The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Raids at BBC's India offices deeply concerning

Angst over media coverage should be countered with facts, not harassment

We are very concerned and disappointed with the raids at the BBC offices in India, following the recent controversy over its showing of a two-part investigative documentary on the Gujarat riots of 2002. It is a direct threat to freedom of the press. The Indian government has argued that the sudden raids on the BBC's offices by the Indian tax authorities have no relationship with the news agency's airing of the documentary – but we in the media have become quite used to this phenomenon. Whenever the media publishes something that governments do not approve of, we see governments resorting to tactics of harassment – whether through legal, financial, or other threats. And these events are never coincidences.

Any government may feel aggrieved by certain media coverage. And it may also be because the coverage was inaccurate, in which case the fault could lie with the media. But the right way to go about addressing this is through providing accurate counter information. If there were any flaws within the BBC's documentary, the correct way to expose those mistakes would have been for the Indian authorities to provide counter facts. Any government, when it is unsatisfied with a media content, has the right to challenge it by pointing out flaws and factual errors. However, to use the might of the state machinery to harass the media should never be acceptable in any democratic society. Moreover, such pressure – whether it be legal, financial, or otherwise – never works to achieve the end goal.

Ultimately, the media's job is to inform the public. And the public never sees suppression of the media in a positive light. Whenever a state machinery harasses the media right after it has revealed information that the government feels apprehensive of, the people never see it as being a coincidence. Rather, it only further corrodes the state's credibility in the eyes of the public.

Rights groups around the world have already expressed their concerns about the deterioration of press freedom in India. And this latest incident only brings it under more global spotlight for the wrong reasons. Therefore, we agree with the statement of the Indian Press Club that, "Such an action against an international broadcasting network will damage the reputation and image of India as the largest democracy." As such, we hope the Indian government will restrain its agencies from misusing their powers to intimidate the media.

Unfortunately, the misuse of state power to harass the media has been increasing all around the world, including in our country. It is something that should concern all those who believe in the values of a democratic society. We hope the Indian government, as well as all other governments around the world, realise how counterproductive such actions are, and refrain from any such intimidation tactics. Instead, governments should engage more with the media in the realm of information, and look to provide counter evidence when it believes certain coverage by the media has not been accurate.

Cutting UN aid will spell disaster for Rohingya refugees

Int'l community must live up to its commitment

We are shocked and dismayed by the news that the United Nations plans to cut food aid to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh with full knowledge of how vulnerable this over one million population is and what catastrophic consequences such cuts will have.

The UN is blaming the cuts on funding shortfall but as many international agencies are saying, this harsh decision will lead to greater food insecurity and malnutrition for the Rohingya refugees. More than a third of Rohingya refugee children are stunted and underweight. Starting next month, WFP is being compelled to reduce the value of its food assistance to USD 10 per person from USD 12.

We agree with the two UN special rapporteurs who have said that this would have devastating consequences and that it is "unconscionable" to cut rations just before Ramadan.

We have been hearing about cuts in UN funding for Rohingya refugees for the last few years. In August 2022, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) appealed to the international community for help and cited the plight of the Rohingya refugees who are living in very difficult conditions and who have slim prospects of being rehabilitated to their home country. Only 49 percent of the USD 881 million in the 2022 response plan was given at the time.

Bangladesh has made huge sacrifices to host the refugees and is struggling with the economic, environmental, and social impacts of having such a mammoth refugee population in its land. The most sustainable solution would be the safe, dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees, which would give them full citizenship rights. But the international community has failed to broker such a peaceful repatriation.

Given the reality of the Myanmar government's refusal to take back its people and the growing vulnerability of the Rohingya refugees in the camps, it is shocking that the UN is reconciled with cutting these essential humanitarian funds. Aid shortages will mean more malnutrition, more diseases, fewer health services, and increased insecurity as violence in the camps will escalate further. It will also increase the number of desperate, risky journeys made by Rohingyas towards foreign lands – which have often led to tragic deaths. Thus, an already desolate situation is about to get worse for these victims of genocide and forced displacement.

We join the voices of various agencies working on the ground in their alarm over this decision by the UN to cut aid. We understand the global pressures of food and general inflation due to the prolonged war in Ukraine. But this is a continuing humanitarian disaster created by Myanmar, one that has imposed a huge burden on Bangladesh – which itself has been impacted by the global economic crisis. The international community must pool together the funds required to meet the bare minimum humanitarian needs of the Rohingyas until a sustainable solution is found.

RHETORIC OR REALITY?

IMF's conditions on governance and corruption

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IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

Among numerous conditions that the Bangladesh government has agreed to in order to secure the IMF loan of USD 4.7 billion – to be disbursed over 42 months – is a set of pledges to strengthen governance and control corruption (SGCC). If given due seriousness, SGCC is not merely a standalone but a cross-cutting prerequisite for nearly every other deliverable under the reform package.

Contained in paragraph 31 of the Attachment-I of Bangladesh's letter of intent of December 23, 2022, these commitments are nothing new, especially in view of the highest level of political and governmental pledge repeatedly announced about strengthening governance, including zero tolerance against corruption. Failure to translate these into reality has now converted the government's own commitments into IMF conditions.

As unspecific and questionable as the paragraph is, it does contain a few notable items which, if effectively implemented, may open up opportunities to at least partially challenge the deep and fast-spreading menace of governance deficit and corruption.

The pledges include: a) moving towards international best practices on anti-money laundering by enhancing risk based supervision (RBS) covering cross-border activity and trade-based money laundering; b) amending the Companies Act to facilitate beneficial ownership transparency (BOT) in the financial sector and strengthen central bank governance and fiscal transparency; and c) combating corruption by safeguarding the independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The key question is regarding if and to what extent any substantive difference will be made.

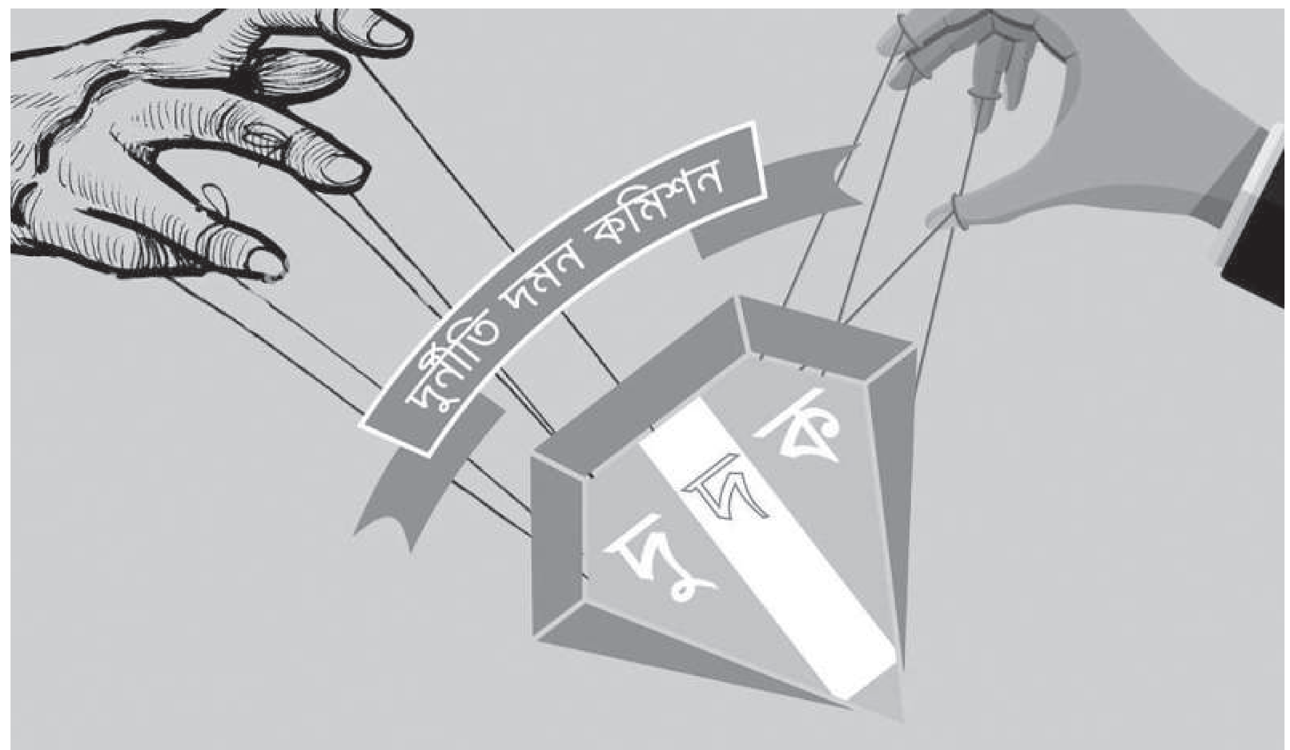
SGCC have long been part of the government's own pledges to the people, especially since the 2008 national election, reflected in many ways including in the election manifesto, Vision 2021, followed by 2041, and in the SDG 16. Specific items like actions to control money laundering and promote beneficial ownership transparency, central bank governance, and fiscal transparency have long been among the key issues of voice and advocacy in civil society.

The irony is that, if the government could have delivered its own SGCC pledges, especially in terms of grand corruption, banking sector scandals, and money laundering (including trade-based and other forms of illicit international financial transfers), there would be no need to opt for this loan from the IMF.

If Global Financial Integrity reports on trade-based annual illicit transfers of USD 8.75 billion out of Bangladesh during 2008-2015 could be updated consistent with the prevalent trend, the annual loss of Bangladesh on account of money laundering through invoicing fraud alone would be no less than USD 12 billion. Taking into account other forms of money laundering like hundi, it is obvious that an amount several times higher than the receivable from the IMF over 42 months could be annually available domestically.

That the IMF conditions include money laundering and other cross border financial activity, BOT, central bank governance, and fiscal transparency is therefore unsurprising. Hardly anything effective has been done in this regard over the years, despite the fact that the bank and non-bank financial sector of Bangladesh has long been devilled by scandalous corruption, including deliberate loan default, swindling, and money laundering. Hardly any of the kingpins of the scandals has been brought to account, while in most cases fake and anonymous entities have been used as enablers of the scandals.

As a result of unscrupulous secrecy of the real beneficiaries, those involved in banking sector corruption and money laundering have not only evaded accountability, but have also enjoyed ever-increasing lobbying power to extort more and more concessions. It is therefore pertinent to pledge to amend the Companies Act to facilitate BOT in the financial sector and strengthen central bank governance and fiscal transparency.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

If there is the necessary political will – and this is a big if – to fit the purpose, not only legal provisions but necessary institutional structure (including the national register of BOT) must be created to facilitate the disclosure of who ultimately owns, controls, and benefits from companies or other entities. BOT also needs to be accompanied by the adoption of the Common Reporting Standard (CRS), already in practice in 120 countries, for the automatic exchange of national and international financial transactions which will facilitate tracking money laundering and tax evasion.

The importance of safeguarding the ACC's independence is a no-brainer. The key to the ACC's effectiveness in delivering its mandate is independence, especially when setting the example that, in handling allegations of corruption, it is guided by equality before law, and not by the status or identity of the individual depending on their political, governmental, or other connections.

Ever since the ACC's birth, successive regimes have hardly shown sufficient evidence to have reconciled with its legally mandated authority to hold political, governmental, and business power-holders to account. Nor has the ACC succeeded in overcoming its mindset of operating like a government body.

Everything necessary to maintain bureaucratic control over the ACC, through placing deputed officials on the most senior seats, has been done. The ACC and the government have found common ground with regard to curtailing the ACC's independence. The Commission, for instance, found no problem in the repeated attempts to create an obligation for the ACC to seek government approval before taking public officials into custody for corruption investigation, ignoring the fact that this is contradictory to the constitutional provision of equality before law.

Against this backdrop, an office order on the delegation of administrative and financial authority, issued on January 18, 2022, has sweepingly assigned to the ACC secretary some key elements of the Commission's executive power, which were vested by law in the Commission understood as the Chair and other Commissioners. The order practically invalidated section 3(2) of the Act that stipulates ACC to be an independent and impartial organisation.

Whether or not effective actions will be taken to fulfil the pledge of SGCC will depend not on how the government plans to satisfy the IMF, but on the commitment and capacity of the political and bureaucratic authorities to prioritise public interest over anything else.

Driving sustainable and inclusive growth for everyone

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ARMIDA SALSIAH ALISJAHBANA

Rapid development in Asia and the Pacific has propelled the region to become a key engine of growth for the global economy. Yet, this prosperity has not reached everyone. And with the region not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, much work lies ahead of us.

As societies chart future paths, there are promising opportunities for driving sustainable and inclusive growth. Countries in Asia and the Pacific will discuss these issues, and more, as they convene this week at a regional UN forum on trade, investment, enterprise, and business innovation.

Digital trade and the digitalisation of trade processes in recent years are opening up new possibilities, facilitating access to new markets, lowering the costs of cross-border transactions, and easing participation in global and regional value chains, besides also reducing carbon emissions from trade and business.

More than ever, digital trade offers a springboard to foreign markets for less advantaged groups within countries. By linking businesses to a wider pool of consumers, e-commerce platforms enable more inclusive participation in the market, particularly for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), women-owned businesses, and those in remote locations. Furthermore, advances in trade facilitation help reduce setup and administrative costs, which can otherwise disproportionately impact smaller businesses.

Similarly, as one of the largest sources of financial flows into developing countries, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) presents untapped prospects for scaling up projects that contribute to gender equality, empower small businesses, and bridge digital divides. Asia and the Pacific has been the leading destination and source of FDI globally since 2020. However, quantity has not necessarily meant quality.

Investor practices must shift towards investing for social and environmental impact, beyond investing solely for economic gains. At the same time, government agencies responsible for investment promotion require support to incorporate and encourage this change in investment behaviour. More resources and greater prioritisation should be dedicated to attracting and working with foreign partners who focus on people and the planet alongside profit.

Within countries, the emergence of innovative business models such as social enterprises and inclusive businesses is enabling inclusive and sustainable growth. These models tackle social and environmental challenges through their business operations and provide livelihoods, products, and services to those at the base of the economic pyramid. Across the region, governments are also starting to implement supportive policies such as tax incentives and wage subsidies for social entrepreneurs and inclusive businesses, as well as provision of public advisory services and training courses.

In all these efforts, partnership between the public and private sectors is crucial, particularly for infrastructure development in transport, energy, and health, which are critical for participation in economic and social spheres. Such public-private partnerships and networks can bring stakeholders together and facilitate much-needed support. Importantly, they can serve as platforms for learning and sharing experiences and the best practices in promoting sustainable development and building resilience to shocks such as pandemics and economic crises.

Particularly for smaller businesses, which often lack capacity and resources, networks are valuable avenues for obtaining new knowledge and know-how, seeking technical assistance, and building connections with public and private sector actors.

The benefits of these myriad opportunities will, however, not manifest automatically. Turning potential into reality calls for decisive policy action to foster an enabling environment and to take the necessary steps forward, underpinned by greater commitment, collaboration, and regional cooperation. Together, we can build a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future for our region.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781
thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/
EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam
Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net
Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222
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