

A new height in Bangladesh-Brunei ties

Collaboration on energy, labour issues a welcome development

We welcome the spirit of friendship and collaboration that marked the first-ever visit of Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah in Bangladesh, which culminated with the signing of several important agreements. At a meeting between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Brunei sultan on Sunday, the two countries signed a deal and three memorandums of understanding (MoUs), including one on a long-term collaboration in the energy sector, particularly in the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other petroleum products to Bangladesh. It comes at a time when Bangladesh is searching for alternative sources of energy amid a spike in fuel prices as well as supply-chain disruptions in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The sultan's visit is a reciprocal one after Sheikh Hasina's state visit to Brunei in 2019. Besides the energy agreement, the two leaders also signed MoUs on recruitment of workers from Bangladesh and recognition of certificates for the seafarers, in addition to a deal on direct flights between the two countries. Bangladesh has a major stake in the labour agreement. About 20,000 Bangladeshis are currently working in Brunei. The possibility of more recruitments is an aspect that the government will certainly like to explore, while making sure the interests of workers are protected through a fixed minimum wage, insurance and reducing recruitment costs. For this to benefit all sides, it is also essential that the recruitment process is managed in a transparent and orderly manner.

Bangladesh and Brunei share strong commonalities in terms of faith, tradition and a shared vision of peace and prosperity. Brunei is said to be the third-largest oil producer in Southeast Asia, and also the ninth-largest producer of LNG in the world. But like Bangladesh, it has been also focusing on diversifying its economy, with an eye to the future. Both countries can benefit enormously for increased collaboration, although bilateral trade between the two is far below its potential at the moment. Some of the areas where trade and cooperation can be increased were highlighted during the delegation-level meeting on Sunday, including maritime connectivity, agriculture, livestock and fisheries, training and exchange of services in health sector, defence and security, disaster response, humanitarian operations, information technology, etc. Bangladesh also invited Brunei to invest in its special economic zones.

For Bangladesh, diversifying its sources of energy including LNG is vitally important, as it relies heavily on energy imports for power generation. In that, Brunei offers a potentially stable and long-term alternative. With the global energy market going through unprecedented volatility since the Russia-Ukraine war, and Bangladesh facing a crisis with rising demands for energy but shrinking ability to procure or produce it, it is all the more important that the country has as many options as possible.

With the sultan's visit, Foreign Minister Abdul Momen said that Bangladesh's bilateral relationship with Brunei has reached a "new height". We hope this will result in a new, elevated level of engagement in the form of increased trade, investment and mutual cooperation.

A laudable initiative for safe journeys

Installing CCTV cameras in buses will help improve safety of female passengers

We appreciate the authorities for taking the initiative to install CCTV cameras in public buses, which has been a long-standing demand of women passengers and organisations working on women's rights. Reportedly, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, with funding from Dipto Foundation, has initially installed cameras in 100 public buses of four companies in Dhaka. According to the government, if this helps improve the security of female passengers, the entire public transport system could be gradually brought under the initiative. While we appreciate the move, we think this is just one of the many measures that need to be taken to stop harassment of women on public transport.

Unfortunately, while women have long endured all forms of sexual harassment and violence on public buses, including rape and even gang-rape, little has been done to address the issue. The only initiative that the government took, apart from reserving nine seats for women, is to introduce a small number of women-only buses in Dhaka, which are too few compared to the number of women and girls who use buses to commute every day.

Over the last few years, several studies and surveys have been conducted to understand the gravity of the issue. The situation seems to have become progressively worse. The most recent survey report on this, published in late August, found that 87 percent of the women surveyed faced some form of harassment at least once in their lives, while 36 percent faced sexual harassment regularly in buses, launches, trains and at terminals. What is particularly worrying is the revelation that only 36 percent among those harassed protested after being harassed, while only one percent went to the law enforcers for support.

Under such circumstances, we think installing CCTV cameras in buses will not only help in identifying culprits harassing women, but will also give women passengers the courage to protest such incidents and go to the police for help, since it will now be easier to provide evidence of the harassment. However, in addition to installing CCTV cameras and establishing a reliable monitoring system to track such crimes, there needs to be vehicle tracking systems in all public transports as well, as advised by experts.

Furthermore, often women are harassed not only by other male passengers but by the bus drivers and helpers themselves. Research has found that 83 percent of women received abusive and misogynistic comments from transport staff, which makes the problem harder to address. To address this, the authorities need to undertake special programmes to educate bus drivers and helpers on gender issues. Campaigns on women's rights and safety must be carried out continuously if we really want to bring a change. Overall, the formation of a gender-responsive guideline for our entire transport sector is a must to effectively address the issue.

LOAD-SHEDDING IN BANGLADESH

Are we living in 2022 or 1984?



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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We are now more than halfway into the month of October. In July, Nasrul Hamid, the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, said that the then ongoing power cuts in the country would not last long. He wrote in his verified Facebook page: "Within the next few months, the second unit of Payra power plant and Rampal power plant will come into operation. Also, 1,600MW electricity will be imported from India's Adani power plant soon. All these will add more than 4,000MW electricity to the national grid."

In the same month, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, energy adviser to the prime minister, assured people would get some relief from load-shedding from September onwards based on the same logic. At that time, this newspaper quoted experts who had questioned their claims. They asked what good adding more power generation capacity would do, when the resources needed to generate power were lacking – coal, for example. No one within the government batted an eyelash.

In August, State Minister Hamid again said, "The power situation will improve in the next month [September]." September came and went, but the load-shedding problem stayed. None of the three new power plants that were "slated" to "save us" from load-shedding started operations.

On October 7, the minister announced that load-shedding had decreased from before, but there was still a shortage of "approximately 700-800MW per day." According to data from the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh Ltd (PGCB), however, both his claims were inaccurate. On that very day (October 7), power outage was 964MW, or eight percent of total demand. And people have already suffered from more load-shedding in October than in the previous month.

All these remind me of a quote from George Orwell's prophetic novel *1984*, "The Ministry of Plenty's forecast had estimated the output of boots for the quarter at 145 million pairs. The actual output was given as 62 million. Winston, however, in rewriting the forecast, marked the figure down to 57 million, so as to allow for the usual claim that the quota had been overfulfilled. In any case, 62 million was no nearer the truth than 57 million, or than 145 million. Very likely no boots had been produced at all."

To Nasrul Hamid's credit, he did come out only three days later (October 10) and admit that load-



shedding had gotten worse. "We hoped that from October there would be no load-shedding, but we failed as we couldn't find a solution to the gas shortage." (Remember how experts had warned that the supply of resources for energy generation was among the main problems?) Hamid further added, "I hope the situation will improve next month." He has now set a new deadline for when the load-shedding situation would improve, albeit less confidently than before.

But what about those who have been claiming for years that the Awami League government's energy policy over the last decade has been flawless? Weren't they the same ones who also categorically condemned anyone who identified any flaws in it – such as the folly of paying exorbitant amounts of capacity charges to the owners of idle power plants, all the while ignoring the need to modernise our power transmission infrastructure, and the government's refusal to explore domestic gas reserves, despite the fact that at least two studies conducted by foreign institutions (with superb track records) estimated the presence of a significant amount of gas reserves in

Bangladesh?

Will they come forward and admit they were wrong? Or do we shove their past boastings down Orwell's "memory hole"?

For years now, one particular issue we've heard the ruling party loyalists boast about regularly is how the party had transformed the country from one that experienced hours of load-

brought to a parliamentary standing committee to indemnify officials of the state-run Petrobangla from legal proceedings?

Recently, the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) disclosed that the government (in reality, the people) had been deprived of about Tk 4,697 crore for 19 counts of irregularities by

Bangladesh Oil, Gas and Mineral Corporation (Petrobangla) and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation. The irregularities include spending beyond the rules to buy goods and services at high prices; flouting the instructions of the finance ministry and the National Board of Revenue (NBR); and disregarding the Gas Sales Rules of 2004 and 2014, the Bangladesh Gas Act, 2010, Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission, the Public Procurement Act, 2006, and the Public Procurement Rules, 2008.

The overall lack of transparency in our energy sector over the years – which really is a microcosm of the general tendency of this government – has cost the nation dearly. And the government is now trying to push the cost of its irregularities onto the people – which is another of its common tendencies. But the people must resist. It's time to investigate the government's past decisions, to really identify what went wrong and what the irregularities were. Otherwise, there will be no getting out of the crisis we are in; in fact, it might only get worse.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Ukraine Safari

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



I don't usually write about cultural products from my own country, but I must make an exception for Slovenian film-maker Miran Zupanec's new documentary *Sarajevo Safari*, which details one of the most bizarre and pathological episodes of the 1992-96 siege of the Bosnian capital.

It is well-known that Serb snipers in the hills surrounding the city would arbitrarily shoot residents on the streets below, and that select Serb allies (mostly Russians) were invited to fire some shots of their own. Yet, now we learn that this opportunity was provided not only as a gesture of appreciation, but also as a kind of tourist activity for paying customers. Through "safaris" organised by the Bosnian Serb Army, dozens of rich foreigners – mostly from the US, the UK and Italy, but also from Russia – paid top dollar for the chance to shoot at helpless civilians.

Consider the special form of subjectivity that such a safari would confer on the "hunter." Though the victims were anonymous, this was no video game; the perverse thrill lay in the fact that it was real. And yet, by playing the "hunter," these rich tourists, occupying a safe perch above the city, effectively excluded themselves from

ordinary reality. For their targets, the stakes were life or death.

There is something perversely honest in this melding of reality and spectacle. After all, aren't top politicians and corporate managers also engaged in a kind of safari? From their safe perch in the C-suite, executives often ruin many lives.

Dmitry Medvedev, a former Russian president who now serves as deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, recently imputed a similar logic to Western political leaders. Dismissing warnings by the US and Nato about the consequences of a Russian tactical nuclear strike, Medvedev argued, "[T]he security of Washington, London, Brussels is much more important for the North Atlantic Alliance than the fate of a dying Ukraine that no one needs. The supply of modern weapons is just a business for Western countries. Overseas and European demagogues are not going to perish in a nuclear apocalypse. Therefore, they will swallow the use of any weapon in the current conflict."

Medvedev has also said that the Kremlin will "do everything" to prevent "hostile neighbours" like "Nazi Ukraine" from acquiring or hosting

nuclear weapons, as this supposedly would pose an existential threat to the Russian state. But since it is Russia that is threatening Ukraine's existence as a state, Medvedev's logic dictates that Ukraine, too, should have arms – and even nuclear weapons – to achieve military parity.

Recall Putin's own words this past June, "... there is no in-between, no intermediate state: either a country is sovereign, or it is a colony, no matter what the colonies are called." Since he obviously views Ukraine as a Russian colony, the West should not treat Ukraine as though it agreed with him. That means rejecting the idea that Western powers should bypass Ukraine and broker a settlement with Russia.

Unfortunately, many Western leftists have been playing directly into Putin's hands on this issue. Consider Harlan Ullman of the Atlantic Council, who writes, "Clemenceau observed that 'war is too important to be left to the generals.' In this case, is Ukraine too important to be left to Zelensky? The US needs a strategy with an off-ramp to seek an end to the violence and the war."

But if we had followed the peaceniks' advice and not sent arms to Ukraine, that country would now be fully occupied, its subjugation accompanied by far greater atrocities than those found in Bucha, Izium, and many other places.

A far better stance has been advocated by the German Greens, who advocate not only full support for Ukraine, but also structural reforms to accelerate the transition away from oil and gas, which in turn will steer humanity away from

the catastrophic climate change. The rest of the Western left has been on safari, refusing an intervention that will not challenge its established way of life.

Peaceniks argue that Russia needs a victory or concession that will allow it to "save face." But that logic cuts both ways. Following Medvedev and Putin's nuclear threats, it is Ukraine and the West that can no longer compromise and still save face. Recall that Medvedev predicted that the West would refuse to respond militarily to a Russian nuclear strike because it is too cowardly and greedy to do so.

Here, we enter the domain of philosophy, because Putin and Medvedev's words clearly echo Hegel's master-slave dialectic. If two self-consciousnesses are engaged in a life-or-death struggle, there can be no winner, because one will die, and the victor will no longer have another self-consciousness around who can recognise its own self-consciousness. The entire history of human culture rests on the original compromise by which someone becomes the servant that "averts its eyes" to prevent mutual, assured destruction.

Medvedev and Putin presume that the decadent, hedonist West will avert its eyes. And that brings us back to the dynamic captured in *Sarajevo Safari*. Privileged elites feel as though they can intervene in the real world in strategic ways that entail no personal danger. But reality catches up with everyone eventually. When it does, we must not heed the advice of those concerned only with not provoking the beast in the valley.