

Dialogue is the only way forward

Political parties' unyielding stances hurting the nation

The United States has reiterated what we have been saying for months: that the two major political parties of Bangladesh should sort out their differences through dialogue for the sake of a free, fair and participatory general election. On Monday, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu wrote separate letters to Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party (JaPa), inviting them to hold talks, without any condition attached, to end the current political stalemate.

It is, we must admit, unfortunate that a foreign country needs to spell out the basics of how to resolve political differences—through political means—although doing so, amid zero signs of any attempt at reconciliation from any side, does add some pressure. Right now, AL and BNP are firmly set on a collision course, each refusing to budge on their stances: the first determined to go ahead with the election under the incumbent government, and the second (and other like-minded parties) adamant about having a neutral election-time government. Neither party immediately responded to Donald Lu's call. Only JaPa has expressed its interest, although, frankly, it may be of little consequence given its ceremonial role in the bigger scheme of things.

Whether all parties will eventually see eye to eye on the need for dialogue remains to be seen. But what is not being said enough is that the success of any dialogue requires a sense of being on equal footing for all parties. It requires building confidence and evening the playing ground a bit. That is proving to be a major hurdle with the ruling Awami League keeping the opposition on such a tight leash that it is, quite literally, unable to attend a dialogue even if it wants to, with many central leaders behind bars and local leaders and activists facing the triple whammy of arrests, cases, and imprisonment. This is hardly the ideal environment for dialogue, but this is also precisely why a dialogue must happen.

With the election less than two months away, escalating tensions between the two major parties is creating an environment of fear in the country, particularly because of the spate of violence we have seen over the past few weeks. We do not want to see another election where people are deprived of the chance to elect representatives of their own choosing. Reportedly, the Election Commission (EC) is scheduled to sit down today to plan the poll schedule. Regardless of the debate over having a schedule without having the basic building blocks of a participatory election, we hope that AL and BNP will see the urgency of dialogue now more than ever. And to that end, AL must take the first step.

A growing threat for young people

Prevalence of diabetes among the youth is alarming

We are concerned about the increasing number of young people battling with diabetes in Bangladesh. According to a recent study, seven out of every 100 people aged 15-35 now face this severe health challenge. This may seem surprising at first, but when we look at our increasingly sedentary lifestyle, it is quite evident why this disease has become so prevalent.

Around 1.3 crore people are living with diabetes in the country, and that number is projected to be 2.23 crore by 2045. Against this backdrop, the study found that 26.5 percent of the young population have an obesity problem—a risk factor for the disease—and around 61 percent don't show symptoms despite having diabetes. Those who don't walk for more than 30 minutes daily and don't control their food intake are more susceptible to diabetes. The question is, do most people, especially in our congested cities, even have the opportunity to be physically active or eat healthy?

Over the last three decades, green areas like parks, playgrounds, and urban forests have shrunk by 66 percent in locations under Dhaka North City Corporation. At the same time, grey or urban spaces increased by almost 95 percent from 1992 to 2022. The choice left for most people then is to walk on what concrete space is available, but that too may be cumbersome at times. Walkable footpaths are either absent or mostly dilapidated. Further compounding the problem is the lack of mobility because of traffic congestions, preventing many from going outdoors, as well as the boom of the entertainment industry, making many glued to their screens.

As for food habits, another study has shown that one in eight people cannot afford a nutritious diet in Bangladesh. As food inflation remains sky-high—12.56 percent till October—people, when outdoors, resort to cheap, processed meals full of sugar and salt, or plenty of rice, exposing themselves to risks of diabetes. Reportedly, around two-thirds of packaged food contains unhealthy levels of salt, and around 97 percent of people consume such food, which mostly contain junk calories, twice a day.

Experts say that 70 percent of diabetes cases are preventable if the right measures are taken, which, unfortunately for us, seems increasingly unfeasible. The situation calls for comprehensive measures: while city corporations must ensure availability of open spaces, the government must bring food prices down. Furthermore, the authorities may consider imposing additional tax on high-calorie food and beverages—as is the norm in many countries—and nutritional labels at fast-food restaurants must be mandatory. If such steps are taken, the rise in diabetes among the young may be largely contained.

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UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

Bangladesh's human rights record under scrutiny



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TAMANNA HOQ RITI

On November 13, Bangladesh's human rights record was reviewed for the fourth time under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), an important UN human rights mechanism. A high-powered government delegation, led by Law Minister Anisul Huq, represented the Government of Bangladesh on the review and presented the country's progress in implementing previous recommendations. In his presentation, the law minister highlighted Bangladesh's progress in ensuring economic, social, and cultural rights. He also mentioned the various legal policies and other initiatives the government has taken to protect human rights and constitutional rights. However, he did not adequately address existing human rights concerns or the allegations of various stakeholders. He mentioned that the government took initiatives in consultation with the CSOs and HRDs, even though adequate, effective, and meaningful engagement of CSOs in this process was absent.

The UPR process was launched in 2006. Bangladesh underwent its first review in 2009, its second in 2013, and its third review in 2018. The process is a four-and-a-half-yearly review of the human rights records of all UN member states by the Human Rights Council, during which member states make recommendations to the state under review on human rights issues. The UPR process has gained considerable acceptance from various states and stakeholders compared to other human rights mechanisms of the UN because it uses a peer review system.

The UPR review is based on three reports: a national report prepared by the government, a compilation prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (based on various information from the UN), and another prepared by the OHCHR from reports submitted by the National Human Rights Commission and national and international human rights organisations or coalitions of organisations.

Member states make recommendations to the state under review. The state under review can highlight the initiatives taken by the government to improve the human rights situation, and support or note

the recommendations made by other states. To "note" means that even if the government does not support these recommendations at the time, it will take necessary measures to create an environment for supporting them in the future.

For the fourth round of review, the government, the National Human Rights Commission, and national and international human rights organisations or coalitions of organisations submitted reports. These reports were uploaded to the website of the UN's OHCHR two weeks before the review.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

It is worth mentioning that this time, 39 stakeholder reports have been received from various national and international human rights organisations or coalitions of organisations. In addition, countries such as Belgium, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Sweden, and Uruguay have already submitted their questions, focusing on issues such as the ratification of the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances, prevention of child marriage, the creation of a conducive environment for human rights defenders and civil society organisations, and the guarantee of the right to peaceful assembly. The law minister responded to these questions during the interactive dialogue.

Bangladesh needs to do better for its elderly



Dr Nawshad Ahmed, an ex-UN official, is an economist and urban planner.

NAWSHAD AHMED

These days, I frequently see elderly people pulling rickshaws or sleeping on the footpaths at night. And my heart breaks with sadness. As per the Population and Housing Census, 2022, over 15.3 million Bangladeshis are aged 60 years or above, which constitutes 9.28 percent of the total population—an increase from 7.48 percent in 2011. With the elderly population growing fast and projected to reach 18 percent of the country's population by 2050, their needs in terms of housing, food, healthcare, financial services, are expected to be enormous.

However, there is very limited targeted support available for the ageing population of Bangladesh. Globally, the older people are called senior citizens and they receive various support and benefits. The government introduced a monthly allowance for disadvantaged elderly people back in 1998, which still exists today. At present, about 5.8 million people—men aged at least 65 years and women aged at least 62—receive a monthly allowance of Tk 600 per month.

The Universal Pension Scheme, enacted in August 2023, has the potential to support our senior citizens. But we need to wait and see how effective it can be in the long run.

It will allow people aged between 18 and 50 years to put aside a part of their income and receive a monthly pension at the end of their payment period. However, this will benefit the older population of the future, not those who are in this age group at present. As of October 22, 2023, about 15,000 people registered for the pension fund and deposited Tk 12.54 crore. The government has invested Tk 11.31 crore in 10-year treasury bonds from this amount.

The National Policy on Older Persons 2013 considers people above 60 years to be senior citizens, in line with the UN World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna held in 1982. It commits to promote the participation of older persons in decision-making and policy formulation, increase employment opportunities, promote health, affordable housing and transportation; addressing the needs of older persons in humanitarian situations, disaster relief programmes, and during collection of statistical data. However, the policy has not been adequately promoted and thus, its achievements are few.

While we know that, in the developed world, there are a variety of support mechanisms available for senior

In 2007, the Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB) was formed, consisting of 20 human rights and development organisations to use this process to improve the human rights situation at the national level. For the fourth round, the forum also prepared a report in consultation with various stakeholders and submitted it to the UN Human Rights Council. Before submitting this report, the forum shared the draft with the relevant ministries and national institutions. As in previous reviews, a delegation from the forum was present in Geneva during Bangladesh's review.

Bangladesh's current political situation is conflict-ridden, with clashes and violence occurring at rival political parties' events. There have also been allegations of mass arrests or arrests of opposition party leaders and activists, and people live in fear and insecurity. The scope for freedom of expression is shrinking, and there are increasing allegations that the right to peaceful assembly is being obstructed.

and sexual minorities); institutional ineffectiveness; the possibility of depriving people of their rights through surveillance-centric laws, especially laws that restrict the media, freedom of speech, and the right to organise; the deprivation of labour rights; and the absence of a level playing field in terms of voting rights.

The summary of the UN stakeholders' report raised the following issues: government influence on state institutions; the opaque membership recruitment process of the National Human Rights Commission and its inconsistency with the Paris Principles; the denial of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture allegations, or the failure to provide adequate assurances of necessary measures or accountability in the context of these allegations; and allegations of harassment of civil society organisations, human rights activists, and journalists.

In addition, the stakeholders recommended forming a separate department to protect the rights of children, amending the Child Marriage Prevention Act 2017, enacting a Witness Protection Act, ensuring prompt, impartial investigations and punishments in cases of attacks on religious minorities, taking measures to protect the rights of Dalits and other deprived communities, fully implementing the Chittagong Hill Tracts Agreement, and strengthening the monitoring of recruiting agencies to protect the rights of migrant workers.

On the other hand, the government's national report states that it has taken various initiatives or measures to implement the 178 recommendations adopted during the third UPR. However, there is much debate over whether the initiatives mentioned in the national report are adequate or effective.

The Bangladesh government's position in response to various recommendations will be adopted as a draft outcome document on November 16. However, the government will have until March 2024—the next session of the Human Rights Council—to provide its final opinion. The forum expects and calls on the government to abandon its tendency to deny or avoid addressing human rights concerns, to carefully analyse each question and recommendation, and to make specific commitments for the next four-and-a-half years by adopting these recommendations. At the same time, the government should immediately establish a national planning and monitoring system with the relevant ministries, the United Nations, and civil society organisations to implement these commitments.

In response to widespread criticism, the government repealed the Digital Security Act 2018 and enacted the Cyber Security Act 2023. However, the new law also provides opportunities to curtail the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Critics allege that the only change is the name of the law, and that the basic character and provisions of the law have remained largely the same. Additionally, the government has repeatedly pledged to enact an anti-discrimination law, but the bill on this issue has not yet been finalised.

In the latest UPR, the Bangladesh government faced a variety of questions on issues such as the rights of marginalised groups (including women, children, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities,

citizens, in many developing countries, the elderly people are also well regarded and enjoy separate benefits. In India, for example, senior citizens are offered a higher interest rate on their bank deposits and receive personalised banking services when needed. There is also a separate queue for the elderly at banks and in hospitals. Indians aged

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60 years and above are entitled to specific tax benefits, including higher tax exemptions and lower tax rates. Since the elderly are more prone to illnesses and require regular medical check-ups and treatment, a range of health insurance schemes are available to cater to their specific needs.

Public buses and trains in India also offer highly subsidised rates to senior citizens, of up to 50 percent of the regular fare. They are also allotted the lower berths on trains and can avail wheelchairs from the train stations. Several states in India also offer property tax exemptions to senior citizens. All these benefits immensely help the elderly population in India. The various benefits elderly Indians receive are legally supported by the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

In Bangladesh, there are many significant gaps when it comes to the need to expand the support mechanism for our senior citizens. Millions of elderly people still have to work and earn their own livelihoods. The provision of old-age allowance is not nearly adequate to cover the increasing costs of food, housing, and healthcare. As such, authorities should seriously consider providing the elderly population with free access to health services, subsidised travel opportunities in public transport, provision of higher interest rates from banks, and food rationing. As is our tradition, we regard the elderly in high esteem. But we need to make this attitude a reality by offering them various benefits. The joint family system is slowly dying out, and can no longer be relied upon to ensure support for the older population. So, the government must come up with other mechanisms to assist our elderly in leading decent lives. A legislation would be the first step towards achieving this objective, followed by framing related guidelines for different institutions.