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LATE S. M. ALI

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Ancient Buddhist temple remains occupied

Why has no one attempted to return it to the original owners?

It is deeply concerning that a 200-year-old Buddhist temple in Teknaf remains occupied even after 10 years have passed since it was vandalised and encroached upon. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the temple came under attack in 2010 when a group of thugs led by two local Awami League leaders seized 11 acres of land belonging to it, before assaulting the monks there and desecrating and plundering around 18 ancient Buddha statues. Since then, the partly demolished temple and surrounding areas have been under the possession of the two accused—the current chairman of the Hnila union and also president of the local AL unit, and his brother.

Dakshin Hnila Boro Boudha Bihar is the first Buddhist temple built in Teknaf. It now lies unprotected, uncared-for, and its original owners—Buddhist monks and worshippers—dispossessed of their sacred ground. Through their acts and continued occupation, the perpetrators have set not just another example of what happens where unchecked greed meets unchecked power. It is a testament to the vulnerabilities faced by minorities in general, and also exemplifies the threat and negligence facing many historic/cultural sites in the country. In recent years, we have come across many such stories where members of a certain minority community were either driven away from their ancestral land, or faced violence by reactionary forces, or saw their sacred places razed to the ground. Often, these incidents are met with lukewarm response from the authorities, and attempts are also made to discredit the victims. It is all the more unfortunate when members of the ruling party, which has a mandate to protect all citizens irrespective of religion, are found to be involved in these heinous crimes.

We urge the authorities to take immediate steps to reclaim the Teknaf temple and its land and hand them over to their original owners. It's really troubling to see that such a brazen act of aggression has been tolerated for so long. The government must bring those responsible for the demolition and occupation of the temple to justice, and send a clear message to the communal forces that no one can get away with committing such crimes.

The watchdog on health should be up and doing

More so in the time of the pandemic

If there was a more opportune time to bring the health ministry under an exhaustive scrutiny, it was during the peak period of the pandemic. We believe that with an impending second wave of the pandemic, the health ministry's preparedness, its operational plans to deal with the second wave, which even the prime minister has cautioned the country about, should be put through the sieve in the parliamentary standing committee on health. She has alerted the other relevant agencies to take preparatory measures, and it is the ministry of health that will be at the frontline in combatting the pandemic.

Although, the shock and awe of the pandemic was overwhelming, one needs hardly recount the shoddy work of the health ministry, in spite of the World Health Organization's detailed instructions on dealing with the pandemic. And in spite of the task force set up by the administration, the lack of coordination between various ministries had blunted our response to the pandemic in many respects. We feel that the parliamentary standing committee can play an important part in not only ensuring that mistakes are corrected but also, through regular oversight, ensure that every agency is working as per standard procedures and that the task force can perform according to its terms of reference. More importantly, and it has nothing to do with the pandemic alone, it is important for the committee to wield its stick to remove the virus of corruption that has itself taken an endemic form in the ministry of health.

It is thus surprising that since March of this year, the parliamentary standing committee on health ministry has not felt it necessary to meet even once, given the mismanagement that one witnessed in the health sector during the height of the pandemic. In fact, it has held only six meetings since it was formed in January 2019. We understand that the Covid-19 pandemic prevented normal functionings of the administration, but there were IT facilities, and even the courts had functioned online.

We believe that the health of the health ministry is not in a good state. The standing committee can do a lot to cure its ailments by regular oversight and holding the persons running the ministry and its various departments to account. It should meet at least once a month as per the terms of reference.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Separate lanes for cyclists

There has been a growing popularity of cycling as a means of commuting, exercise and recreation for some time now. However, our capital wasn't cyclist-friendly until recently, when the city corporations started making separate lanes for the safety of cyclists on our roads. DNCC recently conducted a drive against illegal food stands, installations and parking on Manik Mia Avenue to make space for a bicycle lane. It is indeed laudable what the city corporations are doing in this case. Not only is cycling considered as good physical exercise; it is also a green vehicle, meaning it doesn't generate any harmful emissions that pollute the environment. I urge the authorities concerned to arrange more such separate bicycle lanes to promote cycling which will surely help in sustaining a greener environment with healthy citizens.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka

Money without a trail

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

3.65 billion in 2004 to Tk 53.67 billion during 2019. Given the constant reports of the financial shenanigans of the influence-mongers, one can't help but wonder how much of it has gone through legal channels.

And people from every sphere of the sociopolitical spectrum seem to have a hand in it: from politicians and government officials to prominent industrialists and small scale operators—all have significant involvement in one of the most widespread financial crimes that is money laundering. And of course, there are the more recognised criminals: drug traffickers, human traffickers, terrorists and the likes thereof.

In 2020 itself, two prominent money laundering scams did the rounds on the media. First, the curious case of PK Halder, whose ingenious laundering of Tk 10,200 crore to countries such as Canada and Singapore would tempt any film scriptwriter and second, the criminal activities of a lawmaker, who along with his lawmaker wife and relatives, was not only involved in money laundering, but also in the more sinister crime of human trafficking.

According to media reports, between 2016 and 2020, Tk 355 crore was transacted from around 500 bank accounts of the independent lawmaker for Laksmipur 2 Mohammad Shahid Islam Papul and his associates. Papul's wife, reserved-seat independent lawmaker Selina Islam, their daughter and close relatives were all allegedly involved in this. They made their fortunes through human trafficking.

These figures seem incredible, but they are only two of the many money laundering incidents that have taken

A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) report from earlier this year suggested that around USD 3.1 billion (Tk 26,400 crore) is laundered out of the country every year. A 2018 IMF study reported that underground economic activities in Bangladesh accounts for about 30 percent of its GDP. Most of the black money invariably, and understandably, fly abroad.

place this year. In fact, it took the authorities years to even detect them. From the more all-pervasive "hundi" to the more sophisticated trade-based mechanisms, capital flight takes place every day and in many forms. While most are deprived of their fair share of media exposure, some, such as PK Halder or MP Papul, do get their 15 minutes of fame.

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In the Basel Anti-Money Laundering (AML) Index 2020, Bangladesh fell to 38th position from 45th in 2019 among 141 countries. This means the country is more vulnerable to the crime of capital flight. And trade based capital flight remains a major headache for Bangladesh. According to the Global Financial Integrity report ranking, Bangladesh is one of the top countries facing trade-based money laundering (TBML).

Given the stats, one might easily wonder why the regulators are not able to rein in the situation. "This is the failure of the government agencies responsible for combating money laundering. However, it is difficult to tell from the outside if this is due to their incapability

relevant agencies. For instance, if the crime is related to corruption and bribery, the report is sent to the Anti-Corruption Commission. For forgery and related crimes, intel goes to the Criminal Investigation Department; for trade based money laundering, including over-invoicing, under-invoicing, tax evasion and related financial crimes, information is shared with the National Board of Revenue. For financial crimes related to drugs, the Narcotics Control Department is alerted. In case of financial crimes related to stock exchanges, intel is shared with the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission "for further investigation and taking it to prosecution", added Abu Hena Mohd Razee Hassan.

Once intelligence is shared with the agencies, it is up to them to carry forward the investigation and take subsequent action to bring the culprits to book.

With regard to combating trade-based money



or involvement in capital flight. The cases of PK Halder or Shahid Islam (Papul) are just the tip of the iceberg," suggested prominent banker, economist and former deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank Khondkar Ibrahim Khaleed.

He further added that addressing the problem of capital flight is one of the direct responsibilities of the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU). "If the agencies are not being able to do their jobs, then the government, the cabinet, should make them accountable for their failures. The existing rules are sufficient to tackle the problem of money laundering; we need the right enforcement."

BFIU, however, seems have its own limitations. "Our core task is to collect suspicious transaction reports, analyse the information and share them in intelligence format with law enforcement units so that they can investigate," said Abu Hena Mohd Razee Hassan, head of the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit.

BFIU was formed as part of compliance with recommendation 29 of the Financial Action Task Force, that says, "Countries should establish a financial intelligence unit (FIU) that serves as a national centre for the receipt and analysis of: (a) suspicious transaction reports; and (b) other information relevant to money laundering, associated predicate offences and terrorist financing, and for the dissemination of the results of that analysis. The FIU should be able to obtain additional information from reporting entities, and should have access on a timely basis to the financial, administrative and law enforcement information that it requires to undertake its functions properly."

Under the Money Laundering Prevention Act, there are 27 categories of financial crimes. Based on the nature of the crimes, BFIU sends intelligence reports to different

laundry, BFIU has issued the Guidelines for Prevention of Trade Based Money Laundering in 2019. Abu Hena Mohd Razee Hassan believes that if these guidelines are strongly implemented by all relevant authorities, it would play a major role in curbing trade-based capital flight. But BFIU can only do so much. The investigative and enforcement authorities need to be more prompt, efficient and honest in taking immediate action on the intel shared by the BFIU. Any delay in this is only going to aggravate the condition, despite the formation of new units or issuance of new guidelines.

To sum it up, Bangladesh's turbulent tussle with capital flight is not going to end anytime soon. While the country has made some progress in addressing the various forms and mechanisms of money laundering, rooting it out is a long journey ahead, and the reason is simple: the country needs more proactive coordination between intelligence units and enforcement agencies, and a strong political will to end this problem once and for all.

The enforcement agencies need to address this problem with an iron fist, and for this they would need strong backing from the government, since a lot of the money launderers flaunt financial and political muscle. If the influential money launderers—irrespective of their political affiliations—are brought to book, it will send a strong and clear message to not only the financial criminals but also the enforcement agencies. As the new year approaches, one can only hope despite the many challenges, the government and the enforcement agencies would be more active in eliminating the ailment of capital flight.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

Can Bangladesh become a knowledge economy?

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

Bangladesh has the opportunity and potential for becoming a significant knowledge-based economy by 2030 if we make the right decisions and investments going forward. Unfortunately, at the moment we are in a poor position, as was demonstrated by the publication of this year's Global Knowledge Index by UNDP, in which Bangladesh ranked 112th out of 138 countries—we were the lowest ranked in South Asia, with India ranking highest in our region. We need to make a conscious decision to enhance our rank every year over the next 10 years and make the requisite investments to achieve that as a matter of high national priority.

What steps could be taken in this regard? The first point to make is that what I am advocating for will not cost any more money, so finance is not a significant constraint. Rather, the major decision we need to collectively take as a country is to acknowledge that we are not headed in the right direction, and hence, we need a major paradigm shift to change our direction of travel. This needs to be a collective decision not only by our political leaders but by every parent and young person who wants to be better educated, in a manner befitting the new paradigm rather than business-as-usual.

We need to start with the tertiary education system, where Bangladesh now has over a hundred universities, counting both public as well as private universities.

While this is indeed a significant achievement in terms of quantity, most are very poor in terms of quality. Indeed, in global rankings of the world's top most universities, even Bangladesh's foremost University of Dhaka has been dropping down the ranking over the last few years.

Hence, we need to focus on changing the universities from being simple certificate-issuing factories to actual places of learning with an emphasis on teaching skills, and the ability to think

genuine knowledge generation, at least two or even three percent of the national budget should be allocated to supporting nationally useful research that addresses the problems and opportunities of Bangladesh. This will be a major indicator of whether we genuinely graduate out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status over the next few years. We cannot graduate as long as we remain dependent on international consultants to fly in and give us knowledge. We must generate our own knowledge or we will

labourers returning home while at the same time, the world economy and education has shifted online, so that we don't have to travel to another country to engage in providing services globally. The biggest raw material for making the most of this opportunity is young people, both girls as well as boys, of which we have many millions. However, we can only gain the benefits if we invest in educating our bright and eager youth to learn the capacity to use the internet to connect to the global economy on a major scale.

The third major step we will need to take is to enable the Bangladesh economy to link more effectively and efficiently with the global economy, and one way this could be done would be to make the Bangladesh Taka into a freely convertible currency. The time has indeed come for Bangladesh to allow this step to be planned and implemented in the next few years. It will be a huge step forward for our economy.

Finally, we will have to change the pattern of our education, including more effective vocational training as well as better quality secondary education, and indeed even primary education, for our children. None of this will require new funding, but it will require us to change the way we do things and how we incentivise teachers at all levels. If these policy steps are taken and implemented sincerely, we could indeed change the face of our country by the end of the coming decade.

I believe that our single greatest national asset are our young girls and boys, and if we are able to invest in educating them better, we can indeed transition to a significant knowledge-based economy within a decade. However, it will require a national consensus for us to make the necessary paradigm shift needed.

Dr Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University Bangladesh.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

and solve problems, rather than simply pass exams through rote memorisation of information and regurgitation.

This will need a major shift in giving incentives to our teachers, who have the ability to change if the reward system for them was changed. One way this could be done is for the university authorities to reward research and innovation from faculty, and also for the national government to provide rewards, including funding for research. For

remain dependent forever.

The second major change in investment opportunities should be in making funding from the banking sector available for young entrepreneurs, with a focus on green business opportunities. While this has indeed started, it needs to be scaled up very rapidly as part of the global economy and not only confined to the Bangladesh economy alone. The Covid-19 pandemic has already led to many thousands of Bangladeshi