

# The Daily Star

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## Don't make a mockery of a noble profession

### Take exemplary action against the doctors who are absent from duty

IN an overwhelming majority of union and upazila health complexes across Bangladesh, absentee doctors are an all-too familiar phenomenon. These doctors, who are on the government payroll and are obligated to serve their patients to the best of their abilities, sometimes disappear for days on end – even months – without anyone knowing about their whereabouts or when they would return to work. In other cases, doctors only attend hospitals once or twice a week, spending a majority of their time in private practices, charging exorbitant amounts to the same patients whom they would have treated for free or at heavily subsidised rates at the government healthcare facilities.

A case in point, as reported by this daily, is a doctor of a government hospital in Gopalganj, who has been absent from work since March 16, 2020. Two years later, no one knows where he is. Even though such an incident should have been reported within 60 days as per service rules, it took the authorities of the facility six months to report the incident to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). According to the DGHS, many doctors remain absent without leave yet continue to be paid by the government. It takes the healthcare facilities months to report the absentees, and another three to six months for the authorities to replace them.

There are around 25,000 physicians engaged in hospital service under the health directorate, but there is no reliable data on how many of these doctors are absentees. The DGHS, after issuing a directive to the chiefs of health facilities across the country to report doctors absent without leave earlier this year, received names of 161 doctors and launched disciplinary action against 78 of them. The monitoring wing has another list of at least 300 absentees. The real number of such absentees, however, is much higher.

In a country where government healthcare facilities are severely understaffed and resources overstretched, these “missing” doctors are doing a serious disservice to their patients and the nation at large, and making a mockery of the healthcare profession. What is most alarming is that the authorities have actually enabled this unacceptable practice by systematically failing to take prompt and adequate actions against the absentees; in fact, in many cases, they even colluded with the latter to protect them. Currently, at least 250 absentee doctors are yet to be meted out punishments, with some cases pending since 2007.

This deplorable and unethical practice cannot be allowed to wreak havoc on an already ailing healthcare system. While it is appreciable that the DGHS is taking steps to identify absentee doctors, it must take exemplary action against them to send a clear message to others that such action will no longer be tolerated. It must also review its existing policies, service rules and monitoring mechanisms to identify loopholes within the system, and engage with hospital authorities to institute discipline in their respective institutions. Medicine is supposed to be a noble profession, and it is a shame that our doctors are making fools of the people they have taken an oath to serve.

## No compensation for affected landowners?

### GCC must not make residents suffer for its city development work

WE'RE surprised to learn that the Gazipur City Corporation (GCC) has resumed work on a controversial initiative of widening streets and constructing drains and footpaths without compensating residents whose land had been forcibly taken away from them. The two related projects were stalled after mayor Mohammad Jahangir Alam, accused of various irregularities including land grabbing, was suspended in November. Several thousand residents of the city had by then lost their land and properties. The resumption of work, despite two previous High Court stay orders, means their ordeal will continue with no promise of compensation yet from the government.

Meanwhile, part of the work has already been completed in some places. Reportedly, around a 200m stretch of the Dhirashram-Chhoto Dewra road, the construction of which was earlier stalled, was completed two months ago. Besides, asphalt is being laid on a 3km stretch from Karkhana to Kaultia link road in North Salna. Work is also underway on a 2km stretch from Porabari Kata road to Colony road. This is despite affected landowners – whose buildings, shops and factories were demolished – saying they were aware of no progress in paying damages, or determining the prices of their land, or making the acquisition official. The GCC says that it is trying to move the needle on this front – through making a list of affected landowners and discussing with the higher authorities – but is unable to compensate them on its own.

This means that the government will have to intervene and manage funds if the owners are ever to get any payment. The question is, how ethical is it for the new GCC administration to resume work without fixing what led to its stalling in the first place? It indicates their skewed sense of priorities and a failure to own up to their faults. Also, are we to believe that there are no provisions for land acquisition and compensation in the Tk-2,200 crore projects meant to widen almost 800km of roads and construct drains and footpaths in Gazipur? Where did the money for that go? The GCC administration must answer these questions.

Unfortunately, this mismanagement is the hallmark of government projects in Bangladesh. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, lack of good governance is routinely undermining the efficiency of public infrastructure projects (PIPs). It manifests itself at various stages of a project – through poor feasibility studies, discrepancies in public procurement, unfair land acquisition, frequent project revisions with time and cost overruns, etc. A systemic lack of accountability has allowed these irregularities to persist without any end.

We urge the authorities to prioritise paying compensation for the forcibly occupied land of Gazipur residents, which itself is an offence. While completing the development work is important, compensating those affected should also be treated with equal importance. The point of development is lost if citizens suffer at the cost of it.

# Are you 'satisfied' with our diplomacy?



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KAMAL AHMED

THE just-concluded visit by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India has been described by officials in both the countries as a success that will further cement friendly ties between the two neighbours. However, a good number of observers in Bangladesh feel that the outcome fell short of the expectations.

According to them, the seven MOUs signed during the visit were mostly on routine cooperation. The most significant MOU signed was the one regarding the sharing of Kushiara river water, which was agreed upon at the Joint River Commission (JRC) meeting a week before.

After reading the 33-point joint statement issued following the bilateral talks and the two leaders' meeting, one conclusion that, I think, exasperated and saddened every conscious citizen was the use of the word “satisfaction,” despite failing to bring down border killings to zero. Item 10 of the joint statement says, “Noting with satisfaction that the number of deaths due to incidents along the border has significantly reduced, both sides agreed to work towards bringing the number down to zero.”

Commitment to bring down border killings to zero is not new. Rather, it is a reiteration of a bilateral agreement reached on April 26, 2018 to deploy non-lethal weapons on the borders to ensure zero deaths. It took almost seven years to agree on zero deaths since the death of 15-year-old Felani Khatun in January 2011, which caused a global outcry. In 2009, British TV outlet Channel 4 had dubbed the Bangladesh-India border as the world's deadliest border, as by then casualties in the new millennium had crossed more than 1,000. No wonder the Indian rights group MASUM (Manobadhikar Suroksha Mancha), known for monitoring the Indo-Bangla frontier, protested the joint statement last week, saying, “We protest the political intent of the governments that has been reflected through this statement, which is to conceal facts, propagate false information and non-cognisance of the sufferings of the



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

border populace.” MASUM estimates that the number of killings by the border guards at the Bangladesh-India border has drastically increased in the past decade to almost 200 per year.

Usual diplomatic practices dictate that differences of opinion between parties are either to be noted in the agreed minutes or in joint statements, or simply referred to by describing that it was “discussed” or “noted.” The same statement has such instances. For example, Item 12 in the statement says, “The Indian side requested for early signing of the interim water-sharing agreement on Feni River, taking into account the urgent irrigation requirements of the state of Tripura. The Bangladesh side took note of the Indian request.”

Another example is Item 8, where the joint statement notes, “The Bangladesh

side requested the Indian side for predictable supply of the essential food commodities from India such as rice, wheat, sugar, onion, ginger and garlic. The Indian side conveyed that Bangladesh's requests will be favourably considered based on (the) prevalent supply conditions in India, and all efforts will be made in this regard.”

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Given the fact that considerable resentment exists in Bangladesh about border killings, why did our foreign ministry not insist on retaining some mention of the fact, without just expressing “satisfaction”? Is it our foreign ministry's view that no resentment exists on our side about border killings? Does our government agree that those killed are criminals, illegal trespassers or involved in illicit trades, and deserve to be killed? Is it Bangladesh's official stance that even if someone is “suspected” of such crimes, they can just be killed without any chance of protection, especially if they are unarmed? Will no distinction be made for unarmed civilians? Is there any other country on Earth that does not protest deaths caused by the actions of another country, but expresses satisfaction instead because

as “a garrulous Momen” (September 4, 2022). Following his controversial comment, where he said, “I went to India and said Sheikh Hasina's continuation must be ensured,” another Indian newspaper *The Statesman* wrote, “Many knowledgeable thinkers also say that the remarks of the Foreign Minister tend to signal to the global community that Bangladesh's diplomatic corps is professionally below par and not capable of setting out foreign policy plans and vision.” (August 25, 2022).

Can anyone blame commentators who think our diplomatic corps is professionally below par? Or is it the amateurish political appointees who are not only damaging the image of the nation, but also making blunders like expressing satisfaction over limiting the numbers of extrajudicial killings on the border?

## China unlikely to make a rash move over Taiwan



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SAYEED AHMED

STEVE Hanke, professor of applied economics at Johns Hopkins University, makes an interesting point: no Chinese university has found a place among the world's top 20. However, in three key areas relevant to the crucial rare earth minerals, China has a strong presence.

Rare earths are those naturally occurring minerals that power everything – from mobile phones to precision-guided missiles to petroleum refining to EVs – hence driving modern economies. Hanke calls them the three Ms: 1) Mining and mineral engineering; 2) Metallurgical engineering; and 3) Materials science and engineering. Of the top 20 universities in mining and mineral engineering, almost half come from China and none from the US. On metallurgical engineering, China has a 45 percent hold and the US has 20 percent. Only in materials science and engineering does the US hold 50 percent positions, while China has 25 percent. How has this come about?

The architect of modern China, Deng Xiaoping, almost certainly had in mind the oil crisis just 29 years ago when he said in 1992, “The Middle East has oil; China has rare earths.” In 1973, oil-producing countries in the Middle East brought the world economy to its knees with their control of this crucial energy source. The Chinese leadership also knew that it must control the whole value chain to gain an effective reign in the industry and pushed for supremacy in the three Ms, bringing it to where it is today. From a nobody in rare earths in

the 1980s to holding 90 percent of the processed supply, anyone can tell what China is extremely good at – playing a long game.

Of course, America's myopic views helped. Until 1980, the US produced 99 percent of the world's rare earths as by-products of titanium, zircon and phosphate mining. The first ever rare earth patent went to the US in the 1950s, while China got its first in 1983. But now there are five national rare earth laboratories in China (against only one in the US), giving it numerous patents, the total number of which exceeded those of the US in 1997. Despite the changing scenario, Washington abolished the entire Bureau of Mines in 1996. It changed its regulations and relinquished expertise and intellectual properties, all of which aligned well with Beijing's long-term policy goals.

Taking a long view, Beijing launched its 10th five-year plan for National Economic and Social Development in 2001, aiming to utilise mineral resources and upgrade traditional industries with advanced technologies. It promoted key technologies and established universities with sizeable investments in research and development (R&D) with spectacular achievements. Today, China dominates the production of lithium, natural graphite and synthetic graphite necessary for making EV batteries.

The long game skill is perhaps ingrained in China's leadership, which it adopted for gaining the United Nations (UN) membership. In 1949, China's

nationalist government in Taiwan claimed control over the whole of China. With generous Western support, it got its UN membership. China waited patiently for more than two decades, supported the pro-independence movements in Africa during the 1950s and 60s, and secured their support for the UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, which changed the UN's

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recognition of the government of all of China being Taipei to being Beijing.

China played the same long game in Afghanistan. After centuries of fighting heavy-handedness from Britain, Russia, and the US, Kabul is now looking at Beijing as the most favoured development partner. Beijing has been patiently waiting on the sidelines for this very moment, watching as the US was getting into a costly mess. Meanwhile, it helped Kabul in building hospitals and power stations, provided medical aid, and fostered trade relations – becoming its largest trading partner, never taking its eyes off its lucrative minerals. In 2008, Beijing took one step towards extracting these minerals when the Chinese joint venture MCC

signed a 30-year deal with Kabul to mine Mes Aynak, believed to be the world's largest copper reserve. But the security situation and logistical issues forced MCC to leave in 2014. Now that the American forces have slunk away, Chinese miners have returned to a warm welcome by Kabul to revive the project.

A long game is at play over Taiwan as well. Neither the US nor China would prefer a war just now because Taiwan's semiconductor industry, essential for both, will be among the first casualties of a conflict.

Although Washington is developing its own fabrication capability by investing USD 52 billion, production will take a long lead time. Chinese plants have recently achieved a breakthrough by making 7nm semiconductors, which is still a generation behind Taiwan and South Korea's 3nm chips. However, Beijing is steadily catching up – as Apple's recent decision to buy memory chips from Hubei-based YMTC might indicate – and has far better options than a rash cross-strait invasion. Meanwhile, if Washington also becomes self-reliant on semiconductors, Taiwan's usefulness as a chip supplier might be altogether lost – although its strategic importance as the first chain of islands circling China might remain. But war is still plausible, as the 34th US president warned in 1961.

Dwight D Eisenhower said in his farewell address, “We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.” Two years later, Bob Dylan released his *Masters of War*:

“Come you masters of war  
You that build the big guns  
You that build the death planes  
You that build all the bombs

...  
Let me ask you one question  
Is your money that good?”  
Sadly, it is. The only hope is Beijing's patience.