

Can BTCL just hold off paying its dues?

It dodged payment of over Tk 2,200 crore to the exchequer

LIKE all offices run by the state or carrying its seal in some form, the Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL) is not exactly a paragon of good governance. The company, whose main offering of landline service has fallen out of favour since the advent of mobile phone, has been trying to stay afloat by providing a host of related services licensed under the telecom regulator. Yet to dodge due payments like the way it did over successive fiscal years, as recently revealed by an audit report, comes as a fresh reminder of how financial mismanagement has been plaguing the public sector.

According to the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), which analysed its books for FY 2017-18, the state coffer stands at least Tk 2,258.76 crore short thanks to the BTCL's failure to share a portion of its revenues from different services. As per its licensing terms, it is obligated to deposit the money with the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), which then deposits it with the exchequer. This tendency to skip payments has been witnessed, albeit at irregular intervals, since it was turned into a public limited company in 2008. For example, it skipped payments of Tk 628.40 crore earned from handling local phone calls, and of Tk 944.56 crore earned from handling incoming and outgoing international phone calls, from October 2008 to June 2014. It continued to skip payments later – notably in landline and international internet gateway services – despite repeated requests from the BTRC.

Clearly, the BTCL doesn't feel as bound to its regulator, or by relevant rules, as any institution handling public money should. The CAG audit team also found that the BTCL's internal control system was weak, with no responsible officer or cell for monitoring payment of dues. There was no trace of an internal audit system either. All this explains why, despite huge investment made over the years, this once-profitable company has been racking up losses since FY 2009-10. All the modernisation projects taken up since, as well as ongoing projects, seem to have had little effect on its outdated modus operandi.

Unfortunately, the BTCL is only the latest in a growing list of state agencies and departments to have been embroiled in accounting scandals. Over the past three weeks, we have had similarly damning CAG reports on the Directorate General of Food, the Directorate General of Health Services, public hospitals, the ministries of agriculture and fisheries and livestock, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation, etc. What was common in all of them was how such irregularities and corruption were allowed to persist year after year without any effective oversight. What's equally problematic is the lack of official response to this Auditgate scandal.

We urge the government to take these audit objections seriously and impose strict discipline on the relevant authorities, including of BTCL, to make them accountable. This situation cannot continue anymore.

Nothing justifies killing a forest

The move to build a prison on forestland is illegal and impractical

WE are concerned at the way different government agencies have been trying to occupy the forestland of Cox's Bazar to implement their projects, disregarding the fact that doing so would further deplete what little forest coverage we have, which is critically important for our environment. The latest such attempt was made by the Department of Prison which is reportedly planning to build a prison on protected forestland in Paglirbil in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya upazila. According to our report, after the land ministry allotted 160 acres of land to the prison department, the latter placed demarcation flags around the area. But the forest department removed those flags since no clearance was taken from them, leading to an apparent conflict between the two parties.

What becomes clear from this state of affairs is that there is hardly any coordination among the ministries and departments involved when it comes to taking or giving lease of any government land, particularly forestland. Otherwise, how can the land ministry randomly allot part of a protected forest to the prison department without following due procedure, and even without asking for approval from the forest department and the department of environment (DoE)?

Reportedly, this is not the first time that a government department has tried to grab the protected forestland of Cox's Bazar. A few years ago, the public administration ministry also planned to build a civil service academy in Cox's Bazar covering 700 acres of land that was declared a protected forest and also an ecologically critical area (ECA). Luckily, later, a parliamentary body strongly opposed the move, while the High Court also issued a stay order on it. Another such attempt was made in July this year, when a part of the Jungle Khuniya Palong reserved forest in Cox's Bazar was handed over to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) by the government for building a residential training facility with funds from FIFA. What is more shocking is that the government de-reserved the 20-acre land for this purpose. This move faced widespread criticism from environmentalists and all concerned.

Coming back to the issue of building an open prison, we would like to make it clear that we are not against building such a facility which will have many modern facilities for the inmates, including scopes for fish farming, gardening and handicraft making. However, we strongly oppose building it on protected forestland, and urge the government to take the project somewhere else where the environmental damage will be minimal. Any incursion into our fast-depleting forest areas, however noble or practical the purpose, must be thwarted.

We hope the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, particularly the DoE, will remain vigilant against such moves to destroy our forests. We have ample laws and court directives in this regard and all government offices must abide by them.

‘Expatriate Diplomacy’ and ‘Mercenary Columnists’



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IN recent news, the government is on the verge of initiating “Expatriate Diplomacy”. The objective of this brand of diplomacy will be to tackle the “negative propaganda” coming from non-resident migrant and immigrant Bangladeshis, as well as to highlight the positive aspects of Bangladesh.

The foreign ministry claimed that they have a lot of positive information, but there are not enough writers. Thus, they are looking for “columnists” (read: mercenaries), who will get remuneration for writing about this.

Some issues and questions arise in this context.

First, only five to seven people are allegedly spreading “negative propaganda” from abroad. Their communication is based on online news portals, Facebook and YouTube. The foreign ministry claims these people will heavily enhance their propaganda efforts during the 18 months before the next election. Thus, “Expatriate Diplomacy” will be kick-started to deal with this.

The culprits will be identified and their whereabouts shared with their respective host country's authorities, who will then be asked to take due action. Also, “mercenary columnists” will be paid to write about the government's good deeds. However, it has not been clarified whether these writeups will be published on local or international media.

Previously, the government struck a similar deal with international news outlet CNN. This was reported in *The Daily Star* on June 3, 2021, where a headline read “The government yesterday teamed up with global news networking giant CNN International for the promotion of “Made in Bangladesh” products worldwide.”

The objective was to highlight the positive aspects of Bangladesh and increase exports. We did not get any further information about the money spent on this, and how we fared against these objectives.

Secondly, the state-owned television network BTV can be watched from every nook and corner of the nation. BTV only highlights the positive



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aspects of the government, which claims it is the most popular channel. Every day, multiple talk shows focus on the government's development activities. The satellite channels are also forced to show BTV's news.

On top of that, there are almost 25 private channels in the country. All these channels highlight the government's development efforts with utmost importance. Every talk show ensures equal participation from pro- and anti-government individuals. If there are two speakers, at least one of them is bound to be a ruling party leader or supporter.

So the question is, why can't BTV tackle these five to seven YouTube and Facebook-based “negative propaganda” practitioners? Does this mean more people watch Facebook videos and YouTube channels than BTV? Does this also mean the content generated by leaders, ministers and pro-government individuals on so many TV channels are inadequate in dealing with online content that feature these handful of individuals?

Apart from a few, most of the online portals that are run by migrants are quite obscure. Among the local online portals, including print media and its online versions, only four to five publish articles criticising the government. Very

few columnists can be termed as critical or severely critical of the government. So why do we need to search for columnists? If the people do not accept the positive writings of so many columnists, why would they accept content coming from paid writers?

A cursory look at party publications can also give us insight into current realities. Take, for example, *Banglar*

Bani, which was once Awami League's publication. If bought and read by AL leaders, supporters and workers, its circulation would have been over three to four crores. But *Banglar Bani* went out of business.

Then there is *Dinkaal*, BNP's newspaper. It is still being published, although the circulation is negligible. BNP leaders, workers and supporters neither buy nor read *Dinkaal*.

Why is this so? Because, people do not read anything other than truth and reality. This applies equally to ordinary people and party members. *Banglar Bani* and *Dinkaal* are burning examples.

In recent times, reports of “enforced disappearances” and people going “missing” have come up time and again in news media, and law enforcement agencies are being accused of being complicit. In fact, we have seen cases of law enforcement agencies knocking on the doors of the families of victims to get them to sign affidavits that state that no one “disappeared” or went “missing”.

What became of this? The government was already suffering from an acute image crisis thanks to enforced disappearances, and after deploying forces to get such affidavits, the crisis reached its crux.

If the objective of “Expatriate Diplomacy” is to label the practitioners of “negative propaganda” as anti-state individuals and to instigate their host nations to turn against them, will it be successful? The possibility is next to zero. Whatever the government claims, the countries in question will also do their own investigations. And if that investigation reveals that these individuals are criticising the government and people in power, and disclosing events of human rights violation, then the whole initiative can backfire. In fact, it might lead to the conclusion that these individuals could not speak their mind at home without being exposed to torture, and even after coming abroad, they are being muzzled. It is most likely that any North American or European nation will only encourage individuals to criticise their home country's government's irregularities, graft and human rights violations.

These five to seven so-called critics, whom the government termed “negative propaganda artists”, are living in developed nations where broadcast media's independence and freedom of speech are deemed basic human rights. Thus, Bangladesh's government can actually be laughed off by global leadership for these muzzling efforts.

Finally, there are possibly more columnists who write on the positive aspects of the government as opposed to the critical ones. The same scenario persists among talk show participants. If these elements cannot tackle “negative propaganda”, then how can this feat be achieved by paid columnists? Even if those columns are published on international media with money, will they have any credibility? We might ask now, was the CNN contract useful?

Whatever is being planned with regard to “Expatriate Diplomacy” is something that our foreign missions are already doing to a certain extent. Previously, the government spent a fortune to hire foreign lobbyists to build a positive image of the nation. Was that successful? The answer would not be a resolute “yes”. People usually do not accept anything other than truth and reality. Being silent or saying it was started during the BNP era does not wipe things like Aynagar from people's minds. If proper elections take place, if good governance arrives, and if a vile law like the Digital Security Act is abolished, then the government will no longer have to be so concerned about tackling negative propaganda and their image crisis.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Ukraine Is Palestine, Not Israel



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ONCE asked my younger son if he could pass the salt, only to be met with the response, “Of course I can!” When I repeated my request, he snapped back, “You asked me if I could do it, and I answered you. You didn't tell me that I *should* do it.”

Who was freer in this situation – me or my son? If we understand freedom as freedom of choice, my son was freer, because he had an additional choice about how to interpret my question. By contrast, I effectively renounced this choice and automatically relied on the conventional sense.

Now, imagine a world where many more people acted in everyday life the way my son did when he was teasing me. We would lose an immense amount of time pursuing pointless interpretations. Is this not an apt description of political life over the last decade? Donald Trump and other alt-right populists have capitalised on the fact that democratic politics relies on certain unwritten rules and customs, which they have violated when it suits them, while avoiding accountability by not always explicitly breaking the law.

In the United States, Trump's Republican Party lackeys are pursuing such a strategy ahead of the next presidential election. According to a fringe legal theory that they have embraced, a loophole in federal election law would permit a state's legislature to appoint its own presidential electors

if the secretary of state decides that he or she cannot certify the result of an election. Republican election deniers are now running for the offices that they will need to override the will of the voters in 2024. The GOP, thus, is attempting to destroy one of the basic conditions of democracy: that all political participants speak the same language and follow the same rules. Otherwise, a country will find itself on the verge of civil war – an outcome that almost one half of the American people now expect.

The same conditions apply to global politics. For international relations to work, all parties must at least speak the same language when they talk about concepts like freedom and occupation. Russia obviously is undermining this condition by describing its war with Ukraine as a “special operation” to “liberate” the country. But Ukraine's government has also fallen into this trap. Addressing the Israeli Knesset on March 20, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said, “We are in different countries and in completely different conditions. But the threat is the same: for both us and you – the total destruction of the people, state, culture. And even of the names: Ukraine, Israel.”

Palestinian political scientist Asad Ghanem described Zelensky's speech as “a disgrace when it comes to global struggles for freedom and liberation,

particularly of the Palestinian people.” Zelensky “reversed the roles of occupier and occupied.” I agree. And I also agree with Ghanem that “every possible support must be given to Ukrainians as they resist [Russia's] barbaric aggression.”

Unfortunately, Zelensky's Knesset speech was not a singular event. Ukraine regularly takes public positions in support of the Israeli occupation. In 2020, it quit the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP), and just last month, its ambassador to Israel, Yevgen Korniychuk, declared, “As a Ukrainian whose country is under a very brutal attack by its neighbour, I feel great sympathy towards the Israeli public.”

This parallel between Israel and Ukraine is totally misplaced. If anything, the Ukrainians' situation is closest to that of the West Bank Palestinians'. Yes, Israelis and Palestinians at least acknowledge their adversaries' otherness, whereas Russia claims that Ukrainians are really just Russians. But not only does Israel deny that the Palestinians are a nation (as Russia does with Ukraine), the Palestinians also have been denied a place in the Arab world (like Ukrainians vis-à-vis Europe before the war). Moreover, like Russia, Israel is a nuclear-armed military superpower that is de facto colonising a smaller, much weaker entity. And like Russia in the occupied parts of Ukraine, Israel is practising a politics of apartheid.

While Israel's leaders welcome Ukraine's support, they have not returned the favour. Instead, they have oscillated between Russia and Ukraine, because Israel needs Russia's continuing toleration of its own military strikes on targets in Syria. But Ukraine's full support for Israel mainly

reflects its leaders' ideological interest in presenting their struggle as a defence of Europe and European civilisation against a barbaric, totalitarian East.

This framing of the fight is untenable, because it requires glossing over Europe's own roles in slavery, colonialism, fascism, and so forth. It is crucial that Ukraine's cause be defended in universal terms, around shared concepts and interpretations of words like “occupation” and “freedom.” To reduce Ukraine's war to a struggle for Europe is to use the same framing as Russian President Vladimir Putin's “court philosopher” Aleksandr Dugin, who draws a line between “Russian truth” and “European truth.” Confining the conflict to Europe reinforces Russia's own global propaganda, which presents the invasion of Ukraine as an act of decolonisation – part of the struggle against Western neoliberal domination and a necessary step towards a multipolar world.

By treating Israel's colonisation of the West Bank as a defensive struggle for freedom, Ukraine is validating another power's aggression and thus compromising its own fully justified struggle for freedom. Sooner or later, it will have to make a choice. Will it be truly European, by participating in the universal emancipatory project that defines Europe? Or will it become a part of the new right's populist wave?

When Ukraine asked the West, “Can you pass the howitzers?” the West did not cynically quip, “Yes, we can!” and then do nothing. Western countries replied reasonably by sending weapons to fight the occupiers. Yet, when Palestinians ask for support of any kind, they receive nothing but empty statements, often accompanied by declarations of solidarity with their oppressor. When they ask for the salt, it is handed to their opponent.