



A health worker of Brac is checking the health condition of a Rohingya child in one of the camps for the refugees in Cox's Bazar. The non-governmental organisation, as a partner of the government, has been rendering various humanitarian services to the refugees since the crisis began.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

## Improving service quality is next challenge

Brac Executive Director Asif Saleh says in an interview with The Daily Star

PORIMOL PALMA

**Brac**, a Bangladeshi non-governmental organisation, has retained its place as the world's largest NGO for the last seven consecutive years. Founded by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in 1972, it has made significant contribution to the health, education and poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. It also works in 10 other countries. Brac Executive Director Asif Saleh shares his thoughts on the successes of the NGO and the challenges it faces as it celebrates 50 years of its founding today.

**DS:** We often see that institutions' sustainability depends on individuals. Today, Brac Founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed is no more. Still, Brac continues its journey and is expanding. What's the key to it?

**Asif Saleh:** Sir Abed has always insisted on institutionalisation, not the person Abed. He always tried to create collective leadership. Brac works a lot to strengthen its internal capacity, which includes training of human resources, strong management and an effective system.

We see these aspects of institutions in many foreign institutions, but not much here. I think Sir Abed's wisdom has been a key to building a strong institution. Brac has a management and a governing body of independent individuals to check the management.

**DS:** Brac began its activities with relief and rehabilitation of the refugees coming from India after the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Later, it also established some enterprises like Aarong and Brac Dairy. Why did Brac

do that?

**Asif Saleh:** While working with the poor people, we discovered that they need income-earning and jobs. Many people have their skills and products but don't get the right prices. So, we thought we could help them. We provided the artisans with some training and then helped market their products. That's how Aarong began. Today, 65,000 artisans are involved with Aarong.

We call them social enterprises, not meant to make profits. The earnings from these enterprises are used for expansion and development programmes.

Also, we began Brac Bank to promote small and medium enterprises, which were facing challenges in getting loans from the banking sector. Today, it is doing an excellent job. Thus, we are becoming independent. As the foreign development assistance flow is declining, we hope to become self-dependent.

**DS:** Brac has worked a lot on health, education and poverty alleviation. What is your evaluation after 50 years?

**Asif Saleh:** There was a time when we had to provide meals to the poor people in rural areas like Kurigram. Now, the situation has changed significantly both through the interventions of the government and NGOs.

You would see a huge shift in the rural areas. There are government

schools and hospitals all across the country. So, the people are getting services now. But the question is whether they are getting quality service. The challenge is now to improve the quality.

**DS:** There are some criticisms that Brac does not have a rights approach in its interventions. How do you respond to it?

**Asif Saleh:** Sir Fazle Hasan Abed always believed in promoting the rights of people, bringing out the inner potentials of people and their empowerment. They then can claim their rights themselves. He did not think that there was always a need for a confrontational revolution for realising rights.

For example, Brac implements many programmes for women empowerment through which women in Bangladesh came out to the streets to work. We educated the women and promoted their health, thus empowering them. We believe that we need to work with the government, whichever is in power. So, we are also working for people's rights – but under a different approach.

I know there are some criticisms, but I would say that not all organisations would work the same way. There are some others that would focus on rights, directly confronting the authorities. That's their way and it is fine.

**DS:** Globally, 100 million people have become new poor because of the

Covid-19 pandemic. The number of new poor is several millions in Bangladesh. Does it suggest that the organisations like Brac have got new relevance now?

**Asif Saleh:** The pandemic and climate change threats are suggesting that there will be more natural or manmade calamities in the coming years. Lots of people have lost their livelihood options. Many have returned to the villages.

Our finding is that the people who migrated to the villages are getting involved in farming or local businesses. As the economy is recovering, the people who had lost jobs or businesses are quickly returning to the previous situation with some financial support or getting their jobs back.

What is more important now is to work both at national and international levels. Both the government and NGO sectors need to have contingency plans and funds for mitigating disasters.

**DS:** What message do you have as you celebrate 50 years of Brac?

**Asif Saleh:** Brac and Bangladesh are almost synonymous. Brac wouldn't have been born in the first place if the nation of Bangladesh wouldn't have emerged. At the same time, the progress and development of Bangladesh might have been more unequal if Brac was not there with its massive interventions. And, Brac could never do such volumes of work if the government was not with us.

The people were at the centre of all activities of Brac. We took risks and we have both successes and failures. For good work to be done, we need to take risks and we will take them. We are confident and ambitious in what we do for the people.

## Myanmar junta approves sale of Telenor subsidiary

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta has approved the sale of Norwegian telecoms giant Telenor's Myanmar subsidiary to Lebanese conglomerate MI Group, both companies said on Friday, in a move activist groups warn could put sensitive customer data in the hands of the military.

The Southeast Asian nation has been in chaos since a coup last year sparked huge protests and a bloody military crackdown on dissent, sending the economy into freefall.

In July, Telenor announced that it planned to divest its lucrative subsidiary Telenor Myanmar, whose value it had written down to zero, and later cited junta demands that it install monitoring equipment on the network as a reason for leaving the country.

"We could not endure the situation in Myanmar any longer as local laws conflicted with international laws in addition to our own values," Telenor CEO Sigve Brekke told AFP.

"The day the military took over, the battle for customer security was lost. The reality is that the military is responsible for issues we have been experiencing, concerning customer data and human rights," Brekke added. After months of waiting, on Friday Telenor and MI -- which is helmed by Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati -- both said the sale had been approved by the Myanmar junta.

"MI Group has been informed that the Myanmar Investment Commission has approved Telenor Group's application for the sale of Telenor Myanmar to Investcom PTE Ltd, an MI Group affiliate," MI said in a statement.



Energy giant Saudi Aramco's gas facilities in the eastern part of the desert kingdom. Aramco's net income increased by 124 per cent to \$110.0 billion in 2021, compared to \$49.0 billion in 2020, the company said.

**Seasonal migration useful in some places Yale University economics professor says**

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Encouraging seasonal migration is a useful strategy under some conditions, but not everywhere, said a professor of economics at Yale University while delivering a public lecture at the University of Dhaka yesterday.

"We often think of poverty as a chronic, binary phenomenon—people are either poor or not—but many are seasonally deprived. Seasonal poverty is widespread in agrarian societies," said the academic, Ahmed Moshfiq Mobarak.

However, hundreds of millions of the world's poor live nominally above the poverty line but regularly go hungry for some portion of the year, he said.

The public lecture on "Innovations to Address Seasonal Poverty: A research programme in Bangladesh, Nepal and Indonesia" was organised by Economics Study

Center of the University of Dhaka. Mobarak said the seasonal poverty was particularly severe for the rural poor, who typically suffer a so-called lean season in the time leading up to harvests.

During these periods, savings from the previous harvest dwindle and the price of staple crops rise, sometimes by as much as 100 per cent in remote areas, he said.

He said seasonal poverty was one of the most pressing problems faced by the global poor. It is widespread, some 80 per cent of the world's poor rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, he said.

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## India's oil imports from US to rise

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's oil imports from the United States will rise by 11 per cent this year, officials said on Saturday, as the severely energy-deficient country looks to secure supplies from producers around the world, including heavily sanctioned Russia.

The surge in oil prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine last month threatens to fan Indian inflation, stretch public finances and hurt growth just when it was emerging from a pandemic-induced slowdown.

New Delhi faces criticism from the West for its long-standing political and security ties with Moscow, with some saying that engaging in business with Russia will help fund its war. India has urged an end to the violence in Ukraine but abstained from voting against Russia.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, meeting his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi during a visit on Saturday, said he will encourage a unified approach on Ukraine.

India buys most of its oil from the Middle East, but the United States has emerged as the fourth-biggest source and this year supplies will rise substantially, a government official briefed on the matter told Reuters.

Iraq supplies 23 per cent of India's oil, followed by Saudi Arabia at 18 per cent and the United Arab Emirates at 11 per cent. The US share of the Indian market will rise to 8 per cent this year, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with government policy.

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**Saudi Aramco's profit more than doubles**

AFP, Riyadh

Energy giant Saudi Aramco said Sunday its 2021 net profit soared by more than 120 per cent, due to higher crude prices, as global economic growth recovered from a pandemic-induced downturn.

The announcement came hours after Yemen's Houthi rebels – against whom Saudi Arabia leads a military coalition – targeted several locations, including Aramco facilities, in cross-border armed drone attacks.

Aramco, Saudi Arabia's cash cow, did not say if the attacks caused damage.

"Aramco's net income increased by 124 per cent to \$110.0 billion in 2021, compared to \$49.0 billion in 2020," it said.

Aramco achieved a net income of \$88.2 billion in 2019 before the pandemic hit global markets, resulting in huge losses for the oil and aviation sectors, among others.