

The Daily Star

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Bloomberg's praise of PM's timely steps

Economic uncertainty will keep us on our toes

We are heartened by the Bloomberg news agency's recognition of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's "timely reform steps" which have acted as a buffer against the negative impacts of an international economic crisis. After tackling its crippling effects on our economy during the pandemic, Bangladesh had to face continuous challenges created by the prolonged war in Ukraine. These included a protracted energy crisis leading to the rise in import costs and consequently the costs of all commodities, including daily essentials. The unprecedented depreciation of the taka and the dramatic drop in forex reserves have been a source of great concern for industries dependent on the international market.

As Bloomberg's article has mentioned, it was a prudent move of the PM to get a \$4.7 billion IMF loan in January this year, which helped to bring about some economic stability against the backdrop of a volatile international market. Though it was not the most popular decision, the government went ahead with it and raised energy prices which prompted the IMF to give Bangladesh the loan first, among the three countries that had asked for it. This may well have helped to avert a deeper economic crisis in the country.

The IMF loan, no doubt, has prompted other international donors to step in; recall the \$2 billion budget support from a co-funding initiative led by the Asian Development Bank. These funds will help ease the continued pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

Of course, all these funds have been given with the condition of initiating certain reforms. Further funds can be ensured if the government can bring about reforms in the financial sector such as the central bank's adopting an independent monetary policy, reducing non-performing loans, boosting climate change funding, and so on.

While the PM and her government's efforts to bring about stability in such an economically turbulent time in the world is laudable, we must remind ourselves that the uncertainty that we are facing is far from over. The PM has reiterated the need to maintain food security during these difficult times, and we think it is wise to prioritise this when food inflation is a global phenomenon and has reached our shores quite punishingly. With no signs of the Russia-Ukraine war abating, the ripple effects of this catastrophe will continue to disrupt economies and keep us on our toes. As the world threatens to go into recession, our industries that depend on the international market will be more vulnerable. This will then affect employment, consumption and the cost of living. Thus, the focus should be kept on the most marginalised groups, who are already heavily affected. Reforms required in the financial sector must also be carried out on an urgent basis.

Bangladesh, despite being such a small country in terms of land area with a population of over 160 million, has shown remarkable economic resilience in the face of the pandemic and the war. We hope that the government will continue to take timely steps and ensure proper follow-ups so that this resilience is maintained and nurtured.

Heed UN's call for DSA moratorium

A law used only to punish critics has no place in democracy

We stand by the call for an immediate moratorium on the use of the Digital Security Act (DSA) by the human rights chief of the United Nations. In a statement released after the editor of *Prothom Alo* and one of its reporters were sued for a report critical of high food prices, he called upon the authorities to suspend any further application of the law. He also urged them to comprehensively reform its overly broad and ill-defined provisions which have been frequently abused to intimidate journalists and muzzle critical voices online.

The UN is the latest to join the ever-growing chorus of rights institutions from home and abroad who are concerned about the government's refusal to honour its own commitment to ensure responsible use of the law. Meanwhile, the US State Department, which earlier released a report highlighting the impediments to freedom of expression and the internet in Bangladesh, has also reiterated its concern, saying that "no members of the press should be threatened, harassed, physically attacked, or arrested for simply doing their job." Unfortunately, even as these concerns are being raised, there is little indication they are reaching the ears of the authorities.

As per latest media reports, two cases have been filed against a correspondent of *Desh TV* in Khulna following a report on a beauty parlour. The cases were lodged with the Khulna Cyber Tribunal on March 21 and 28, respectively. Such assault on journalists using the DSA has been persistent throughout its first four years of existence, as a review by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) has shown earlier this year. An estimate by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) now reminds us that the threat has not been limited to just a law. It says that over the last three months alone, at least 56 journalists from different media outlets have been attacked in various ways. This illustrates how widespread the repression of journalists has been, with the DSA emerging as the crown jewel of all instruments of repression.

The question is, how long will the government continue to resist calls for reforming or repealing this law? Freedom of expression, including for members of the press, is especially important in an election year. Citizens need reliable information to assess the performance of their government. They need the insights of journalists and activists to get a sense of what is happening around so that they can hold their representatives accountable. But if restrictions are placed on these vital sources of information and analysis, including through closing down critical media outlets, it is the citizens who are deprived the most, which is the opposite of how democracy works.

We, therefore, urge the government to urgently heed calls for an immediate moratorium on the DSA. With the national election approaching fast, this is also a chance for the government to reaffirm its commitment to democracy.

State should investigate all deaths in custody



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

On March 22, Sultana Jasmine, 38, a single mother, was picked up by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) at around 10am while she was on her way to the Chandipur Union Land Office, where she worked as an office assistant. Some 48 hours later, on March 24, she was declared dead at the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH).

In her death certificate, the cause of death has been stated as "irreversible cardio-respiratory failure due to intracerebral haemorrhage". Reportedly, she had suffered a head injury along with brain haemorrhages. But what caused it remains a mystery.

Sultana was initially admitted to the Naogaon hospital at 1:15pm on March 22, which means she was taken there within a few short hours of her detention. According to Rab, soon after her arrest, Sultana had fallen sick and was rushed there. As for her head injury, Rab said she had fallen down.

Sultana's relatives, however, claimed that she was a perfectly healthy individual and alleged that Rab must have tortured her in custody. The reasons why people might be inclined to share their suspicions over the claims made by Rab are plenty. Number one among them is the frequency with which individuals in custody of our law enforcement agencies suddenly fall ill or succumb to "fatal" accidents or injuries. Even if we are to believe these claims of freak "accidents", mustn't we ask why our law enforcement agencies handle detainees so poorly? And shouldn't the law enforcers be held responsible for being so careless?

What is also interesting is that Rab recorded a case against her under the Digital Security Act (DSA) – for "syphoning off" money from job seekers using a Facebook account – more than 31 hours after she had been picked up and when she was unresponsive in a hospital bed. Without first recording the case, what justification did Rab have for detaining her? According to rights bodies, after Sultana was detained in a case, she was illegally interrogated and police were not informed. These are the worst examples of violation of the constitution, fundamentals of human rights, Supreme Court directives, existing laws, and misuse of power, the Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB) said in a statement.



Sultana Jasmine.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Exactly a week before Sultana's death, on March 17, a 65-year-old man was shot dead and another was shot in the legs during a raid by Rab in a village of Sonargaon upazila of Narayanganj. According to a Rab commanding officer, law enforcers opened fire "in self-defence" after miscreants opened fire on them and tried to snatch a murder suspect from them. Multiple witnesses, however, have said that the deceased and others present at the scene were unarmed. They also said the law enforcers were wearing plainclothes – in violation of a High Court ruling – and opened fire when villagers, who were unaware of the presence of Rab and thought some crime was taking place, came out to figure out what was going on.

Once again, Rab's version of the story is completely contradictory to what numerous eye witnesses have claimed. And so far, we have heard nothing about there being an independent investigation to find out why an innocent old man, who had nothing to do with the case that brought Rab to that location, had to die.

Back in 2019, the United Nations

Committee against Torture (CAT), upon receiving the government's overdue and lacklustre initial State Report under Article 19 of the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT), said that it was "concerned at information it received alleging the widespread and routine commission

In the absence of independent investigations, the domestic and international perceptions that our law enforcing agencies are involved in widespread human rights violations will continue to persist, further tarnishing the image of the country. So why are our government high-ups, who claim to be so concerned about preserving Bangladesh's image on the world stage,

of torture and ill-treatment... by law enforcement officials for the purpose of obtaining confessions" in Bangladesh. These allegations included 1,335 people being extrajudicially killed by law enforcing agencies through crossfire between January 2014 and May 2019 and the alleged deaths of 348 prisoners in jail custody during that time, among other human rights violations recorded by local and international rights organisations, UN agencies and others.

Similarly, in its 2015 annual report, the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh reported that 70 percent of the complaints it received "alleged a human rights violation by law enforcement agencies and about half of all complaints concerned torture allegations." In spite of that, the CAT was provided information by the Bangladeshi delegation about the filing of only 17 cases under the Anti-Torture Act against members of the law enforcing agencies, which shows the lack of willingness on part of the government to investigate – let alone hold to account – law enforcers alleged to have been involved in some of the worst human rights violations.

least concerned about it? Is it so that they can use the same law enforcing agencies and the same tactics to silence any dissent against the government? Is it so that they can use the law enforcing agencies to illegally suppress opposition political parties, as alleged by multiple international rights organisations?

The government would be well-advised to keep in mind that our security forces are under increased scrutiny following the designation of human rights sanctions by the US government and in the lead-up to general elections slated for early 2024. Therefore, by continuing to provide such leeway to alleged human rights violators from within our security forces, it risks further criticism and actions against our country from the international community.

More importantly, a sense of injustice being perpetrated against them by state actors is increasingly building up among the common people. And it might only be a matter of time before they consider this injustice to be too much to bear, which certainly raises risks of social disharmony and dissatisfaction among the population.

The Global Game of ChessGo



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ANDREW SHENG

Games are imitations of real life. They teach players how to think how the other would act, with better players learning to appreciate how the other player reads them. As all games are defined by rules, two-player games are actually far simpler than multi-player games. That is exactly where the global game has shifted, from a unipolar single dominant player who determines the rules-based order, to one in which the others want voice and power to change the rules.

So, we are back to how *Numero Uno* reads the game, and how the others read him.

The kiddie's game of checkers teaches players to think linearly, but smart players quickly learn that if you offer the other side a quick win and he takes it, you crush him by anticipating several moves ahead of him. The game of chess is much more complicated, with pieces that have different power, and can be promoted (pawn to become queen). The moves are much more complicated with psychology and stamina key to who wins.

The game of Go, popular in the East, has only black or white pieces, but is far more complex, because you have to think spatially, manoeuvring your pieces to outwit your opponent. Today, computers can be taught and self-taught to outplay the best human

players, which is why the Great Powers are in a Chip War, investing in computer semiconductors and processing power to simulate war games with each other, plus upgrading the accuracy and firepower of smart weapons.

But the smartest of weapons can be wielded by dumb users, leading to accidental conflicts. We are in that dangerous phase right now.

The Ukraine war is a litmus test of Principle over Practicality, with Nato (basically US calling the shots), having a mindset that the principle of sovereignty over-rides everything else. The 20th anniversary of the illegal invasion of Iraq reminded the Rest of the World that Nato does not necessarily follow its own principles consistently.

The Ukraine war is a massive tragedy, because from a practical point of view, Ukraine will pay for that principle to the last Ukrainian, if not being completely flattened by unceasing conflict. The underlying US objective of the Ukraine war is to weaken Russia, as revealed by US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin.

History teaches us that all wars, just or unjust, end up with negotiations, so war is a conflict to strengthen your bargaining position for best or least-worst outcome. Principles end up with pragmatism. In the nuclear game, either you negotiate or everyone gets annihilated.

So, what is the game of ChessGo

all about? Basically, on the global chessboard, can the West (Nato and allies) contain the rise of its perceived "existential rivals", namely, Russia and China? In essence, the Rest (non-West or East) will decide who has the upper hand.

ChessGo therefore is the game of thrones where all powers position themselves over the long haul so that they will be able to defend themselves or at least thwart their rivals. Chess is the linear projection of power from the player point of view, Go is how to surround your opponent by moving anywhere in the chessboard.

From a perspective of people, wealth and land/sea resources, it is too early to tell who will win. Population-wise, the West has 1.2 billion out of 8 billion, whereas China and Russia have 1.5 billion and the Rest 5.2 billion. The West is rich in terms of GDP, but that also depends on whether you measure by market exchange rate or Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). However, if you combine land area plus Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the West has 46.4 million sq kilometres, compared with 35.9 million for China and Russia. The Brics countries have combined 53.5 million sq.km.

The Americans won the Cold War by containing the Soviet Union through pulling China out of the Soviet camp, so that it became two versus one. Today, by identifying China and Russia as "existential threat", Nato achieved what historical military-strategists have always feared – fighting against two rivals, but one contiguous Eurasian land-mass which no single navy can surround.

The Ukraine war revealed that Russia is not a "gas station" with the GDP of Texas. She has a nuclear power with the largest land area in the world, with

everything she needs in terms of food, energy and mineral resources. China has economic and people clout, but lacks natural resources to power her economy. By pushing Russia and China together, Nato has created a formidable self-sufficient set of rivals. Kissinger was wise to balance power to two-to-one. Biden's blinking foreign policy is to take on both Russia and China with an internally divided nation, united only in being anti-China.

This global rivalry is already becoming a Hundred Year Marathon, not a quick win for anyone. Europe and the Rest will side with the winner. Europe is now clearly deeply weakened by the Ukraine war, having its cheap food, energy and mineral sources cut off by alienation of Russia. European costs will go up, and she fears migration from Africa and Asia when climate change drives the young population to move West and North to Europe. If the Ukraine war continues to drag on, Europe will not recover economically. The outcome may be a global recession reminiscent of the 1930s.

America remains the fortress defended by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. But how long can she maintain the largest military in the world if the global economy moves into recession?

War cannot be the solution to global peace and prosperity. War and more defence spending will not get us out of climate warming, inflation, debt distress, financial crises and job-disruption from technology.

There is no endgame in war, only wealth and health destruction. Better sense will prevail when everyone loses sufficiently from the fever of war and get back to practical living with each other. ChessGo is not going to end anytime soon.

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