

## Rackets abound in Teknaf Land Port

*It has become a concern for our national security*

PORTS are gateways through which import and export goods reach customers to help businesses run smoothly. Hence, it is of utmost importance that these entry and exit points remain functional and free of corruption of any kind. The Teknaf Land Port is one such gateway that has drawn the attention of the law enforcing authorities and the media for all the wrong reasons.

Bangladesh's trade with Myanmar is conducted through this land port but investigations reveal there is hardly any record of confiscation of drugs, especially Yaba, that enters Bangladesh in large volumes on a regular basis. There are also no reported cases of arrests for tax evasion through false declaration of goods. An investigative report on the activities in and around the land port was published in this daily on Wednesday, which threw much light on the real picture there. It has been reported that there are gangs that have been forging import-export and other relevant documents for years and helping clients to evade taxes. This important port operates with a poor scanning system and has no dependable security apparatus to check the smuggling of illegal and contraband items like drugs, etc.

Evidently, over the years, the port has turned into a safe haven for some corrupt officials, their henchmen and unscrupulous traders. In the absence of an automatic scanner machine, customs officials only check about two percent of the cargo through a random sampling method, which is not enough to detect illegal goods inside any import consignment.

It is alarming to learn that cargo boats from Myanmar enter the port without having to undergo rigorous checks by the customs authority. Myanmar nationals coming with the boats as staff members roam freely in the markets nearby. Similarly, local traders, clearing and forwarding agents and port workers also walk right into the boats unrestricted. What causes observers to wonder aloud is the fact that no Yaba consignment has so far been seized at Teknaf Land Port, which is believed to be the major route for its smuggling into Bangladesh.

It is good news that some corrupt employees have been identified by the law enforcing authorities and a ringleader named Nurul Islam, a computer operator, was arrested in September. Investigations conducted by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) revealed that the ring leader masterminded smuggling of Yaba and forging of documents for the last many years. The ringleader has allegedly made a fortune of about Tk 460 crore.

It appears to us that from both the smuggling of contraband items point of view and national security point of view, Teknaf Land Port is extremely vulnerable. It deserves to be manned and protected by a more competent and honest contingent of customs officials and security personnel.

## World must heed WHO's warning about Omicron

*Bangladesh should also prepare its healthcare system for any case surges*

As many countries around the world have been experiencing fresh surges in Covid-19 cases—propelled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant—and have brought back restrictions to curb further spread of the infections, Bangladesh should also take necessary preparations to deal with any fresh surge of infections. Reportedly, the WHO has warned the world about the threat Omicron poses, saying that it may lead to overwhelmed healthcare systems worldwide.

Even though early studies suggest that Omicron leads to milder disease, China and Germany have already brought back tough restrictions to prevent new infections caused by this variant. Reportedly, China has been following a “zero Covid” strategy—the country has already put hundreds of thousands of its people under strict lockdown despite the fact that the country is facing a much smaller outbreak compared to many European countries. While France has ordered firms to have employees work from home at least three days a week, other European nations such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark have also brought back fresh curbs despite the fact that these may put their economy in further stress.

At a time when nations around the world are working hard for economic recovery and trying to strike a balance between economically punishing restrictions and controlling the spread of the virus, such fresh surges in Covid-19 cases are truly concerning. And as countries with weaker healthcare systems are particularly vulnerable to this new threat, Bangladesh must take WHO's warning seriously.

While we must not panic about this new variant, we should definitely be well prepared to fight against it. Already seven cases of Omicron have been detected in the country; if we fail to take the precautionary measures in time, the situation might get worse in a short span of time.

Since vaccination is one of the ways to stop the virus from wreaking havoc on our population, the authorities must put all-out efforts to vaccinate as many people as possible in the shortest possible time. The government has already started giving booster shots to those most vulnerable to the virus. While we commend the initiative, we would also like to stress the need for preparing our healthcare system to handle any further surge in infections. Preparing our hospitals and health complexes with the lifesaving drugs, oxygen cylinders and other necessary equipment must be prioritised right now.

Moreover, as countries around the world are putting restrictions on travel and gatherings, authorities in Bangladesh must also consider taking such measures as part of their preparations to deal with the situation.

# Bangladesh's risky passage through the 'digital iron curtain'

DECEMBER SURPRISES



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Bangladesh from the “The Summit for Democracy,” an event initiated and hosted by the US from December 9 through 10, which welcomed 111 countries, including India, Nepal, and Pakistan from South Asia.

Second, on December 10, the US announced punitive actions against six current or former ranking officers of Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), including Benazir Ahmed, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) and the highest-ranking law enforcement officer of Bangladesh. Financial sanctions and travel bans were imposed on RAB officers by two executive departments of the US federal government, citing the violation of human rights, extra-judicial torture, and the killing of prisoners under RAB's

THE United States of America took three ominous actions related to Bangladesh in the 11-day period between December 11 and December 20.

First, the US excluded

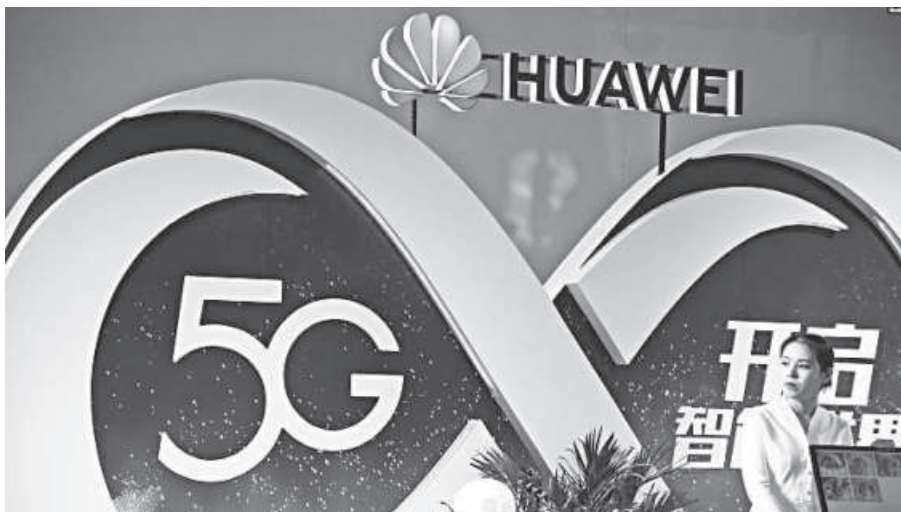
information leading to the arrests of two fugitive convicts, Major (sacked) Syed Ziaul Haque and Akram Hussain of Ansar Al-Islam Bangla Team—reportedly an offshoot of Al-Qaeda. Both convicts received death sentences by a Bangladeshi judge on February 16, 2021, in the murder case of Dr Avijit Roy, a US citizen, who was a famed writer and blogger. The murder happened six years earlier, on February 26, 2015, near the Dhaka University campus while Avijit was visiting Bangladesh. Out of the six defendants, five received the death penalty and one received a life sentence in prison.

It is clear from the RFJ's announcement that the US has reservations about Bangladesh's handling of this case. On one hand, it implicitly suggests some acceptance of the investigative and judicial processes of Bangladesh by explaining that “six individuals were convicted in a Bangladeshi court and sentenced for their role in the attack.” On the other hand, it includes a sentence asking witnesses to contact the US Department of State directly with information regarding the fugitives and anyone else involved in the attack: “If you have information about Haque, Hussain, or anyone else involved in the attack, text your information to us.”

who are resident citizens of Bangladesh, and without Bangladesh's cooperation. That cooperation may not be given enthusiastically: from public statements of Bangladeshi Foreign and Home ministers, it appears that they were not consulted and are upset about the US's unilateral announcement, issued nearly ten months after the verdict.

The obvious question arises: Is the US unhappy for some reason? Why is

*Why is Bangladesh included in a group with North Korea, Russia, and China? Bangladesh is neither a hostile military rival to the US, nor a geopolitical economic rival.*



It is the US's concern that if Huawei equipment and designs are used in the US, China can spy on everything that uses Huawei technology. PHOTO: REUTERS

custody. These same officers played a vital role in suppressing and crushing Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organisations that the US has declared as enemy combatants. Indeed, for its work, the RAB has garnered widespread accolades, including in a phone call between Antony J. Blinken, US Secretary of State, and the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, just two days after these officers were censured.

Third, on December 20, the US State Department's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) programme announced a USD 5 million reward for anyone who could provide

In other words, the US State Department is not only interested in information about the fugitives—it is interested in information about any possible others involved, and it is interested in receiving this information through its own channels, independent of any authority in Bangladesh. Although the US potentially has the jurisdictional right to prosecute this case under legal precepts like the passive personality principle, it would be very difficult—and possibly impossible—to meaningfully try this case in a US court without subpoena powers over witnesses

Bangladesh included in a group with North Korea, Russia, and China? Bangladesh is neither a hostile military rival to the US, nor a geopolitical economic rival. And while concerns about human rights violations may certainly invite harsh scrutiny, the US seems to be ignoring such concerns regarding other countries.

Perhaps we should instead look to the world's emerging “digital iron curtain” for answers. Over the last two decades, there has been intense competition between the US and China in attempts to achieve domination over the digital technology space. In this race, it appears that China, in some areas, runs ahead of the US—at least for now. But the countries are mutually dependent on one frontier: 5G, which is used for advanced telecommunications. The US is superior in computer chip manufacturing and China is ahead in 5G device design and equipment. There are also other small players in parts-making.

China has been alleged to steal intellectual property related to digital technology from Western countries and to engage in digital espionage. Meng Wanzhou—the chief financial officer of Huawei (the Chinese telecommunications giant) and the daughter of Chinese billionaire Ren Wanzhou, founder of Huawei—was arrested and detained by Canada on December 1, 2018, on a charge of fraud and conspiracy filed by the US for circumventing US sanctions against Iran. She was freed from house arrest, conditionally, on September 24, 2021.

## COP26 agreed rules on trading carbon emissions, but they're fatally flawed



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would allow countries to trade the right to emit greenhouse gases.

Carbon trading is part of how countries intend to meet their obligations for reducing emissions under the Paris Agreement. Unfortunately, the manner in which countries agreed these rules may hobble the Agreement in its goal of averting catastrophic warming.

Carbon markets were central to the design of the Paris Agreement's predecessor, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which created three different mechanisms for trading carbon. Developing countries had become accustomed to attracting investment via one called the “Clean Development Mechanism” (CDM) which allowed industrialised countries to invest in projects to reduce emissions in developing countries and count them against their own targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Many industrialised countries wanted to retain this sort of flexibility in how they met their own treaty obligations.

As a result, most governments were keen to keep carbon markets as part of the Paris Agreement. In Paris in 2015, the bare bones of mechanisms similar to those in the Kyoto Protocol were agreed, but without the details needed to put them into practice. Why then did it take six years to agree the rules which would govern these markets? This was more than the four years it took countries to do the same in the Kyoto Protocol and, in effect, they were recreating the same mechanisms. The problems in reaching an agreement this time were three-fold, and they weren't satisfactorily resolved in Glasgow.

Going backwards from Kyoto Various states, and many environmental

campaign groups, suspect that carbon markets weaken the overall effort to reduce emissions. As climate change has accelerated over the past decade these concerns have become more acute. Why trade emissions if everyone is trying to get them to zero? There is considerable evidence that carbon offset projects—such as wind farms, which emissions trading can fund—have failed to deliver a reduction in overall emissions. A 2017

their nationally determined contributions (NDCs)—national plans for reducing emissions. They may or may not have an emissions target and they vary in how they account for emissions or which sources of emissions they include in their plans.

How can a market function if there is no clear way of measuring what is being traded? And how should a country trading with another adjust its own NDC to avoid double-counting, when the design of each



Smoke billows from the chimneys of Belchatow Power Station, Europe's biggest coal-fired power plant. PHOTO: REUTERS

study led by the EU Commission found that 85 percent of projects funded by the CDM hadn't reduced emissions.

There are also fundamental design issues in the Paris Agreement that make setting up carbon markets under it much more difficult. The Kyoto Protocol expressed the obligations of industrialised states to reduce their emissions as targets. These could be translated into a fixed number of emissions allowances that provided carbon markets with a clear set of accounting rules and indicators of market demand.

No such set of rules exists in the Paris Agreement. Instead, all states submit

country's NDC varies so much? And what should countries do with all the credits created in the Kyoto Protocol's system? Should they just be rolled over to be used in the new markets? Should they be simply abandoned? Or is there some way of allowing them in but controlling their use? A lot of CDM credits in particular remain, and they could flood the new markets and undermine the integrity of the NDCs.

A cop out

In the first week of COP26, it looked like these issues would continue to dog the negotiations. India supported unrestricted use of CDM credits in the new mechanism while the Solomon Islands (representing

It is the US's concern that if Huawei equipment and designs are used in the US, China can spy on everything that uses Huawei technology. And, according to the US, if China wants, it can sabotage and devastate the entire Western world's power grid, telecommunications, internet, computers, transportation, and anything that uses Huawei's 5G technology. Huawei's business reputation has tempted the US's allies to sign contracts with Huawei. However, under the US's tremendous pressure, Huawei's 5G technology was banned by the United Kingdom, Japan, the Netherlands, and Australia. Canada, Germany, and New Zealand are considering following suit. The list of countries participating in the ban is fluid. Justin Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, expressed his concern on December 25 that China has been acting as an angel to split the Western alliance. This conflict is not going away anytime soon. It may split the world into two camps divided by a “digital iron curtain”.

On December 12, Bangladesh's TeleTalk, according to an agreement signed previously with Huawei, installed 5G infrastructure, with the hope of pushing Bangladesh to the leading edge of the digital revolution. But in the emerging Digital Cold War, Bangladesh's alignment with the Chinese tech giant may make the US unhappy.

The US and its allies are also concerned about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), led and initiated by China, that attracted support from 139 countries, including Bangladesh. The BRI includes New Silk Road and Marine Silk Road initiatives that would encompass most of the globe. Moreover, there are problems in the South China Sea and the Straits of Taiwan where contentious activities and military exercises are brewing. On the top of that, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the US, Japan, India, and Australia—dubbed as the “Great Game” in Asia and “Asian NATO” by China—together with accompanying military exercises named “Exercise Malabar,” are bones of contention for China.

The US's punitive actions against Bangladesh—these December surprises—may be related to Bangladesh's growing relationship with China, and particularly its acceptance of Huawei's 5G technology. This is a very complex geopolitical situation that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has to navigate carefully, like Odysseus sailing between Scylla and Charybdis. A thorough analysis of risks and rewards and a reimagining of Bangladesh's foreign policy are needed at this juncture.

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the Least Developed Countries group) opposed using them at all. In week two, these issues were either fudged or hastily agreed. The carbon traders were happy, as were the managers of the COP26 process—the UN secretariat and the UK government. We can now see the cost of failing to grapple with these thorny issues.

The Glasgow decisions on both Article 6.2 and 6.4 of the Paris Agreement are extraordinarily unclear compared with the equivalent ones for the Kyoto Protocol. Specialists in this field are still decoding precisely what they mean in practical terms. It's likely that states will be able to use this opacity to double-count and claim credit for the same emissions-reducing activities.

Countries are supposed to set new NDCs regularly. At the same time, countries will be negotiating individual emission trades. The possibility for a country to game its NDC—making it appear more ambitious than it really is by counting already agreed trades within them—is impossible to avoid. It's hard to see how this doesn't fundamentally weaken the ambition of countries when updating their NDCs.

Monitoring how these mechanisms work in practice and whether they have the desired effect will be important over the coming years. While heralded at the time as a breakthrough in implementing significant tracts of the Paris Agreement, the Glasgow pact on carbon markets might instead be remembered as its undoing.

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