

Lavrov's visit consolidates BD-Russia relations

Russia should help us with supply of LNG, wheat and fertilisers

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's trip to Bangladesh, the first ever visit of its kind from a Russian foreign minister, is an important milestone in continuing diplomatic relations between our two countries. The seeds of this relationship were sowed in 1971, when the Soviet Union extended its support to Bangladesh during the Liberation War, and as such we welcome his presence and his talks with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen.

However, it is important to note that this trip comes at a time when the major nations are deadlocked in a power struggle, and increasingly turning towards the Indo-Pacific region as a battleground for their hostile relations. Coupled with the disruption of global supply chains and subsequent price hikes as a direct result of the Russia-Ukraine war and sanctions against Russia, countries like Bangladesh are finding themselves caught in the crossfire and having to maintain a delicate balancing act to navigate these challenging diplomatic situations.

Lavrov made strong statements on US interference and Russia's commitment to working with its partners to prevent any outside "dictates." In this regard, we defend our right to formulate our own national policies without facing external pressure from any nation. At such a time, it is even more imperative for Bangladesh to maintain its foreign policy position of friendship to all, malice to none.

We hope that part of this policy of maintaining friendly, mutually beneficial relations will lead to creating conditions that allow Bangladesh to deal with and recover from the negative impacts of the past year's global events. A possible supply of LNG, wheat and fertilisers to provide urgent relief from high inflationary pressures is the need of the hour, as well as repayment of loans from Russia in a currency that will suit Bangladesh. At the same time, we hope Russia will exert its influence with its allies in the region to hold Myanmar accountable for the violence against the Rohingya, and ensure safe, voluntary and durable repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

So far, Bangladesh has taken a balanced position in the UN regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. We support the prime minister's call for all parties to arrive at a peaceful settlement through negotiations, and hope that in the ongoing G20 summit, major powers will listen to the voice of reason that countries like Bangladesh are providing, and choose cooperation instead of militarisation.

Ensure justice in Cox's Bazar rape case

Make reporting cases of sexual violence easier for victims

We are enraged to learn about the gang rape of a 19-year-old woman in Cox's Bazar's Kolatoli area. On September 4, the rape survivor and another woman, who were visiting from Dhaka, were taken and held captive at Rajan Cottage by a group of criminals. According to her, three men raped her and forced them to board a Dhaka-bound bus the following day. She had to be admitted to Ramu Upazila Health Complex due to the severity of the physical and psychological trauma. Once the police were informed, they moved her to Cox's Bazar General Hospital.

This case is yet another tragic example of how unsafe this country is for women. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), at least 640 women were raped, and among them 23 were also murdered, within the last six months of 2022. It's feared that the actual scenario is much worse, as numerous incidents of rape and sexual violence are never reported. It's time for us to take a hard look at why many refrain from reporting rape cases.

In December 2021, a girl was raped, but police ignored her allegation and arrested her for theft instead. In another case, one rape survivor had to stay at police station for three days because the police delayed recording the case. We have seen police being reluctant to take action when the perpetrator is a member of the force or politically influential. How would a survivor of sexual assault have faith that law enforcement members would come to her aid without questioning her past, her clothing, why she was there or what the relation between her and the assaulter was? Even if she could successfully file the case, is there any assurance that she would not be socially persecuted, threatened, and/or financially crippled for continuing to seek justice? How can she take on the mammoth burden on top of her horrific experience when thousands of cases remain unresolved?

We acknowledge that there are positive steps towards improvement, like abolishing the practice of two-finger test. We understand that the culture of rape and sexual assault against women has deeper roots in our society, and need thorough and prolonged actions to be uprooted. But, at the very least, our law enforcement and legal system must rise above social misogyny and emerge as reliable support systems for the victims of sexual violence.

New Message

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Khadija's ordeal and the questions we need to ask



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MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Khadijatul Kubra, a student of political science at Jagannath University, was supposed to complete her third year of undergraduate studies by the end of this year. As the daughter of a Kuwaiti expat father and a struggling mother, at this moment, she would probably support her family with part-time jobs while preparing for a bright career. According to her classmates and teachers, Khadija is smart, intelligent, well-informed and a studious person. She loves her studies and to explore beyond the classroom and textbooks. She was also a lance corporal of Bangladesh National Cadet Corps and the class representative at her department.

Unfortunately, such a prospective talent has been languishing in jail for more than a year for something that would have been deemed as a commendable job in any civilised society.

In 2020, when most university students were suffering from prolonged inactivity that led many of them to mental health issues due to months-long shutdowns and hardly accessible online classes, Khadija did not sit idle. Although she was only a fresher at the time, she became a familiar face on her campus by hosting webinars on social issues, politics and human rights, connecting people from home and abroad. She hosted webinars on the living conditions and struggles of Bangladeshi migrant workers during Covid, the state of student politics and students' rights at Jagannath University, democracy in Bangladesh, and so on.

In October 2020, former army officer Major (ret'd) Delwar Hossain joined in one such webinar, and at one point, he criticised the current government. Only for hosting this webinar, Khadija, along with Delwar Hossain who lives in Canada, was charged under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA). As per media reports, police filed two cases with two police stations, but the words in the charge sheets filed against her are similar. In both cases, Khadija has been accused of foiling the current political situation, involving common people in anti-state activities, and defaming the image of Bangladesh abroad.

This was just the beginning of the



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

persecution against Khadija, just a 17-year-old girl when she hosted the webinar and when the DSA cases against her were filed with Kalabagan and New Market police stations, according to her identity and academic documents. Per the Children's Act, 2013, Khadija's age must be considered from the day of the occurrence of the incident. Therefore, per the law, Khadija is entitled to be treated as a child, her trial has to be processed by the juvenile court, she can be taken into custody only for the shortest possible duration, and even if she has to be taken into custody, she can only be detained in a child development centre, not in any jail.

In one case, police recorded Khadija's age as 19 years, and in the other case 22 years. This is a flagrant violation of the Children's Act, where it has been clearly stated that if the police detain a person who may be below 18 years of age, the person's age must be determined by the investigation officer by checking their identity papers and other documents. Also, a probation officer and the parents of the accused have to be involved in the process. If the age cannot be confirmed through papers, the person has to be produced before

a children's court. The court, after thorough investigation, will decide on the person's age.

No such procedure was followed in this case. Almost two years after filing the cases, police picked Khadija up from her home at Mirpur on August 27, 2022. According to her family members, even moments before her arrest, they did not have any idea that she had been sued under the DSA.

Students and teachers of all universities, human rights activists and organisations at home and abroad have been vehemently protesting against such a cruel treatment of a minor girl. Breaking free from the shackles of intimidation, people are now staging demonstrations demanding her immediate release.

One can't help but wonder: is such a vicious application of DSA against

Khadija was produced before the Cyber Tribunal where her appeals for bail were rejected three times, and she was sent to jail even before the beginning of her trial. Reviewing her appeal for bail, the High Court granted her permanent bail on February 16 this year, but when the state party challenged this verdict before the Appellate Division, a full bench led by the chief justice postponed the hearing of the bail petition for four months.

Unfortunately, in none of the hearings did the court raise any concern over how the police determined Khadija's age during their investigations.

Jailed without any trial, Khadija did not get any opportunity to prove her innocence. Meanwhile, her academic career has been stalled. The court did not issue any directive to the jail and the university authorities to allow her to appear in the examinations from jail. As a result, she is already two semesters behind in her studies.

According to her family members, Khadija has been suffering from kidney disease. So far, she has not received any specialised medical treatment other than treatment by the jail doctors.

a 17-year-old university student not tarnishing the image of Bangladesh and the incumbent government? What did the government and its judicial administration achieve by detaining a bright female student without any proven crime?

Khadija's ordeal has exposed some flawed sides of our legal system that hold us responsible to raise some questions. For instance, does the state have the right to incarcerate a citizen without any trial and without proving their guilt? Especially when there are plenty of examples where people accused of serious offences such as rape, murder and money laundering are getting bails and in many cases, they have gotten anticipatory bails? If Khadija is granted bail in the coming months, how will the state ensure that she recovers her health and continues her studies? If she is proven innocent, how will the state compensate her for the irrecoverable losses she is suffering during her pretrial incarceration?

Unless and until our legal system is reformed, these questions need to be asked repeatedly to ensure that no other talented mind like Khadija is silenced by the state and its laws that we envisioned to protect our rights.

Reinforcing our commitment to Rohingya refugees



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KANNI WIGNARAJA

It has been more than six years since the forced mass displacement of over 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine state took place in August 2017. They fled state oppression and were forced to leave their homes and embrace an uncertain future. Bangladesh found itself having to deal with one of the most rapid, large-scale human displacements ever faced by a single country. The people and Government of Bangladesh rose to this extraordinary challenge with compassion and courage, and the United Nations along with the wider international community collaborated to assist the country in responding to this crisis.

However, as a large part of the Rohingya population, in Bangladesh, enters its seventh year residing in refugee camps, international attention has been diverted by other global crises and disasters. This has resulted in a funding crisis to support those displaced around the world. There is a pressing need for the world to reinvigorate its commitment to the

Rohingya and to help find a sustainable long-term solution for more than one million refugees who now live in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char.

The drawdown in funding is creating a dilemma for both the international community and the people of Bangladesh, while causing deep cuts to the lives and hopes of the Rohingya refugees. Humanitarian conditions in the world's largest single refugee camp could further deteriorate significantly as funding declines. Food ration cuts, for example, threaten to increase rates of malnutrition. Shortages in clean water and proper sanitation, and the lack of access to decent livelihoods risk throwing basic living conditions out the window. All this, in an already fragile ecozone prone to natural disasters, is contributing to a crisis of human development and human security in the camps.

Criminal groups who menace camp communities could increase their efforts to recruit youths. Amid despair and uncertainty about the future, incidents of communal, sexual

and gender-based violence have shown a dramatic uptick. This is, sadly, an unsurprising consequence. On the housing front, heavy and more frequent rains linked to climate change batter bamboo and tarpaulin shelters that house a majority of the Rohingya, barely sheltering them from the harsh elements. Recurring maintenance and rebuilding costs cannot be borne by this community. But perhaps the greatest cost is the loss of hope for a better future among many Rohingya, especially women and girls.

Next week, when we visit the camps in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, we will meet with Rohingya communities, the government and partners to explore new initiatives and support. The safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya to their homes in Myanmar remains the primary solution to the crisis. We need to recognise, however, that the situation in Rakhine is currently not conducive to large-scale return. So, in the interim, while preparing the ground for that repatriation, we must collectively consider what more can be done.

Rohingya youth have not had access to senior secondary and tertiary education since 2012, so there is a large population of unemployed, unskilled, and under-educated Rohingya in need of education and skills development. This includes continuing to expand Myanmar's curriculum education for children in the camps, and to

support livelihood opportunities that emanate from the knowledge and skills developed. Ensuring that despairing youth have positive choices in their grasp and are not lured into extremism or criminality serves these young people, their families, and the communities around them. It is a high-return investment in a larger public good.

Another key initiative to improve the immediate living conditions of the Rohingya refugees is to scale the prototype temporary shelters built by UNDP and other partners, using resilient eco-friendly materials that are more durable than bamboo. We hope that this and other similar initiatives will make these shelters more resistant to extreme weather events and minimise rebuilding costs.

In October 2020, at the Conference on Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response, I called for "longer term commitments and investments between and by the (concerned) parties, and the strong support of the international community." These words remain as true today as they were three years ago. The international community must not forget the plight of the Rohingya, both inside Myanmar and outside. While the journey ahead is challenging, as part of the UN system, UNDP's commitment to durable solutions together with our partners remains undeterred.