

476 women raped in the last six months

What has the state done to prevent violence against women and girls?

WORDS are not enough to express how appalled we are by the increasing incidents of violence against women and girls across Bangladesh. According to a new report by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), at least 476 women have been raped in the country in the first six months of 2022. Among them, 24 were killed after rape, and six died by suicide.

Our women and girls have suffered many other forms of violence as well during this period of time. Reportedly, a total of 228 women were victims of domestic violence between January and June this year. Of them, 140 were killed and 42 died by suicide. ASK found that dowry was one of the major reasons behind domestic violence, and the number of dowry-related deaths and suicides are extremely concerning. These numbers are truly horrifying, but we shudder to think what the real picture could be as these numbers were collected from newspaper reports only.

These revelations point to the fact that all the efforts made by human rights groups, legal aid organisations, and the media to combat violence against women and children in Bangladesh have hardly yielded any results. And how will they, if the state is not willing to take responsibility to ensure the safety of half of its population?

In the cases of rape, it is still the survivors who have to suffer from social stigma, while the perpetrators often roam around freely, further intimidating the victims and their families. When it comes to the legal side of it, there are a number of loopholes that discourage survivors from filing rape cases and pursuing justice. The archaic definition of rape in our law is one of the biggest examples of this. Although the controversial “two-finger test” was finally prohibited by the High Court in 2018, a more extensive reform is still needed so that the law can do justice to rape survivors.

Therefore, if we can’t change our mindset towards the victims of such a heinous crime, bring the necessary reforms to our existing laws, sensitise the law enforcement officials and the society at large about the issue, and break the existing culture of impunity that the rapists enjoy, things will not change for our women and girls, and we might continue to witness such high number of rape cases in the coming years.

Eid Mubarak to you and yours

May the essence of sacrifice, both spiritually and materially, embrace us all

THIS year, we celebrate Eid-ul-Azha amid a number of crises. Thousands of people in Sunamganj, Sylhet, and other parts of Bangladesh have only recently lost all their belongings to one of the most devastating floods seen in a hundred years. The world is experiencing one of the scariest inflationary trends in recent times, which has also spilled over to our country. People all across Bangladesh are struggling to afford even the most basic necessities, while it seems that another wave of the Covid pandemic has begun to rear its head. It is in times like this that the deeper message of Eid-ul-Azha becomes even more important.

Let us all remember that this Eid is really about sacrificing in the divine way. And what can be more divine than to use some of our material wealth to help out our fellow man and woman? There is no shortage of people around us right now who need help. It is our religious and moral obligation to extend a helping hand to them, and to ensure that they too can have somewhat of a joyous Eid.

If sacrifice is what this festival is all about, then the people in distress should be the prime beneficiaries of what we do on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha. This Eid, let us resolve to break away from the temptation to show off our worldly riches, and focus on sharing some of our blessings with the less fortunate. In keeping with the true spirit of Eid, we hope that government and non-government organisations will also come forward with various initiatives that can alleviate some of the sufferings of the people who have been hit badly by the floods and ongoing inflation.

We would also like to remind everyone how important it is to maintain proper hygiene during Eid-related ceremonies and distributions. The government must ensure that the city corporations and other local administrations diligently carry out their duties, so that garbage and other waste material don't pile up on our roads and other public places. Finally, we hope that Eid travellers have a safe journey home and back, properly following all the health guidelines to prevent another sizeable outbreak of Covid post-Eid.

We wish our readers and patrons a happy and safe Eid. Eid Mubarak!

A sobering call for austerity



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IN a rare public call, our prime minister has asked us all to maintain austerity to cope with the economic fallout caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. As a statesperson, she reminded us of the consequences of the war that we are facing in the developing world. The sanctions on Russia, following its invasion of Ukraine, have disrupted our energy supply chain, crippling our electricity production, forcing us to return to the nightmare of load-shedding that was a recurrent feature 20 years ago. The domino effects of the economic sanctions on Russia are causing a humanitarian crisis throughout the world via inflation and a spike in food prices.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made an additional call to utilise every plot of available land to grow food, so that we can be self-reliant for food. The idea is simple: We need to reduce food imports to save foreign currency. She also, probably for the first time, admitted that “the burden” of 1.1 million Rohingya refugees is a bit too much at a time when we are all suffering, and the world should do something for their repatriation. The message is clear: We cannot afford to be generous when the world is not ready to reciprocate. The government knows that, now that the Western world is focused on the influx of “blue-eyed,” “light-skinned” refugees from Ukraine, little attention will be paid to the forgotten people forcibly displaced from Rakhine. The mineral-rich, strategically located Myanmar’s weapon-savvy junta can flout democracy and persecute its own people to make refugees out of them, and still remain a darling of the West. Such is realpolitik.

This makes me think of an African proverb: “When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” The prime minister’s words are sobering. Already, there have been office orders to reduce electricity production to save fuel for power generation. Rationing of electricity has been planned, and special decorative lights for social events at community centres, shops, offices, and houses have been banned to save electricity. Load-shedding is back with a vengeance. Earlier, we heard of a curb on unnecessary foreign travel by government officials and postponement of some less important development projects. The drive included the devaluation of our local currency. Now, there are indications that all types of subsidies,



VISUAL:
SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Did we focus too much on a quick fix while ignoring a wide range of energy production sources? How effective will our solution of local austerity be if we don't address the issue from a global perspective?

such as for fuel, water and electricity, will be slashed – a signature World Bank/IMF prescription.

So, what went wrong? Our economy was going strong even during the pandemic. We had some extravagant events even when the world was reeling from the ills of the coronavirus. Our hard-working remittance earners continued to send money to aid their

Europe does in an afternoon.”

Unfortunately, we don’t have the strength to voice our needs. While we critiqued the sanction, we couldn’t say that we would buy the cheapest raw material for our energy production. Instead, we are ruminating paying USD 41 per unit of LNG, which was USD 4 prior to Covid. The bulk of our energy production has relied on imported LNG, which has

relatives at home. Our industrious workers defied the threats of the pandemic to meet export deadlines to keep the economy alive. And we demonstrated extreme resilience to adapt to a digital reality over the last two years.

Then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine; nobody expected it to last this long. Everyone started to feel the pinch. Most of the countries were upfront in their responses. Some increased their military budget, some compromised their climate action plans to ensure the immediate supply of fossil fuel, some took economic measures to protect their vulnerable groups, and some pursued austerity.

The double standard of the West became apparent as European countries continued to import Russian gas notwithstanding the sanctions. Political analysts feel that these countries undermined the effectiveness of sanctions by refilling Russia’s depleted foreign currency reserves. When, at a US-India ministry-level meeting, the Indian foreign minister was asked to stop importing Russian oil, he categorically said, “If you’re looking at energy purchases from Russia, I’d suggest your attention be focused on Europe. We do buy some energy, which is necessary for our energy security. But I suspect, looking at figures, our total purchases for the month would be less than what

suddenly intensified the crisis. What happened to our gas, coal, hydro, and solar projects? Did we focus too much on a quick fix while ignoring a wide range of energy production sources? Is there any follow-up on the benefits of the solar panels that we are all obligated to install?

How effective will our solution of local austerity be if we don’t address the issue from a global perspective? The World Bank predicts long-term damage to global growth due to this ongoing crisis. It calculates global growth to slump from 5.7 percent in 2021 to 2.9 percent in 2022. “As a result of the damage from the pandemic and the war, the level of per capita income in developing economies this year will be nearly five percent below its pre-pandemic trend,” it says.

Our prime minister’s message is a wake-up call to the forthcoming recession. While austerity is one tool of arresting the economic downside, we also need programmes for robust fiscal activism. Given the devaluation of currency, there is no political or public mood for savings. It will be difficult to inculcate a desire for austerity. The challenge, then, is to dare to think big, act big: Earn the confidence of the big economic blocs, encourage trade and investment. Give social security to the vulnerable groups. It’s time to have a new dream, fulfil it, and return to the world stage.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Are the BRICS breaking up?



Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general, is an MP for Indian National Congress

SHASHI THAROOR

THE recent virtual BRICS summit, which brought together the heads of state and government of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, was interesting as much for what did not happen as for what did. The two-day gathering was marked by some constructive discussions, but also platitudes and pabulum, and concluded with a grandly titled but thoroughly anodyne “Beijing Declaration.”

Few doubt the huge potential of the BRICS, which comprises the world’s two most populous countries (China and India), a former superpower (Russia), and two of the biggest economies in Latin America and Africa. But the grouping’s record since the first annual BRIC meeting in 2009 (South Africa joined the bloc the following year) has mostly been a story of lofty rhetoric and chronic underachievement.

The Beijing Declaration states that the BRICS High-Level Dialogue is an opportunity to deepen cooperation in the fight against Covid-19, digital transformation, supply chain resilience and stability, and low carbon development. All these goals are being pursued in a variety of multilateral forums.

More hypocritically, the declaration condemned terrorism and called for the finalisation and adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism within the United Nations framework. This rang rather hollow, since the summit took place just days after China blocked a joint proposal by India and the US to designate the

The common concerns of the four (later five) emerging markets about the direction of global development and the power of the Western-dominated Bretton Woods institutions meant that the group’s agenda was political as well.

Pakistan-based terrorist Abdul Rehman Makki as an international terrorist under the provisions of the UN Sanctions Committee.

This was not the first time that China stymied proposals for the Sanctions Committee to list known Pakistan-based terrorists. It has repeatedly blocked efforts to designate as international terrorists Masood Azhar, chief of the UN-proscribed terrorist entity Jaish-e-Mohammed, and others associated with the equally murderous Lashkar-e-Taiba. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pointedly stated at the BRICS summit that the group’s members should understand each other’s security concerns and provide mutual support in the designation of terrorists, adding that this sensitive issue should not be “politicised.”

It was against this background that China, the summit chair, floated a proposal to enlarge the group by accepting new members, and subsequent reports claimed that Argentina and Iran had applied to join. But the matter was not officially discussed at the meeting and featured only tentatively in the closing declaration.

Underlying the enlargement issue are two questions that go to the heart of the BRICS grouping. First, is it a largely economic organisation or a geopolitical one? Second, if the BRICS is primarily a geopolitical bloc, will it become the principal vehicle for the emergence of a global axis led by China and Russia – a goal that China appears to support and that the proposed enlargement, and the putative candidates, seem intended to serve? In that case, what is India doing in it?

As to the first question, the BRIC acronym was initially impelled by a vision of economic cooperation. The four (later five) emerging markets’ shared and compatible perspectives on issues of global governance reform certainly provided a *raison d’être*.

But their common concerns about the direction of global development and

the power of the Western-dominated Bretton Woods institutions meant that the group’s agenda was political as well. BRICS seemed to be emerging as the premier platform of the Global South, articulating developing countries’ dissent from the so-called Washington Consensus – a tendency underscored by the addition of South Africa, the only African economy in the G20.

In recent years, however, the global environment has changed dramatically. A backlash against globalisation and a US-China trade war, as well as heightened suspicions among US policymakers of China’s geopolitical intentions, have been compounded by military hostilities between China and India.

As a result, BRICS appears to be undergoing an identity crisis. Indian foreign policy mandarins initially saw the group as a useful platform to increase India’s international influence, in keeping with its traditional role as a leader of the developing world. But India is plainly uneasy about efforts to turn the bloc into a geopolitical forum supporting Chinese and Russian interests – and to enlarge it to include other “like-minded” states such as Iran. (Brazil has also maintained a studied silence on Argentina’s reported membership application.)

It appears that China has not taken India fully into its confidence regarding BRICS expansion plans and the pending applications. India can scarcely be expected to welcome an enlargement of BRICS that is intended to make the bloc more China-centric. There are also the inevitable concerns about whether, given China’s patronage, Pakistan would be next in line to join.

India has always been the indispensable swing vowel in the BRICS acronym. If the bloc’s current strategic direction and possible enlargement push the country toward the exit, the grouping will become not just unpronounceable, but also unviable.

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