

Rape as a tool of political intimidation?

The authorities must ensure speedy justice

THE impossible obstacles that women in this country face while standing up for their rights and attempting to take their rightful positions in society have once again come into focus after yet another gruesome incident of sexual violence. On September 7, a female Zila Parishad member candidate was returning from an election campaign when she was waylaid by five men and raped at gunpoint in Bagmara upazila's Mahmingram village. The victim, while speaking to a correspondent of this daily, said, "They raped me to stop me from competing in the election."

While we commend the local authorities for their speedy arrest of the perpetrators, who have already confessed to the crime after primary interrogations, we do not have the words to sufficiently express our horror at the fact that sexual violence was used in this instance as a tool to intimidate a political candidate. What does this say about the rights of women seeking political inclusion in the country? What does this say about the rights of women in general?

Incidentally, *The Daily Star* published reports on four rape-related incidents in its Monday issue alone, including that of the Zila Parishad member candidate, which speaks volumes about the unsafe conditions that women have to navigate every day. The other reports involve the gang rape of a woman in Savar, the murder and rape of a seven-year-old child in Chattogram city, and the lack of action against a police officer accused of raping a 10th grader in Lalmonirhat. If anything, this last report shows how the quick arrest of the member candidate's rapists is an exception rather than the norm.

However, simply arresting the perpetrators is not enough. A woman was raped, reportedly as a method of political intimidation. This is not an issue to be taken lightly – it goes not only against the fundamental rights of women but against the very essence of democracy as well. The authorities must investigate the involvement of others behind the crime, and the Election Commission must take a strong stance against violence being inflicted upon political candidates and activists everywhere, especially those with the opposition camp, something it has so far failed to do.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the road to justice for survivors of sexual violence can often be a long, painful and seemingly endless one. This was corroborated in a recent media report that said that more than 43,000 cases lodged under the Women and Child Repression Act have been left hanging in the justice system for more than five years. It is not enough to make arrests or change laws to deal out the highest punishment, if survivors of sexual violence are kept waiting for justice. If the authorities are sincere about ensuring the rights of woman, and ending the status quo where rape is continuously used as a tool of power and repression, then every case needs to be handled with the utmost urgency and sensitivity.

Doomed to failure

Systemic loopholes allowing irregularities in public projects

WHY do public projects flounder the way they do in Bangladesh? If there is one thing constant about the endless procession of projects being taken up in the service of "development", it is this air of inevitability about something *always* going wrong in them. Whether through collusion, or carelessness, or ineptitude, these projects are being undone by those involved in various stages starting from their conceptualisation to implementation. The most obvious outcome of this state of affairs is revision of projects – with deadlines extended, sometimes multiple times, and original costs pushed up several times higher – but rarely any punishment for the perennially underperforming project authorities.

Our report on a recent workshop, attended among others by the cabinet secretary and planning commission officials, brought out some of the most common irregularities in such public undertakings. For example, in case of foreign-aided projects, it is seen that the Economic Relations Division (ERD), which negotiates foreign loans on behalf of the government, fails to thrash out watertight contracts because of the lack of efficient human resources. In the absence of legal counsel well-versed in international contracts, sometimes clauses are slipped in that are not in Bangladesh's favour or in compliance with the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC) rules. Such unfavourable clauses include a foreign lender itself doing the feasibility study or drawing up the design, or the contractor and the consultant being the same, etc. All are in violation of the FIDIC rules.

As well as robust contracts and feasibility studies, avoiding conflicts of interest at any stage of a project is also a fundamental requirement. That goes for locally funded projects as well, where, unfortunately, the rules are more often breached than honoured. Lack of open tender and competitive bidding remains a constant threat. Often, the project implementing agency and line ministries lack ownership and even knowledge of relevant development project proposals (DPPs), leading to all sorts of problems including project revisions. Sometimes the pressure for revisions comes from the contractors, who exploit their connections to profit off any cost overrun. In short, there is no shortage of challenges or loopholes allowing corruption and mismanagement in the government's construction projects.

These long-festering problems have frequently come in the way of such projects over the last decade or so, delaying many of them or, in worst-case scenarios, halting them in their tracks. In the end, poorly planned and executed projects make poor investment returns. And it is the taxpayers who have to suffer the most as a result, firstly because of the overspending, the burden of which ultimately falls on their shoulders, and then because of their lower-than-expected results post-completion. We, therefore, urge the government to critically rethink its project management strategy. It must reform how its projects are designed and implemented from start to finish.

Bangladesh should revisit its Myanmar policy



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

ON September 18, 2022, for the fourth time, Myanmar Ambassador to Bangladesh Aung Kyaw Moe was summoned by the foreign ministry to protest the repeated violation of Bangladesh's land and airspace by the troublesome neighbour in recent weeks. Since mid-August, Myanmar has been in the grips of a civil war, and in the process, shells have landed inside the Bangladesh border. On September 16, an 18-year-old Rohingya youth was killed, and five others were injured after a mortar shell fired from Myanmar exploded in a Rohingya camp. And earlier on September 3, Myanmar military aircraft entered Bangladeshi airspace, orchestrating firing attacks from both fighter jets and helicopters, after which the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) was put on alert.

While it is commendable that Bangladesh has not fallen for the provocations of the Myanmar military and is exercising extreme restraint – a demonstration of Bangladesh's political maturity – it is high time the government carefully and critically examined the recent development to better understand the reasons behind this escalation. Are the firing and shelling solely the result of the Tatmadaw's fight against the Arakan Army, or is there a more sinister reason behind these incidents? Could it be a further attempt to flush out the remaining Rohingyas in Myanmar?

In the absence of the rule of democracy, the military junta of Myanmar has zero accountability to the people, or the international community for that matter, and are highly likely to make ill manoeuvres – both in terms of internal and external policies – which could yield disastrous impacts on regional stability.

Not that this is the first time that tensions along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border have escalated. In 2020, Myanmar deployed more than 2,500 additional troops near the border in the pretext of fighting internal insurgency. In 2018, several months after the Rohingya exodus, Myanmar sent troops along the border and Bangladesh had to summon the Myanmar envoy to have them pulled back. In 2009, abnormal movement of Myanmar troops along the border was observed, in response to which Bangladesh also sent army reinforcements to the border. In May 2014, border guards of the two countries exchanged gunfire that was caused by the killing of a Bangladeshi guard on duty.



Myanmar's firing and shelling into Bangladeshi territory is yet to stop, despite several formal complaints from Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

While in the past, tensions were diffused with some diplomatic efforts, this time around, it seems even formal complaints are not enough for the Myanmar junta to stop the firing spree along border areas, resulting in the death of one individual and injuries of many so far. The situation has reached a point where the Bangladesh government may have to take this issue to the United Nations, as suggested by the home minister on September 17.

But the nature or extent of support the UN can offer in this regard remains unclear. In the past, the UN's role has been limited to condemning Myanmar's actions, or at best attempting (and failing) to impose sanctions on the country. And with Myanmar now strengthening ties with Russia – earlier in September, Myanmar's junta chief Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia for the second time in two months to attend the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok – and with China having its back, it would not be wrong to assume that any UN attempt to impose economic sanctions on Myanmar would be vetoed.

The UN has recently asked countries to halt arms sales to Myanmar as its military terrorises and persecutes its own people. But since a significant volume of these arms are Chinese – and the two countries share close ties – how effective the UN call would

be remains to be seen. The other countries that are engaged in arms trade with Myanmar include India, Russia, Ukraine, Israel, the Philippines, and North Korea, among others, and the arms portfolio includes fighter jets, missiles and missile launchers, armoured combat vehicles and warships, among many other weapons.

Myanmar was expected to reach more than 225 percent. In FY21, between July and March, the volume of trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar stood at 185,822.28 tonnes. While the financial value of these trading interactions may not hold much value for Myanmar, especially in view of the billions of dollars it is receiving in

Bangladesh can expect little help from the UN or any other regional forums in stopping Myanmar in its aggressive tracks, as has been the case in the past, as the majority of the countries in the region have invested in Myanmar – both China and India have invested in Rakhine itself. Even after the coup, the Myanmar military junta has approved foreign investment amounting to USD 3.8 billion – USD 2.5 billion alone on a liquefied natural gas power plant – according to a Reuters report. It was revealed that China was one of the top investors; the list also included businesses from Japan, Thailand, South Korea and Singapore, among others.

One hope, though, is the recent regional development in the Asean community. During the 55th Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Myanmar generals were barred from attending unless they made headway on a 15-month-old plan to address the issues triggered by the coup. However, with Chinese backing, as has been demonstrated by the visit of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Myanmar in July this year, Myanmar's junta remains confident and reckless.

In light of all this, it might now be time for Bangladesh to revisit its bilateral policy towards Myanmar, including in trade, commerce and diplomacy. In the 2021-22 fiscal year, trade between Bangladesh and

foreign direct investment, Bangladesh severing these ties with Myanmar will carry a symbolic value. Also, the diplomatic ties with Myanmar needs to be revisited in light of the recent failures of diplomatic manoeuvres to stop shelling at the border.

At the same time, Bangladesh should continue engagement with the international community to diffuse the situation with Myanmar and find a suitable rehabilitation solution for the Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh is a key strategic player in the region, with its own geopolitical advantages, and it wisely maintains strategic relations with both China and India, as well as the region as a whole. We should engage with all our regional partners and leverage our position to push Myanmar to resolve the outstanding issues. The Myanmar ambassador during a recent meeting suggested that the Arakan Army was stealing their military's bullets and using them to shell along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border; however, the country cannot shrug off the responsibility of the actions of its people or the military.

At the end of the day, the actions of the international community will reflect on their values and ethics, but we must continue to play our part in upholding our territorial integrity and protecting the interests of the displaced Rohingya, whom we have sheltered for so many decades.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's long infatuation with Russia must end



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

SHASHI THAROOR

DURING a parliamentary debate in April, I expressed my concerns about India's relationship with Russia. My words were met with grim-faced silence. But the events of the last five months have only strengthened my case.

The debate was on the Ukraine war. While deploring India's reluctance to call a Russian shovel a spade, I acknowledged that India had historically depended on the Kremlin for defence supplies and spare parts, and appreciated Russia's long-standing support on vital issues like Kashmir and border tensions with China and Pakistan. But the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions have weakened Russia considerably, I noted. The ban on semiconductor chips, for example, significantly eroded its ability to produce advanced electronics and defence goods that form the basis of India's dependence.

Worse still, I argued, the war highlighted and reinforced Russia's reliance on China as its principal global partner – a relationship that would intensify as Russia grew weaker. India

could then scarcely depend on the Kremlin to counter Chinese aggression, exemplified by the People's Liberation Army's territorial encroachments and killing of 20 Indian soldiers in June 2020.

My Russian friends pooh-poohed my fears privately, expressing confidence that Russia was doing far better than the Western media had led the world to believe. India's purchases of discounted oil and fertiliser have increased significantly since the war began – though a 30 percent discount on oil prices that have gone up 70 percent because of the war can hardly be considered a bargain. More importantly, China and Russia do indeed seem to be deepening their ties, which augurs ill for India's relationships with both countries.

Russia invaded Ukraine just a few weeks after Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced their "no limits" partnership. And since the war began, both countries have repeatedly affirmed their geopolitical concordance.

Last month, Putin's press secretary,

Dmitry Peskov, denounced the US for permitting House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to visit Taiwan. "This is not a line aimed at supporting freedom and democracy," he declared. "This is pure provocation. It's necessary to call such steps what they really are."

A week later, China returned the favour. In an interview with the Russian state news agency TASS, China's ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, called the US "the initiator and main instigator of the (Ukraine) crisis."

While this sort of reciprocity points to a growing awareness of shared geopolitical interests, it cannot obscure the fundamental imbalance in the bilateral relationship. Chinese imports from Russia have increased by more than 56 percent since the war began, and China is the only country that can provide Russians with consumer goods that once came from Europe and the US before the sanctions. Moreover, according to Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Chinese renminbi could well become "the de facto reserve currency for Russia, even without being fully convertible."

Xi, who will soon be confirmed as China's paramount leader for an unprecedented third term, is well aware of this imbalance and is reaping massive rewards from it. In backing Russia diplomatically, he demonstrates his refusal to be cowed by the West. At the same time, he is benefiting from China's increasing dominance over Russian markets and the renminbi's

enhanced status.

The Kremlin is in no position to complain about Chinese price-gouging, let alone alienate China by failing to support its stance on key issues like Taiwan. As Gabuev put it, "Russia is turning into a giant Eurasian Iran: fairly isolated, with a smaller and more technologically backward economy thanks to its hostilities to the West." With few friends, Russia knows that it has little choice but to stick with China.

Against this backdrop, India must urgently review its geopolitical options. It must recognise that it has never needed Russia less. Its dependence on Russian military supplies – for which it pays top dollar – has fallen from 75 percent in 2006-10 to below 50 percent in 2016-20 to an estimated 45 percent today. This reflects India's efforts to diversify its defence purchases, with the US, France, and Israel becoming key suppliers. Furthermore, US support means that India no longer needs Russia's veto power to keep Kashmir off the agenda at the UN Security Council.

India must also recognise the need to cooperate with others to constrain China's overweening ambitions. The need for India to establish and shore up its own partnerships is magnified by the risk of a hostile China-Pakistan axis on its borders. Russia will be ambivalent, at best, about such an axis; at worst, it will be complicit. The Russia of the foreseeable future, severely weakened by its Ukrainian misadventure, is not a Russia on which India can rely.