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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

BR's inefficiencies are proving costly Lack of accountability is the main issue

The continued poor performance of Bangladesh Railway (BR), particularly in terms of completing projects on time, is really frustrating. Reportedly, six major projects of BR have been on halt for years or have seen little to no progress of late. The fate of two of the projects have become uncertain due to complexities over financing. Complications in land acquisition and lack of manpower were the other reasons given by BR officials for the delays.

One of the projects was taken up in July 2011 to rehabilitate the Kulaura-Shahbazpur section of the railway to establish connectivity between India and Bangladesh. It was supposed to be completed by December 2012, but saw only 27.5 percent progress over the last 12.5 years, while its cost also rose more than five times. As per officials, the problems arose on the side of the Indian contractor, but they have now finally resumed work. Another project was taken up in January 2015 to build a second line on the Dhaka-Narayanganj route to increase the existing capacity of 16 pairs of trains per day. Its deadline was originally set to June 2017. However, when the project was 82 percent complete, the contractor laying the rail line cancelled the contract last year, alleging that it was not getting payments and the project site was not handed over on time. Similarly, another project is now stuck in limbo after China in early 2021 decided to pull out from funding it, citing "lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study."

The common theme running through these projects is the lack of good governance and accountability, where none is held responsible for project delays, thus perpetuating such malpractices. Experts have also alleged that while BR has a master plan, its projects are not taken up accordingly due to the problem of funding. Unfortunately, the BR has neither the capability nor interest to revise the plan.

So, while external factors have played a part in the delays, BR's inefficiencies, including the inability to properly negotiate with foreign partners, are also to blame. And the fact that the BR has been mired in myriad irregularities does not help either. Consequently, it is the public that are suffering from poor and insufficient services. This is totally unacceptable. It is time for the government to overhaul the BR and bring some much-needed discipline into it.

TikTok traffickers must be stopped Raising awareness, harsher punishment for criminals necessary

It is deeply concerning to know the extent to which criminals are able to exploit social media platforms to upend the lives of vulnerable people. On Tuesday, this daily reported the story of two underage girls who were preyed upon by a transnational gang that trafficked at least 100 girls to India over a single year. The girls in question, like most such victims, were targeted through TikTok by the traffickers, who convinced them to leave behind their homes and families in pursuit of success as content creators. They did, but then fell into the traps of the syndicate that may have already transferred them to India. Now, they could be victims of anything from forced prostitution to organ harvesting.

There are several factors behind the rise in TikTok trafficking of late. There is the lack of awareness among the poor, particularly young people, who may be adept at using smartphones and the Internet but are unable to identify the pitfalls, such as lucrative job/career-building opportunities offered by traffickers. Equally troubling is the authorities' response to deter these criminals. Take, for instance, the 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report by the US State Department that found that while the courts and tribunals in Bangladesh had convicted 94 traffickers in 35 cases during the reporting period, only 33 traffickers received prison terms, while 61 were simply fined. Such punishments appear lenient for criminals luring vulnerable people out of their homes with false promises and putting them at fatal risks. In one of the cases, a Bangladeshi girl named Tumpa Akter was killed in India's Gujarat after being taken there by traffickers who had targeted her through TikTok.

We need a multi-dimensional response to address this threat, including organising awareness campaigns, especially in rural areas, to educate individuals to navigate the traps of the cyberspace. It is also important that there are proper trial, prompt conviction and punishment matching the crimes of traffickers, which may deter prospective criminals. Also, strengthening security at our border with India is essential to stop trafficking gangs from operating there.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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End unnecessary honking

The issue of sound pollution in Dhaka is escalating day by day. It has become a cultural norm for drivers on the roads to honk their horns indiscriminately. Sometimes, this kind of honking serves as a means of communication, while at other times, it is merely an outlet for their road rage. I've observed many drivers honking their horn for no reason at all. This practice must change. The capital's authorities urgently need to address the city's sound pollution problem. Considering the severe negative impacts of noise pollution on human health, especially in the long term, I implore the city corporations and traffic authorities to establish a robust system to combat this, starting with imposing fines on drivers who honk their horns unnecessarily.

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Dealing with Myanmar's civil war requires delicate deliberation



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The resistance against the military junta in Myanmar is decades old. But it took a new turn when the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA) banded together under the banner of Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA). Four years after the 3BHA was established, Myanmar witnessed "Operation 1027," a renewed armed resistance launched by almost 50,000 people. The name indicates the date—October 27—on which the 3BHA commenced armed attacks in various regions. It began with the MNDAA retaking its stronghold township, Laukkaing, located in the northern Shan state which is partially bordered by China, offering an attractive trade route. There is another armed alliance called the People's Defence Force (PDF), formed in 2021 by pro-democracy activists and the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile. A group of ousted members of parliament formed the NUG, represented by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, various minor parties, and ethnic insurgent groups.

China made its first move to establish ties with the three armed ethnic organisations (EAOs) in 2016 when the latter jointly attacked Mongkoe, a township located in northern Shan state. The groups thanked China for its assistance in sheltering civilians crossing the borders. China also convinced Myanmar's military to let these groups attend the second and third sessions of the Union Peace Conference. Again, more recently, China pressed for and mediated talks between the three EAOs and the military junta. It took all these initiatives to protect its national interest, like the oil and gas pipeline projects in the areas where the armed resistance groups had been making their headway. The latest was clamping down on transnational cyber scams and traffickers targeting Chinese citizens. Operation 1027 helped China's efforts to tackle these and get rid of these transnational crimes.

More importantly, the 3BHA responded to the growing ties with China by adopting a joint declaration just two months before Operation 1027. They pledged that they would protect Chinese investments and act against those attempting to harm international investments. The Chinese project covers almost 800 kilometres and includes twin pipelines stretching from Kyaukpyu port in Rakhine state through Magway and Mandalay regions and eventually to the northern borders of Shan before reaching China. India, another neighbouring country and a regional rival of China, has also invested in the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in Rakhine state and the Trilateral Highway Project, which passes through several states to connect its northeast region



A member of Karenni Nationalities Defence Force rescues civilians trapped amid airstrikes, during a battle to take over Loikaw in Kayah State, Myanmar on November 14, 2023.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

with Myanmar and Thailand.

The MNDAA and TNLA have established their control in northern Shan state, and the Arakan Army has control in Rakhine state. The AA renewed its fighting against the Myanmar army on November 13, 2023, bringing an end to its year-long unofficial ceasefire. According to a recent news report, the AA has captured five towns out of 16 in Rakhine state and one in its neighbouring Chin state. Rakhine and Chin states share borders with Bangladesh and India.

The brunt of this civil war is being felt at Bangladesh's borders. In Ghumdum union of Bandarban, the district that borders Rakhine, two individuals were killed by stray mortar shells coming in from Myanmar. Media reports show that at least 330 members of Myanmar army and border police have entered Bangladesh, fleeing the conflict, in recent weeks. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which even aligned with the AA for a while, seems to have taken a turn as some RSO members are entering Bangladesh as well.

We find ourselves in a unique situation, facing several unforeseen challenges. The first challenge involves the risks of both China and India's economic interests and investments in Rakhine state, and their response to AA's military advancement there. China has proven to be crafty in establishing its ties with the Three Brotherhood Alliance and is diplomatically one step ahead compared to India. It indirectly signals that Bangladeshi foreign

policy makers will be in a catch-22 regarding the strategic and economic interests of China and India in dealing with the AA and the military junta in Myanmar. Against such a backdrop, a calculated and rational response from policymakers to the growing control of AA over Rakhine is pivotal, in the sense that we must repatriate all Rohingya refugees and also the military personnel currently taking

we seek to do, we must realise that we are in a catch-22 situation, given the political and territorial uncertainty in Myanmar. We should remain neutral in responding to the civil war and adopt an approach that does not put us on bad terms either with the central government or the Arakan Army. For instance, if we abide by the international humanitarian laws adopted in the Hague and Geneva conventions, it will

shelter in Bangladesh, since the future of the military junta in Myanmar is vehemently uncertain. The second challenge emerges from the uncertainty over the territorial integrity of Myanmar. The NUG in exile, recognised by the European Union, has a plan to create a democratic federal union after the removal of the junta from power. The long history of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar does not support this plan. The unity that we are currently witnessing is not guaranteed, given the politics of populism, ethno-nationalism, and the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. The relationship between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine is currently hostile. For the same reason, the Muslim community has traditionally distrusted the Arakan Army, which predominantly represents Buddhists, and vice versa. The good news is that the head of the AA, in an interview with a Bangladeshi news outlet, has assured that the Rohingyas will face no problem going back. They will not be discriminated against for their religious identity as they are also citizens of Myanmar. The other possibility is that Myanmar might experience Balkanisation or fragmentation, with the military government becoming administratively weaker. In such a scenario, it will be a dilemma for Bangladesh to choose whom to speak to and negotiate with regarding Rohingya repatriation.

The third challenge is concerning what approach to follow in sending back the Myanmar troops. Whatever

be a safe approach. These conventions help us legally navigate the situation without antagonising Myanmar's central government or the Arakan Army. Articles 11 and 12 of the Hague Convention and Article 4 of the Geneva Convention provide that the host country can treat soldiers or belligerents crossing into a country to escape wars as military interns. These conventions do not contain a detailed description of the issue, but they suggest two solutions. The soldiers or belligerents can be considered refugees or military interns. If we consider them refugees, the role of the UNHCR comes into play. If we accept them as military interns, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) becomes relevant. The Geneva Convention contains a clause that suggests that the host country can engage the ICRC in such a situation for collecting information, communicating with their families, and sending them back.

Whatever happens to Myanmar, and no matter what steps we take, we need to be delicate and sensible, giving immediate priority to the Rohingya repatriation issue while also dealing with the Myanmar security force and border police personnel entering Bangladesh. We must not compromise our national interests in responding to the civil war in Myanmar. And to ensure this, the best way is to remain neutral and take guidance from international humanitarian laws.

As told to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

Why must we take IELTS exams?

A national exam council can resolve English certification issues

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It is widely acknowledged that proficiency in English opens up many opportunities around the world. This skill enhances one's ability to connect with others, access resources, and navigate a globalised and interconnected world. Perhaps it is considering all these aspects that English is widely taught as a foreign or secondary language and is a compulsory subject from Classes 1 to 12 under the national curriculum.

However, even after studying and learning this language for 12 years, a large section of our students are not proficient enough in English to pursue higher studies abroad. Most unfortunately, even those who earn a bachelor's or master's degree in English at home often face the same

fate when they decide to work or study abroad.

One contributing factor is that the quality of English teaching in our schools and colleges is lacking when considered against the global standard. And consequently, students aspiring to pursue further education abroad have to incur additional expenses by taking English proficiency tests such as TOEFL or IELTS, and accordingly, take private lessons to do well. Meanwhile, many international institutions are reluctant to accept our school and college certificates as evidence of proficiency, as the exams are not managed by a central authority.

While improving the quality of English lessons is a structural issue, the certification process need not be as it is. In many countries, national examination councils or similar bodies exist to oversee and administer national-level examinations for educational certifications, and these certificates act as proof of proficiency. For example, in Nigeria, the National

Examinations Council is responsible for conducting examinations and award certificates for completing both primary and secondary education. In our neighbouring country India, students passing the Indian Standard XII English Language on the first



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attempt under certain boards are not required to take a proficiency test when pursuing higher studies.

Regrettably, Bangladesh currently lacks a dedicated national examination council or an equivalent organisation to manage school and college qualifications. In lieu of a centralised council, various examination boards and educational authorities within the country manage and administer exams

at different levels. These entities collectively contribute to maintaining the integrity and standardisation of the national education system. This fragmented system makes it difficult for international institutions and employers to assess the academic credentials of individuals accurately. This ultimately leads to further challenges for Bangladeshi students who want to study abroad.

In this era of intense global competition, having a reliable and transparent examination system is vital. A national council can help align national educational standards with international benchmarks, ensuring that our students are well-prepared to compete globally.

Considering all these issues, the establishment of such a council in Bangladesh is not just a demand of the time, but a critical step in ensuring the integrity, consistency, and quality of examinations, which will ultimately contribute to the improvement of Bangladesh's education system as a whole.