

The Daily Star

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DHAKA THURSDAY DECEMBER 9, 2021, AGRAHAYAN 24, 1428 BS

Accident, negligence or murder?

CCC cannot avoid responsibility for deaths from open drains

THE open drains of Chattogram have taken lives before, and this time around, a 12-year-old boy fell in a drain on Monday and disappeared. Fire service personnel are conducting an operation to recover the body of the missing boy. The photograph of the mournful father holding the mug-shot of his missing son that appeared on the front page of this daily is a poignant one, indeed. Ironically, the boy fell in the same drain which had devoured 55-year-old Saleh Ahmed, a vegetable trader, on August 25 this year. And only a month later, on September 28, 19-year-old university student Sehrin Mahbub Sadia met with the same fate. Even earlier, in the month of June, a CNG-run autorickshaw fell in one such drain and the driver died along with a passenger.

The open drains have turned into veritable death traps for the citizens of the port city, and these unfortunate deaths, occurring in quick succession, seem to have failed to stir the conscience of the people responsible for keeping the drains covered anticipating such accidents. These wide and deep drains have been constructed very close to the roads and during heavy rains it becomes difficult to guess where the drains are located. Rescue operations by the fire service department personnel cannot run smoothly because of the filth and sludge in the drain-water.

The main mantra of any construction project is "safety first", but we hardly notice people responsible for the maintenance of safety implementing the slogan as diligently as they should. Following the accidents involving the open drains, citizens have demanded that these be covered with durable slabs. But, no perceptible action has been taken so far to prevent such tragedies. One town planner, almost echoing our concern, told the correspondent of this daily that drains in the city have been left open and accidents are happening because of the sheer negligence of the authorities. He further said that the Chattogram City Corporation cannot avoid responsibility for these accidents. We cannot but agree with him that you need not be an engineer to sense it. Just common sense is enough to understand that leaving drains open may cause accidents.

We notice the same old tendency of passing the buck here as well. When contacted, the CCC mayor, instead of taking responsibility, said the drain in question could not be covered up as the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) has been working on it as part of a mega project to address waterlogging. The mayor has no idea when CDA would hand over the drain to them.

The whole episode smacks of negligence and apathy towards human suffering and human life. It is criminal in nature and needs to be investigated by the government so that no more lives are lost in avoidable accidents.

Weak institutions lead to bad governance

50 years on, why are we yet to develop strong and independent institutions?

DESPITE racking up impressive GDP growth numbers over the years, Bangladesh's failure to establish effective institutions and institutional capacity is very disappointing. At a recent panel discussion, experts expressed their concern regarding how this would affect the country going forward, particularly as it graduates from the least developed country (LDC) category. Bangladesh has had to pay a hefty price already due to its weak institutions. While our economic performance has been admirable, various studies by national and international organisations have revealed on multiple occasions how our economy could have performed better if it weren't for reasons that are ultimately tied to weak institutional capacity—such as widespread corruption and lack of accountability and transparency on part of state agencies.

The rising inequality—both economic and social—is another major problem that we see as a result of feeble institutions. This has also been holding us back from attaining our developmental goals, including the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For years, experts have been harping on the matter, asking politicians and bureaucrats to take it seriously. However, due to the unfortunate fact that weak institutions allow for a lack of accountability and transparency—which in turn can be exploited by people in positions of power—none of them seem to have been listening. As a result, Bangladesh's institutions rank among some of the worst in the world.

If we look at the banking sector for example, we see that the sector has been in perpetual crisis for years—with some fearing that we haven't even seen the worst of it yet—due to the absurd policy-making of the central bank and numerous interventions from the finance ministry in its decision-making. The lack of autonomy of our central bank is a perfect example of how we have failed to build effective and independent institutions. Another such example is the lack of independence of our Anti-Corruption Commission, whose powers have been gradually weakened by policymakers through laws that outright undermine our constitution—by granting civil servants undue privileges.

Throughout the world, there have been countless examples of countries that have failed to make the jump that we are about to, simply because they failed to develop effective institutions that can hold bureaucrats and politicians accountable. Will we turn out to be another such case?

If not, it is high time for our policymakers to recognise the danger we are in, and pursue policies that strengthen the capacity of institutions that are supposed to hold the decision-makers accountable. We have to try and instil the concept of checks and balances in all our state institutions. Otherwise, those in positions of power will continue to do as they please—and exploit state power for personal benefits—instead of acting in the best interest of the country.

Expand space for accountability to control corruption

INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION DAY



DECEMBER 9 is observed as the International Anti-corruption Day (IACD). On this day in 2003, the United Nations called upon governments and peoples of the world to mark the

adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). IACD is intended to highlight the importance of concrete and collective action against corruption involving all stakeholders.

The Cabinet Division of the Government of Bangladesh decided in 2017 that IACD will be officially observed in the country annually. For Bangladesh, IACD has assumed much greater significance this year as we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the glorious victory of our independence.

terms of nearly every credible indicator of governance and corruption. These include the Rule of Law Index, Regulatory Quality Index, Government Effectiveness Index, Political Stability Index, Voice and Accountability Index, Press Freedom Index, Political Rights Index and the civil liberties index.

According to the Corruption Perception Index 2020, Bangladesh continues to be ranked among countries where corruption is perceived to be most pervasive. Although it has been able to overcome the pains of being at the very bottom of the list as during 2001-05, its current 12th position from the bottom, with a score of 26 out of 100, remains well below the global average of 43, and the second-lowest in South Asia, only after Afghanistan.

Corruption is a crime that undermines and impedes development, social cohesion, political stability and democratic progress everywhere. It is a menace that causes the plundering of resources, destroys level playing field in

controlled corruption, the cost of which is estimated as at least two to three percent of GDP. For the common people, it is a distressing experience that hurts the poor and disadvantaged the hardest. According to the national household survey on corruption released by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in 2018, 66 percent of the surveyed people experienced corruption in the service delivery sectors while 89 percent of those who were victims of bribery were forced to make unauthorised payments as they wouldn't otherwise have access to public services.

Against this backdrop, as we mark the country's 50th victory anniversary, we need to consider the opportunity costs of corruption in terms of our aspirations for sustainable development, democracy, justice and equality. What the UN has identified as the theme of this year's IACD—"Your Right, Your Role: Say No to Corruption"—was much more eloquently and comprehensively articulated by

fortress against corruption."

Given the level of criminalisation of politics and the depth and breadth of corruption, there is hardly any indicator of whether and to what extent Bangabandhu's call inspired subsequent rulers and political leaders, including the party he led before being brutally killed and deprived of the opportunity to lead the transformation needed to realise his vision.

The incumbent head of the government coincidentally echoed the same spirit in the context of the casino scandal and a short-lived high profile drive against ruling party-affiliated youth leaders, procurement lords and casino "dons". She declared zero tolerance against corruption, promised that nobody would be spared and made the ambitious pledge to cleanse "own house" first. The zero tolerance commitment was repeated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the context of Covid-19 pandemic response.

However, hardly anything has been done to effectively implement these pledges. Nowhere in the world can such pledges be translated into reality by the head of a government alone. Ironically, a section of the people—in their official and institutional capacity—who are entrusted to implement the pledge are among the colluders, beneficiaries and protectors of corruption.

The importance of multi-stakeholder participation against corruption has been underscored by Article 13 of the UNCAC, "each State Party shall ... promote active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption." A State Party to the Convention against Corruption for Bangladesh thus has to be committed to creating space for citizens' participation in the anti-corruption movement.

This is easier said than done in an environment where there are aspirations of monopolising the political space, and where the scope for voice and accountability has been severely restricted by the motivated application of certain provisions of laws that restrict freedom of speech and opinion of civil society, media and common people. For the same reason, nearly every institution of democracy and national integrity system has been rendered politicised and dysfunctional, creating scope for widespread impunity enjoyed by abusers of power.

Enforcement of law and holding the corrupt to account without fear or favour are crucial for corruption control, but equally important is to transform anti-corruption work into a social movement, as stressed by Bangabandhu. Space must be expanded, not restricted, for civil society and media to exercise their rights and responsibilities as enshrined in the Constitution, without which any prospect of holding power-abusers to account will remain only a dream.

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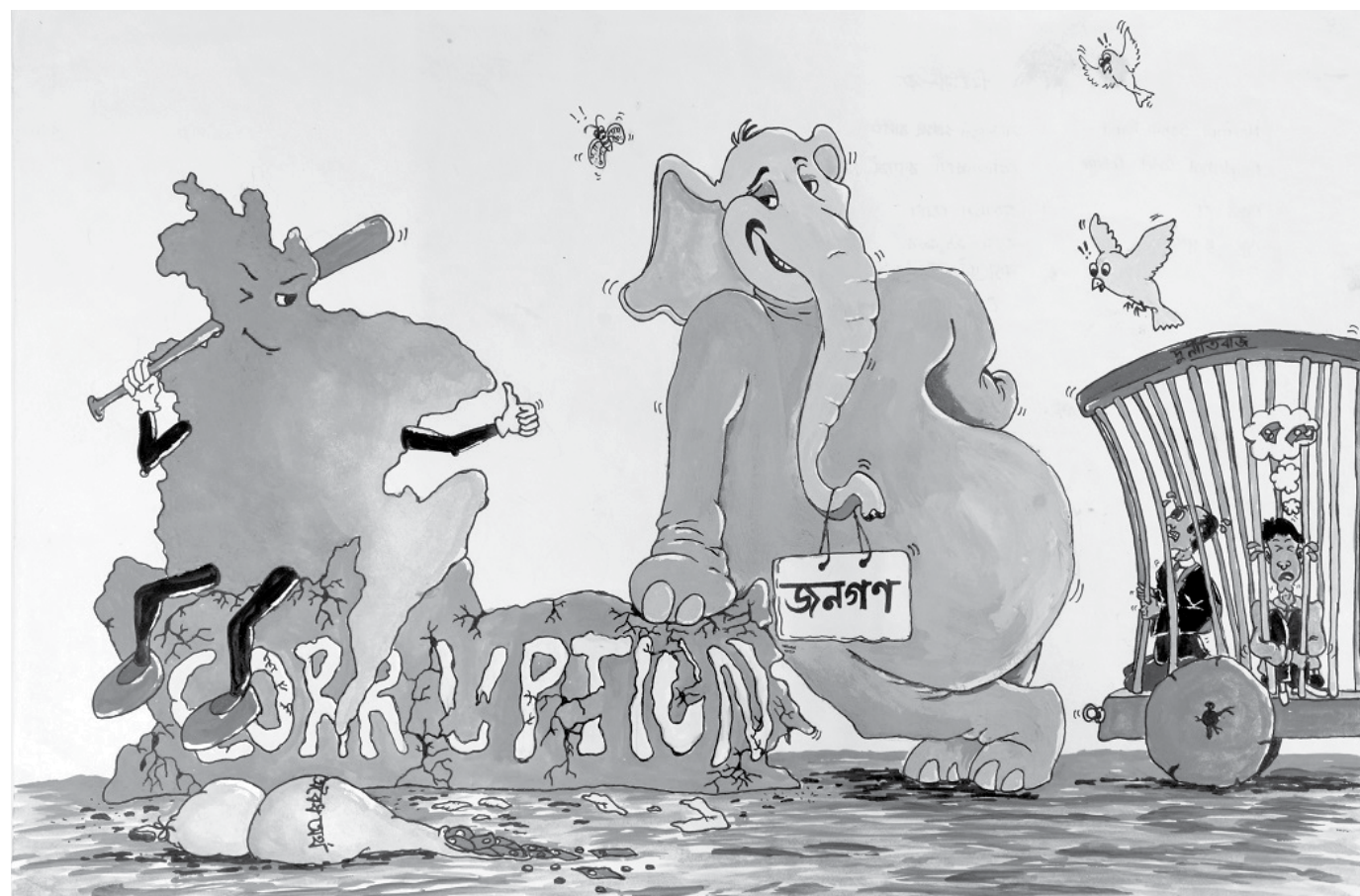


ILLUSTRATION: NAZMUL SAKIB RABIT/TIB

We take pride in our internationally enviable achievements in terms of many socio-economic indicators and now realistic aspirations to become a middle-income country. The country's GDP growth remains consistently high, while in terms of such indicators as Human Development Index, Multidimensional Poverty Index, Gender Development Index, population growth reduction and life expectancy at birth, Bangladesh has been performing better than comparable countries in South Asia and beyond.

However, Bangladesh also anguishes for its contrastingly poor performance in

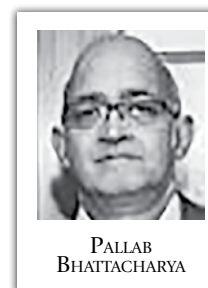
public contracting, distorts competitive business and investment environment, and erodes trust in government and politics. It increases poverty and income disparity, too. It is a multi-trillion-dollar global scandal that includes illicit transfers of corrupt money, mainly from the developing countries like ours to the developed world. Credible estimates suggest annual illicit transfers from Bangladesh at a rate of USD 10 to 12 billion.

Bangladesh's performance in growth and socioeconomic transformation could have been much better if it had effectively

the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, back in 1975 in a speech on Independence Day, as follows:

"In 1971, I called upon you to create fortresses in every household against Pakistani rulers ... the number one priority today is to root out corruption ... I will enforce the laws, I will not spare anybody ... I need your help ... it has to be a people's movement ... it has to be a movement to socially boycott the bribe-takers and the corrupt. ... Who can do it? Students can do it, the youth can, intellectuals can, the people can ... each household should be turned into a

India-Russia ties in a changing world



AS Russian President Vladimir Putin wrapped up his six-hour visit to New Delhi on December 6, most commentaries on India-Russia relations invariably termed it as the continuation of

decades of romance that first blossomed in the Cold War era—a global geopolitical scenario that is very different from what it is today.

Few have noted the important coincidence that Putin's visit took place on the day India and Bangladesh celebrated "Maitri Divas" at a function held in New Delhi, addressed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, albeit through a recorded video message. After all, it is the Liberation War of 1971, which led to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation, that added a new depth in strategic ties between India and the then Soviet Union. During that time, the warming of ties between the US and China under the stewardship of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Pakistan's Operation Searchlight in then East Pakistan, and the grave security challenge posed by the Washington-Beijing tie-up pushed India and the Soviet Union to sign the landmark 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, which envisaged each other's help in defending their territorial integrity.

The international scenario has, of course, changed since 1971. But one thing that has remained constant between then and now is the flux in that scenario. No wonder that India's ruling establishment, irrespective of their ideological moorings, has not given up any opportunity to gush about how India-Russia ties have been tested through vicissitudes and changing times. The Cold War is long gone. Today, India has moved much closer to the US,

and Russia and China have grown closer in the face of Russia's frayed relations with the US and Europe. But what has not changed is the sustained India-Russia engagement at the summit level—the meeting between Putin and Modi in Delhi on December 6 was the 21st top-level interaction, possibly unprecedented for any two countries.

Three major takeaways from the Putin-Modi summit are in defence and trade.

India already has such military logistics support agreements with a number of countries, including the US. To take defence and diplomatic ties forward, India and Russia have for the first time institutionalised meetings between their defence and foreign ministers, who held their first in-person and delegation-level talks under that format. India and the US already have the same institutional arrangement.

to new areas for long-term cooperation to achieve this. By contrast, India's trade with the US and China are close to USD 100 billion, and Russia's trade with China is pegged at slightly over the same amount. But a robust trade is no guarantee for a burgeoning relationship in other areas. High stakes in trade do not always dampen political and military tensions—India-China, US-China and Japan-China are examples of that.

It is a sign of maturity on the parts of India and Russia that they have not allowed the ties between New Delhi and Washington, and Beijing and Moscow, to come in the way of boosting and diversifying their own bilateral relations. For instance, India has gone ahead with procuring the S-400 Triumf air missile defence system from Russia despite the threats of sanctions from the US. Secondly, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, during the bilateral meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu on December 6, raised upfront the issue of China's combativeness on the unresolved border along the Himalayas. True, Rajnath did not name any names, but his reference to the military tensions in India's northern border with China left little doubt as to whom he had in mind. More importantly, Rajnath used this tension to seek greater military cooperation with Russia considering the "real, immediate and legitimate defence challenges" posed by China, and expressed the hope that Moscow will remain a major partner for New Delhi in these "changing circumstances."

India and Russia are also not entirely on the same page as far as the security scenario in Asia-Pacific—which China considers to be its backyard—is concerned. As both India and Russia seek new allies, the flames of their long-standing ties continue to burn brighter.

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of their meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, India on December 6, 2021.

The two countries entered into a 10 year pact on military-technical cooperation, which includes a deal for manufacturing AK203 assault rifles in a factory in India's Uttar Pradesh state. Contrary to expectations, however, the two countries failed to ink an agreement on logistical support for each other's military because, as Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said, there were a "few

On trade, the two sides acknowledged that this front has been somewhat lagging, as the volume of bilateral trade is not commensurate with the depth of the strategic partnership between India and Russia. They set a target of trebling the volume of trade in goods from USD 10 billion at present to USD 30 billion in the next four years, a tall order by any yardstick. The two countries looked

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