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Remove legal handcuffs off the

Why have laws that prevent the prevention of corruption?

HE legal bindings stopping the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) from playing an effective role in preventing money laundering are counterproductive and should, therefore, be immediately removed. According to an ACC commissioner, some people in the country are involved in massive amounts of money laundering—worth crores of taka. But because of legal constraints, the ACC has been unable to do anything about it.

In 2019, the government formulated the Money Laundering Prevention Rules, which assigned particular organisations to investigate particular crimes under the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012. The rules specified 27 types of money-laundering-related offences, of which the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of police has been given the task to investigate 24 alone or with the National Board of Revenue (NBR), Department of Narcotics Control, and Department of Environment. The ACC has been given the sole responsibility to investigate the money laundering offences related to graft and bribery, while the NBR and Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) can probe crimes related to tax and capital

If the government wants other agencies to be involved in investigating money laundering cases, that is all well and good. But why restrict the ACC's ability to also be involved in such cases? Money laundering is a huge problem for Bangladesh: according to the Global Financial Integrity, between 2008 and 2017, Bangladesh lost a staggering USD 7.53 billion per year on average to trade misinvoicing, which accounted for 17.95 percent of Bangladesh's international trade with all its trading partners during the period. And its most recent reports indicate that the amount of money being laundered has only grown. That means the government should do everything in its power to check money laundering—not restrict any of its agencies from probing into such cases.

Over the years, we have seen the government slowly infringe upon the independence of the ACC, taking away its powers to prevent and investigate various types of corruption-related cases. The over politicisation of our government agencies is already a major problem that prevents the ACC from being effective; erecting legal barriers on top of that will only turn the ACC into a toothless tiger—if it hasn't already.

We frequently hear the ruling party propagate that it has zero tolerance for corruption. But its actions often speak differently. If the government is serious about fighting corruption, it should clear the way for the ACC and other agencies that deal with corruption to do their job unhindered. At the same time, we must also point out that the legal barriers aren't the only issue preventing the ACC from doing its job. For years, its high officials have lacked the courage needed to go after people who are involved in high levels of corruption. That courage is something that the ACC must find on its own.

Why is our out-ofpocket healthcare expense rising?

Govt must take measures to bring down OOP expenditure

recent study conducted by the health ministry has found that Bangladesh's out-of-pocket (OOP) healthcare expenditure has been rising steadily, instead of falling. According to the study, our OOP expenses have increased to 68.5 percent in 2020 from 67 percent in 2015, which is the highest in South Asia. While about 64 percent of the OOP expenditure goes towards medicine, disease diagnosis accounts for eight percent, and inpatient and outpatient services account for 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Due to such high healthcare expenditure, 4.5 percent of people are pushed into poverty every year, the study found. The findings are indeed alarming, and we need to find out the underlying reasons and address them in order to bring down our healthcare costs.

It is particularly shocking to know that 64 percent of our OOP expenditure goes towards medicine, while it is only 28 percent in India. Our patients have to spend more on medicine because of irrational prescriptions and aggressive marketing by pharmaceutical companies. And, in the absence of any rules and proper monitoring mechanisms, the private diagnostic centres are charging patients exorbitantly for medical tests. The result is that a majority of our patients avoid going to the doctors when they really need medical assistance, and take over-the-counter drugs instead. According to the Health Financing Strategy 2012-2032, we need to halve our OOP expenditure to 32 percent by 2032 to meet the target of Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

Healthcare experts suggest that we should revise and expand the list of emergency medicines and follow the treatment protocols prescribed by physicians, as well as reduce the diagnosis costs to bring down our overall healthcare costs. In addition, the aggressive marketing strategies by pharmaceutical companies have to be stopped. It should be made mandatory for our physicians to write down the generic names of medicines in their prescriptions, instead of promoting the medicines of any particular company, which would help

reduce competition among pharmaceutical companies. Additionally, our primary healthcare systems in rural and urban areas need to be strengthened so that patients don't have to seek treatment in private healthcare facilities. Moreover, coordination between community clinics and upazila health complexes through the introduction of e-health services, ensuring efficiency of the public healthcare facilities, and introducing a social health insurance system are some of the main areas where we must make improvements.

After the UN resolution on Rohingya crisis, what comes next?



a resolution titled **Human Rights** of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar" was adopted at the United Nations

with unanimous support—a first for a Rohingya-related resolution since the crisis began in 2017. The resolution asked the Myanmar authorities to address the root causes of the Rohingya crisis. Jointly tabled by the member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the European Union (EU), the resolution maintained a strong focus on the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and for finding a permanent solution to this protracted crisis. Having said that, last week's resolution does have some "face value"—both diplomatic and political as it was supported by China and Russia, who in the past always vetoed against any action against Myanmar. Therefore, this resolution is expected to create an impetus for real action in the long run; however, presently, it hardly leads to anywhere. To the Myanmar government, the UN resolution is "intrusive" and shows no respect for "sovereign integrity."

The latest episode of the crisis was initiated by Myanmar with a military crackdown on the minority group in Rakhine state, leading to a massive exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh starting on August 25, 2017. Since then, Bangladesh has given shelter to more than 700,000 Rohingyas. Including those who took refuge here on previous Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for from the OIC, the EU, or any member managing the off-shore facility.

Meanwhile, multiple attempts to repatriate the Rohingyas to their homeland have all failed. Bangladesh and Myanmar signed the first repatriation deal in November 2017. Another agreement was signed in January 2018 to complete the repatriation of all Rohingyas within two years. The failed attempts were followed by the military coup in Myanmar, which led to a complete collapse of meaningful communication between the two neighbouring countries. Given the new momentum and support at the international level, the Bangladesh government should kickstart the repatriation process directly with Myanmar or through a friendly third-party broker/negotiator to find a mutually acceptable solution. We need to remember that it is ultimately a bilateral

state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) as a reliable, impartial and honest broker to jumpstart the negotiation. The newly appointed special envoy of the UN secretary-general on

Myanmar can also facilitate the process. Second, Min Aung Hlaing, head of the current military junta, oversaw the crimes against the Rohingyas, including the reported war crimes and crimes against persons of other minorities, in Myanmar. The army chief who reportedly orchestrated many criminal activities is now heading the Myanmar government. The post-coup tragedies, including killings, torture, imprisonment, sexual violence and rape, continue unabated till date, violating all international laws. The Rohingya crisis and the current oppressions of the mass people by the military are two sides of the same coin.

The UN and the international community must act to bring the perpetrators of the crimes against Rohingyas to justice, and ensure accountability for human rights violations. A truth and reconciliation commission must be established in Myanmar under UN leadership to review all reports of atrocities, and punish those who were responsible in order to re-establish confidence, citizens' rightsparticularly for the minority groups, rule of law, and peace in the country. This is very critical to creating conditions conducive for the voluntary, safe and sustainable return of the Rohingyas. Truth and accountability will be required to restore and strengthen inclusive democratic institutions and processes in the country

In sum, the UN resolution on Myanmar itself will not lead to the desired goals for orderly repatriation of the Rohingyas any time soon. This should be followed by actions at all levels-national, regional, and international. It is time for Bangladesh and Myanmar to re-engage in bilateral talks to enable voluntary, safe and dignified return of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. Since Bangladesh is burdened with the refugees on many fronts, there is no choice but to build a plan, define the approach with international help, and execute it in an orderly manner in collaboration with Myanmar. Achieving this may not be easy, and be fraught with many hiccups and roadblocks. Much work remains to be done diplomatically as part of—and beyond—the newly adopted UN resolution. Bangladesh should now make the move to engage seriously with Myanmar to protect its own interest in the short and long runs.

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Rohingya refugees continue their way after crossing from Myanmar into Palang Khali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on November 2, 2017.

the current atrocities, torture, arbitrary arrests and violation of human rights in Myanmar since the military takeover in February 2021. Apart from the OIC and EU, the resolution received significant cross-regional support from the US, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Japan and the

Republic of Korea, among others. While the resolution demonstrates a good gesture by the member states at the 76th UN General Assembly meetings and sends a signal to the Rohingyas that they are not yet "forgotten" by the international community, it still does not cover all bases, and clearly lacks commitments and a concrete action plan occasions of displacement, Bangladesh is now hosting well over 1.1 million of the displaced Myanmar nationals, providing them with humanitarian assistance, including medical care and attention during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This generosity earned respect internationally for Bangladesh and its prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. The UN resolution recognised the efforts of the Bangladesh government, the massive investment made in building the facility at Bhashan Char to relocate a portion of the refugee population from the squalid camps in Cox's Bazar, and the signing of an agreement between Bangladesh government and the UN High issue, and must be resolved bilaterally between the two countries, with necessary support and assistance from the UN and other key regional players.

FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

The Rohingya crisis is increasingly becoming a security risk for Bangladesh and the region. The governments in Dhaka and Naypyidaw are both strongly encouraged to work out a viable and concrete plan and unleash new forces to make the necessary transition to repatriation in the near future. What could the Bangladesh government do to facilitate the repatriation? As noted earlier, Bangladesh has already done a great deal. However, to find a way out of the present impasse, the government can seek help

PROJECT **■** SYNDICATE

Modi's Anti-Muslim Jihad



India's **1** recent defeat by Pakistan at the T20 Cricket World Cup tournament, Indian bowler Mohammed Shami faced vicious trolling on social media. It was the latest display of the

Islamophobic bigotry that has consumed the Indian society under the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya

Shami had performed poorly in the match. But so had 10 other Indian players in the rout by Pakistan. Shami was singled out because he is Muslim. His failure was viewed not merely as a sporting issue, but as a failure to do his best against an opposing team composed of his co-

Unpleasant as it was, the Shami episode pales in comparison to other recent incidents of Islamophobia in India. In Darrang district, in the northeastern state of Assam, the state's BJP government launched an eviction drive against Muslims whom it decided were "illegal settlers" on public land. During a protest against the evictions, police shot and beat a villager, and a photographer officially documenting the demolition drive brutally stomped on him, in full view of cameras, even after his body appeared lifeless.

Video footage of the murderous assault went viral on social media, prompting much hand-wringing among those sections of the public not yet inured to stories of violent hate crimes against its Muslim minority, which have proliferated under BJP rule. In recent years, a spate of inflammatory anti-Muslim rallies has sometimes erupted in violence. In February 2020, riots consumed parts of the capital, New Delhi, leaving more than 53 dead. Most of the victims were

There has also been a dramatic increase in lynchings of Muslims, especially for the "offence" of transporting or consuming beef (the cow is considered holy in Hinduism). Most states have enacted laws prohibiting the slaughter of cows, and

both police and self-appointed mobs are enforcing them with greater zeal than judgement. Cow "vigilantes" have been known to beat Muslims, forcing them to chant Hindu religious slogans. Such hate crimes are committed with impunity.

Meanwhile, police have charged Muslim students under draconian terrorism and sedition laws for the frivolous "crime" of cheering for Pakistani cricketers. Four Muslims were arrested in the city of Indore for attending a popular annual college dance celebration that was abruptly classified as restricted to "Hindus only." A Muslim journalist named Siddique Kappan has been jailed for more than a year on charges of sedition, terrorism, and incitement, when all he did was his job.

sins—both real and imagined—of past Muslim invaders and rulers are blamed on the entire community.

Whereas previous governments sought to temper communal passions, promote harmony, and provide official support (including tax incentives) for efforts to promote India's pluralism and diversity, the BJP unapologetically embraces an intolerant majoritarian Hindutva ideology. Those close to the ruling establishment routinely excoriate the Muslim minority—and previous governments' alleged appeasement of itas a threat to India's Hindu identity.

Under the BJP rule, campaigns have been launched against interfaith romance (with Muslim men being accused of

offering fast-track citizenship to refugees from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries—provided they were not Muslim. And family-planning campaigns have been portrayed as efforts to preserve India's "demographic balance"—India is 80 percent Hindu—in the face of higher Muslim fertility. What dismays liberals like me is how

thin the veneer of India's constitutional secularism has turned out to be. In just seven years of BJP rule, the cultural pluralism and Hindu-Muslim amity that India has touted for decades have been annihilated.

There was a time when government officials would point proudly to Muslims in prominent positions as evidence of India's ability to overcome the bitter legacy of Partition with Pakistan. Today, Muslims are dramatically underrepresented in the police forces and elite central administrative services, and they are overrepresented in the prisons. Sentiments that would have been deemed impolite to express a generation ago are declaimed from political platforms. The police often enable, rather than stop, the torment of Muslims.

Islamophobia now seems to have colonised a significant segment of north Indian society, though the south has yet to succumb. India's much-vaunted free press has been complicit—and even an active participant—in the erasure of its longstanding syncretic cultural traditions.

Under the BJP rule, the segregation and disempowerment of Muslims—the division of Indian society into "us" and "them"—is being gradually normalised, and Indians are becoming desensitised to the routine expression and practice of anti-Muslim bigotry. A Muslim who points this out will be told to "go to Pakistan." Hindus like me are derided as "anti-national."

I have been called that myself. In 2015, speaking in parliament, I repeated a friend's observation: in BJP-ruled India, it is safer to be a cow than a Muslim. Sadly, that rings even truer today.

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Protests and rallies demanding to send Muslim 'immigrants' back have been all too common in India in recent years. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

As disturbing as these trends are, they should not be surprising, given that senior political figures express their bigotry openly. Modi once declared that antigovernment protesters could be identified by their clothes—that is, traditional Muslim attire. And prior to the 2019 general election, BJP President Amit Shah called Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants "termites" and pledged that a BJP government would "pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal." Islamophobic sentiment is stoked further via social media, often in BJP-curated WhatsApp groups, where the

women), religious conversion (despite it being permitted by India's constitution), and Muslim practices of marriage, divorce, and alimony (which are viewed as incompatible with women's rights). A popular apparel firm was browbeaten into withdrawing an advertising campaign deemed by zealots to be inserting Muslim elements into the Hindu festival of Diwali. A Muslim religious gathering was deemed a Covid-19 super-spreader event, even as the far larger Hindu Kumbh Mela festival was allowed-even encouragedto proceed.

The BJP government also enacted a law