

The Daily Star

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PM's timely directive for all to be economical

Putting it in place is the challenge

WE reiterate the prime minister's call to government officials, private sector and the people in general to be economical in the face of growing global instability and crisis. However, we would emphasise her point more vigorously for government officials—despite the current global factors not being in our favour, it should be recognised that mass-scale corruption and regular wastage of funds domestically have also hindered our economy and are factors that are contributing to the sufferings of ordinary people.

The prime minister has reminded everyone to go slow on non-essential projects, and we completely agree with this. We would, in fact, go a step further and ask the government to perhaps seriously examine their usefulness before spending any resources on them for the time being. As we have repeatedly said in this column, wastage and cost manipulation need to be checked. They have become a regular phenomenon in our country, and under the current circumstances in particular, the people cannot afford them. The government should take this opportunity to strengthen the monitoring of projects and ensure transparency and accountability, which are the only cures to the corruption plaguing our nation.

While at this moment, the ruling party urgently needs to finally put into practice its pledge to have "zero tolerance for corruption," the people, too, have a big role to play. It seems that we now have a perfect storm on our hands—given the global conditions and local situation. And it is during times like this that people need to come together. Right now, what we need is for unity and common sense to prevail, and for the affluent members of society to come to the aid of lower-income groups, who are finding it increasingly difficult to afford their daily necessities.

The government, while cutting back on non-productive expenditures, corruption and mismanagement, should divert more resources to social safety net programmes for the poor and disadvantaged groups and, even more importantly, make sure they reach their intended beneficiaries. It should put more focus on strengthening the country's fundamental macroeconomic factors, as prescribed by experts. Moreover, the authorities should remain extra vigilant in regard to preserving the country's forex reserves, and stay true to the decision to stop overseas trips of government officials, employees of autonomous, state-owned and semi-government organisations, as well as public banks and financial institutions.

Open drains waiting for more victims

When will the CCC wake up and take action to cover them?

DESPITE the frequent injuries and deaths caused by open canals and drains in Chattogram city as well as demands for proper measures to avoid further casualties, these roadside canals and drains still remain unmarked or uncovered. The memory of the deaths of some children, a female university student, and some adults after falling into open drains is fresh in our minds. It hurts more when continued inaction by the authorities renders those unfortunate deaths meaningless.

The canals and drains with yawning gaps could once again spell disaster with the approaching monsoon season when they are likely to overflow, making the edges of nearby roads indistinguishable to pedestrians and commuters. As such, people and small vehicles might slip and fall into them. It was not long ago that the driver of a three-wheeler miscalculated the edge of a road and fell into a canal in the city, leading to the deaths of the driver and a passenger. It is unthinkable that such a thing can happen in what is known as the commercial capital of the country, but even that couldn't nudge the authorities into action, let alone a serious reflection on why this keeps happening.

Every time an accident takes place, a committee is formed and asked to conduct a survey to identify risky spots contributing to such accidents, but hardly ever is it followed by a proper response. According to a recent survey, there are 57 canals—measuring 161 kilometres in total—and 765 kilometres of drains in the city. A total of 5,527 risky spots, measuring up to 19 kilometres, were also identified. This is extremely disturbing for a city that remains busy round the clock. One wonders why those risky spots haven't been made safer by the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) and other competent authorities in all these years. How many more lives will be needed before they undertake measures that actually make a difference?

Reportedly, works on the risky spots have seen little progress so far, with over 70 percent of works still unfinished. No one could provide a credible answer as to why this is taking so long, or when those works will be finished. The top brass must answer for this and also take a long, hard look at why this problem has persisted through the years and at their own failures and incompetence. We urge the CCC mayor to lead this effort and ensure quick results.

Will money laundering continue to haunt us?



Golam Mortoza is the editor of The Daily Star Bangladesh.

GOLAM MORTOZA

PK Halder, the former MD of a bank and a notorious embezzler, siphoned off and laundered about Tk 10,000-11,000 crore out of Bangladesh. That's equivalent to the combined yearly budget of 51 public universities of the country, which is Tk 10,515.71 crore.

Take a moment to grasp the enormity of this reality. One man embezzled such a huge amount of money and laundered it out of Bangladesh to India, Canada and other countries. He didn't do it overnight. There was no way for him to use the banking channel. How did he manage this extraordinary feat, then?

The money was siphoned off to a place where no one asks about your source of wealth. Dubai is such a place where illegally transferred money can be kept in banks, legally. Many Bangladeshi businessmen and politicians have bought houses and set up businesses there. Some of them are now permanent residents. They can move in and out of Dubai to any destination as they wish. I met a couple of such people in Bangkok about three years ago. They told me they could not return to Bangladesh due to political reasons, and were running their own business in Dubai. One of them regularly visited Thailand for medical treatment. The other said that although he was settled in Dubai now, he spent most of his time in London. He, too, was in Bangkok for treatment. It's not that these two particular individuals were loan defaulters or embezzlers. But they did illegally launder money from Bangladesh. As far as I know, they also bought houses in Canada and London. However, they transferred the money from Dubai through legal channels.

It is quite easy to transfer money from Dubai to other countries. This process is popular among Bangladeshis who engage in loan defaulting or embezzlement. The same can be said for India, too. However, if the amount is too big, it's impossible to keep it in an Indian bank. PK Halder managed to smuggle a large part of his illegally amassed wealth to India. Did he take the money directly to India, or did he channel it through a third country's banking system? These questions must be looked into urgently.

If the government is sincere about this issue, PK Halder can be easily brought back to Bangladesh from India, where he was arrested a few days ago. It's not difficult to find out how he embezzled and laundered the money. But the question is: Will the government walk that path? Are there any roadblocks ahead?

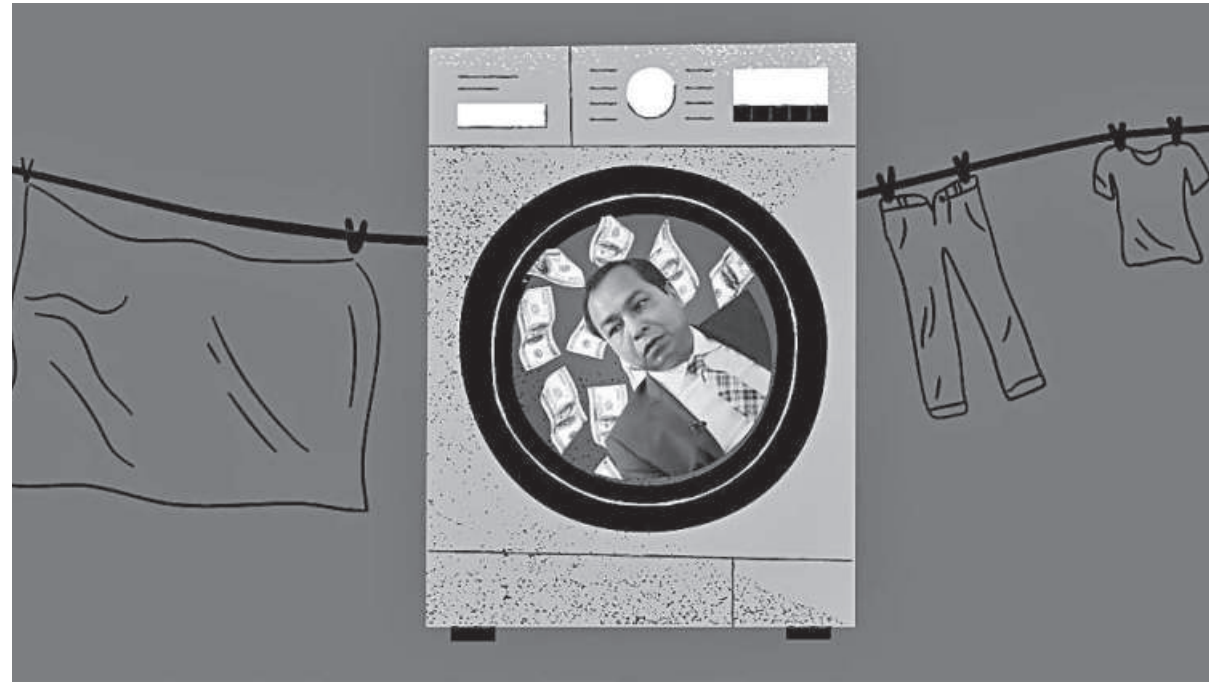
Generally speaking, the government should not have any problem with moving

ahead with the investigation. But if one looks closely, there may be one major roadblock. PK Halder embezzled and laundered money over a long period of time, from several banks and financial institutions. It was Bangladesh Bank's responsibility to detect what he was doing, and to prevent this from happening. It is speculated that the high-ups in the

money." He also asked the opposition to provide a list of money launderers.

There is clearly a disconnect between these vital ministries and between what we think should happen and the reality.

Ruling party lawmaker from Natore Shafiqul Islam Shimul bought a house in Scarborough, Canada under his wife Sultana Jannati's name, spending 1.46



▲ VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

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Bangladesh Bank knew about it, but did nothing to stop PK Halder. They allegedly even helped him. Two such individuals are former Deputy Governor SK Sur and former Executive Director Shah Alam. Allegedly, they aided many other embezzlers along with PK Halder in exchange for a share of the bounty. They were ousted from their positions and questioned by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), but it is still unclear as to how the government plans to deal with them.

Questioning the government's position regarding embezzlers and launderers is nothing new. However, in 2020, a message from the foreign minister gave us hope for a change.

"You, the media men, often write about Begum Para in Canada... that many Bangladeshis have purchased luxurious houses there. Unofficially, we have collected information. This is not verified. An expatriate has given us some information about this issue. We were shocked. We thought that it might be politicians who purchased these houses. But we have information that most of these houses have been purchased by government officials," the foreign minister told *The Daily Star* in November 2020.

No information about any ongoing investigation in this regard has been revealed since then. A few days after the foreign minister's comment, the finance minister said during a parliamentary session, "I don't know who launders

million Canadian dollars. A report revealed this specific piece of information, yet no relevant government bodies ran any investigation. Two brothers from Faridpur, both Awami League leaders, were arrested for laundering at least Tk 2,000 crore.

Another Bangladeshi lawmaker from Lakshimpur, Mohammad Shahid Islam alias Papul, is already serving in a jail in Kuwait for human trafficking and money laundering. A Bangladeshi businessman procured a number of five-star hotels in Singapore, which the country's media reported. The ill-famed Sikder group bought properties in Thailand and a few other countries and ran business as well.

These are just a few examples of the vast amount of money that is laundered out of Bangladesh every year. Apart from this, traders launder at least Tk 70,000 crore every year through import-export price manipulation. The Washington-based think tank Global Financial Integrity (GFI) has reported on this phenomenon several times. The government is yet to take their findings under consideration.

PK Halder's arrest in India has brought the issue of money laundering to the fore once again. Another new topic may emerge in a few days, burying this issue again.

Does that mean our fate is sealed, and our money will continue to be embezzled and laundered?

(The article was translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishiaque Khan.)

Europe's colonial history and double standard



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SAYEED AHMED

COMMEMORATING Europe Day, European mission heads in Bangladesh jointly penned an opinion piece published by *The Daily Star* on May 9. It emphasised European Union's (EU) solidarity with Ukraine and reiterated continuation of humanitarian support for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. On reading it, two questions crossed my mind: 1) Could the EU prevent Ukraine war from happening; and 2) Is the EU sincere in its commitment to human rights of the Rohingya? To elaborate on my point, let us first look at Europe's colonial history.

Have you ever wondered why the African state boundaries are often straight lines? The answer is, because they were drawn at will by a group of dealmakers, predecessors of today's European leaders, with a ruler and a pencil. In the winter of 1884-85, they spent 104 days in Berlin over a five-metre long African map to tear the continent apart among themselves. Unsurprisingly, no Africans were allowed there.

The Berlin Conference was convened by Bismarck, Chancellor of the German Empire, on November 15, to divide Africa according to "international law." The colonial powers drew arbitrary territorial boundaries on the map, utterly disregarding the cultural and linguistic lines of the Indigenous population. Such boundaries cut through tribal societies and lumped fragmented and disparate tribes into newly formed colonies. Oxford Professor Terence Ranger noted: "Before colonialism, Africa was characterised by

pluralism, flexibility, multiple identities." But with the forced imposition of the new boundaries, laws, and systems by the colonial powers, all that was gone, creating a fertile ground for perpetual conflicts.

There are tons of documents recording the torture, massacre, looting, exploitation, enslavement, and devastation that followed. The Berlin Conference allocated a part of the Congo Basin to Belgium's King Leopold II as his personal kingdom. Under his rule, over half of its population died. A century on, the same Belgium's capital, Brussels, is the home of the EU that promotes human rights, democracy, and international order. Few leaders from present Europe will take responsibility for the atrocities of their colonial past. Even as the colonies are now independent, Africans fight more civil wars than interstate conflicts that not only kill and maim people but also keep millions trapped in endemic poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy. The ongoing civil wars benefit business too. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), African countries are a good market for French arms, Algeria being among the top.

But France has refused to even acknowledge the atrocities it carried out in Algeria. Macron has ruled out issuing an official apology for abuses there. The Belgian king, however, made history in June 2020 by expressing regret for the country's atrocities in Congo, but it stopped short of an apology. In July last year, Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema apologised for the city's role in the African slave trade. However, the Dutch Prime Minister refused to acknowledge its unsavoury past. In September 2001, the EU moved to apologise to African countries for the slave trade. But Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal rejected it. In summary, Europe is at best divided on the question of confronting its dark colonial history, prompting one

to question its sincerity towards human rights and international order.

As for Ukraine war, can the EU really deny its role in the series of events that led to it? The Soviet Union fell in 1991. The EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) granted memberships to most Eastern European nations. These two organisations worked in close coordination and surrounded Russia's western borders, practically bringing the war to Moscow's doors. Notwithstanding Putin's desire to restore Russia's glory days, we cannot ignore Nato's and EU's irresponsible actions. Let's not forget, a similar treatment of Germany after the First World War led to the Second.

On the EU's commitment to human rights, let us look at the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. The EU continued trading with Myanmar's military junta despite its continued atrocities against the Rohingya population. Italian University of Trento academics Arlo Poletti and Daniela Sicurelli elaborated on this point in a January 2022 paper titled "The Political Economy of the EU Approach to the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar." In response to the Rohingya crisis in 2018, the EU continued its trade preference to Myanmar, knowing well that it will benefit Myanmar army and assist it in continuing the genocidal activities against the Rohingya.

I will end by quoting a piece published in *Phileleftheros*, a Cypriot daily, "It is very likely that Ukraine would have avoided a Russian invasion and the world a new cold war and the threat of a nuclear holocaust if Europe had pursued its own policy instead of serving American hegemony. Europe had the opportunity to integrate Russia into a European security system, which would have also promoted the development of democratic institutions in that country, but it failed to do so... Europe opted for a solution that is already proving disastrous for its own interests." You can do better, Europe.

Have you ever wondered why the African state boundaries are often straight lines? The answer is, because they were drawn at will by a group of dealmakers, predecessors of today's European leaders, with a ruler and a pencil.