bangladesh. Yet, it was not until 2017 that elected representatives took office in the country’s zila parishads. The Zila Parishad Act, 2000 has given the mandate to the zila parishads to carry out development activities by formulating annual and five-year plans in consultation with other local government institutions and individuals, considering their own financial capabilities.

Decentralisation is often linked with the concept of active participation in decision-making processes. Indeed, local authorities with actual discretionary powers make the foundation for decentralisation that can lead to efficiency, equity and development at the local levels. Effective local institutions can develop and implement policies that are in line with the citizens’ aspirations, thereby improving the quality of public services. Bangladesh is a unitary state with a constitutional provision for local government bodies to provide all necessary amenities. Decentralisation is specifically mentioned in the constitution of the country.

**The existing challenges**

Under the current LGI framework, zila parishads have only limited revenue discretion. According to the law, LGIs can only collect revenue from the sources specified by the government. They are not authorised to look for alternative tax bases. Even within the limited discretion, zila parishads don’t have enough capacity to effectively collect the revenues from the sources assigned to them. In addition, the zila parishads receive limited funds compared to their actual needs under the current intergovernmental fiscal transfer system. Inadequate funding is a major constraint on the ability of zila parishads to perform their mandated functions. Currently, the zila parishads play some roles in the delivery of local services, and local administration offices provide these

services as well.

Due to a fragmented legal framework, the assignment of functions and expenditure responsibilities to zila parishads remain unclear, and there is a significant gap between legally assigned functions and their actual capacity to perform those functions. The lack of coordination between zila parishads and district administration offices in delivering services has been identified as a major impediment to effective local service

*In Bangladesh, the local government as a political institution is focused on ensuring development, and public participation in development activities is far from being an effective tool of governance.*

delivery. The main hurdle in effective coordination is the distance between the frontline service delivery unit, where the service is delivered to the citizen, and the officials who ultimately have the decision-making power over local service delivery, often sitting at the district level or within the central government. Therefore, there is a need to deconcentrate the decision-making authority on service delivery to the zila parishad level, thereby reducing coordination failures and improving local services.

A major challenge in the current local government system is limited opportunities for meaningful participation of local citizens, and weak upward and downward accountability. There is a wide

consensus that a more devolved and effective local government system is crucial for making development agenda more pro-poor, widening participation in decision-making processes, and ensuring that resources are directed to where they are most needed. For instance, zila parishad standing committees are not operational in about 90 percent of the zila parishads, because the elected chairpersons and other members are not properly aware of or interested about the committees’ functions and jurisdictions.

**Policy recommendations**

First, zila parishads should identify all relevant stakeholders and involve them in the development process. A zila parishad must hold a special meeting on a regular basis to approve the project list in accordance with the Zila Parishad Act. It must submit the annual plan to the relevant deputy director, local government (DDLG) and the Local Government Division (LGD) by deadline. The zila parishads should incorporate their standing committees’ suggestions in the annual plan. Endurance, steadiness and sequential knowledge should be guaranteed by the committee members.

Zila parishads must identify their existing establishments and assets, and work out renovation plans of said establishments as well as further investment of available assets. The LGRD ministry must engage the relevant entities for transferring knowledge and skills to the officials of zila parishads. The ministry must also introduce digitalised accounting systems and how to prepare financial statements, and have them audited by the audit standing committee of the zila parishads within three months of the closing of a financial year. The authorities involved must work out a performance-based budget allocation, i.e. placing governance reform as a condition to receive a budget for infrastructure improvements. The zila parishads must prepare and present citizens’ charter at their offices. Creating websites, promoting citizens’ charter and disclosing all development and financial related documents, holding regular public hearings and inviting local communities, CBOs, and NGOs to the zila parishad meetings are indispensable.

**Making zila parishad effective**

Reforming local government institutions requires agreement on fundamental principles. These principles encourage governments to do the right thing by providing services consistent with the citizens’ preferences. In addition, the zila parishads should manage their fiscal resources carefully. They should gain citizens’ trust by performing better and spending frugally, as well as managing the community’s economic and social risks. They should perform to increase both the qualities and quantities of public services as well as access to them.

In Bangladesh, the local government as a political institution is focused on ensuring development, and public participation in development activities is far from being an effective tool of governance. Being mostly poor and unaware, particularly at the grassroots, the people approach their local public representatives, whom they consider as local guardians well aware of their needs and feelings. In reality, elected local bodies in administrative units ensure effective involvement of the people in decisions that affect them, and this participation is a precondition for the development of a democratic polity at all levels.

While NGOs are still likely to be mainly concerned with the basics of improving human development, being involved in human security projects helps to improve NGOs as organisations and to reinforce and expand the contribution they can make to the people with whom they currently work. To make development really meaningful, people must be directly involved in the formulation and implementation of decisions. This requires decentralisation of democracy to the most basic levels. Allow political parties and relevant stakeholders, including community members, to learn from this experience and overcome these challenges in the greater national interest. A paradigm shift in government is required, shifting from imposing development to supporting rural development, and from teaching local people to learning together with them. Human security must be included into the existing mainstream rural development approaches.