

US finally gives recognition to Rohingya genocide

Now it needs to be followed up with action

AS the eighth partnership dialogue between Bangladesh and the US was coming to an end, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken termed Myanmar's crackdown against the Rohingyas as genocide during his visit to the US Holocaust Museum in Washington. We heartily welcome the US recognition—although belated—that the Myanmar Army had committed crimes against humanity by carrying out mass killings of the Rohingya Muslim population. And we hope this will give rise to the renewed US and global action towards finding a permanent solution to the crisis. The Rohingya people have suffered greatly for many years, and it is high time they were returned to their homeland with their dignity and human rights fully restored.

Meanwhile, during the dialogue, Bangladesh, while expressing concern at the early stages, has said that recent US sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) will not cloud the bilateral ties between the two countries. And discussions on trade and securities are expected to cement Bangladesh-US partnership further. During the talks, the US expressed its wish for Bangladesh to take a stronger stance against Russia's action in Ukraine. While we strongly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the loss of lives in war and, in many ways, share the same concerns as the US, we do believe there are other factors that form a big part of this crisis. Even though the US has expressed some valid points when it comes to Ukraine, and we fully support the notion that no country has the right to violate the sovereign territory of another—which Russia has done in Ukraine—we know this is not the whole story.

It is a matter of fact that, in order to maintain global stability and peace, the concerns of other global actors should also be taken into account—not just the concerns of Western powers. Unfortunately, the fact of Nato expansion has totally ignored Russia's position and its security concerns. Given the seriousness of the crisis, as well as the grave threat to the entire world considering where this confrontation could lead to, the West should have given more weight to Russia's concerns over Nato expanding right to its borders. Therefore, we again call on all parties to the conflict, who have it within their capacity to bring an end to it, to hold immediate dialogues in an attempt to find an urgent political settlement before more lives are lost.

We hope the eighth Bangladesh-US partnership dialogue has strengthened the relations between the two countries and will facilitate greater trade and cooperation between them. Moreover, following the US recognition of the genocide against the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the global community should now step up and aid Bangladesh in finding a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis.

Where will depleting groundwater leave us?

The fallout spells disaster for the country

We note with great concern that an estimated 32 cubic kilometres of groundwater is being extracted annually in Bangladesh, which is having a disastrous effect on the groundwater system of the country. As a result of overextraction, scientists warn of extreme arsenic and other heavy metal contamination, increased salinity, and groundwater depletion. The bad news is that the water level is not being recharged even after the monsoon seasons.

According to the Department of Public Health Engineering, Bangladesh requires about 2.75 million litres of water per day, 80 percent of which are extracted from the ground, and the rest is met by surface water. Bangladesh ranks seven out of 10 countries in the Asia-Pacific region that extract the most groundwater. Groundwater is being depleted not only in Dhaka and other cities, but all over the country. Researchers identified that, in 2006, the number of shallow water pumps that extract groundwater was a little over 1.18 million, but in 2019, the number went up to 1.6 million.

It is indeed alarming that because of the overextraction of groundwater, already 24 percent of land area in Bangladesh is exposed to high risks of elevated arsenic, salinity and groundwater depletion calamity. Furthermore, it is said that 4.5-17 percent of our total population are exposed to such extreme conditions, and among them nearly 8.6 million are from lower income backgrounds.

It is now common knowledge that continued depletion of groundwater poses serious threats to the water reservoirs, which increases the risk of top soil fertility loss in agricultural lands, and ultimately desertification of large areas.

The answer to solving the problem can be found in reducing the dependence on groundwater and its usage. As per the SDGs, 70 percent of our water consumption must come from surface water sources.

But, as we know, our surface water is horrendously polluted. Therefore, use of surface water will be possible only when the government's water recycling and purifying plants are ready for operation. We urge the government to make these plants operational without any further delay. We also need to devise mechanisms to harvest rainwater to reduce the dependence on groundwater.

In the end, there can be no better alternative than to actually preserve whatever surface water is available from further contamination. The use of ETPs should be made mandatory for all factories. If the laws are strictly enforced, the rivers will be pollution-free and the water can be used for industrial and agricultural purposes.

Riddled with U-turns

Development activities must be streamlined to stop wastage of public money



A CLOSER LOOK

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RECENTLY, Dhaka North Mayor Atiqul Islam made some comments with regard to traffic management in the city, some of which are not without inherent logic. For instance, he questioned the efficacy of the existing traffic management system where, although the roads belong to the city corporations, they are being managed by traffic police belonging to another government agency. He suggested that since the roads fall under the purview of the city corporations, they should have a say on how Dhaka's traffic is managed. This particular argument appears to be sound and points to the problem of a lack of coordination between various government agencies and authorities that plague not only our traffic management mechanism, but the overall governance and development of the city.

Take, for instance, the two U-loops that were built on the Airport Road in 2019 at a cost of Tk 3 crore, only to be demolished two years later to facilitate the construction of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project. Apparently, the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) knew that the U-loops would be an impediment for the BRT work, they were still constructed, narrowing down footpaths and demolishing service roads.

The two U-loops were built as a part of a Tk 24.83 crore project to build 11 U-loops across Dhaka, aiming to ease traffic congestion. Later, the project cost was revised to Tk 31.81 crore. The project director, DNCC's Khandoker Mahbub Alam, admitted that they had known the structures would have to be demolished to accommodate the BRT project, which was undertaken in 2012. He also suggested that new U-loops would be built through the pillar gaps after the construction of the BRT and flyover were finished.

This raises some specific questions: Did the public get the value of Tk 3 crore in the last two years? At the end of the day, was the project worth it?

The case of the Elevated Expressway in Chattogram is even more alarming. The Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) undertook the project in 2017, encompassing a wide area from Lalkhan Bazar to Patenga, aiming to alleviate the city's traffic congestion.

However, as almost 60 percent of the construction work has been done, significant flaws in the project planning have surfaced that would worsen the



One of the U-loops on the Airport Road in Dhaka that were recently demolished to make way for the Bus Rapid Transit. Built at the cost of Tk 3 crore, these U-loops were in use for only two years.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

traffic situation, rather than improve it. One of the major issues is the common meeting point of the Elevated Expressway, the Bangabandhu Tunnel, Outer Ring Road and the Airport Road, which, in the absence of U-loops, U-turns or service roads, would invariably result in traffic gridlocks.

Moreover, the expressway, spanning 16

sufferings, especially since they are carried out without any coordination among these agencies. A local English daily reported in 2020 how the same roads in Dhaka's Monipuripara had been excavated twice in five months—once by the DNCC and then by Dhaka Wasa, all due to the lack of coordination between the two agencies. Had the DNCC and

kilometres and involving a construction financial footprint of Tk 3,000 crore, was planned without engaging other relevant authorities. In fact, it has been suggested that the traffic department was not even consulted during the feasibility study.

These logistical challenges came to light after the Chattogram Metropolitan Police (CMP) brought the issue up in September last year. Now, the CDA and the Bangladesh Bridge Authority are working on a new blueprint with a scope for incorporating U-loops and U-turns to address the faults in the initial design. Implementation of the new blueprint would add to the existing expense of the project, with the public having to bear it.

Another classic example of gross lack of coordination among various agencies involved in development work is the repeated road excavations in Dhaka and other cities across Bangladesh. Roads are dug up every now and then due to various reasons: "improving" sewage lines, water pipelines and gas pipelines, laying internet and electric cables, etc. In Dhaka, the two city corporations, Wasa, Rajuk, Desco and the BTCL are mainly involved in these excavation activities. While the work may be taken up with good intentions, they result in aggravating further public

Dhaka Wasa planned the various works in sync, and conducted their tasks in a structured way, the residents of the area wouldn't have to suffer so much, and public money would also be saved.

There are plenty of media reports on such wastage of public resources due to a sheer lack of shared strategic planning and coordination among various authorities responsible for city development. Experts have repeatedly urged the authorities to work in tandem to streamline the work and optimise logistics. But these calls seem to fall on deaf ears, perhaps because of a lack of accountability in the system. Our policymakers need to take a hard look at these issues and resolve them at the earliest. Accountability must be embedded in the system, and so should be coordination.

The authorities need to take greater ownership of their responsibilities. They must be made to realise their obligation to prioritise and ensure public well-being. They cannot just take arbitrary calls with complete disregard to the consequences of those calls that the common people and the national economy will face. After all, all these projects are undertaken for the welfare of the people.

The path to cultural redemption



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The Nazrul Festival 2022, a two-day cultural extravaganza that was open to the public, has recently concluded.

The event was headlined by the who's who of artistes from Bangladesh and West Bengal, including Khairul Anam Shakil, Srikranta Acharya, Ferdous Ara, Yasmin Mushtari, Sreeradha Bandyopadhyay and Jayati Chakraborty. However, what provided the event genuine heft was an astonishing number of artistes culled from all over Bangladesh—all told, well over 50 more artistes performed.

Events like this add an indispensable fillip towards nurturing a broader awareness of our language and culture, particularly for our urban younger generations.

Five decades after independence, we face a crossroads. Our language and culture face new headwinds as English threatens to swallow the whole world in this brave, new globalised world.

In Bangladesh, for all our protestations of love of the mother tongue come each February, there is no gainsaying the fact that English has become the de facto lingua franca for the elite. It is beyond the scope of this article to dwell on the underlying causes, but I will mention a personal anecdotal experience that really brought this home to me.

Over the years during my annual travels to the old country, one of the charms was hanging out with my nephews. A few years ago, they were all schoolboys, and I noted with alarm that while they spoke Bangla well enough, they were increasingly detached from our cultural tradition.

The busybody mama that I am, decided to sit them down with a reading from the delightful short stories of Satyajit Ray, a bedtime staple in my childhood that gave me countless hours of joy. What better way to kindle a love of language and culture, I thought, than introducing them to the wondrously rich treasury of Bangla literature?

Suffice it to say, for my nephews the experience was about as pleasurable as a root canal. I came to the ironic realisation that today, young Bengali kids in upper-crust homes in Dhaka (and, I daresay, Kolkata) are more likely to discover the charms of Ray's unforgettable sleuth Feluda in English translations, rather than in its original Bangla form. This telling vignette epitomises the formidable challenge of nurturing Bangla language and culture for the next generation in the metropolis.

I think wistfully about a different time. Half a century ago, we were still East Pakistan, and the ruling Pakistan government and its Bengali quislings looked askance at our love of Bengali culture. It considered the inclusive humane Bengali cultural tradition an existential threat.

In those days, organisations like Udichi and Chhayanaup stepped up to the plate. This is a unique cultural tradition—I am hard pressed to think of any equivalent effort in South Asia—where activists, out of a passionate love of culture and language, launched and sustained extensive endeavours to ensure that our culture endured.

Over the decades, Udichi cultural activists nurtured the performing arts across the length and breadth of the country, while Chhayanaup, a school for Bangla music, has trained—and most importantly, instilled a passion in—generations of youngsters in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, classical music and much more.

It's heartening to note that this tradition continues. In the recent past,

the Bengal Foundation created a track record of cultural philanthropy in an astonishingly diverse variety of fields, running the gamut from print, CD, art to performing arts. Thanks to the foundation, for instance, the exquisite kirtans of Nilufar Yasmin, instead of being lost forever, are saved for posterity in pristine, state-of-the-art recordings. The foundation's all-night classical music concerts, headlined by the leading lights of South Asia and thronged by tens of thousands of attendees, are a cultural landmark in Bangladesh.

As we brainstorm to develop ways to mitigate the apparent cultural apathy of the metropolitan elite, it is this rich cultural tradition, of which the Nazrul Festival 2022 is a distinguished addition, that can prove an effective corrective.

At the Nazrul Festival, while top performers from Dhaka and Kolkata provided the ultimate imprimatur, what moved me deeply was the artistes from all over Bangladesh. Youthful, talented, dedicated to their craft, they were living proof of how deep and extensive the roots are of Nazrul's songs—and by extension, the Bengali culture. I almost teared up when I saw them on stage—young, eager faces from places as far flung as Cumilla, Chattogram, Bogura, Pabna, Jhenaidah, Cox's Bazar and Narail.

Then I looked at the names of the artistes—from Dhaka and Kolkata, Hindu and Muslim, all united by the love of Nazrul and his vision of a humane, inclusive, plural Bengali identity.

Over half a century ago, essayist and rhymester Annadasankar Ray lamented, "Bhul hoye gechhe bikkul/Aar shob kichhu bhag hoye gechhe, bhag hoye kichhu Nazrul" (It's all been a dreadful mistake/We've divvied up everything else, only Nazrul remains undivided).

Not only is Nazrul undivided, he still brings all lovers of Bengali culture together.

The author was the art director for Nazrul Festival 2022.