

Israel must answer for its crimes in Gaza

Continued strikes amid genocide hearings show its defiance

The military, legal, and humanitarian aspects of Israel's war on Gaza have come into sharper focus after reports emerged that Israeli strikes continued to intensify despite its pledge to scale down its operations as well as hearings on genocide charges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which began on Thursday. The case, brought by South Africa claiming Israel had violated the 1948 Genocide Convention, also calls on the court to order it to stop military operations in Gaza. With the world's focus firmly on hearings, that Israel would still continue its offensive shows its defiance and disdain for international laws and humanitarian concerns.

Since the war began, Israeli forces have killed at least 23,357 Palestinians in Gaza as part of its campaign to eradicate Hamas. Innocent civilians continue to die and suffer as access to humanitarian aid is proving to be as difficult as ever. Reportedly, the World Health Organization has again cancelled a planned medical aid mission to Gaza due to security concerns—the sixth such cancellation in two weeks—while four Red Crescent staffers were killed when an Israeli strike hit their ambulance.

Against this background, far from creating room for hope and humanitarian aid, Israel seems to be focusing on creating the optics of addressing concerns even though the ground reality betrays its motive. For example, its continued offensive contrasts its pledge earlier this week that it would pull out some troops and shift to a more targeted campaign, which did not happen. And then, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly, but unreliably, rebuffed calls by some right-wing ministers to permanently occupy the enclave. The fact is, the world should continue to be cautious about Israel, regardless of the outcome of ICJ hearings.

Experts say the ICJ could rule quickly on South Africa's request for suspension of Israeli military campaign, but a final ruling on genocide could take years. But whatever happens at the court, there is no denying Israel's crimes, and it must answer for them. The international community must force Israel to agree to a permanent ceasefire.

We must brace for key global risks

Reducing climate impacts, combatting disinformation vital

The key findings of the recently released 2023-2024 Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum are indeed concerning. The report identified extreme weather and AI-generated misinformation and disinformation as the two biggest risks facing the world in 2024. As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries, and one that frequently suffers from misinformation and propaganda, Bangladesh has its job cut out for it: it must make room for improvements on both fronts.

Last year's Global Risks Report was accurate in identifying a cost-of-living crisis to be the number one predicament facing the world. But it is quite telling that, in the latest report, this has been knocked down to fourth position, while extreme weather has moved up from being in second place. What does this mean for Bangladesh? Considering the frequent climate events we faced in recent years, this can indeed be a big headache, so the authorities must prepare accordingly. Besides ramping up efforts to combat flooding and cyclones including strengthening flood embankments and shelters, it is crucial that the government invests more in early warning systems, as recommended by experts. Robust warning systems can minimise the damage of dangerous climate events.

As for the second-biggest global risk, while the WEF report categorises misinformation and disinformation as a technological threat, its impacts, if unchecked, can be felt across societies. Nearly half of the world's population will go into national elections this year. Not only will this amplify prevailing cyber insecurities, it will give reason to autocratic powers to increase surveillance under the guise of fighting mis- and disinformation. It will be up to democratic institutions to stay vigilant and fight off mis/disinformation campaigns, including from state powers, to stop manipulation of ordinary citizens.

In the face of increasing global challenges, what we need desperately is unity among citizens, among democratic institutions, and among nations. We—citizens and the media—must band together to demand justice, democracy, and accountability of state institutions so that they can play their role better to weather the crises facing us.

FROM ONE PARTY TO ONE PERSON

What was de facto is now de jure



THE THIRD VIEW

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We congratulate Sheikh Hasina for winning her fifth term as the prime minister, and fourth consecutively—the longest ever in our history. Today, in Bangladesh, everything is centred around her, which is both a testimony to her ability and how institutions are run. From policies to plans to projects and their implementation, from the macro to the micro, from the bigger picture to the minute details, from tinkering with flyover planning to green chilli preservation—everything has to have her direct consent if they are not to fall into the bureaucratic maze. All the megaprojects and their timely execution can be credited to her. There is a story that a fire brigade team leader, while dousing fire in a high-rise in Dhaka, was reportedly captured on TV referring to the PM's direct guidance through which he and his team were able to bring the fire under control. If it is true, then it is an example of her inexhaustible energy, incredible extent of her interest and total dominance in everything.

According to her supporters, it is deservedly so because no one else before her brought about as much positive change in Bangladesh as she did, a claim not without foundation.

The latest election is another example of her complete control of the most important event in any democracy, made easier by the opposition's boycott, which allowed Hasina a total free hand. There was practically very little interference on election day, as everything was worked out much earlier. BNP proved completely incapable of understanding Sheikh Hasina's strategic thinking and meticulous planning and thought very little of the heavy price they would have to pay, both in the short and in the long run, for their boycott. Hasina's playing of the nationalistic card was bold and brilliant, and her handling of the big powers quite dextrous. Bringing China and India on the same page in supporting her is something many regional and world leaders can learn from.

In terms of Sheikh Hasina's control over everything, the poll outcome tells the story as nothing else could. The Awami League (AL) won 222 seats, while 62 seats were won by the "rebels," 58 of whom were lifelong Awami Leaguers and were approved by the party. Jatiya Party won 11 seats with AL's blessings. Another two seats were won by 14-party alliance members were the result of AL handouts to the extent that they had to use "boat" as their election symbol. So, out of 298 seats whose results have been declared, 293 have been won either by the AL itself or by those it "approved" or "blessed." If we add the 50 reserved seats for women, by far the majority of which will go to the AL, Hasina can easily claim a tally of minimum 45 more, making for a total of 338 MPs in a House of 350. Can it then be termed as anything other than a one-party rule? It can be a case of being too successful for one's own good, for such extreme concentration of power has its own built-in vulnerabilities.



Five-time Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addresses a rally on the occasion of Bangabandhu's Homecoming Day on January 10, 2024.

PHOTO: BSS

Out of 28 political parties that participated in the election, 23 did not win a single seat, with all their candidates losing their "deposits" proving that they had no public support. They were brought into the fray to hike up the number of parties joining the election only to argue that the polls were contested by many parties.

The only party that could have challenged the AL in any meaningful way—the BNP—was so heavily crushed, and over such a long period, that by the time polling time came, it got decimated through police action, endless cases, fast-track conviction and widespread intimidation. As of election day 13,424 BNP leaders and activists were arrested, according to the party. It also claimed that under 499 cases lodged, a total of 52,342 members have been implicated as their names were included in the first information reports (FIRs). The fact that BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakrul Islam Alamgir, a man who commands respect across the political divide, has been in jail since October 29 and denied bail repeatedly—even last Wednesday—says it all.

However, BNP's own policy of boycotting the election, which we consider to have been suicidal, further added to the process of its marginalisation.

The most important outcome of this election is the emergence of Sheikh Hasina as the supreme leader of the country. She has been so for many years now, but the latest election has enormously consolidated that position. What was de facto is now de jure.

Ever since her return from exile in India in 1982, she has been consolidating her power—first within the party and then within the

government—through politicisation of the bureaucrats, law enforcement agencies, administration in general and massive distribution of perks and facilities, and finally in the whole country, through total crushing of any opposition and non-partisan dissent, making her its supreme leader.

The outcome of the January 7 election is that there is not a single

that people overwhelmingly voted the present government to power needs to be examined more objectively, and its in-built lessons learnt.

Simply put, Sheikh Hasina now stands out as the person solely responsible for whatever happens to the country. The economic turbulence that is predicted because of global economic turmoil will all

fall on her doorstep, with all blames coming her way. The dollar price hike, the inflation, rising prices of essentials, money laundering, unbearable energy subsidy and the unrest in the global market dipping our export will all come home to roost in the coming months. Already, the former finance minister has announced that all IMF conditions cannot be met. In the June-December period, we could not maintain our foreign exchange reserves as asked. This may not be the first of other defaults that may follow.

During the last decade and especially the last five years, corruption increased by leaps and bounds; denying it will only amount to burying our heads in the sand. The rising amount of non-performing loans is sucking the very "blood" out of our banking system, and the main business houses responsible for it continue to receive official favour. The banks' internal governance system has been weakened, making the sector more vulnerable and putting the whole economy at risk. The issue of good governance has been ignored alarmingly, with vital institutions abandoning its own rules and accountability. The weaponising of the legal system and its selective use will definitely weaken the confidence of the global business community, which is of vital importance if we want to increase foreign investment. The prime minister assured us that the economy will be her main focus. We urge her to start her new tenure by taking decisive actions on the problems identified above.

The all-encompassing victory may not be as smooth a sailing as it looks on the surface. For the fact is that victories naturally glitter, but absolute victory inevitably blinds.

Self-congratulatory rhetoric aside, there are some hard messages for the winning party from the low voter turnout. AL's vote bank is usually considered to be 35-40 percent. So the total turnout of 41.8 percent (per Election Commission data) shows that only AL supporters turned up for voting, and the neutral voters, assumed to be 20-25 percent, stayed away, as well as the vote bank of BNP which is estimated to be 30-35 percent (from previous elections), making for a total of nearly 60 percent voters who stayed away. So the exuberant claim

Business should look past gender



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Despite loud proclamations of women's empowerment in the country, the statistics paint a depressing picture. According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, in Bangladesh, only 35 percent of the formal labour force consists of women. Female entrepreneurs account for only 7.2 percent of overall business owners. This latent wellspring of talent represents a missed opportunity for economic growth. But the impact is not confined to economic figures. Women-led businesses are more than just profit-generating entities; they are catalysts

for social progress. They reinvest more profits into their communities, fostering education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship among other women, thus contributing to social development.

Evidence from Bangladesh's Southeast Asian neighbours paints a vivid picture. In Vietnam, a study revealed that for every dollar earned by a woman entrepreneur, her family's income increased by \$0.70, showcasing the direct impact on household well-being. Similarly, in Indonesia, research found that villages with higher rates of female

business ownership had significantly lower child mortality rates, demonstrating the link between women's economic empowerment and improved healthcare outcomes for the next generation. In Bangladesh, similar stories abound. Programmes enabling micro-loans for women have led to a dramatic decrease in poverty and a surge in children's school enrolment.

Entrepreneurship, therefore, offers women opportunities for economic independence, autonomy, and control over resources. By engaging in entrepreneurial activities, women can challenge societal norms and traditional gender roles, contributing to their own empowerment and the overall development of the country.

The path to empowering women entrepreneurs, however, is not paved with good intentions alone. It is fraught with challenges that act as invisible barriers: access to finance remains a major hurdle with traditional banks often hesitant to

lend to women-owned businesses. Cultural norms and societal expectations can also limit their mobility and access to networks. Lack of training and mentorship further hinders their ability to navigate the complexities of the business world. Tackling these hurdles requires a multi-pronged approach.

Firstly, the financial gates must be unlocked. While microfinance has served as a valuable stepping stone, it is like a watering can, good for keeping a small plant alive. But for women's businesses to truly grow and thrive, a whole irrigation system is needed. Thus, if doors to formal banking, venture capital, and angel investors are opened, these financial instruments will act as oxygen that will fuel women's businesses beyond micro-enterprises, propelling them into the realm of medium- and large-scale ventures that can truly drive economic growth.

Secondly, these women need to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Training programmes in business management, digital literacy, and marketing can act as tuning forks, ensuring their businesses resonate with the demands of the modern marketplace. Peer-to-peer learning networks and mentorship programmes can provide invaluable guidance and support, acting as experienced conductors and guiding them through the complexities of the economic landscape.

Thirdly, cultural barriers that limit women's mobility and access to opportunities must be dismantled. Targeted social awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in challenging these norms. By openly discussing and questioning traditional gender roles, these campaigns can encourage families and communities to actively support women's entrepreneurial ambitions.

The benefits of prioritising Bangladeshi women's entrepreneurship resonate far beyond national borders. By nurturing innovation, diversity, and

ethical practices, Bangladesh can become a beacon of sustainable and inclusive economic development, attracting foreign investment and inspiring other developing nations. This is not just a social checkbox to tick. It's about unleashing a tidal wave of prosperity that lifts everyone.

This generation—to unleash the untapped potential of Bangladeshi women in business. Let us be the wave of change, the rising tide that lifts all boats. By empowering women entrepreneurs, we empower not just individuals but families, communities, and the entire nation.

Imagine Bangladesh riding the crest of this economic wave, propelled by its women's ingenuity and hard work. Imagine a future where equal opportunity thrives, where women's success sparks widespread prosperity, and where Bangladesh shines as a beacon of hope for other nations seeking the transformative power of gender equality.