

Students or criminals?

Take action against the DU students involved in mugging, harassing people on campus

We are alarmed by the increasing incidents of mugging on the campus of Dhaka University (DU) where the culprits are none other than students. According to media reports, several such incidents have taken place over the last one month alone. The latest case to be reported saw a married couple mugged near the Shaheed Minar area on February 4. The couple was attacked by a group of 10 to 12 men who not only took away their cash and ATM cards, but also beat them mercilessly. And when their uncle, who happened to be an official of DU, tried to save them, the muggers assaulted him as well.

One may wonder who these students are, or why they are engaging in such petty crimes on their own campus. The answer is probably known to all: these muggers are reportedly leaders and activists of the dreaded Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) unit of DU. Apparently, there are several such criminal groups active on the campus who are led by the BCL. The group that attacked the couple in question was reportedly led by BCL activists belonging to the Masterda Surja Sen Hall.

BCL's involvement was found in all recent criminal activities reported in the area – for example, beating and snatching Tk 15,000 from a covered-van driver, vandalising a shop at Bangabazar because its owner refused to pay extortion money, assaulting a woman and her husband at Suhrawardy U'dyan, etc. While these organised groups mostly target non-students passing by or through the campus, students are also not spared. Our reporters talked to several students who said they knew someone who had been assaulted or mugged on campus, while many said they had been victims themselves. The situation has turned so bad in recent times that even the Shahbagh police station acknowledged it.

The question is, what action has the university administration taken against these criminal groups? Nothing visible or effective yet. This is quite disturbing. The administration clearly does not have the will to hold BCL-linked criminals to account due to political reasons. And when it comes to ordinary students, they hardly have the courage to speak up against the BCL or report such crimes. The case with the police is the same as well. They sometimes arrest students committing such crimes, only to release them a few days later. The inaction of the university administration and law enforcers as well as the silence of the victims are thus creating an environment in which such crimes are on the rise, to say nothing of other atrocities routinely committed by BCL on the campus. This must stop.

We urge the authorities to take a strong position against on-campus criminal activities and take action against all those involved. They should also take necessary steps to prevent mugging – such as installing adequate street lights and CCTV cameras, increasing patrols on campus, etc. – to ensure the safety of students and ordinary people.

Telegu people need levelling up

Eviction fears expose generational vulnerability of DSCC cleaners

It is disconcerting to know that the Telegu community at the Dhalpur area of Jatrabari has been passing their days in fear of being evicted following a verbal notice issued to vacate houses on land owned by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). According to media reports, there are about 16 acres of government land in Outfall No. 14 of Dhalpur, where over a thousand members of the Telegu community live. The eviction drive, which was set to begin on February 12, targets illegally built houses, and barring any rehabilitation, community members fear they would end up homeless. Even though the DSCC apparently has a plan to build housing for them on six acres of land after clearance, the message clearly hasn't been convincing enough.

We cannot help but wonder why the authorities would opt to evict a marginalised community that has lived there for long without rehabilitating them first. Where will they stay during the time between clearance and building new housing? How long will it take? Will all the tenants be accommodated there? These are valid questions, and with a history of discrimination and social ostracism facing them over the decades, the community is justified in distrusting the authorities or any eviction plan, which activists have rightly termed “illegal” and “whimsical”.

The Telegu people form a small part of the Harijan caste, the so-called “untouchables”, known for their hereditary professions involving rawhide processing, tea plantation, sanitation work, manual scavenging, etc. In cities, you see them mostly in sanitation work on behalf of the city corporations, as cleaners, sweepers, and garbage collectors, keeping our neighbourhoods clean and habitable. Thus they provide a vital service to our cities, and should be recognised and duly rewarded for it. The reality, however, is totally different. Not only do these people have to suffer poor pay and zero employee benefits, but they are also deprived of the chance to live with dignity as well as services that others take for granted. Without any political representation, and hardly any opportunity for their children to pursue high studies, their voice remains unheard, their future pitted against the same uncertainties that plagued them for generations.

The Telegu people are found in various slums and “colonies” in Dhaka. At the Dhalpur area of Jatrabari, we're told that community leaders were warned by the Jatrabari Police Station not to disobey the instructions of the DSCC or hold any protest publicly, essentially depriving them of their democratic rights. This is quite alarming. We understand that the DSCC is within its rights to reclaim occupied land, but it must be sensible in such cases. Eviction without rehabilitation is not the way to go.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to reconsider their plan so that Telegu workers in DSCC's employ, as well as their families, are safely rehabilitated before any eviction is carried out. They must also take steps to ensure that this marginalised community is not left behind in our drive for development.

Can Bangladesh get out of the Adani power deal?



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

As Indian billionaire Gautam Adani's business empire and its practices have become a subject of intense global scrutiny, Bangladesh, too, seems to be drawn under the scanner. More and more experts are now coming out questioning the rationale behind Bangladesh's power purchase deal with Adani Power (Jharkhand) Limited (APJL), which many of them have termed as “one-sided” and against Bangladesh's interests. Amid such controversy, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, adviser to the prime minister on energy, while responding to questions from the Indian media recently, said talks with the Adani Group on power supply were “private” and “can't be made public.”

It's unclear whether the prime minister's energy adviser meant commercial secrecy of the deal or the political compulsion alleged by *The Washington Post* in a report on December 9, 2022. The question of commercial secrecy is no longer a valid argument, since a number of news organisations have obtained a copy of the contract and experts have published detailed analysis of it. Reviewing the Adani contract, *The Washington Post* suggested that though the deal appeared unfavourable, not signing it was not an option for political reasons.

Surprisingly, the Bangladesh government did not respond to the newspaper's request for comments or protest its suggestions after the story was published. This policy of secrecy seems to be maintained strictly, as the government refrains from contesting the claims in the local press that the APJL will be paid almost double the purchase price of power compared to that paid to Bangladeshi producers, and three times the price of power imported from other sources in India at present. These price comparisons are crucial as the import of Adani power is in addition to the existing overcapacity.

Last week, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, in his speech in Lok Sabha, made similar suggestions when he questioned why Prime Minister Narendra Modi's deal for selling power to Bangladesh became a deal between Bangladesh and the Adani



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Group. Rahul Gandhi's attack on Modi's relationship with Adani is nothing new. What's new, though, is the timing as the Adani Group's share values and fortune have been bleeding heavily following the allegations of widespread fraud and irregularities by the well-known activist investment firm Hindenburg Research. Hindenburg called it “the largest con in corporate history.”

Before all this media brouhaha, another serious research pointed out the flaw in the contract and put out a figure of more than USD one billion that Adani would be getting from Bangladesh over its 25-year term. In a joint study, published in June 2022, the Bangladesh Working Group on External Debt (BWGED) and Growthwatch, a voluntary research and advocacy institution in India, said the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) would have to pay a maximum of USD 1.17 billion and a minimum of USD 918.18 million per year to buy electricity from Adani Group's Godda Power Plant. Of this amount, USD 423.29 million is the capacity charge per year, which amounts to USD 11.01 billion over its lifetime, which will only benefit the billionaire Adani Group to make more money.

According to India's Guidelines on Cross Border Trade of Electricity, coal-fired power plants owned by private companies would only be allowed to export electricity if they had surplus capacity. AdaniWatch says India still doesn't have power surplus, and bending the rules by the state of Jharkhand to exempt Adani may not be legal.

It then adds that Adani's inclusion of costs that appear to be non-existent may allow Bangladesh to claim the deal invalid, too. According to the report, under the contract, the BPDB will have to pay a reference tariff that includes excise duty, customs duty for imported goods, service tax, krishi kallyan tax, central sales tax, VAT on equipment, composite tax on civil construction, work contract tax, construction workers' welfare fees, water charges, and income tax. But four and a half months before the contract was signed, the Indian government rolled out a comprehensive Goods and Services Tax regime, replacing almost all those state and centre taxes. Then again in 2019, 15 months after signing the contract, the Godda Power Plant project was declared a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), granting them a lot of tax exemptions. Documents

that APJL must inform BPDB of any changes in law that might affect these assumptions within 30 days of such an occurrence, and any variation shall be adjusted in the reference capacity price.” Clearly, the PPA was signed without informing the BPDB about the changes that hugely cut APJL's tax liabilities. AdaniWatch asks whether these changes were notified to the other contracting party, and if it wasn't, the agreement may be legally voided by the BPDB for breach of contract.

There's scant public debate in Bangladesh over such a costly blunder, compared to foreign observers and media, despite the fact that it will be the Bangladeshi consumers who will have to carry the burden. Adani Power Ltd, on February 3, 2023, informed the National Stock Exchange of India that its subsidiary APJL had received a request from the BPDB to consider a discount on the energy charge as per the PPA, adding that no PPA amendment was under consideration. This latest development suggests that the BPDB might do well by demanding scrapping the contract for the deliberate breach by Adani to take undue advantage. Or else questions of political compulsion would prove hard to dispel.

Taxing air travel could fund climate victims

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

Dr Mizan R Khan is deputy director of ICCCAD.

SALEEMUL HUQ and MIZAN R KHAN

Last year, the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27) for climate change agreed to establish a loss and damage (L&D) finance facility to support the recovery from loss and damage caused by the increasing impacts of climate change. The decision to establish an L&D fund can be regarded as just a political win; it is not a climate win yet.

COP27 established a 24-member Transitional Committee to develop a framework to operationalise the L&D facility, to be adopted at COP28 in Dubai this year. The framework is expected to include the approaches, modalities and sources to capitalise this finance facility.

A number of funding proposals have been made by different parties and agencies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including the G20 Ministers and the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Climate Financing, over the last 15 years. They included new and innovative avenues such as financial transaction tax, air passenger levy, levy on military expenditures, etc. This is because public financing from developed countries will never be sufficient for

this purpose. Funding mechanisms that are independent of public treasuries of the developed countries can substantially complement the mobilisation of L&D funds.

The COP27 decision also indicates exploring innovative financing options. However, the current international environment is not very conducive for minimum public financing because of the global pandemic fallout as well as the ongoing war in Ukraine. The procrastination of politicking to mobilise the long-pledged USD 100 billion support is a case in point.

The LDCs also made a proposal at COP14 back in 2008 for a modest international air passenger adaptation levy (IAPAL). The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) also proposed a multi-window facility focusing on insurance and rehabilitation schemes. But neither of these suggestions were accepted by the UNFCCC negotiators. There was some opposition from some developing countries, including the SIDS, that a levy on air travel would likely impact the tourism industry negatively, which is the main source of external revenues for many of those countries.

It may be mentioned that the foundational principle for addressing climate impacts remains Article 3.1 of the UNFCCC: the common but differentiated responsibility based on respective capabilities (CBDR-RC). This principle implicitly implies the polluter pays-principle (PPP), which should be the cardinal basis of mobilising money to address climate change impacts. The climate regime

is based on the neoliberal market-based economic system. However, the most fundamental of solutions under this very system lies in internalising the emission externalities that cause climate change. This is being applied by many countries, both developed and developing, in the form of carbon pricing – either through imposing a tax or emissions trading. The number of these schemes at present is well over 70 globally.

While these instruments are applied nationally, there are still no schemes at the international level to tax the externalities. The reason is, unlike solid waste, air pollution does not stay put within national borders. Now that there is an agreement on an L&D facility, interests are renewed at the policy and academic levels to look for new, extra-budgetary sources of funding. The suggested list includes, among others, a tax on fossil fuel companies, carbon pricing at global level, financial transaction tax, climate damage tax, levies on maritime and air transportation, solidarity payment, taxing billionaires, etc. Among all these, levies on maritime and air travels are being discussed very actively.

In this context, the proposal for international air passenger levy could be revisited. Air travel has changed a lot since the proposal was tabled in 2008, including the factors that determine the volume of air travel. Flying now includes a whole gamut of factors, such as historic heritage and entertainment facilities at destinations, volume of business travel, cost of accommodation at destinations, food costs, internal

transport facilities, security-related issues and other charges imposed on travellers. So, demand for flying is not affected just by a little hike in ticket pricing.

In the last 15 years, average income across the world has risen significantly, including in developing countries. This and the enhanced demand for tourism are likely to cancel out the possible negative impact on the demand due to a little price hike. Also, the earlier opposition by the LDCs and SIDS against this levy may not hold now, in view of a sense of solidarity among the UNFCCC parties to mobilise fundings for an L&D facility.

So, we renew the proposal to revive the IAPAL in this changing context of global political-economic environment and the rising sense of climate emergency. The earlier proposal quantified the total revenue generation of around USD 10 billion, based on the levies of USD 4 and USD 40 on economy class and business/first class, respectively. The proposal warrants substantial research to look into the latest developments in air travel and the potential of mobilising new money for the L&D facility from this particular sector. Different scenarios may be developed under different levels of levies.

With this perspective, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) has undertaken a study on reviving the IAPAL proposal as a source of capitalising the loss and damage financing facility, the findings of which will be shared with a wide range of stakeholders well ahead of COP28.