

## Anomalies galore in BTCL 5G project

### How could it evaluate all financial proposals in just four days?

While we were happy to learn about a government project to develop an optical fibre transmission network with a view to building 5G infrastructure in the country, the way the project is being handled has raised questions. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the state-owned Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Ltd (BTCL), the implementing agency of the project, has not followed due procedure in awarding the project contract. The contract decision was apparently reached after evaluating all submitted financial proposals in just four days, which, experts say, should have taken at least a month.

Reportedly, the BTCL opened the tender proposals submitted by ZTE, Huawei and Nokia on November 8, and by November 12, it submitted its evaluation report. Since the Huawei Technologies Limited was the lowest bidder with an offer of Tk 326 crore, it was given the notification of award on November 13. The question is: why and how did the BTCL do all this in such a short time? It has been alleged that the BTCL has completed the process hurriedly to give the work to the company of its choice, which should be looked into by the higher authorities.

According to experts, there are many aspects related to financial proposals that should be evaluated before awarding a contract to any company. While the financial and technical experience of companies need to be carefully examined, potential mistakes in calculations also need to be checked. Additionally, the rates given by companies need to be verified and all the rates need to be converted into taka according to the currency rates. Most importantly, the financial proposals need to be evaluated according to the law, rules and tender conditions. The question is: have all these been done properly by the BTCL?

Since Bangladesh has set the target of reaching the upper-middle income country status by 2031 and high income status by 2041, the importance of internet and digital technology cannot be overstated. Therefore, setting up a 5G optical fibre transmission network is very important. But if such projects are riddled with irregularities from the start, one cannot but be concerned about what will happen during the course of the project implementation or even about the future of those lofty goals. We, therefore, urge the government to investigate the allegations of anomalies raised against the BTCL and take proper action.

## A flawed law is easy to exploit

### Authorities must address concerns regarding the new land law

We share the concerns raised by some experts on the recently passed Land Crime Prevention and Remedy Act, 2023. At a roundtable discussion organised by the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) in collaboration with *The Daily Star*, they highlighted different aspects of the law to show how it was not aligned with the constitution. They also sought its cancellation or amendment in light of these concerns.

For one, the speakers pointed out that land crimes or offences were not clearly defined in the law, which can lead to confusion and exploitations. They also said the law was a product of bureaucratic overreach, as evidenced by the provision that transfers the jurisdiction of restoring a person's possession of land from civil courts to the executive magistrates appointed by the government. By entrusting mobile courts and executive magistrates with almost all land-related cases, the law threatens to create anarchy in the administration of justice, one expert said. The ALRD executive director also expressed concern about its possible impacts on the marginalised communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in terms of land ownership.

According to the land minister, this law was formulated after consulting all the relevant ministries and departments, as well as other stakeholders including those at the field level. If that was the case, why are there so many disparities and contradictions in it? When nearly 3.7 million cases involving land disputes, fraud and forgery remain pending at our courts (as of October 15, 2022), why didn't the relevant authorities do due diligence in ensuring a fool-proof law that aggrieved citizens could confidently use to seek justice?

When the provisions of a law are unclear or contradictory, they can be subjected to interpretation and misuse. For a long time, Bangladesh has needed a uniform law to empower the citizens so that they could seek justice in land-related cases, which, as of 2015, constituted 80 percent of criminal offences in the country. Now that we finally have one, the relevant authorities must make sure that it serves its intended purpose. To this end, we urge the government to listen to the experts and do whatever is necessary to plug all loopholes.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Make mental health care accessible

Mental health is a severely neglected issue in our society. Aside from a select few affluent circles, getting professional help for mental health issues never gets attention. Most institutions fail to incorporate mental health education as an essential component, perpetuating a cycle of generational mental health illiteracy. Professional mental health support is out of reach for the majority—with sky-high therapy fees and meagre availability of competent mental health professionals. I urge the authorities to build a better support system for all.

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# Rising foreign debt and financial worries



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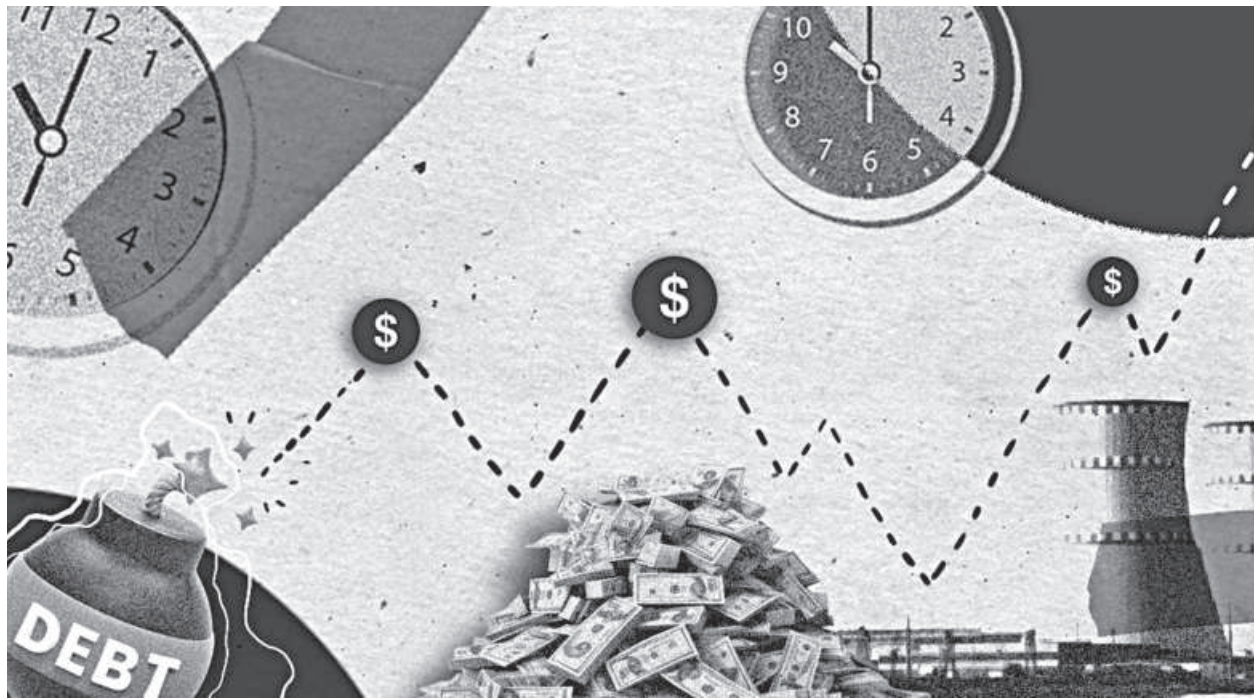
In September this year, the amount of Bangladesh's external debt exceeded \$100 billion. Given that the country's GDP is \$456 billion, the amount of external debt equals 22 percent of its GDP. In 2016, this amount was only \$41 billion and equal to 16 percent of GDP. The country's foreign debt registered a growth of as high as 14 percent over the last six years, while annual GDP growth was 6.55 percent on average. The growth of debt exceeding the growth of GDP is a clear sign of vulnerability, the consequences of which are already present. Seventy percent of this debt burden was created in the last decade, during a period when Bangladesh's development was notable. But this obviously puts into question the method of financing development by borrowing funds from outside.

While politicians in power do not seem to consider this abnormal growth of foreign debt as a sign of weakness, the emerging threats to financial stability will be difficult to tackle when principal plus interest payments mount exponentially. The government must act now to put a break on the abnormal growth of debt, which can only be accomplished by getting our superrich to make more contributions to the coffers of taxes and duties. But the current regime's preparedness to make this happen seems to have gone backwards, as evidenced by the falling tax-GDP ratio over the last 10 years. Fiscal erosion of this kind is abnormal for any developing country.

Bangladesh's private sector now occupies a 21 percent share of the composition of the foreign debt. While the debt growth is good for private investors because of lower cost of funds, the loans would require more and more foreign currency as repayments keep rising over time. But Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves have dwindled over the last two years. The government should investigate whether private borrowers who collected foreign currencies have really invested in domestic businesses or have misused them somehow. Concerns over the rise in both foreign

borrowing and money laundering are worth addressing.

The abnormal growth in foreign debt is significantly attributable to the borrowing from Russia to fund the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant. The loan for this megaproject alone exceeded \$11 billion, which was not adequately discussed in parliament or on economists' forums. Even a former finance minister disapproved



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

of this idea of the country taking on a huge liability for such a project. Environmentalists assert that this mammoth nuclear installation could be an enormous threat to the nation—a Trojan horse of sorts. Financial experts have not found enough gains in their cost-benefit analyses either.

While other developed countries are disbanding nuclear power plants, Bangladesh's abrupt move to finalise the Russian deal came across as imprudent and myopic. With the implementation of this megaproject, pressure groups with vested interests

India's foreign-debt-to-GDP ratio is 17 percent, while Pakistan's is 43 percent and Sri Lanka's stands at 68 percent. These figures give us an idea of what these economies have faced in the last two years. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka sank into disastrous situations while India escaped. Bangladesh's total debt-to-GDP ratio (including both domestic and foreign debt) is approaching 45 percent, which is actually the lowest in the region as the corresponding figures for India is 55 percent, for Pakistan is 76 percent, and for Sri Lanka is a staggering 118 percent. So, in terms of the total

Pakistan and reaped the momentum of development.

Although Bangladesh is not spending too much on expanding its military might, the country's debt effectiveness is one of the poorest in the world due to bureaucratic tentacles, inordinate delays in project implementation, and massive corruption in public sector projects. And all this makes the rise in foreign debt a real concern for Bangladesh's economy. Unfortunately, the over-30-percent devaluation of the taka in the last two years has made the burden of foreign debt even heavier.

## HOICHEMIN ISLAM'S EXCLUSION FROM NSU EVENT

# A blatant, disgraceful act of discrimination



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Hochemin Islam, a prominent transgender rights activist and a nurse by profession, was set to speak at a career fest on November 24 at the capital's North South University (NSU). The event, titled "Women's Career Carnival," was organised by Heroes for All and iSocial Limited, and hosted by NSU and its Career and Placement Center (CPC). As part of a panel with the International Labour Organization, Hochemin was planning to speak on how a workplace could be made inclusive for members of marginalised communities, and how such disadvantaged individuals can be assimilated into the labour force equitably.

However, since the evening before the event was set to take place, calls began being exchanged between the organisers and NSU authorities regarding protests from a certain section of the university's student body. The students were opposed to Hochemin coming to their university and speaking. In a formal letter to the university's vice chancellor—headed "Letter of objection and notification about Criminal activity as per Bangladesh penal code chapter 16 article 377 inside our NSU campus and the Promotion of Homosexuality (Transgenderism & LGBTQIA+) on

November 24, 2023"—they attempted to "highlight that a significant majority of NSU students practice various religions, and according to Bangladesh penal code chapter-15, article-295A, it is illegal to incite outrage of religious feelings..." and urged the VC "to intervene and advise the CPC against allowing this misunderstanding to escalate, potentially causing distress among the majority religious community." The night before the event, NSU authorities went back and forth regarding whether Hochemin could be allowed to speak at the event or not. But as tensions escalated, they decided against bringing Hochemin in for the event, citing concerns regarding her safety. But the hate campaign against this inspiring person—who has struggled against hatred and hurdles all her life—still continues, with even death threats being hurled her way.

Higher education institutions are meant to be havens of free speech and thinking. In a way, it is commendable that this particular university has created an environment wherein students can confidently approach the authorities with any complaints they may have. That said, the protesting group's actions and words so far suggest a lack of knowledge of and familiarity with people

from marginalised communities, and specifically individuals from the transgender community. Most concerning, the theme of the protest betrays a kind of restrictive mentality which hinders human rights. And here, the university and the University Grants Commission (by extension) have a central role to play.

Given that the university in question is indeed a practitioner of citizens' rights as enshrined in our constitution, it must educate its students in line with the values promoted by the state. Seeing as all citizens—including Hochemin Islam—are equal before the law of the country, it is disgraceful for a university to bow to pressure from a likely misinformed/miseducated section of its vast student body.

NSU boasts the privilege and responsibility of educating more than 22,000 students. Hence, it is quite incredulous that they were not confident they could have ensured the safety of just one person on their premises. In a similar vein, one cannot help but feel disturbed by what kind of discipline the students are being taught if a guest speaker could need protection from them. A better way of dealing with this situation would have been for the university higher-ups to sit down with the protesting students and hold a civil discussion with them. The NSU authorities should also have done everything in their power to ensure that Hochemin could safely speak at the event. Instead, in the eyes of many young people, this leading private university has validated an act of blatant discrimination.

In its press release regarding the situation, dated November 26, NSU failed to acknowledge the deeply concerning nature of the protesting

students' agenda. The statement instead focused on clarifying that, at the time of the event, the VC was abroad and that there is currently no pro-VC instated to represent the VC in his absence. But how does that matter? Again, NSU is a university of massive scale. Whether or not Hochemin's safety could have been ensured should not be dependent on the VC's presence alone.

As an alumna of the university in question, I must voice that I feel disheartened. My four years at NSU represent a time when I was able to flourish intellectually. The pursuit of my degree itself encouraged me to think freely and critically—question everything but hinder no one. I believe now that either the institution and its values have changed drastically over the past couple of years, or that it is doing a shabbier job of becoming a world-class university. A tragedy, indeed.

I hope the higher education institutions in the country—and especially the ones working intently to claim a place in the global rankings of universities every year—will perform their duty of educating students to be tolerant free thinkers. What has been done in Hochemin Islam's case is nothing but discrimination and a clear disregard of her human rights. The NSU authorities must assume responsibility for this by carrying out an investigation and taking due actions regarding those who have fuelled this hate campaign. As for long-term measures to prevent such shameful incidents from taking place at any other university, the UGC must be more involved in ensuring human rights and practice of basic tolerance at Bangladesh's higher education institutions.