

Ensure smooth Eid preparations

Eid-ul-Azha brings familiar joy but also worries

As we get ready to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha, the second most important festival for Muslims, we hope that we can go beyond the ritualistic practices and embrace the spiritual side of the occasion. Through the slaughter of sacrificial animals, the message that is intended is that of sacrifice, sharing, restraint and cleansing our minds. Since Eid-ul-Azha involves a lot of activities and preparations for both individuals and institutions, it is important that all of us do our part properly so that the spirit of the festival can be upheld.

There are three aspects that deserve particular attention. First, the movement of people across the country as they head to their home districts to spend time with loved ones. As expected, the highways have been witnessing heavy traffic, but thankfully, no major gridlocks have been reported so far. However, the closure of garment factories will further increase traffic flow and congestion on the highways. Transport authorities have reportedly taken various steps to manage the surge in travellers, but care must be taken to ensure a hassle-free journey, with special attention given to preventing accidents. We don't want to see a repeat of the tragic road crashes that follow every Eid holiday.

Secondly, the Eid brings familiar concerns for workers, particularly those at the RMG industry. According to a report, out of 3,164 garment, textile, and jute factories across the country, at least 2,501 did not pay workers their 15 days' wages for June as of Monday, while 728 factories did not pay their Eid bonuses. This is quite unacceptable. The spectre of pending dues continues to haunt workers every Eid. The news of a labour leader beaten to death in Gazipur over his attempt to get salaries for workers shows how powerless the latter still are when it comes to protecting their rights. We hope the authorities will promptly address these issues.

Another issue that needs to be kept in mind is the importance of a prompt clean-up after slaughtering animals. In Dhaka, both city corporations have taken steps to manage waste. The deployment of thousands of sanitation workers, along with the distribution of eco-friendly jute bags and disinfectants, showcases a commitment to maintaining cleanliness, but citizens must cooperate and dispose of their waste responsibly. We hope, in the end, everything will go smoothly and the holiday will be an enriching experience for everyone. Eid Mubarak!

Graft eating away public funds

CMSD, public hospitals must answer for reported anomalies in procurement

We are shocked to learn of the sheer lack of accountability and transparency at the country's Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD) and government healthcare institutions when it comes to procuring medical equipment. According to a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), prepared for the period between FY2014-15 and FY2018-19, irregularities in budget spending by CMSD caused the government to lose Tk 459 crore in these five years. The report, placed at the parliament recently, revealed how this procurement agency had been involved in various malpractices.

During this five-year period, the CMSD supplied medical equipment to medical colleges and hospitals which remained largely unused. In many cases, it supplied the machinery without following proper protocols. Among the institutions audited, three – Khulna Medical College Hospital, Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, and Rangpur Medical College Hospital – alleged that the CMSD supplied those products unduly and without their consent, while other auditees said that the machinery in question would be installed soon. Moreover, in FY2016-17, different government institutions acquired medical and surgical supplies from CMSD at prices that were up to 18 times more than that offered by the Public Health Institute and the Essential Drug Company for similar products, which is outrageous.

The question is, can the CMSD just supply machinery without consent or request by the hospitals? Also, why would government institutions take supplies from it if they do not need them, and also at inflated prices? Clearly, the CMSD has been conducting these illegal activities with help from inside the hospitals, which must be looked into.

Our health sector has been riddled with corruption for long. The CAG audit report has just exposed it once again. Irregularities in medical equipment purchase are, however, just one aspect of the problem, with corruption permeating every level of the health sector, as the High Court has recently observed. We urge the authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the irregularities done by the CMSD in connivance with public hospitals, and identify those responsible for such a waste of public money.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Duplicity of politicians

The recent comments made by ruling party members in response to international pressure for a free and fair election in Bangladesh, about how the ruling party has promoted democracy in the country, is laughable. They have basically held onto power for over a decade by taking away people's voting rights. The destruction of our state institutions, which were weak to begin with, has set the country back by decades. For those who have unethically benefitted from all of these to now speak about the interest of ordinary people is beyond duplicitous.

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INCOME TAX ACT 2023

Yet another mortal blow to ACC



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With the enactment of the Income Tax Bill, 2023, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been inflicted such a mortal blow that it will now have to struggle to swim in the deep sea of corruption with legs and hands tied. The bill provides that the ACC cannot access tax, income, wealth and other related data of individuals under investigation for alleged corruption without a court order, the timely securing of which, in the abiding context, is likely to be a pipedream in most cases.

The ACC's expectations to catch the big fish or even small fries of corruption have thus been further undermined, while the scope of impunity of the corrupt has been reinforced. This is also rewarding news for forces outside and within the ACC who never wanted the commission to be effective. This has to be treated as yet another evidence on how the ruling party's pledge of zero tolerance against corruption, repeated quite often from the highest level, is blatantly undermined.

This is not the first time that the ACC's authority in the key areas of its mandate have been tactfully curtailed. One of the reasons that Bangladesh's Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012 was considered to reasonably meet the global standard is the fact that it provided the ACC with full authority to investigate all the scheduled offences treated as money laundering. But for some inexplicable reasons except to chop off the powers of this specialised anti-corruption agency, the law was amended in 2015 to take away all but one category of offences out of 27 from its mandate. All remaining jurisdictions were handed over to authorities, most of whom heretofore had no track record of expertise or interest in anti-corruption work. By a single stroke, not only did the ACC lose its power, but the specialised tasks of anti-money laundering were converted into a tertiary assignment. Civil society and media concerns against the amendment met deaf years. The result, as ACC insiders lament, is that the ACC is now the whipping boy for all inactions or failures of effective actions against money laundering, though it is only marginally responsible.

The government's successive actions, including the Public Service



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Act, 2018, to deprive the ACC of the authority to take into custody any public officials for investigations on alleged involvement in corruption is no longer any important news. This demonstrated the government's high stake and determination to curtail ACC's investigative authority to selectively protect sections of public officials from accountability. It was also an example of violation of the constitutional pledge of equality before law.

An equally pernicious follow-up of such manipulative disempowerment of the commission to protect and promote those enjoying favour within the government and beyond took place on January 18, 2023, when the ACC's key executive authority was transferred to ACC bureaucracy. Though executed as an apparently inside job through an office order, this could not be viewed in isolation from the overall strategic trend to make the ACC legally and institutionally dysfunctional, which has now been crowned by the Income Tax Act, passed in parliament on June 18.

Sections 309 (2) and 309 (3) of the new Income Tax Act provide that notwithstanding the Evidence Act, 1872, Anti-Corruption Commission

income and wealth disproportionate to legitimate income.

In recognition of the key importance of these data for corruption investigation, the ACC Act made it mandatory for the relevant authorities to provide such information upon request and collaborate with the ACC as and when requested in the interest of investigation. The law even authorised the ACC to seek action from the government if any organisations failed to provide information the commission sought in the interest of corruption investigation. The Right to Information Act, 2009 also provides that access to corruption-related information cannot be treated as exempted.

Making it now conditional upon court order makes it practically impossible for the ACC to conduct any meaningful investigation of corruption based on illicitly earned income and wealth related data, unless it is small fries or individuals out of grace of the powers that be. This is contradictory to Article 20 (2) of the constitution, which criminalises unearned income. Creating arbitrary barriers against ACC's access to key information, as the new Income Tax Act does, will not only have a crippling effect on the

provision as well as other examples cited above may have found it convenient to protect and strengthen their power base with short-term gains in view, but they have clearly ignored implications in terms of the government's own pledge against corruption. Belying such aspirations, signals are being sent systematically that there are legal, procedural and institutional provisions that actually invite and encourage people to engage in corruption.

All these show how public interest is trampled to serve kleptocratic interests, and how protection and promotion of corruption can make public policies and institutions ridiculed. By allowing such a corruption-friendly policy regime to take such deep roots, the government has not merely undermined its election pledge, which may perhaps be repeated soon, but also undercut the Perspective Plan 2021-41, which promises governance reforms for transparency and accountability and reduction of corruption and abuse of power. The Perspective Plan also makes a specific pledge to strengthen the Anti-Corruption Commission. What purpose do such pledges serve is anyone's guess.

Key takeaways from the Paris summit on climate finance



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

Recently, I had the privilege of being invited to the Summit for a New Global Financing Pact, hosted by President Emmanuel Macron of France, alongside over 20 heads of government. Bangladesh was represented by Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and Climate Envoy Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

I was invited to speak at three events during the summit. The first was an official side event organised by civil society groups on raising funds by making polluters pay. It was attended by high officials from France, Barbados and the European Union. I raised the proposal for an air passenger solidarity levy of five euros per passenger, on all passengers, to provide additional funds for the new Loss and Damage Fund, to be set up at COP28 in Dubai in December. Such an air passenger levy has already existed in France for 10 years, and it raises nearly 200 million euros a year, which is donated to the global health fund.

Such an air passenger levy could be applied unilaterally by other European

governments across the EU. If the EU were to apply such a levy, it would raise over one billion euros a year, which would be a good start for the Dubai Loss and Damage Fund. Frans Timmermans, who is the European head on climate change, said it was an interesting idea.

My second side event was organised by Brac, and it presented an opportunity to showcase Bangladesh's efforts to tackle climate change in a whole-of-society approach. It included Saber Hossain Chowdhury speaking on behalf of the government, Dr Golam Rabbani from the Climate Bridge Fund (CBF), managed by Brac, representing Bangladesh's civil society, and me representing academia showing how the Bangladeshi population is preparing to tackle climate change at the scale that is required.

My third event was a public event at the centre of Paris at the Academie du Climat, which attracted many hundreds of young people from the city to a series of interactive events.

I was given the opportunity to speak to the young Parisians about how young people around the world need to join forces to tackle climate change as a truly global movement, without necessarily waiting for their leaders to act with the necessary speed.

My young colleague, Towrin Zaman, was also interviewed about the losses and damages from human-

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induced climate change suffered in Bangladesh.

Finally, the summit itself resulted in some very good ideas and speeches from a number of heads of government. I would like to mention the speech from Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados, who has been pushing for

debt relief for all developing countries suffering climate change impacts as part of her Bridgetown Initiative. Also, President William Ruto of Kenya made a powerful speech accusing the developed countries of making promises they do not keep. He argued for a more equal distribution of global power in global financial institutions.

The heads of government were also made to listen to a young activist from Africa, Vanessa Nakate, who told them they were failing in their duties to the younger generation.

My overall impression of the summit was that it was certainly an admirable attempt by President Macron to raise the important issue of reforming the global financial system in light of the climate change emergency. He was indeed able to get some key allies and heads of government to support his call. At the same time, the heads of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), who were also present at the summit, promised to take necessary actions to enhance their climate change funding.

The summit was also an event for young people and climate activists to come together to both protest and celebrate together.

Whether the summit will result in any new concrete action going forward remains to be seen, but it has certainly given a positive push in the right direction, and President Macron and the people of France should be recognised for their positive actions.