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Graduation from LDC status is a momentous achievement

Overcoming future challenges should now be the focus

WE are delighted that the United Nations General Assembly, on November 24, gave its final approval for Bangladesh to graduate from the least developed country (LDC) category to that of a developing country. It is a major milestone in our development journey—one we can be extremely proud of. As Bangladesh celebrates its Golden Jubilee of independence, this achievement establishes us on the global map as a country with great potential. While we celebrate this accomplishment, we also hope that Bangladesh will be successful in living up to that potential.

However, the graduation, while a momentous achievement, will bring with it a host of new challenges. As Bangladesh enters the developing nations' bracket in 2026, only the EU and the UK will continue to give Bangladesh their preferential trade benefits until 2029; the rest of the countries will withdraw their concessions. Many of the other trade benefits that Bangladesh currently enjoys will cease to exist, meaning that the country has a lot of hard work to do to discover new trade-related opportunities. Our exports, which are going to lose their duty-free, quota-free market access, will have to be diversified and made more competitive. Bangladesh must also diversify its export destinations, and to that end, experts have been calling on the government to try and negotiate free trade agreements with individual countries as well as with different trade blocs. The authorities need to carefully study the pros and cons of these key decisions to make the country's graduation go smoothly.

The graduation to developing country status will affect all our industries in one way or another; therefore, the government has to try and create a more business-friendly environment in the country and provide greater support to our businesses. Identifying which industries will require what kind of support will be a key challenge for the authorities going forward. In line with that, we urge them to involve experts from different fields, as well as various industry stakeholders, in all its important decision-making procedures. Bangladesh must also strengthen the overall capacity of its economy; besides, diversification of the economy, technological upgradation, skills development and institutional strengthening should be prioritised.

Most importantly, as a developing country, Bangladesh has to try and strengthen its democracy, and improve its human rights record. It is a matter of great disappointment that at a time when Bangladesh is being globally recognised for making great progress in certain areas—as evidenced by its graduation—the state of democracy in the country is in such peril. Therefore, democratic institution-building is something that the authorities have to urgently focus on, because ultimately, the benefits of graduation will only be meaningful if they are distributed fairly among all citizens, and when the government functions in the interest of protecting the rights of the people.

Make online spaces safer for women

Stronger law enforcement needed when dealing with cyberbullying, abuse

IT is disappointing, but not surprising, that the real-life abuse of women in our country has also spilled over to our digital spaces. According to the findings of a survey by ActionAid Bangladesh in partnership with Prothom Alo, 77 percent of its respondents faced sexist or misogynistic comments online, while 50.37 percent received explicit images in their messages on social media. Moreover, 30.37 percent of women were victims of identity theft and fake profiles, 23.70 percent faced non-consensual dissemination of intimate photos, and 19.26 percent faced cyberstalking.

The anonymity that social media lends to individuals leads abusers to believe that their comments have no impact, or that what they are doing is not wrong, or that they can get away with whatever they want. Such a belief is strengthened by the fact that most victims are reluctant to take legal action against online abusers. As the survey found, only 15.56 percent of victims reported incidents of cyberbullying to the police, while 2.22 percent spoke to lawyers about it. A vast majority kept the incidents to themselves or only shared them with friends and families. This happens either due to fear or because of how normalised abuse of women has become in our society—be it online or offline.

One would think that the solution to the online abuse of women would be the implementation of the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018. However, its history of being used arbitrarily to muzzle free speech has made it seem as if the law was not enacted to benefit the general public. Experts say that the DSA, as it is, has not put emphasis on curbing cybercrimes against women, and that reforms are needed so that it can be used to combat such problems. And while helpline numbers—such as 999 (national emergency hotline) and 109 (the national helpline centre for violence against women and children)—do exist, women who face abuse online often do not turn to these resources for help due to a lack of knowledge about them, or fear of inaction and further psychological distress/stigmatisation of their situation.

We urge the government and law enforcement agencies to prioritise the safety of women in cyberspace—by promoting existing helpline numbers, reforming the DSA to better serve female victims of online harassment, and making the reporting of such incidents easier and more accessible. While online abuse takes place on the internet, the trauma from it is experienced by real women and affects their lives and safety in real life. Victims should be able to turn to the justice system for help in this regard without hesitation, and abusers should be punished accordingly if we are to make our digital space safe for all citizens.

Protecting our Students from the Wrath of the Titans



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

hyped pedestrian tunnel has not been opened to the public yet. It's been more than three years since the death of two students of a nearby school in a tragic bus accident, on July 29, 2018, which prompted a spontaneous protest led by school children from every part of the city to take control of the traffic system for the next nine days. In an unprecedented role-playing campaign, students were checking car documents and controlling traffic mobility in the presence of traffic officials as bystanders. The public, sniffing



Students have been out on the streets of Dhaka for several days now, demanding discounted fare for buses, protesting against the rape threat a transport worker openly gave to a female student, and now seeking justice for the untimely death of a college student in the hands of an untrained driver.

a change, complied, but after a few days, it was not "cute" anymore. Their main demand of capital punishment for drivers involved in accidents leading to death was craftily toned down with the use of the word "intentional." The commissioning of an underpass on the busy Airport Road was one of the many carrots thrown along with the strategic sticks used to calm the protest. The incident brought the students and the transport workers at loggerheads with each other. It probably soured the relationship between these two segments of society. Thanks to Covid, the issue remained as subterranean as the underpass.

Once again, students are back on the streets—although on a limited scale compared to the last time around. Once again, students and transport workers have taken an oppositional stance. The protesting students are angry as privately owned

bus operators have declined to give any concession to them now that the fares have gone up due to fuel price adjustment. The government and the licence-giving authority Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) are in a fix as they cannot officially force the private bus owners to follow an international practice of offering special discounts for students. The bus owners, it seems, have no intention of giving any concession to students either.

The strong position taken by the bus owners has allowed their staff to exert force and exude authority. In one instance, a female student was threatened with sexual assault when she demanded a student discount. Her post on social media sparked another bout of protest. To complicate the issue even further, a proxy driver of a city corporation garbage truck ran over a college student earlier this week, killing him on the spot. Two days ago, another garbage collection truck hit a ride-sharing motorcycle from behind and wheeled over the passenger who fell down following the impact. While writing this piece in the early

students. It was, however, not nice to see the transport workers and "some miscreants" chasing the protesters, wielding sticks and chanting slogans to announce their party affiliation. For the bus owners, according to press reports on the mediatory meeting, the students should avail themselves of the state-run BRTC bus services. Their uncompromising attitude puts the government in a difficult position before the landmark victory celebration. A solution is a must, but it demands resolution and

female passengers. In most cases, they are lonely garment workers returning home at night. We also saw how a Dhaka University student was raped by a drug addict vagabond about two years back. A rape or rape threat can be construed as a power statement. It can be an assertion of deep-seated anger, frustration, perversion, fetish, or deprivation. Each case is unique. But this particular incident shows that the transport workers do not have respect for students. Without doing any post-mortem at what

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mutual respect.

There are two recent instances that may be helpful in this connection. In the Philippines, they have passed the Student Fare Discount Act in parliament to protect student rights. In India, the Kerala High Court in 2019 ordered for necessary steps to be taken to ensure that students availing travel concessions are not prevented by private bus operators from boarding the bus or occupying vacant seats. Our government can institutionalise a similar system to protect our feather-weight students from the wrath of the heavy-weight transport workers, who feel deprived while carrying students on board.

There can be additional incentives for the buses so that they do not incur losses while catering to student passengers. Increasing the number of government-run BRTC city buses or commissioning special buses through public-private partnerships during school hours can be the other solution.

I remember using student cards for accessing not only transport, but also public services, in the countries I have studied or travelled to. For instance, with my University of London ID, I enjoyed discounts in various museums throughout Europe. I was never looked down upon by the service providers for showing my student ID. Here in Bangladesh, it is the opposite. Most of the bus owners set a daily revenue or profit target; their income is consummate with the number of passengers they carry. Quite naturally, they view students as a leak in the system that allows their profit to ooze out.

There is another psychosocial aspect that also needs to be taken into account, especially in the case of the rape threat. Why would a driver or a helper think of a passenger in sexual terms? Could it be that the male ego of the helper was hurt when a female student assumed authority because of her uniform? There are many reported incidents of transport workers abusing

point in time these groups lost respect for one another, we can say that the tension is on the rise, and immediate action is required. Both the students and the workers need to learn about each other. The respect for hard labour and service providers can be instilled through minor inclusion in the curriculum. Field visits can help students understand the pressure under which transport workers work. Similarly, workers need to understand the role of education in the overall growth of society.

The other day, my chauffeur was expressing his disgust at the way the bus driver had threatened the female college student. He had just become a grandfather. His love for his daughter made him worry about the social and moral downslides. "They don't understand the value of education anymore. It is no longer special. There are students in every household now. The respect for education is gone." His words made me think of the democratisation of education. One would think that the more education was spread, the more the appreciation for it would be. But in many cases, education without the right skillset or moral underpinnings results in social burdens. For instance, a farmer parent who has provided for his ward to get education often finds that his child is capable of neither getting a job nor working in the field. We encounter a white-collar vs blue-collar debate, where education is the loser.

Let's not delude ourselves by thinking that these accidents or incidents are isolated. While I express my deepest condolences to the victims, there are bigger issues that need our attention. There seems to be a deep social, moral wound that has never been addressed. It is time to educate ourselves, or else we will always be stigmatised for our half pass.

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Now is the time to refocus on adolescent girls



I was honoured to visit Bangladesh last week in my role as the UK special envoy for girls' education. The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has put girls' education high up on the agenda, pledging to stand up for the right of every girl in the world to 12 years of quality education. We have set an ambitious target to get 40 million girls back into school with higher learning levels in the next five years. The global community backed up this commitment at the Global Education Summit held in London in July, where international partners raised USD 4 billion for education.

With equal levels of enrolment for girls and boys at primary and lower secondary schools, in many ways Bangladesh is already a leader in providing access to girls' education. The challenge now is to ensure that all of these girls are learning, and that they can continue their education into adolescence in order to reach their full potential. During my visit, I was keen to learn first-hand about the challenges facing adolescent girls as they re-enter school following Covid-19 closures, and see the inspirational and innovative ways that

girls, their families and communities are overcoming these barriers and benefitting from quality education.

From my visits and conversations this week, I was struck by the warmth, enthusiasm and leadership of the young people in Bangladesh. I spoke with various groups of adolescent girls in both Dhaka and Sylhet, who raised three main issues of concern in relation to education: climate change, child marriage, and gender-based violence.



The UK has been a long-time partner of Bangladesh in the prevention of child marriage and promotion of girls' education.

PHOTO: COURTESY

At the start of November, the UK hosted COP26, the global climate conference. I arrived in Bangladesh fresh from these discussions, and keen to understand more about how the country is adapting education to ensure that children can stay in school. During my visit, I travelled to Sylhet, which regularly experiences extreme floods leading to school closures. I visited a government primary school in Sunamganj, which has been specifically designed to withstand the impacts of climate change, but we must all do more to make sure education systems and structures are more

resilient to the effects of climate change in the future.

Sadly, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, and there are fears that the rate has increased during Covid-19 school closures. Education is too often one of the many casualties of child marriage, with young married girls unable to continue their studies. In Dhaka, I was pleased to visit the UK-funded National Urban Poverty Reduction Programme (NUPRP), which works with

local women-led organisations to prevent child marriage and gender-based violence. I spoke to young women being supported by the programme and learnt how the local community was taking action, including through self-defence lessons. I am proud that last week, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced 18 million pounds of new funding for programmes to end child marriage, which will include new work in Bangladesh and reinforce the UK's commitment to women and girls in this country.

During my visit, I also heard directly

from girls about how gender-based violence, or the threat of such violence, affects their day-to-day lives. Gender-based violence ruins lives, and we must all work together to eradicate it. My time in Bangladesh coincides with the start of the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. We've seen, both in Bangladesh and across the world, that Covid-19 lockdowns have dramatically increased incidents of gender-based violence, and this cannot be tolerated. The time to make a change is now, and the UK will continue working in partnership with Bangladesh, including through this new funding, to make a future that is safe for all women and girls.

The year 2021 is special for Bangladesh, and it was a privilege to be in Dhaka to celebrate the nation's Golden Jubilee. I was honoured to join the honourable Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni and British Council Chairman Stevie Spring at an event celebrating 50 years of Bangladesh's independence, and 70 years since the first British Council office opened in Dhaka. The relationship between our two countries is certainly historic, and I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to the Bangladeshi people on all that has been achieved in the last half century.

Looking ahead, I can proudly say that the UK will continue strengthening its deep bond with Bangladesh. Last week, Lord Ahmad, UK minister for South Asia, announced 54.5 million pounds of new UK aid funding to support the Government of Bangladesh achieve their objectives in improving student learning, supporting adolescent girls to stay in school, and enabling the most marginalised children to access quality education. Our excellent team at the British High Commission is excited to take this work forward in the months to come.

I am grateful to all those who have so warmly welcomed me to Bangladesh, and I wish I could stay longer in this beautiful country.

Helen Grant, MP, is the British prime minister's special envoy for girls' education.

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