

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Russification of Ukraine deeply worrying

It signals sharp escalation at a time when we need sanity to prevail

We are deeply worried about the dramatic turn of the Russia-Ukraine war after Russia's annexation of four captured regions of Ukraine. Reportedly, President Vladimir Putin on Friday signed documents to formally begin the process of incorporating Russian-controlled Luhansk and parts of Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia into the Russian Federation after a series of disputed referendums. It effectively provides Moscow a land bridge to Crimea, the peninsula that it annexed in 2014. While Crimea represented the first annexation in Europe since World War II, the latest move represents the biggest such annexation. Together, all five regions make up around 20 percent of Ukrainian territory.

We condemn this slow Russification of a sovereign nation in the strongest terms. Altering borders with brute force is not just a clear violation of international law. It represents the height of absurdity of a war – now in its eighth month – that has proven to be detrimental to even faraway countries like Bangladesh. The disruptions caused by the war and the West's response to it – in the form of heavy banking, trade and commercial sanctions – led to unprecedented crises in the global supply chain. On the ground, countless people have been killed, injured and displaced. With the Ukrainian forces clawing back wins in recent weeks, and the mass mobilising of Russian forces as a result, along with the threat of using nuclear weapons, things are quickly becoming totally unmanageable.

The irony of the latest development is that Putin, at the annexation ceremony in Kremlin, slammed the colonial past of a "satanist" West. He said western colonies had carried out genocide, opium wars and plundered states. There is no disputing that. But does it justify his own "colonisation" project? He signalled his willingness to continue the battle for a "greater historical Russia", using whatever tools he had at his disposal. Ukraine as a sovereign nation must not be a victim of that battle. And the West, on its part, must ensure it does not contribute to it by escalating tensions to a point where such drastic actions find justification.

The West, so far, has been an active if unreliable third party in this war, its actions nearly having as much of an effect on the world as the two warring parties. Instead of trying to assuage tensions, it has been a provocateur at times. Its sanctions, aimed at the Russians, have instead caused suffering globally. Clearly, this strategy of aiding Ukraine militarily and punishing Russia economically is not having the desired effect, which only shows the importance of using more judicious means and solutions.

We urge the Russian authorities to refrain from their destructive pursuit in Ukraine, and the international community to prepare the ground for de-escalation of tensions. Nothing justifies continuing this war or any illegal takeover of occupied territories. We urge everyone to pursue peaceful and diplomatic solutions to end this war.

Ensure safety of women, children

Latest data depicts a shocking picture of child marriage, sexual violence

We are appalled by the latest data on child marriage revealed by the National Girl Child Advocacy Forum. Reportedly, from January to August this year, as many as 2,301 girls fell victim to child marriage in 28 districts of the country. This means an average of 288 child marriages took place per month in those districts alone. During this time, 574 girls were also raped there. Of them, 84 were gang raped, and 43 had different types of disability. We wonder how the situation has come to this point despite there being government institutions, law enforcement agencies, and various private organisations working to prevent these crimes.

The advocacy forum, in its "Girl Child Situation Monitoring Report-2022", has also revealed that in the first eight months of the year, 76 girl children were sexually harassed and tortured, 136 fell victim to kidnapping and trafficking, 186 were murdered, and 181 died by suicide. And not only girls, boys are also increasingly becoming victims of sexual abuse around the country. According to another estimate by Ain o Salish Kendra, at least 44 boys were raped during the first nine months of this year.

While these findings by different organisations suggest a very bleak situation in terms of safety, they do not reveal the full picture, however, as they have been collected mostly from national and local dailies. And such crimes are often underreported. Unfortunately, we still do not have any comprehensively prepared and updated national-level database on child marriage and violence against women and children. So, how will the government assess the actual reality of problems facing vulnerable sections of society? We urgently need such comprehensive data leading to comprehensive response. What we know from various newspaper reports is that the rate of child marriage has increased manifold during the pandemic, as did school dropout rates of girl children.

That being said, we think the government can still do a lot to stop child marriage and violence against children, including boys, based on available data. A number of rights organisations regularly prepare reports on these crimes and violations of human rights. But what is the point of preparing these reports if appropriate measures cannot be taken to address these issues?

The government must ensure that those involved with the crime of child marriage do not get any patronage from the administrations and local political/social leaders. It must also ensure speedy prosecution of child abuse and rape cases. The National Girl Child Advocacy Forum has called for establishing a separate directorate for children, raising awareness on the issue and proper enforcement of relevant laws to stop child marriage and abuse – demands that experts made frequently in the past as well. We need strong action now. We urge the government to take these recommendations seriously to improve the safety of women and children.

GAME OF SEATS

Eden College ugliness exposes the rot in student politics



Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @shuprovatasneem

SHUPROVA TASNEEM

Extortion, corruption, seat trading, violence, bullying, threats, fraud, blackmail, torture, harassment, coercion, and forced political participation. These are not words one would like to have to associate with student politics in a country that once proudly boasted a student movement that became one of the catalysts of its liberation. Unfortunately, as recent events at Eden Mohila College show, this has now become the norm. The conflict in question, between two factions of Eden College BCL, injured 10 people and led to a decision from Chhatra League's central executive committee to permanently expel 12 leaders and four activists from BCL on September 25.

Reportedly, this fight surrounded who is getting the biggest slice of the pie known as "hall/seat trade" – the practice of charging ordinary students Tk 15,000-20,000 initially, and then Tk 2,000-3,000 per month, for places in student halls. This practice is off the books, so university administration tends to simply look the other way. As always, the biggest victims of this dirty politics are ordinary students.

According to media reports, there are around 3,310 seats at halls but at least 12,000 students unlawfully inhabit them, with up to 12-15 students living in one room. If we crunch the numbers, this means the people conducting this "trade" could be earning around Tk 13.5 crore per month. No wonder the expelled leaders have gone on hunger strike to get their positions back, and organised a press conference to ask why only their faction has been punished, while the other faction has been allowed to get off scot-free, without any sort of investigation. And while we have no love lost for either of these warring groups, we cannot ignore the perfectly legitimate question: "Why were the other leaders, who were also in the video footage of the conflict, not expelled too?"

This question is all the more valid given that the unpunished faction involves BCL president Tamanna Jasmine Riva, whose threats of physical and sexual violence against students who failed to pay her extortion fees went viral on social media in August. She is not only accused of having created extortion rings around almost every



PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Too often, student political leaders are given a free pass while protestors' demands are met with a heavy hand.

service available at Eden College, from halls and canteens to internet use, but is facing the very serious accusation of sexually exploiting students, that too from fellow members of BCL.

Yet, despite the gravity of these accusations, neither the university administration, nor BCL's central executive committee, have ever opened an investigation into her, or any of the other (I dread to call them) "leaders" involved with her. Does that mean activists like Riva actually represent the interests of their leaders in the ruling party? Because if student politics reflects the values and ideals of their patron political parties, then we should be extremely concerned.

The student leaders of Eden College have behaved abominably, of this there is no doubt. But they would not be able to act this way if it was not condoned and patronised by the higher echelons of power. We cannot deny that this is how student leaders are allowed – in fact, expected – to behave, and that extortion and corruption flourish in almost every public university in Bangladesh.

Which brings us to the complicity of university administrations in the current state of affairs. When was the last time we witnessed any university administration condemning the violent, reckless and oftentimes

criminal behaviour of influential student politicians on campus? Recently, *The Daily Star* interviewed Eden College principal Supriya Bhattacharjee who, when not being evasive, flat out denied the influence of BCL at Eden, dismissing the accusations of extortion as being made "for the sake of it", and identifying "counseling" as their chosen strategy

be silent when women are the victims, but when women are the perpetrators, they suddenly can't help but raise their voices against injustice. A common stance is the usual "See what happens when women have too much power?" But then there is the righteous outrage against the *naribadis* of Bangladesh, followed by the trope: "Where are the feminists now? Why are they so silent?"

in handling what she refused to call – but cannot be termed as anything else but – crimes on campus.

Instead, what we have witnessed is university administrations looking the other way or even defending the wrongdoings of political activists, while coming down on ordinary students for protesting for change. Such as in July this year, when a female student from Chittagong University filed a complaint of harassment and attempted rape against five students. Not only were her complaints ignored until protests erupted on campus – the university's assistant proctor went on to (wrongly) blame the victim for being in a "secluded" area in a TV interview. Or during the massive protests at SUST in January this year, initially stemming from female students' perfectly reasonable demands for better dormitories and greater campus safety, which not only fell on deaf ears but were later met with violence, with the aid of police and BCL activists.

The Eden fiasco has also made it clearer that the political empowerment of some women does not amount to the emancipation of all women. Rather, the crimes of these politically empowered women are now being used as fodder for the misogynists gleefully following their "catfight". It's ironic how a certain group of people tend to

It would be comical if it were not so frustrating – the fact that so many are still so blissfully unaware of the part they play in creating the power imbalances in a patriarchal society; that they would be outraged if every Muslim was asked to account for the Taliban's actions, or every man was asked to account for the crimes of rapists, but when a woman's actions are in question, it is suddenly up to the entire female race to stand up, condemn it, and build a better world, while the men do their bit by angrily typing Facebook statuses.

This widespread abdication of responsibility – amongst political leaders, university administrations and even outraged netizens – is at the heart of the current situation we find ourselves in. What future can our students hope for when such an aggressive rot has spread in student politics? Earlier this year, Chile swore in a former student leader as their youngest ever president, who immediately demonstrated his progressive credentials by appointing a young cabinet with more women than men. Can you imagine a leader of this sort emerging from the dredges of student politics of Bangladesh? What hope can we have if the student leaders of today are slated to be the leaders of tomorrow?

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Fed should wait and see

Joseph E. Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University and a member of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation. Dean Baker is Co-Director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, DC.

JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ and DEAN BAKER

The US Federal Reserve Board met on September 20-21, and while most analysts anticipated another big interest rate hike, there was a strong argument for the Fed to take a break from its aggressive monetary-policy tightening. While its rate hikes so far have slowed the economy – most obviously the housing sector – their impact on inflation is far less certain.

Monetary policy typically affects economic performance with long and variable lags, especially in times of upheaval. Given the depth of geopolitical, financial, and economic uncertainty – not least about the future course of inflation – the Fed would be wise to pause its rate hikes and wait until a more reliable assessment of the situation is possible.

There are several reasons to hold off. The first is simply that inflation has slowed sharply. Consumer price index (CPI) inflation – the measure most relevant to households – was zero in July, and it is likely to have been zero or even negative in August. Similarly, the personal consumption expenditure (PCE) deflator – another often-used measure based on GDP accounts – fell by 0.1 percent in July.

Some will be tempted to credit tight monetary policy for this

apparent victory over inflation. But that argument commits the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (to assume that because A happened before B, A must have caused B) and confuses correlation with causation. Moreover, most of the main factors behind today's inflation have little to do with curbing demand. Supply-side constraints drove inflation higher, and now supply-side factors are bringing inflation back down.

To be sure, many economists (including some at the Fed) expected the supply-side interruptions from Russia's war in Ukraine and the pandemic to be overcome very quickly. In the event, they were wrong, but only about the speed at which conditions would normalise. Much of this failure was understandable. Who would have thought that America's storied market economy would be so lacking in resilience? Who could have foreseen that it would suffer critical shortages of baby formula, feminine hygiene products, and the components needed to produce new cars? Is this the United States or the Soviet Union in its dying days?

Still, the overall inflation story is simple: Many of the supply-side factors that drove prices higher earlier in

the recovery are now being reversed. Notably, the CPI gasoline index plunged by 7.7 percent in July, and private indices suggest a comparable decline in August. Again, this price reversal was predictable and predicted; the only uncertainty concerned the timing.

Other prices are following a similar pattern. In July, the core CPI (which excludes energy and food) rose by a relatively modest 0.3 percent, and the core PCE deflator rose by just 0.1 percent. That suggests an easing of the backlog of imported goods – the problem behind those empty store shelves and business disruptions earlier in the pandemic.

Recent data support this inference. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Global Supply Chain Pressure Index has fallen sharply from its peaks last fall to just above where it was before the pandemic. While shipping costs are still well above their pre-pandemic levels, they are down almost 50 percent from last fall's peaks and likely to keep falling. After soaring during the pandemic and in the early months of Russia's war, the prices of a wide range of commodities have fallen back to pre-pandemic levels. The Baltic Dry Goods Index, for example, is now below its average level for 2019.

Auto manufacturers have also overcome the problems created by the worldwide semiconductor shortage. According to the Fed's own industrial production index, motor-vehicle output was actually above its pre-pandemic level as of July.

The standard justification for Fed

policy tightening is that it is needed to prevent a cycle of self-fulfilling expectations, with workers and businesses coming to expect higher inflation and setting wages and prices accordingly. But this cannot happen when inflation expectations are declining, as they are now.

Some analysts have suggested that the US needs a long period of higher unemployment to get inflation back down to the Fed's target level. But these arguments are based on the standard Phillips curve models, and the fact is that inflation has parted ways with the Phillips curve (which assumes a straightforward inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment). After all, the large rise in inflation last year was not due to a sudden large drop in unemployment, and the recent slowdown in wage and price growth cannot be explained by high unemployment.

Given the latest data, it would be irresponsible for the Fed to create much higher unemployment deliberately, owing to a blind faith in the Phillips curve's ongoing relevance. Policymaking is always conducted under conditions of uncertainty, and the uncertainties are especially large now. With inflation and inflationary expectations already dampening, the Fed should be assigning more weight to the downside risk of additional tightening; namely, that it would push an already battered US economy into recession. That should be enough reason for the Fed to take a break this month.