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Khaleda Zia’s health is deteriorating

Time to reconsider the situation

THE latest news about former prime minister and BNP chief Khaleda Zia has reconfirmed that her health has severely deteriorated. For the first time, her doctors have publicly briefed us about her health complications. Khaleda has been diagnosed with liver cirrhosis and has also been passing blood. Her doctors have gone on to say that her condition could turn critical at any moment, and that she needs TIPS (transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt) technology to intervene, which is available at some specific advanced medical centres in the US, UK, and Germany.

Because Khaleda Zia is at high risk of re-bleeding in the next week and an even higher risk in the next six weeks, her doctors have strongly suggested that she be taken abroad for treatment immediately. Taking into consideration the recommendation of her doctors, we believe it is time for the government to rethink whether to send her abroad for treatment on humanitarian grounds.

The government has already allowed her to be in the company of her family on humanitarian grounds. However, the comments made by the law minister that Khaleda is now free and is not in the government’s custody is somewhat confusing. As far as we are aware, she has been convicted and has been serving her term. What did the law minister mean when he said she is now free? Does that mean she is free to travel abroad for treatment? If that is the case, what prevents her from going abroad, or what was meant when it was said that she needed to go back to jail to be allowed to go abroad?

We see VIPs constantly going abroad to receive treatment, which means that our healthcare system is not advanced enough to support all sorts of medical emergencies. Khaleda Zia’s medical situation could be such a case.

We understand that there are many political implications in regards to Khaleda Zia and her case. However, since she is now severely ill, at this stage of her life, can politics be left aside, and the focus be shifted to the humanitarian side?

Prevent Omicron from entering the country at all costs

Govt should impose early travel bans, ensure strict screenings at airports

AS Omicron, a new variant of the coronavirus, is spreading fast across the world and countries are imposing travel bans and stepping up efforts to contain its spread, we must not lag behind in taking all the precautionary measures needed to stop the variant from entering our country. Considering the current situation, the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 has already recommended imposing travel bans on countries where the new variant has been found. The committee has also suggested that people who arrived in Bangladesh in the last 14 days from any of the countries where Omicron has been detected should be in institutional quarantine, and has stressed the need for wearing face masks everywhere, including in educational institutions, and the limiting of mass gatherings. However, whether we will be able to prevent the new variant from spreading will largely depend on how these recommendations are followed by the authorities concerned and the people at large. As far as we know, the civil aviation authorities have not yet issued any travel restrictions, although they have directed the international airports in the country to remain on high alert to prevent the spread of the new variant.

What we know so far about the new strain is that it is far more transmissible than the Delta variant, which wreaked havoc in Bangladesh as well as around the world only a few months back. Although we still don’t know how deadly Omicron is, one thing we do know is that the variant has 32 mutations in its spike protein, which is about double the number associated with the Delta variant. One major concern regarding this variant is how effective the existing vaccines will be against it because of its large number of mutations. As a result, we must immediately prepare to deal with the new variant.

Imposing travel restrictions is particularly important for a country like ours, because if this highly transmissible virus strain does spread here, our weak healthcare sector might not be able to provide proper treatment to the large number of patients who might get infected with it. Given our poor track record of maintaining simple health guidelines such as wearing masks and avoiding social gatherings, it could be easily assumed what might happen if the new coronavirus variant does enter the country.

If that happens, we may not have any other option but to impose another lockdown, which will have serious negative impacts on our economy that has just started to recover from the damage done by the previous two lockdowns. Therefore, the authorities should immediately impose travel bans without any hesitation. Beside imposing travel bans, maintaining strict screenings at the airports, ensuring institutional quarantine, preparing our healthcare facilities and strictly maintaining the health guidelines are some of the most important measures that we should enforce right now.

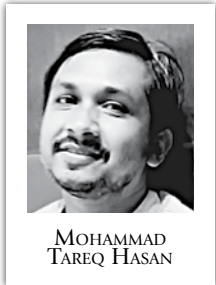
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Produce Covid vaccines locally

Our PM recently told parliament that Bangladesh has the capacity of producing Covid-19 vaccines and supplying them to other countries. I am very happy to know this, because I personally think that we should not wait for other countries to give us the vaccines. Instead, we should produce our own vaccines.

Dripta Haq, Farmgate, Dhaka



of Dhaka yet again. They demanded a speedy trial of the accused, compensation for the family, strict traffic laws, etc. Protests for road safety is not new. Regrettably, the law formulated in 2018 following even larger student protests after the death of two students in a similar road accident is yet to be fully enacted. Nonetheless, the unity shown by the students in the past few years for restructuring the quotas in government



Students break the divide between the rulers and the governed during these protests.

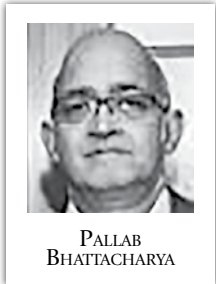
PHOTO: RAFIUL ISLAM

jobs, eliminating imposed VAT on tuition fees, enacting new traffic laws, etc., is admirable. All these protests reflect similar aspirations for equality and justice, and more importantly, show the power of unity. Students break the divide between the rulers and the governed during these protests and make the fallacies of certain rules and laws visible. For example, since the start of the latest demonstrations, they checked driver’s licences on the roads. On the second day of the protests, the driver of a police bus could not show his

offices, but facing a protest, the mayor came out and made commitments before the students. This was possible only because the horizontal cooperation among the students without recognised leadership—an important feature of the recent student protests—left no options. Typically, authorities want to talk with the representatives during a demonstration, but having no specific leader makes it difficult for the authorities to negotiate. So, rather than inviting the representative to an office, the office bearers are forced to come to

discontent. Thus, we can identify more significant implications of these protests beyond the reductive label of “student protests”. The student uprisings, in Alain Badiou’s words, can womb an “[idea] capable of challenging the corrupt, lifeless version of ‘democracy’, which has become the banner of the legionaries of Capital”. The frequency of student protests indicates the possibility of forming a more egalitarian society. But how should we go about forming a new society? Should we aim for new laws,

Looking beyond the security dialogue on Afghanistan



THE first conference of top national security officials of eight Asian countries on crisis-hit Afghanistan, hosted by India on November 10, sent out an important message relating to the need for preventing the war-torn country from becoming a safe haven for global terrorism once again, for an inclusive government, and an unhindered supply of humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. The meeting was attended by the national security advisers and chiefs of Afghanistan’s neighbours Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and extended neighbours Russia and India. The security and stability of Afghanistan have significant implications for all the eight countries. The main items on the meeting’s agenda was the security challenges emanating from Afghanistan, which found reflection in the “Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan” issued after the meeting. Stopping the Afghan territory from being used for planning terrorist acts and the need for an urgent response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan were among the key points of the declaration.

An equally important lesson from the Delhi meeting was that it served as a strong reminder that the next logical step for the diplomats of the countries in the region is to explore the possibility of concrete collaboration in the economic sector and connectivity across the two parts of Asia. This has not received as much attention as it should have. Any discussion on economic linkages between South Asia and Central Asia brings to sharp focus the centrality of Afghanistan and India as strategic bridges between the two regions on the one hand and energy-rich Eurasia comprising central Asia and Europe (read Russia) on the other hand.

Because of their locations, India and Afghanistan are set to play key roles in bringing South Asia and Eurasia closer. However, Pakistan has so far stood in the way of Afghanistan’s emergence as a focal point of economic cooperation between South Asia and Eurasia, mainly because of its deeply flawed policy of regarding Afghanistan as a “strategic depth” in the event of a conflict with

India. If Pakistan truly wants a prosperous Afghanistan, it should see the rationale behind allowing transit between India and Afghanistan. India has successfully executed development projects in a wide range of sectors, touching the life of common people in Afghanistan. That has been achieved by New Delhi without Islamabad’s help. By refusing transit to India to access Afghanistan through land, Pakistan is scoring a self-goal as it stands to



Security crisis in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has significant implications on its neighbours and the region to a greater extent.

PHOTO: REUTERS

lose economic spinoffs of transit. India’s geographical location, improving infrastructure, and robust economic and development partnerships with most Central Asian countries gives it a unique place in providing a link with South Asia, and beyond to Southeast and East Asia via the sea and land. India is already constructing a road between the northeastern state of Manipur and Myanmar that would lead to Thailand. India has built the Kaladan River multimodal transport hub in Mizoram abutting Sittwe port in Myanmar that is geared to cater to both South and Southeast Asia. India is also in the process of putting together many more multimodal facilities in different parts of the country. In 2019, India and Thailand had solidified a cooperation pact for direct maritime connectivity between Ranong port in Thailand and ports in Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata. If operationalised, this has the potential to cut the 15-day journey time for cargo between

India and Thailand by half. India is also linked by the Bay of Bengal to the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Just look at the communication links being created through Northeast India to South and Southeast Asia: the Kaladan multimodal transport project, and, of course, the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project which can be extended to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Five of the six rail links that connected

Bangladesh and India before being disrupted by the 1965 India-Pakistan war are now back in operation. Also, India is connected to Nepal through Jayanagar-Kurtha railway line, and another rail link between Raxaul and Kathmandu is on the cards. All these conjure up the picture of an expansive network of existing and proposed land ports. Integrated check posts are being built along India’s land borders for trade, creating new transport corridors to promote movement of goods and people between different countries in the region. South Asia is also witnessing the slow emergence of a common energy market, with the Indian power grid connected to Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, allowing India to supply 1,160MW of power to Bangladesh, about 700MW to Nepal, and import 1.8GW from Bhutan. Procedures for export and import of electricity with India’s neighbouring countries have also been notified, and gas and petroleum products pipelines are being installed to link India with Nepal and Bangladesh.

for example, for governing traffic in the country? This demand for more formalised laws—seeking an enhanced humane condition or equality—may contrarily curb the potentials of cooperation and agency. The imposition of more regulatory procedures usually leads to authoritarianism and power concentration. If examined critically, the solution that the people in power also propose in the face of mass protests is about formulating new laws for governance. Recently, fines for violation of traffic rules were hiked, and many people believe it will make drivers follow traffic rules diligently. Conversely, some sceptics also predicted that it would only increase bribery to avoid fines and legal action.

The fascination with creating new laws arises from the assumption that we will be more humane once an authority enforces regulations. Contrarily, it keeps us from transforming the authoritarian socio-political system for a better democracy or a more equal and just society. Remarkably, the student protests repeatedly show, it is possible to maintain equality and justice by being anarchists—uniting and carrying our everyday affairs spontaneously. Many would relate anarchism with violence, disorder and destruction. But philosophically, as David Graeber has argued, anarchism proposes that human beings are capable of reasoning and can perform the art of living without being subjected to any coercive force. Even from the Rousseauian perspective from the book *Discourse on Inequality*, anarchism would be a straightforward proposition that stands as opposed to the formal social structures or institutions designed for governance. Hence, the economic and political elites always find the idea of anarchism anti-society. As the formal governing structures do not eliminate, but instead engender, socio-political inequalities, we should spontaneously unite for change—which the student protests repeatedly have indicated their potential for.

Research on mass uprisings in Bangladesh has always been analysed from the venture points of transferring political power, but the student protests show the possibility of a new life form. These protests shake the image of powerful sovereign authority and claim sovereign power ephemerally. Student protests reflect a horizon beyond state authority—a life form based on equality, justice and unity.

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However, Pakistan has been stonewalling the idea of trade transit between India and Afghanistan. To be more accurate, Pakistan has always played the spoilsport not only in being the transit point of India’s trade with Afghanistan, but also in any common plan for South Asian electricity exchange grid and road connectivity project. That only partly explains India’s developing the Chabahar port in southern Iran to circumvent Pakistan and access Afghanistan. In fact, it would also give the entire Central Asia, including Afghanistan, entry to the sea for trade. India has many more economic and strategic reasons to have funded the development of Chabahar port. The idea of connecting with Central Asia, a link that was disrupted by the partition of the Indian subcontinent, was also behind India joining the project of International North-South Corridor covering Iran and Central Asia, and reaching up to Russia. Central Asia is also the region where China’s Belt and Road Initiative has made impressive strides.

Security, particularly in the context of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, is an issue that has brought out differing perceptions among the countries in the region, because not all of them view the Taliban in the same way. Agreeing that peace and economic progress go hand in hand, the question is if trade and economic cooperation would remain hostage to divergences on security perception—and if so, for how long.

What gives India an added advantage to its potential role as a vital link between the institutional set-ups of regional cooperation in South, Southeast Asia and Eurasia is its leadership role in SAARC (it is unfortunate that SAARC has fallen into disuse due to India-Pakistan tensions), BIMSTEC, and its membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which has all the countries of Eurasia region. With the institutional mechanisms in place, all that is required now is to coordinate among them by looking, and not overlooking, at not just the security issue, but at the fruits of economic cooperation as well. They go hand in hand.

Regardless of whether India is in a position to set the security agenda in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and its neighbouring areas or not, it has strong credentials for playing a crucial role in the proposed construct of a template for economic cooperation between Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia.

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