

Why won't the UN recognise '71 genocide?

The ICJ must hold the war criminals accountable

We join the PM's call to the United Nations to recognise March 25 as the International Genocide Day. The failure of the UN to officially recognise the genocide of 1971 has been a painful reality for the people of Bangladesh. It is mindboggling that despite overwhelming evidence of the atrocities committed by Pakistani Army against unarmed civilians of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) – which included the most brutal forms of torture, murder and sexual violence, driven by racial hatred and bigotry – the UN has consistently chosen not to term these crimes against humanity as genocide. This in the backdrop of the international body recognising other genocides, such as those in Armenia, Bosnia, Cambodia and Rwanda.

The acts listed by the 1948 Genocide Convention that constitute genocide include killing members of a group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, and deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. All these acts and many more were committed in 1971, as a state unleashed unspeakable horror on its own citizens. By all standards, these acts constitute genocide. So why this illogical refusal to recognise it as such?

Most significantly, the Bangladesh genocide of 1971 was amply documented by foreign media outlets and journalists covering the war then. Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas published a detailed report titled "Genocide" which was published in the UK's *Sunday Times* on June 13, 1971. An article in the *Time* magazine, published in August 1971, quoted a US official who referred to the anti-Bengali racism as being the fuel that made the soldiers "willing executioners". The chilling accounts of Archer K Blood, the US consul general in Dhaka at the time, describe the horrific sight of bodies of women who had been raped, shot and hung by the heels in the ceilings of Rokeya Hall. There were other foreign correspondents on the ground, such as Simon Dring and Mark Tully, who reported extensively on Pakistani brutalities.

In addition, there have been countless books, newspaper articles and reports based on eyewitness accounts of what happened during the nine months of the Liberation War. The details of "Operation Searchlight", which systematically targeted Bengalis (especially of Hindu faith), have been documented in numerous books, journals and newspapers. It included seeking out intellectuals, picking them up with the help of local collaborators, and subjecting them to merciless torture before killing them.

Are these facts/evidence not authentic enough for the UN to recognise the genocide? Even after 51 years, Pakistan has not formally apologised for the crimes of its army. It has not tried the 195 war criminals identified by Bangladesh in 1972. It is, therefore, incumbent on the UN to recognise the genocide in Bangladesh. Pakistan must offer its unconditional apology and commitment to try the war criminals who were part of this diabolical plan to eliminate a race. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has enough material to put on trial the main perpetrators behind the genocide. The UN and the ICJ have a moral obligation to recognise and seek justice for this genocide.

Level crossings need better coordination

Relevant agencies must work together to improve their safety

The threat of unsafe level crossings has once again come to the fore after a recent train-bus collision at a crossing right at the heart of Dhaka, which thankfully caused no fatalities but temporarily suspended rail communications between the capital and the rest of the country. The fact is, most crossings in Bangladesh are still unprotected, and therefore remain highly susceptible to accidents, even after repeated warnings, deadly collisions as well as assurances of preventive action. A recent survey jointly conducted by Bangladesh Railway (BR) and the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) also highlighted the danger, and made recommendations that deserve proper attention.

Bangladesh has about 3,111 level crossings. Of them, 1,886 are authorised, even though a large number of them remain unmanned. In addition, there are 1,225 crossings that are both unauthorised and unmanned. Thus, the survey has underscored the urgency of improving their safety through various measures. For example, it recommended building overpasses or underpasses at 47 crossings, and installing an automated system at 194 unmanned crossings so that a warning bell goes off when a train approaches. Other recommendations include setting up gate barriers, putting in place electricity and telephone lines and other basic facilities at 1,436 more crossings. The survey also suggested shutting down 62 closely located crossings. Moreover, given the acute shortage of staff to operate the crossings, it suggested recruiting 5,772 people.

It should be noted that in the first two months of this year, at least 37 people were killed in 36 rail-related accidents, according to the Road Safety Foundation. Last year, at least 326 people were killed and 113 were injured in 354 such accidents, most of which took place at level crossings. All this calls for drastic reforms, and those changes/reforms suggested by the survey can indeed help reduce crossing-related accidents. However, as we know from past experience, addressing lack of infrastructure or staff alone will not be enough. We also need to address the lack of coordination among the agencies involved with crossings, especially the unauthorised ones.

Reportedly, at least nine government bodies were involved in building the unauthorised level crossings, with the LGED having constructed the highest 516. It is a common tendency for the BR and those agencies to trade blame or to try to avert responsibility after every collision. In the absence of systemic coordination among them, unprotected crossings continue to throw up dead bodies every now and then. It is, therefore, vital that there is a central administrative wing in charge of all level crossings, authorised or not. It should supervise all decisions related to them and ensure proper follow-up. A central command would be ideally placed to fast-track such activities and ensure collaboration.

We, therefore, urge the higher authorities to undertake these reforms with the highest priority. Given the current risk, there is no time to dilly-dally in this regard.

Protecting a generation in danger



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Education Watch and others have been sounding the alarm bell about the learning loss from disrupted schooling for two academic years due to the pandemic. They have been urging remedial actions. The decision-makers have been in denial about the losses and have been bent on returning to normal school routine. Two recent studies under government auspices have confirmed the warnings given by Education Watch.

A study, designed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) with European Union support and conducted on 3,000 primary schools and 20,000 students of classes 2 to 5 was completed in October, 2022. Its findings apparently have caused the authorities to be hesitant about releasing the report. However, *Daily Janakantha* revealed the findings in its cover story on March 21 under the heading, "Corona impact on education – Children in distress." The study found many class 2 students did not recognise the alphabet, and class four students could not do simple addition or subtraction. The situation was worse for disadvantaged groups, such as the ethnic minorities in the hills.

Another survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) with Unicef support under the title, "National Survey on Children's Education in Bangladesh 2021", carried out in 9,000 households was officially released on March 16. The survey was conducted between December 21, 2021 and January 10, 2022. The aim was to investigate school attendance, dropout, engagement in learning activities and other effects of the pandemic as schools re-opened after the long closure.

This study, following the methodology of Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) used for survey of children by Unicef and BBS, found that among children aged 7-14 years, about half could correctly answer simple comprehension questions after reading a simple story, thus demonstrating overall foundational reading skills. Foundational numeracy skills among children aged 7-14 years were acquired by a quarter of students (25.8 percent) who could read numbers, understand smaller and larger values and do simple addition. This study provided a snapshot after schools reopened in late 2021, rather than an estimate of loss.

It showed that only about one in five (18.7 percent) school-going children (regardless of education level) attended online or other distance mode learning during the school closure. The primary level participation rate (13.1 percent) was lower compared to lower and



PHOTO: UNICEF

upper secondary levels (20.3 and 23.7 percent, respectively).

The adjusted attendance ratio in primary school was reported to be high (80.5 percent) when schools reopened, but considerably less in lower and upper secondary school (59.6 percent and 50.5 percent, respectively). The corresponding pre-Covid attendance ratios three years earlier were higher at primary level (85.9 percent) but were comparable at lower secondary (57.8 percent) and upper secondary levels (48.1 percent).

The NCTB study mentioned above attempted to compare students' learning outcome in 2022 with a pre-Covid assessment undertaken by NCTB in 2019. For example, class four students were tested on their knowledge in class three curricular content in 2019 and 2022. The results were not satisfactory in 2019 – a large proportion of students (40 percent in Bangla, 37 percent in English and 44 percent in Mathematics) showed "severe" lag in 2019 compared to expected grade-level knowledge and skills. The post-Covid results in 2022 were even less satisfactory – "severe" lags for class four students were found for 44 percent in Bangla, 49 percent in English, and 39 percent in mathematics. The relatively better math outcome for class four was an exception, because for other classes, according to the findings, post-Covid

results were uniformly worse. The point to be noted is that pre-Covid results with around 40 percent students not achieving essential competencies were not acceptable; but the post-Covid outcomes were worse.

A third study, Education Watch 2022 report (EW22), titled, "Post-Pandemic Education: Recovery and Renewal of School Education," again

teachers to cope with the new grade level lessons and to avoid cumulative deficits and widening learning gaps, EW22 recommends the following steps:

- A grade-wise rapid assessment of student status in core skills/competencies (Bangla and math at the primary level; and Bangla, English, math and science at the secondary

supported by the European Union, now being finalised and to be released shortly, also provides a snapshot of the school operations and outcomes in the last quarter of 2022. It, among other things, undertook an assessment of knowledge and competency of a sample of class eight and nine students, testing them on expected outcomes in Bangla, English and Mathematics based on class eight curriculum. The findings are largely similar to the NCTB study findings at the primary level.

The Education Watch study concluded that at least one-third of the class eight and nine students were not able to cope with their lessons in the classes they were placed in the post-Covid period. The premise that students should be promoted to the higher classes without letting them lose any school year due to the pandemic disruption or the assumption that somehow students would manage at their class level were not well-founded. Class nine students, tested on class eight materials, did not do much better than class eight students, suggesting a cumulative deficit in learning.

The key recommendation of EW22 is that bringing students up to grade level within a year should be the priority. It urges that grade-wise and school-based recovery plan should be initiated. To assist students and

level) should be undertaken.

- Students should be grouped by performance level determined by the rapid assessment and assisted to bring them up to a minimum grade level competency within a year.

- Simple assessment tools should be developed to be used in each school as well as teaching guides and content for remedial lessons by groups.

- Supporting teachers and schools to carry out the assessment and remedial learning activities.

- Teachers should be provided in print and on-line with simple and well-structured pedagogy tools for lessons to serve different ability groups.

The final draft of the NCTB-sponsored study also recommends a recovery and remedial action plan to be jointly formulated by the Directorate of Primary Education, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and NCTB for primary education. It should include elements, such as priority to foundational skills, extending learning hours, preparing grade and subject-specific remedial packages, recruiting local volunteer teachers and para-teachers to assist classroom teachers, and working with parents and community.

It would be logical to consider similar steps also for the secondary level. Given the convergence of views of researchers and stakeholders, will the decision-makers now listen?

The global banking crisis and world economy



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The banking crisis that hit Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) recently has spread. We recall with a shudder two recent financial contagions: the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which led to a deep Asian recession, and the 2008 Great Recession, which led to a global downturn. The new banking crisis hits a world economy already disrupted by pandemic, war, sanctions, geopolitical tensions, and climate shocks.

At the root of the current banking crisis is the tightening of monetary conditions by the Fed and the European Central Bank (ECB) after years of expansionary monetary policy. In recent years, both the Fed and ECB held interest rates near zero and flooded the economy with liquidity, especially in response to the pandemic. Easy money resulted in inflation in 2022, and both central banks are now tightening monetary policy and raising interest rates to staunch inflation.

Banks like SVB take in short-term deposits and use the deposits to make long-term investments. The banks pay interest on the deposits and aim

for higher returns on the long-term investments. When the central banks raises short-term interest rates, rates paid on deposits may exceed the earnings on long-term investments. In that case, the banks' earnings and capital fall. Banks may need to raise more capital to stay safe and in operation. In extreme cases, some banks may fail.

Even a solvent bank may fail if depositors panic and suddenly try to withdraw their deposits, an event known as a bank run. Each depositor dashes to withdraw deposits ahead of the other depositors. Since the bank's assets are tied up in long-term investments, the bank lacks the liquidity to provide ready cash to the panicked depositors. SVB succumbed to such a bank run and was quickly taken over by the US government.

Bank runs are a standard risk but can be avoided in three ways. First, banks should keep enough capital to absorb losses. Second, in the event of a bank run, central banks should provide banks with emergency liquidity, thereby ending the panic. Third,

government deposit insurance should calm depositors.

All three mechanisms may have failed in the case of SVB. First, SVB apparently allowed its balance sheet to become seriously impaired, and regulators did not react in time. Second, for unclear reasons, US regulators closed SVB rather than provide emergency central bank liquidity. Third, US deposit insurance guaranteed deposits only up to \$250,000, and so did not stop a run by large depositors. After the run, US regulators announced they would guarantee all deposits.

The immediate question is whether SVB's failure is the start of a more general bank crisis. The rise of market interest rates caused by Fed and ECB tightening has impaired other banks as well. Now that a banking crisis has occurred, panics by depositors are more likely.

Future bank runs can be avoided if the world's central banks provide ample liquidity to banks facing runs. The Swiss central bank provided a loan to Credit Suisse for exactly this reason. The Federal Reserve has provided \$152 billion in new lending to US banks in recent days.

Emergency lending, however, partly offsets the central banks' efforts to control inflation. Central banks are in a quandary. By pushing up interest rates, they make bank runs more likely. If they keep interest rates too low, however, inflationary pressures are likely to persist.

The central banks will try to have it both ways: higher interest rates plus emergency liquidity, if needed. This is the right approach but comes with costs. The US and European economies were already experiencing stagflation: high inflation and slowing growth. The banking crisis will worsen the stagflation and possibly tip the US and Europe into recession.

Some of the stagflation was the consequence of Covid-19, which induced the central banks to pump in massive liquidity in 2020, causing inflation in 2022. Some of the stagflation is the result of shocks caused by long-term climate change. Climate shocks could become worse this year if a new El Niño develops in the Pacific, as scientists say is increasingly likely.

Yet stagflation has also been intensified by economic disruptions caused by the Ukraine War, US and EU sanctions against Russia, and rising tensions between the US and China. These geopolitical factors have disrupted the world economy by hitting supply chains, pushing up costs and prices while hindering output.

We should regard diplomacy as a key macroeconomic tool. If diplomacy is used to end the Ukraine War, phase out the costly sanctions on Russia, and reduce tensions between the US and China, not only will the world be much safer, but stagflation will also be eased. Peace and cooperation are the best remedies to rising economic risks.