

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Corruption has crossed all limits

BPC once again found to be at the centre of it

According to yet another damning audit report by the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), the Standard Asiatic Oil Company Ltd (SAOCL), a subsidiary of the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), has deprived the government – or, more accurately, the people – of Tk 472.7 crore through 21 counts of irregularities. This came to light after the CAG went over the company's books from 2012-13 to 2019-20 fiscal years and made field visits. Over the past several weeks, multiple audit reports by the CAG have given us a small peek behind the curtain to see how different government organisations are functioning. And the picture that has formed from what little information we have seen so far is truly terrifying.

SAOCL is a 50-50 joint venture between the BPC and the Asiatic Industries. According to the CAG audit report, anomalies in the SAOCL include embezzlement by top officials, high rates, overtime, missing funds, irregularities in payment of litigation fees, and violation of the Income Tax Ordinance and VAT Rules. Moinuddin Ahmed, one of its five directors and the president of its management advisory committee, was found majorly involved in the irregularities.

Ahmed took out Tk 86.7 crore from SAOCL's bank accounts for company purposes from FY 2011-12 to FY2013-14 without furnishing any vouchers or invoices for the advances. He also withdrew Tk 23.11 crore from FY2012-13 to FY2015-16 in advance – thanks to no withdrawal ceiling – and never returned the funds. According to an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Ahmed bought two flats under his wife's name on Gulshan Avenue for Tk 12.37 crore and six flats for Tk 10.31 crore in Lalmatia, North Kamalapur, Baridhara, Bashundhara, and Chattogram's Halishahar with the money embezzled from SAOCL.

While Ahmed is currently under ACC investigation, it is obvious given the scale of the irregularities that the BPC's internal controls have failed, as auditors have pointed out. Therefore, the government should launch a full-scale investigation into the matter and bring to book all those responsible. This is not the first audit report to disclose the outright looting of public funds that is happening in relation to the BPC. A previous audit report submitted in parliament in June revealed that the state coffer was robbed of about Tk 4,697 crore because of irregularities in 11 companies under Petrobangla between FY2014-15 and FY2016-17, and in two companies of BPC in FY2013-14.

Therefore, we cannot accept the statement made by the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources that, "BPC is responsible for looking into the issue of SAOCL. If BPC finds any irregularity, then they can take action." Clearly the BPC has failed that task, and it is such lackadaisical attitude on the minister's part that is partly responsible for it. We expect the concerned minister in particular, and the government in general, to take the findings of the audit reports much more seriously. Bangladesh is currently going through a significant economic crisis. And government corruption has been one of the biggest reasons behind that. It is high time we established some accountability and transparency in governance.

## DU must take sexual harassment seriously

No university admin should be protecting teachers accused of crimes

This year, over and over again, we have come across reports of students – especially female students – facing discrimination, harassment, and abuse on the country's university campuses. Many of these led to widespread protests, such as at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in January, which spiralled into a wider movement after a female student accused her dorm principal of misbehaving with her, and at Chittagong University in July, when the authorities failed to take action against five influential students who had attempted to sexually abuse a female student. In almost all of these cases, the situation was grossly mishandled by the respective university administration, who were accused of failing to protect student rights.

We are greatly concerned to now find yet another complaint of a similar vein, this time levelled at the Dhaka University administration. According to a report in this daily, the university's anti-sexual harassment cell has failed to finish its probe, eight months after a student brought an allegation of sexual harassment against an associate professor of the peace and conflict studies department, despite the fact that an initial fact-finding committee found proof of the allegation made against him.

Complaints of sexual harassment should be taken seriously by any university administration, but even more so when it is against a senior member of its own staff. It is appalling that the DU authorities have not only failed to do so, but are also being accused of actively prolonging the investigation on purpose, to protect the accused individual. Despite the fact that the 2009 sexual harassment protection policy, adopted for educational institutions upon a High Court directive, clearly states that such probes must be completed within 60 working days, there does not seem to be any urgency on the part of Dhaka University abide by this.

Even worse, the professor heading the anti-sexual harassment cell, instead of doing everything in her power to ensure that justice prevails, has been reportedly harassing the student with probing questions and demanding evidence. On one occasion, the accused teacher was even allowed to sit near the student and question her along with other members of the cell.

It truly beggars belief that teachers who are meant to set an example for their students are seemingly misusing their positions of power to harass an already traumatised student, instead of providing her with the support she deserves.

What is the point of having an anti-sexual harassment cell if it fails to carry out its duties, and instead uses its influence to protect the accused? If this probe is allowed to die out, it will discourage students from speaking out about harassment and abuse in educational institutions across the country, with dangerous implications for students' and women's rights and safety. If the DU administration is not willing to follow through, perhaps it is high time for law enforcement and the criminal justice system to step in.

# How reality could imitate representation



**BLOWN' IN THE WIND**  
Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I had a whale of a time watching *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Those who have watched this popular South Korean drama portraying a young autistic lawyer must have noticed my wordplay on "whale." The central character of the drama, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), has an obsession with whales. Although she has never seen mammals in her real life and abhors the idea of seeing the animals in an aquarium, she constantly equates her situation with the deep-sea species. Woo's affinity with the mammal is further accentuated by her eating habit which includes *kimbab* – seaweed-wrapped rice rolls. Every day, her father packs her lunch of perfectly sliced rolls, knowing that it is important for his daughter to have food where all the ingredients are visible.

I got hooked on the series after watching the first episode primarily because of the father-daughter bonding. My daughter, who has grown up to be a fine young woman pursuing her career overseas, has had an obsession with sharks ever since she watched *Jaws* as a child, and prefers eating only chicken curry, rice and *daal*. Somehow, the series struck a paternal chord in me as I allowed myself to be educated on developmental disabilities that are often considered taboo in our society. There have been many occasions when I turned away from movies or texts dealing with a mental disorder as they made me uncomfortable. I am not unique in my denial of learning about autism.

We hear of the struggles that our friends, relatives or colleagues are facing, only to indulge in customary pep talks or to shy away from the topic. We breathe a sigh of relief, thanking our luck for not having to go through the terrible troubles of paying for extra care or finding special schools for our children. The K drama puts a human face to the disorder and highlights an important message: individuals with ASD are not necessarily incompetent and incapable of communicating. Often, they develop special characteristics and are misunderstood by the people who surround them. The signs of disorder in children with ASD become visible



VISUAL: STAR

when they start talking. However, the extraordinary characteristics of some of these individuals can be nurtured through timely interventions and familial care. Like Woo, they can be prepared for life by making significant contributions to society.

Attorney Woo's extraordinary memorising skills and photographic memory help her to attend the prestigious Seoul National University and attain a perfect score in her bar examinations. Due to the taboo that persists in South Korea, she finds it difficult to get a job with her communicative disorder. An owner of a leading law firm has a vested interest in giving Woo the necessary opportunity to prove herself in the professional field. The drama of political intrigues and unquenched romance humanises ASD and draws attention to a cause that otherwise would have been met with ignorance and indifference.

I was so excited by the series that I even posted my reaction on Facebook, only to realise that this series has been a crowd-puller. Such reactions made me distinguish my two selves. In my

professional life, I often come across students with autistic characteristics who fail to fit in with their classmates. They sometimes become subjected to humiliation or bullying, notwithstanding our institutional policy of inclusion and plurality.

The simple fact is that not all teachers and students have the empathy to accommodate people with different abilities. Yet, in my "personal" self, I,

systems of child development and functioning.

In Bangladesh, Shuchona Foundation stands out for its remarkable efforts in spreading awareness about autism in the country. It was instrumental in pursuing some key policy-level interventions. The endorsement of the disability rights law and the neurodevelopmental disability protection law are cases in point. Initiatives are now underway to

like my Facebook friends, was ready to imagine an ideal scenario where we would desire an extraordinary character like Attorney Woo to succeed in her profession, fall in love, and live a normal life.

The challenge for us is to curate the second self, the inner goodness in us that often loses its way when faced with reality. Parents of autistic children are told to place their children in mainstream schools for faster social assimilation. But our mainstream system, notwithstanding the national policies adopted in 2013, is far from ready to provide space to those who are different. Many parents conceal the neurological diagnoses of their children from their friends and relatives. Some secretly blame themselves or their luck for their "misfortunes."

The stigma is probably responsible for the lack of data to reflect the real extent of ASD in Bangladesh. According to several surveys, about 0.17 percent of the population is diagnosed with ASD in Bangladesh. The rates are higher in some other countries as they have more rigorous and regular measurement

amend the laws to align our national policies with the international goals of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The success of the K-drama shows that social awareness can be boosted through the use of new media. The Netflix series has shed light on different issues related to discrimination against people with disabilities, including autism. Conversely, the naivety of the central character has allowed the filmmaker to make some social commentary that would have been difficult to articulate through a "normal" character. For instance, in one episode, Attorney Woo fights and wins a case against religious extortion in the name of protecting a temple site from tourism. She thus acts like *Bibek* (conscience) in our traditional *jatra* or the Fool in a Shakespearean drama. The wise-fool paradox in a character with ASD demands further discussion and illustration. One awaits the day when a character like Woo from Bangladesh will win our national hearts and impress the global audience.

## Who's behind the recent violence in the Rohingya camps?



**A CLOSER LOOK**  
Tasneem Tayeb  
is a columnist for The Daily Star.  
Her Twitter handle is @tasneem\_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

Forty-year-old Ayatullah and 30-year-old Yasin had been asleep when, in the wee hours of October 27, 2022, they were dragged out of their shelter in Block C of Camp 17 by more than a dozen criminals and were fatally shot. According to the victims' families, both were vocal against criminal activities in the Rohingya refugee camps and had often cooperated with law enforcement agencies.

Earlier, on October 15, miscreants shot dead two community leaders – also known as *majhi* – Mohammad Anwar and Mohammad Yunus of Camp 13. On October 12, Camp 9's sub-*majhi* Mohammad Hossain was killed. In the last month alone, at least nine Rohingya refugees have been killed – including an 11-year-old child who was a collateral damage in a shootout between criminals and the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) – while more than 25 Rohingyas have been killed between June and October this year.

Fresh tensions have been brewing in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh over the last couple of years. This resulted in the brutal murder of Rohingya leader and activist Mohib Ullah, at the Kutupalong camp in the district's Ukhiya upazila, on September 29, 2021, followed by the bloodbath unleashed by criminals

upon Darul Ulum Nadwatul Ulama Al-Islamia Madrasa in Camp 18, killing six Rohingyas, including madrasa leader Maulana Akiz.

It is common knowledge that, over the years, vested quarters beyond our borders have been vying to assert their control over these refugee camps in the Rohingya camps and had often cooperated with law enforcement agencies.

And the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is increasingly being alleged by refugees to be behind many of the recent attacks.

The police charge sheet for Mohib Ullah's murder includes 29 Rohingyas, many of whom are suspected to be ARSA members. ARSA has also been accused of being behind the attack on the madrasa, as the madrasa chief Maulana Akiz had, on previous occasions, resisted ARSA's overtures to use it as their basecamp, according to media reports. In fact, it has been suggested in media reports, citing local law enforcement officials, that both ARSA and a Rohingya organisation named Islami Mahas have been in a tussle over dominance and control of about 300 madrasas in the Rohingya camps.

Although Bangladesh officially rules out the possibility of ARSA operating inside the country, in view of the recent developments and testimonials from refugees themselves, which suggest that ARSA operatives are active inside the Rohingya camps, we must look into the factors behind their increasing interest in the country.

For one, in the wake of the Myanmar military junta's decision to give away Rohingya lands and properties to the military-controlled Border Guard Police Division Office, ARSA is increasingly losing their foothold in the Rakhine state. The vulnerable, volatile Rohingya camps may look like the perfect setting for such a relocation. A January 2022 article published by *The Diplomat*, titled "ARSA After the Myanmar Coup: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," suggests that "ARSA has lost access to the disenfranchised population base from which it drew its strength. It is for this reason that ARSA has shifted much of its recruitment and sustenance activity from northern Rakhine state to refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh."

Also, yaba trade through Bangladesh is profitable. The country, sitting at the centre of three major drug trafficking routes of the continent – the Golden Triangle, the Golden Crescent and the Golden Wedge – finds itself in a tough spot as a convenient trafficking transit.

While the country is not a producer of drugs, it has become a growing consumer market, especially of yaba. Myanmar, being one of the key producers of yaba in the region, finds Bangladesh a lucrative market – not just for transit, but also for direct sales. Although the Teknaf border was previously a convenient

smuggling route, after law enforcement crackdown, an alternative route has been found through Naikhyangchhari, which facilitates the smuggling of 80 percent of the total yaba supply to the country, of which around 70 percent is sold in the camps and the rest across the country. A complete dominance of this market would be highly lucrative for any group, and ARSA also has an eye out for this.

In the midst of the ever-shifting geopolitical landscape of the region, one cannot rule out the possibility of the Myanmar junta using ARSA and other gangs inside the Rohingya camps to keep tensions high there and eliminate the pro-repatriation elements to completely annihilate the possibility of the repatriation of Rohingyas to their homeland.

In view of these scenarios, it is high time Bangladesh reviewed the situation in Rohingya camps, including the extent and intensity of ARSA's activities and their potential operability, and also assessed the drivers behind the recent rise in violence in the camps, leaving no possibility unexplored.

We cannot just allow criminal elements to violate our territorial integrity and flout our law and order system. We must assess and eliminate all possible risks before the situation spirals out of control.

However, in doing so, we must keep in mind that it is only a minority of Rohingya refugees who get involved in these activities, and they should not be subjected to collective punishment or mass demonisation, simply because we are their host. This is a delicate situation and should be handled by authorities and the people with the empathy it demands.