

Quick fixes will not help end economic crisis

Govt must listen to experts to fix long-standing problems

AMID the global economic turbulence caused largely by the war in Ukraine, Bangladesh is also going through a crisis which, economists say, is not going to go away anytime soon. This is because the country is also having to deal with homegrown wounds that have been allowed to fester, increasing its vulnerability to global economic shocks.

These include dwindling foreign exchange reserves, soaring inflation, energy crisis, weak governance in the financial sector, steadily falling remittances, increasing import payments with the highest trade deficit in five decades, and the addition of over 30 million "new poor" (due to the pandemic and continuous price hikes of essentials). Experts have also pointed out the multiple financial leakages due to mis-governance and corruption in many areas. The end result is: ordinary people, especially the poor and those with low and fixed incomes, are having to bear the brunt of the crisis.

So far, the government's crisis management policy consisted of quick fixes, which will not be enough to address the deluge of economic challenges ahead. It is, therefore, vital that it listens to the experts, who have recently offered short, midterm and long-term recommendations that can help keep the country afloat. For starters, they said, the government should immediately provide support to poor and lower-income households struggling with the soaring food prices. Borrowing from various international organisations such as Islamic Development Bank, IMF and World Bank may help to boost foreign exchange reserves.

Also, the central bank has to rigorously monitor import payments so that non-essential imports can be stopped. A more efficient, independent role of the central bank is crucial to prevent money laundering through trade under-invoicing and over-invoicing. Indulging loan defaulters through loan rescheduling can no longer be allowed. Ensuring good governance in the financial institutions is vital.

The biggest mess, however, that the government must get itself out of is the energy crisis, which is really a grave that it dug for itself. This could have been largely avoided if not for the bizarre decision to prolong the costly maintenance of quick rental plants even when they were sitting idle, depleting our foreign exchange reserves as a result. Meanwhile, despite evidence of substantial gas reserves, the government has not gone for exploration of gas; instead, it spent huge amounts of foreign exchange in importing liquefied natural gas (LNG). The government must see the error of its ways, and start exploring gas.

The ongoing austerity measures, including countrywide load shedding, may have to be continued, but these cannot continue indefinitely. Apart from making people suffer, they will also affect production and supply, thereby increasing inflationary pressures. It is, therefore, essential that the government engages with experts to find more durable solutions.

When a bike accident is not a bike accident

Bizarre turn of events shows people's vulnerability to power abuse

IT may sound like the script of a bad movie: A motorbike accident takes place, and the victim is taken to a hospital for treatment. He goes home with a broken arm in a sling. The next day, the bike owner along with others meet him to pay some money as compensation, expecting an end to the matter. But in an instant, a team of Rab members in plainclothes arrest them. And then, bizarrely, emerges a story of extortion by eight college and school students in a case statement drafted by Rab-4. There is no mention of the accident there, only charges of "beating, injuring and extorting Tk 40,500" from the victim, even though no such complaints were made by him.

A report by *The Daily Star* on this incident, which took place in Mirpur, offers details that point to abuse of power by some members of the law enforcement agency. Evidently, it got itself involved in a minor case of road accident even though no one sought its intervention. Our report says that the young boys who were implicated in the case include the 15-year-old son of one Mohon Mia, an alleged victim of enforced disappearance, who went missing in 2018.

What comes strongly against the law enforcers is the comments of the son of the victim who said that he had been taken to the Rab-4 office along with the five accused, where he wanted to file a case over reckless driving. But for some unknown reasons, Rab members didn't allow him to mention that in the statement. He even requested Rab officials not to charge the boys with physical abuse, but to no avail.

Rab, through its persistence on filing an extortion case, left itself open to accusations of overreach and power abuse. Though the Rab-4 Company Commander refuted all the allegations and said they acted properly, the whole episode shows the opposite. We believe only an independent investigation can establish the truth, which is important at a time when Rab is trying to improve its image after US sanctions imposed on it following allegations of human rights violations.

The organisation must not allow such incidents to happen as it can destroy its legacy of many achievements. It is because of such incidents – occurring in various forms across the country – that people find it hard to trust police and other law enforcement agencies. The government should ensure regular, systematic monitoring of their activities to regain public trust.

ICJ ruling takes Rohingyas one step closer to justice



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THE Gambia's case against Myanmar under the international Genocide Convention, for the alleged genocide committed against the ethnic Rohingyas is now all set to be heard and judged by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), following its rejection of Myanmar's preliminary objections on the grounds of the court's jurisdiction and the Gambia's legal standing. Besides rejecting Myanmar's objections, the ICJ also ruled that the Gambia's application filed on November 11, 2019 was admissible, thereby allowing the case to proceed on the merits. The Rohingya victims of genocide, as well as all peace-loving people who believe in the rule of law, can be certain now that we are one step closer to justice.

The ICJ decision really is a huge step towards an overdue reckoning with the Myanmar military's atrocities against the Rohingyas. It is well-known that the international justice system is a long-drawn complex process, which may take years to conclude. But at least the world court's decision to proceed on substance should worry the Myanmar's military junta that they can no longer shrug off their responsibilities for their murderous campaign against a minority ethnic group.

Myanmar's official reaction to the ICJ ruling indicates that the junta is now beginning to realise the gravity of the world court's ruling. A statement issued by the Ministry of International Cooperation and published by the military-owned news portal Myawady says, "Myanmar is disappointed that its preliminary objections were rejected, while it notes that the court has now determined the matter." It then admits, "Myanmar noted that this judgement will become not only a source of international law, but (will) also set a precedent for future cases." The statement adds, "Myanmar reaffirms its position in a declaration over the ratification of the convention and respects its obligations under the convention without any violation of them."

The ministry ends its statement with a commitment that "it will endeavour its utmost efforts to safeguard the country's sovereignty and national interest and continue to undertake appropriate steps for the country." Justifying its preliminary objections, the Myanmar government argued that the preliminary objections raised were believed to be strong as a matter of



Photographers help a Rohingya refugee to come out of the Naf River as they cross the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Palongkhali, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on November 1, 2017.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

law and a matter of fact. And then it notes Judge Xue Hanqin's dissenting opinion and votes against the court's finding that it has jurisdiction and that the application is admissible.

Myanmar raised four preliminary objections to the jurisdiction of the ICJ and the admissibility of the application. In its first preliminary objection, Myanmar argued that the court lacked jurisdiction, or alternatively that the application was inadmissible, on the grounds that the "real applicant" in the proceedings was the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). According to the second preliminary objection, the application was inadmissible because the Gambia lacked standing to bring this case. In its third preliminary objection, Myanmar asserted that the ICJ lacked jurisdiction or that the application was inadmissible since the Gambia cannot validly seize the court in light of Myanmar's reservation to Article VIII of the Genocide Convention. In its fourth preliminary objection, Myanmar pleaded that the court lacked jurisdiction, or alternatively that the application was inadmissible, because there was no

dispute between the parties under the Genocide Convention on the date of filing of the application.

The court unanimously rejected three preliminary objections, and the other one (on the Gambia's standing for bringing the case) was rejected by a 15-1 vote. The ruling on the admissibility of the Gambia's application, too, was decided by a

15-1 vote. In both these decisions, the dissenting member of the court was Justice Xue Hanqin. One other interesting thing to be noted is that both the ad hoc judges, Navanethem Pillay and Claus Kress, representing the Gambia and Myanmar, respectively, were in agreement with the majority of the court.

Earlier on January 23, 2020, following the Gambia's application, the ICJ issued provisional measures against Myanmar to prevent any genocidal acts in its territory against the Rohingyas and to protect them. It also asked Myanmar to take effective measures to prevent the destruction and ensure the preservation of evidence related to the alleged atrocities, and submit periodical reports to the court on all measures taken to give effect to this order, until a final decision on the case is rendered by the court.

The ICJ, in its latest verdict, noted that Myanmar indeed had submitted reports on the measures taken to give effect to that order on May 22, 2020, November 23, 2020, May 20, 2021, November 23, 2021, and May 23, 2022. The court also said that the Gambia,

too, had submitted comments on each of these reports. The significance of the ICJ's order on provisional measures were not only related to the prevention and protection of a vulnerable ethnic group, but the recognition of the Rohingyas as a distinct ethnic group in Myanmar.

We don't know what actions Myanmar has taken so far and how the

Gambians have evaluated them. But, according to the ICJ, Myanmar overtly maintains its obligation to the ICJ. The unfortunate fact, however, remains that there has not been any progress at all in repatriating about one million Rohingya refugees now living in Bangladesh, and the reason, according to the UNHCR, is Myanmar's failure to create an environment where safe and dignified return of the Rohingyas is possible.

The ICJ's decision to proceed on the merits to examine the Gambia's genocide allegations against Myanmar also gives us an opportunity for a diplomatic push on repatriation. The Gambia has submitted its main arguments in October 2020 within the time frame fixed by the court. So, it is expected that Myanmar will now have to submit its response soon. As Canada and the Netherlands have joined the Gambia in its pursuit for justice for the Rohingyas, we hope the legal course will gather new strength. With the legal proceedings moving forward, it is high time for us to pile up political pressure on the Myanmar military junta, too.

Dhaka has a waste management problem

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SOUTH Asians have a deep attachment to traditions – whether it is a mother making delicacies on Eid morning, or waking up to the tune of *Esho he Baishakh* playing in the neighbourhood on Pahela Baishakh. We cherish these traditions like hidden treasures. Then there are other traditions that deserve a second (or third) look. For example, Dhaka is holding on to a traditional waste management system that has changed little since its independence in 1971. This system allows indiscriminate and open dumping and burning, and disposal of waste into the air, water bodies, landfills, and even directly into agricultural land in the rural areas. Even after 50 years, such behaviour continues unabated and is treated as normal.

Modern societies are, in fact, challenged to manage unprecedented amounts of waste generated by changes in consumption patterns, abetted by uncontrolled urbanisation. Of the more than 2.01 billion tonnes of waste produced globally, roughly a third is not even managed in an environmentally safe manner. According to one study, "about 5,000 tonnes of waste is being generated in Dhaka city every day." Only half of that amount is properly collected and dumped, while the other half remains untreated.

Conversations with the general

public suggest that even when there are good intentions to recycle, the available facilities are simply inadequate. There is no provision to separate the different types of recyclables; so, even if they are separated at home, they all end up in one big pile during collection. Others pointed to a lack of incentives to recycle; rather, they pointed to the enormous effort required to recycle regularly – all to no avail. For some, it was not worth the effort.

The system of waste collection and management in Dhaka is quite disorganised and completely outdated compared to other modern cities. The traditional waste collection system is a labour-intensive process and uses few modern technical solutions. This system consists of three main collection stages: Primary collection, secondary collection, and a final journey to the landfills, all of which work in a linear fashion. At the primary stage, we see the *tokais* (child waste collectors who should be going to school instead) strolling in and scavenging from the streets, or rickshaw vans going from one building to another collecting waste. The ugly sight of the plastic sacks overfilled with rubbish is hard to ignore. This, unfortunately, is what the primary waste collection of the city looks like.

All the rubbish collected is then dumped into giant bins, which could

be placed in many more selected street corners, but that, unfortunately, is not the case. The unsorted and unseparated pile of garbage, at these secondary collection points, often remains uncollected for days.

One lucky day, these bins, filled with a concoction of waste and disease-laden microbes, are emptied into garbage-collecting trucks, which make their way through the centre of the city to the outskirts while announcing

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their presence with obnoxious odour, while spilling some of the garbage along the way. The landfill is where the garbage reaches its final destination. These landfills are playgrounds for the *tokais*, who climb the grey mountains pulsating with hidden health hazards while scavenging for recyclable treasures to sell to recycling shops at a minimal price.

Indeed, the story of Dhaka's garbage has not changed much. But what

has changed is the waste production per capita, as Dhaka's population has increased manifold with rapid urbanisation. As a result, it is no surprise that Dhaka has unfortunately become one of the world's dirtiest, polluted, and unliveable cities with garbage piling up everywhere – may it be the streets, the schools, the shops lining both sides of public thoroughfares, the parks where one goes for an evening stroll, and even areas surrounding one's home! All of this contributes to painting the picture of the city as a huge garbage bin. Is this what an aspiring middle-income country ought to look like? What does this do to the country's image?

The existing condition of the city we depict is proof enough that the traditional waste disposal system is failing at providing a clean Dhaka city. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the ultimate solution to this problem could potentially be a technical/digital intervention. The challenge is to make the existing system smarter, more efficient, and with economic returns – both direct and indirect. Smart solutions will allow the authorities to have better control over the collection and regulation of the waste, resulting in a cleaner city with happier, healthier citizens.

This op-ed, the first of a four-part series, resulted from the authors' participation in the 23rd ASEF Summer University (ASEFSU'23) interdisciplinary hackathon on "Livable Cities for a Sustainable Future" envisioned by Asian and European young professionals and students.