

Blast after blast in Dhaka

Thorough investigations and better building safety are a must

Our deepest sympathy goes out to the victims of Tuesday's deadly blast in Gulistan which led to the death of at least 19 people so far, and injured over a hundred. Some of the injured, we are told, are in critical condition, so the death toll may rise further. The frequency with which such explosion or fire-related incidents have been occurring in recent times is really worrying. Just over a span of four days, there have been three such incidents. On Saturday, an oxygen plant in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila was rocked by an explosion that blew its entire roof off, killing at least seven people. The next day, there was an explosion at Dhaka's Science Lab area, which killed at least three and injured 40 others. The Gulistan explosion comes only two days after that.

According to those present there during the time of the blast, the whole neighbourhood apparently shook as if there was an earthquake. The windowpanes of the building where the blast occurred even fell onto the nearby street injuring pedestrians. What could have led to such a powerful explosion? Investigators so far have found no evidence of sabotage either in the Gulistan explosion or the Science Lab blast. Although their causes are yet to be fully determined, the chief of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) did suggest that accumulated gas may have caused the explosion at the Gulistan building.

Given that there is no option but to wait for the investigators to determine what caused the two explosions, we do not wish to speculate on them further. However, given the frequency of such cases and the damage they have caused – particularly in terms of lost lives – can they truly be called coincidences? Even if they were not the result of sabotage, the lack of focus given to building safety – which will become clear to anyone visiting the blast sites – is an issue that has long plagued Dhaka.

There is also the factor of efficiently conducting rescue operations, which deserves scrutiny. Reportedly, complications in getting clearance had delayed the resumption of rescue efforts at the Gulistan building on Tuesday night. Even though the fire service was ready to carry out their operation, they couldn't enter the building without clearance from the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk). Whatever the issue for the delay was, during emergencies, those precious moments that are lost due to various reasons/delays could make the difference between whether someone gets to live or not. Hence, the fire service and other first responders need to have all the support from every government agency to carry on their important duties during emergencies. This message must be sent to every agency, and clear channels of urgent communications should be set up.

We hope that thorough and independent investigations will be able to clear up the confusion surrounding what caused the two explosions in Dhaka. At the same time, we urge the authorities to take the matter of building safety seriously, and improve our disaster preparedness and responsiveness.

We need more women at the helm

Male-dominated ministries tell a worrying tale of gender equity

Although there have been positive changes in terms of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, the gender gap at the administration is still quite concerning. As a report by this daily has shown, based on a 2021 estimate from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the percentage of female officials was 19.62 percent in public administration, while it was 22.64 percent in field administration. Moreover, out of the 6,310 secretary-level posts under the public administration ministry, 5,072 were held by men while only 1,238 were held by women. The higher the positions, the fewer were women occupying them.

As per another report by the finance division from 2019-2020, the highest percentage of women officials was in the fisheries and livestock ministry – at only 27.59 percent!

These distressing statistics overshadow the fact that, despite the rise witnessed in school/college dropouts and consequently in child marriages since the outbreak of the pandemic, female students have outperformed their male counterparts every exam season for many years now. Why are there so few women in the public and field administrations then? Where do the successful female graduates go? Why are so many still failing to complete graduation, or embark on a profession of their choosing? And why are ministries that impact every aspect of women's lives have so few of them on their staff?

Experts think that lack of gender equity plays the most significant role behind the massive difference between male and female participations in our workforce. For one, female students often have to endure the scourge of early marriage as well as the stress of child-bearing without adequate support from their close ones. Some don't even make it to the tertiary level of education before they are forced to prioritise marriage over education. With the dominant social narrative being that it is more important for men to build their careers, women also do not receive much encouragement from their families to keep aiming high with their studies or work. And even when women do earn a place in the administration, their progress up the ladder is slowed down by various factors.

We call for a higher participation of women in administration – not to fulfil some arbitrary quota, but because it is crucial for women to hold as many of these offices as men. Only that can ensure gender equity at the local level. When citizens see women performing administrative roles which impact the management of a locality, the prevailing gender norms will inevitably shift towards being more women-friendly. As such, the onus is on the government to make space for more women officials by ensuring a safe, flexible, and supportive working environment for them. Introducing proper transport services and day-care facilities has been suggested by a few experts. It is also important to highlight the achievements of existing women officials so as to encourage more aspirants to aim higher.

Is dual citizenship to blame for money laundering?



OPEN SKY

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"Is Bangladesh a place of looters?" – this question was raised by the High Court last month. The court asked this question referring to a recent Bangla report, whose headline roughly translates to "Festival of purchasing properties abroad." The court's question is indicative of what is going on in the financial sector of Bangladesh right now. But to blame "dual citizenship" for the ever-growing culture of looting as well as money laundering may be inappropriate.

The act of earning a second citizenship in another country has never been a main contributor to trafficking funds overseas. While investigating the main reasons or avenues of illicit outflows of funds, not a single report of the US-based think tank Global Financial Integrity has blamed dual citizenship as a vital reason. Rather, dual citizenship has proven to be a boon to remittance

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inflows in Bangladesh, and those inflows rescued the economy from sliding into a full-scale disaster emerging from the dollar crisis.

As reports in February unveiled, the US is the top source of remittances to Bangladesh, surpassing Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The US requires residency or citizenship to allow Bangladeshi people to earn and send dollars to their home country. Other European countries that award citizenship to Bangladeshi people are gradually turning out to be increasingly reliable sources of remittance income. In contrast, Middle-Eastern countries are gradually losing their oil-based revenue because of the rise in green substitutes. These nations are comparatively restrictive in offering their citizenship to Bangladeshi workers. As a result, the relative share of remittance from these countries is dwindling.

The court's direction in framing causality may be mistaken. Dual citizenship is not the root factor for looting wealth from the country. It is



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

the very "Bangladeshi style of rewarding for looting banks" that is to blame for the financial haemorrhage that Bangladesh is facing now. In the name of loan rescheduling, the general amnesty conferred upon the big defaulters by the central bank is a major reason why the act of looting has triggered a renaissance of stashing funds overseas of late. Recently, a former central bank governor commented that the concessions given to defaulters in this country have no parallel in any country or in history.

Of course, the looters are sometimes seeking dual citizenship under the "investment residency" quota in different countries by showing their enormous wealth, which they gained through the loose banking rules approved by the government. Getting citizenship in developed countries is hard and problematic for them, because those countries will ask for evidence of valid sources. These looters prefer parking their funds in countries where there are less queries. In the end, they park their ill-gotten money in the Swiss Bank which does not ask anything. Thus, allowing these looters to steal and get away with it in the first place is the root cause of looting, not dual citizenship.

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siblings and cronies, and largely ruined the corporate culture. These institutional changes and privileges to the tycoons are at the root of money laundering. The tardiest legal system has fuelled the culture of looting. A former caretaker government adviser recently blamed court stay orders on big default cases – a process that has made the wound even worse.

The justices commented that dual citizenship holders have less responsibility towards the country as their hearts are divided. Thousands of students migrate to developed nations every year for higher studies. When they earn citizenship after getting jobs, they send money back to their families. They also enrich their birthplace by delivering their ideas, technology, and expertise – which economists define as trickle-down benefits. Many Bangladeshis migrate overseas through lotteries or family visas. They struggle a lot, but still send money back to their home country. By any means, these are not any instances of either less responsibility or divided hearts.

Forty-nine percent of all countries now allow dual citizenship and most of them are developed or middle-income countries. After understanding how beneficial dual citizenship can be for Bangladesh in an increasingly globalised world, the government on February 27 added another 44 countries on top of the existing 57

is no less than that from Bangladesh. The 2021 Global Financial Integrity Report shows that Bangladesh lost the third highest quantity of trade-related outflows (\$8.3 billion) after Pakistan (\$8.5 billion) and India (\$67.5 billion) annually over 2009-2018. The revenue loss was 17 percent for Bangladesh, 19 percent for Pakistan, and 20 percent for India. The nature of citizenship seems to have played no role in their case.

Poor governance in the financial sector, politicised interventions into banking affairs, allowing massive clemency to habitual defaulters, rewarding money launderers in the national budget and, finally, not punishing any big defaulters or stock market scammers are the main reasons why money laundering and buying properties abroad by a handful of bandits have skyrocketed. On February 6, the agriculture minister acknowledged the evolution of *Begum Paras* in Canada, US and Dubai. It has nothing to do with dual citizenship, which has been in place among nations for decades.

If anyone is politically pampered and plots to be a wilful defaulter, they needn't be overseas to remain safe. They are much safer in what the court labels as a "place of looters." If they can somehow manage a nomination for the next election, this place will turn into a "paradise of plundering" for them. Why would anyone care about dual citizenship then?

Global loss and damage initiative launched in Dhaka



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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This week, the UK-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), together with the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), launched a global initiative in Dhaka to address loss and damage from human-induced climate change. The initiative, called the Alliance for Locally-Led Approaches for Transformative Action on Loss and Damage (ALL ACT on LnD), is aimed at supporting vulnerable developing countries to build knowledge and capacity to address impacts of climate change and the consequent losses and damages in those countries.

The global launch was held with online participation from small island developing states (SIDS) as well as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and also by representatives from developed countries such as the UK, Germany, the US, Ireland, New Zealand, along

with UN agencies and others.

This new initiative aims to support both governments and civil societies in the vulnerable countries to enhance their knowledge of and responses to the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change, which have now become a reality around the world.

These efforts to enhance understanding and build capacity in each country are complementary to the ongoing discussion under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to implement the ground-breaking decision to establish a funding mechanism to address loss and damage, agreed upon at the annual climate conference (COP27) last year.

The process under the UNFCCC is moving forward with the creation of the Transitional Committee on loss and damage funding, which will meet

three times before COP28 this year and provide advice to the negotiators on how to operationalise the funding mechanism.

At the same time, the second Glasgow Dialogue on loss and damage is due to be held in June in Bonn, Germany, which will allow governments and experts to share ideas on the issues that need to be

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addressed at COP28. These include where the funds will come from, how much money is needed, who will manage the funds, who will be eligible to receive the funds, etc.

While all these questions are indeed legitimate and need to be discussed, debated and agreed upon in good

faith, the highest priority, in my view, must be given to delivering outcomes rapidly and helping the poorest victims who are already suffering losses and damages now.

At the launch of ALL ACT, we were reminded of this urgency by the representative of Vanuatu, who described the devastation caused by two successive typhoons that hit the country a few days ago.

Thus, the challenge for the Transitional Committee members as well as the negotiators ahead of COP28 is to deliver outcomes at a speed never seen before. They also need to provide funds proactively to the victims in cash and not require project proposals to be submitted, which take too long to process. One important source of expertise and knowledge is the humanitarian sector, which has developed many ways to bring support to vulnerable communities in vulnerable developing countries.

It is therefore essential that the initiative under UNFCCC be coordinated with the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). A special envoy for loss and damage should be appointed to connect the UNFCCC with UNOCHA as well as the vulnerable communities/countries. The new ALL ACT initiative can provide support to this end going forward.