

UN RIGHTS CHIEF'S VISIT

Conflicting expectations and a hope for positive change



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THE recent visit to Bangladesh by UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet attracted quite a significant amount of interest among rights activists globally, as it came after her controversial trip to China in May. She went to China despite opposition from rights activists and the United States, which expressed concerns that she would not have unfettered access to the people subjected to alleged torture and intimidations. Later, on June 15, she told the Human Rights Council that she was unable to meet the detained Uighurs. Some of these activists expressed concerns that her Dhaka visit could be used by the government, who faces criticism for widespread abuses and repressive laws, in claiming that it had nothing to hide.

Prior to her Dhaka trip, nine human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), issued a joint statement on August 10, urging the UN rights chief to publicly call for an immediate end to serious human rights violations, including torture and disappearances. They claimed that if the high commissioner failed to clearly condemn these abuses and seek reform, the ruling Awami League could use her silence to legitimise its abuses and undermine activists. These groups alleged that "hundreds of Bangladeshis have been forcibly disappeared, tortured, and killed since the government led by

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina first took office in 2009."

They have also appealed to the UN High Commissioner that she should encourage the Bangladesh government to create an independent commission of inquiry to investigate all allegations of enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings and custodial deaths, and offer the support of her office to form such a commission. The joint statement said she should make clear to the government that the ongoing security force abuses would jeopardise the deployment of Bangladesh troops to UN peacekeeping operations. When the high commissioner met representatives of civil society and the victims' families, they pressed her for a UN mechanism to investigate these allegations as, according to them, our judicial system has lost its independence and become politicised.

It is well-known that about a dozen requests from special rapporteurs and experts from various UN mechanisms have been pending for years, as those visits are seen to be something akin to fact-finding missions. So, it was a curious development that the government was eager to host the outgoing High Commissioner Bachelet. Why did the

council. Many have misconceptions and complaints about contemporary issues such as disappearances, extrajudicial killings and digital security laws. All the complaints about these things reported in the media are not correct. As a result, we hope that the high commissioner will understand the situation better by talking to the law minister, the foreign minister and the home minister. If there is a violation of the rules in these matters, what measures we have taken will be presented to her. From this point of view, we see this visit as an opportunity to explain our position" (August 14, 2022).

Expectations on the part of the government and the rights groups could not have been more contrasting. And the statement made by Bachelet at the end of the visit – perhaps the only public one – now makes clear whether or how much of those conflicting expectations have been met. Bachelet's statement commends the government's achievements in socioeconomic development, poverty eradication, increasing access to education and healthcare, reducing women's and children's mortality, and increasing access to food, water and sanitation. But not once did the nine-page statement mention Bangladesh as a

future of UN peacekeeping missions.

Michelle Bachelet's disclosure that her office has put forward recommendations to the government for essential amendments to the Digital Security Act (DSA) to remove barriers on freedom of expression and ensure international human rights standards and obligations means that the government needs to act soon. She also reminded the government of the importance of working closely with civil society and the UN to ensure that the proposed data protection law and the OTT (over-the-top) platform regulations meet international human rights standards.

Prior to her visit, BNP and the families of missing persons demanded a UN investigation following the release of an investigative documentary on enforced disappearances by Sweden-based news portal Netra News, titled "Secret Prisoners of Dhaka (Aynagharer Bondi)." Though some ministers' reactions suggest that the government has realised its diplomatic blunder, it could have been much worse had Bachelet agreed to the demand for initiating the OHCHR's own investigation mechanism. Continuing to be in denial may ultimately lead us to such an undesired end.

Good planning requires accurate data



AN OPEN
DIALOGUE

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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

ACCORDING to government statistics, the population of Bangladesh is now 165 million. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) just finished its Population and Housing Census Survey 2022 and announced these numbers in Dhaka on July 27. According to the report, the rate of population growth is 1.22 percent, which came down from 1.47 percent in the 2011 census.

As with any major development, there is a good side and a bad side to the latest data released by the government. On the positive side, our rapid population growth, which was a source of some concern in the past, appears to have slowed down over the last decade. This strengthens the government's claim that our per capita GDP has risen to over USD 2,500, as frequently mentioned by our political leaders. On the other hand, the numbers are lower than the ones predicted by the last UN estimate, which had projected a population of 171 million. What is the implication of this underestimation on the budgetary allocations for healthcare, education and social safety net programmes? Will this lead to cutbacks in spending in these sectors?

What this discrepancy between the official figures and the estimates provided by non-governmental sources indicates is a common phenomenon observed in many developing countries – i.e. which numbers are more accurate and reflect the real situation in a country. For example, our GDP growth rate, inflation rate, foreign exchange reserves, national debt, and energy insecurity have come under scrutiny in the last few months, and the government's numbers are being challenged openly.

I can go on and on about the contradictory stories that emerge from the statistics released by the government agencies and the more dire predictions that come out of various watchdogs. The prime minister in a recent speech indicated that Bangladesh was self-sufficient in the energy sector, and meets petrol and octane needs from its own productions. According to a news headline, the prime minister said that the country had much more petrol and octane in reserve than what's required. "It is true that Bangladesh needs to import diesel. But it doesn't import petrol and octane as the country gets these as by-products of gas extraction," she said.

The truth of the matter is that petroleum and octane are not by-products of gas. Octane is refined petroleum, and petroleum is a source of energy independent of gas. Fifty-seven percent of our total energy requirement comes from gas. The country's liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) requirements are largely met by imports.

Similarly, the data on foreign reserves has come under scrutiny in the aftermath of its decision to seek loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last month. Bangladesh became the latest South Asian nation to ask for assistance as costlier oil eats into the region's foreign stockpiles. Foreign exchange reserves in Bangladesh slipped to USD 39.79 billion as of July 13, from USD 45.33 billion a year earlier. That's enough to cover roughly four months of imports, slightly higher than the IMF's recommended three-month cover. According to various independent economists, the actual reserves may be USD 7.2 billion less than the official claims due to prior commitments, and

this has been pointed out by international financial institutions.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had in the past emphasised in no uncertain terms the need for reliable data for evidence-based policymaking. He subsequently also highlighted the "challenges faced in the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of reliable, timely, accessible and sufficiently disaggregated data" and its vital role in sound decision-making.

Unfortunately, often governments don't like it when evidence comes to light showing that official data is inaccurate or totally false. People in power also don't want the public to question the veracity of the "success stories" or news flashes touting "rapid economic growth" achieved under its watch.

As I singled out China in one of my previous commentaries on this matter, I would be remiss if I didn't also mention that the leaders of that country, which now has the world's second largest economy, have not only frowned upon any fact-based reporting on politics, civil society and sensitive historical events in the past, but have also increasingly been striving to keep negative news about the economy under wraps. Even the US government, which prides itself on promoting an open society around the globe, is no exception. Just to give you a sample of the double talk at the highest level of the US government, President Joe Biden earlier this month said that "inflation is unacceptable high, but not as bad as it looks" in the US.

Recently, stories surfaced that China had in the past been cooking data on GDP and investment growth. Its government sent a directive to journalists in China identifying six economic topics that would be "managed" by the government. The list of topics includes: i) Worse-than-expected data that could show the economy is slowing; ii) Local government debt risks; iii) The impact of the trade war with the US; iv) Signs of declining consumer confidence; v) The risks of stagflation or rising prices coupled with slowing economic growth; and vi) "Hot-button issues to show the difficulties of people's lives." I cite this list in detail to alert my perceptive readers that they need to take all public pronouncements with a grain of salt.

I will end this brief note with a quick observation on the importance of the role of independent or "third party" sources of accurate and reliable data on GDP, market conditions in a country, and the economic well-being of the masses. An economy that has no independent source of data can be compared to an aircraft flying without its airspeed sensors. The analogy was drawn by Aidan Eyakuze, the executive director of Twaweza, a not-for-profit research organisation in Tanzania, in a critique of his government's actions a few years ago to silence those who questioned official data "releases." "Without the air speed reading, the computer systems failed and the pilots, flying literally data-blind, were unable to regain control of the aircraft," he wrote, referring to an airliner that crashed.

A government that relies exclusively on its own agencies to provide the data and statistics it uses for planning and decision-making purposes is living in a fool's paradise and may drift off course, running into rough waters sooner than others, as the recent experience of Sri Lanka amply illustrates.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

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