

Can nothing stop Netanyahu's genocidal mission?

Israel must agree to a ceasefire immediately

For the past five months, those with a conscience have been asking: what will it take for Israel to stop its genocide against Palestinians? The UN's repeated calls for humanitarian action, mass protests across the world, and even the US pointing fingers at the country—all have, so far, failed to deter Israel. And now, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced that his state will push on with its offensive "against Hamas," intending to ravage the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

Far from changing his stance, Netanyahu seems even more determined. "There is international pressure and it's growing, but particularly when the international pressure rises, we must close ranks," he said. "We need to stand together against the attempts to stop the war." He added that Israel must push back against a "calculated attempt" to blame it for Hamas' crimes. This begs the question: how are killing over 30,000 Palestinians (mostly women and children), instigating a potential famine, and turning a whole region into rubble not Israel's crimes?

With Ramadan just a few days away, the whole world is hoping for an end to this atrocity. Unfortunately, talks of a ceasefire still show no sign of progress, as both Hamas and Israel refuse to capitulate. Hamas has given certain conditions: a ceasefire must be in place before hostages are freed, Israeli forces must leave Gaza, and all Gazans must be able to return to homes they have fled. Israel, however, merely wants a pause in fighting to get hostages out of Gaza and more aid in, and says it will not end its onslaught before Hamas is "eliminated." In short, Israel has proposed a delay of Palestinian deaths—an insult more than an offer. And yet, US President Joe Biden has said the deal is in the hands of Hamas.

History has shown how Israeli oppression ramps up during Ramadan. This year, the tyranny is on a whole new scale, as Netanyahu has announced that there will be no peace during this holy month. It's a depressing irony that right before the month of fasting, a large portion of Gaza's population is on the brink of famine, according to UN agencies. And it's infuriating when one reads that for Israel, this is merely a strategic "starvation campaign." As one UN expert put it, "Israel is not only denying and restricting the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Israel is destroying the food system in Gaza."

For 1.4 million Palestinians, this might just be the worst Ramadan they will have ever witnessed. For the sake of so many innocent, helpless, and unfortunate lives, we sincerely hope Israel will discover some humanity in itself, and a miracle will take place in the form of a ceasefire.

Dengue situation 'alarming' already

What awaits us for the rest of the year?

After Bangladesh witnessed its worst outbreak of dengue last year, it is alarming to see the number of dengue patients across the country nearly doubling that of last year in the first two months of this year. As of February 29, the number of patients across the country was 1,394, compared to 732 getting infected last year. The number of deaths was 17, compared to nine deaths during this period last year. As of December 31, 2023, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 321,179 hospitalisations and 1,705 deaths due to the dengue outbreak of 2023. By the look of things, those records may get shattered again this year, unless the authorities intervene in a timely manner—which, unfortunately, remains a distant dream.

That is what has gotten public health experts, entomologists, and doctors worried, who have expressed four main concerns: risk of second infection outside Dhaka, lack of mosquito control capacity outside Dhaka, lack of adequate health services outside Dhaka, and untimely rains. Health experts had expressed similar fears towards the beginning of last year, which ultimately proved correct, particularly in the absence of any meaningful actions by the authorities. The fact that they are sensing a similar danger this year should, therefore, be taken extremely seriously by authorities. Moreover, last year, for the first time, the country witnessed dengue patients outside Dhaka almost double in number compared to those in the capital. Given that health facilities outside of Dhaka are not as up to the mark as those in the capital, this posed new types of challenges.

There are four types of dengue: Dengue 1, 2, 3 and 4. Last year, the number of den-2 cases was the highest in the country. Doctors say that if a patient is infected with dengue for the second time or in a new form, the condition of the patient becomes more serious.

Given these realities, the authorities need to take steps to minimise the threat of dengue starting now. We have repeatedly urged authorities to design and implement a comprehensive dengue control and eradication plan, alongside bolstering the healthcare system across the country to deal with the increasing number of dengue patients each year. Effective mosquito control measures must be launched on an immediate basis and be continued throughout the year to prevent a similar—or an even worse—outbreak as last year.

New Message

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Who will restrain prices in the month of restraint?



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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A government's job is not to preach about people's food choices, but to keep food prices stable and reasonably down. When it starts to preach, more often than not it is trying to deflect scrutiny of what it cannot achieve through actions. So when the industries minister advises us to choose locally sourced fruits like plums and guavas for iftar—over imported delicacies such as dates or grapes—as a means of cutting down on Ramadan costs, any sincerity in his statement is lost on the consumers who are overwhelmed by the relentless tide of price rises over about three years now. Instead, it comes across as insincere, classist, and oddly evasive, as if he was responding to an unuttered accusation.

When people worry about food prices in Ramadan, they don't mean just grapes or dates. Despite the minister's claim, these are still outliers—one a luxury best afforded in kinder economic times, and the other a starter best had in small quantities. No one, frankly, rues not having more dates on their iftar plates. But it is their prices which are worrisome, where they become one with essential food items, with the humble date going for as much as Tk 1,500-2,000 per kg now, up from last Ramadan's Tk 500-700. This is even after the government reduced import tariffs on dates earlier last month. Prices of almost all other fruits have similarly shot up. One kg of sugar, another iftar essential, will set you back about Tk 140-150.

Before we get into further details, consider this: if the total number of households in the country is 4.1 crore, price rises have affected over 2.9 crore (or 71 percent of all households), according to a World Bank report published in early January. Since then, nothing has changed to assuage their concern. On the contrary, food prices witnessed a fresh spike weeks before the start of Ramadan, which is when you usually expect it to happen.

As per a recent report by this



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daily, multiple price shocks have sent consumers reeling, with things set to turn worse following the imposition of newly set electricity prices. Barring exceptions, prices of most Ramadan staples including chickpeas, moshur deal, rice, eggs, and all varieties of meat have seen an increase. The price of onion has slightly decreased following news of imports from India, but only just. It is unlikely to go down much further if the state of other food imports is any indication.

So, try as the government may to get us to buy into its upbeat Ramadan forecast, with the finance minister even refusing to accept inflation as a major issue, the fact is that prices in general remain in the stratosphere. The question is: why can't the government control them despite supposedly enhancing market monitoring, vowing tough legal action against hoarding, shoring up supplies, and reducing import duties on some items? Checking commodity prices was one of the priorities outlined in

four major reasons for the surge in prices, including the dollar crisis and the currency's increased rate, extortion, syndicates, and still-high import duties. Importantly, they said that traders are forced to pay extortionists at multiple stages while bringing a product from grassroots to the wholesale markets. Even after buying from wholesale markets, retailers also have to pay additional money to secure their release. Apart from extortion, traders also blamed the middlemen, saying a product changes hands at least four times before coming to the wholesale markets. Thus, prices of locally sourced items may increase abnormally.

There are other factors and forces as well. We can talk about market monopolies, or systemic issues making imports costlier as they reach our shelves. We can talk about the trickle-down effects of high costs of fuel and utilities, as well as ballooning indirect taxes hurting people's

PROJECT SYNDICATE

What fundamentalist Christians see in Trump



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Now that Donald Trump is the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee, it seems fitting to address a source of perplexity that has persisted ever since he arrived on the political scene: how can the US' fundamentalist Christians be so enthusiastic about so thoroughly un-Christian a politician? This seeming paradox is rooted in Christian fundamentalist thought itself. At its heart is a special code of meaning-making that enables believers to see and hear what others do not.

Consider the words of Jesus in the Book of Matthew (13:16-17): "But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them." The meaning of these words can be properly decoded only by the faithful.

It's like the figures we see in Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, a painting long attributed to Pieter Bruegel. Something miraculous has just occurred: Icarus has fashioned wings of wax that allowed him to soar into the sky, but his flight and disastrous fall (after veering too close to the sun) cause barely a stir in the tide of human events. A plowman continues to plow. A shepherd dozes (as his sheep wander off into the sea).

A ship in the distance sails past a boy drowning near its bow. As WH Auden writes in *Musee des Beaux Arts*, whether it is a tragic death or a miraculous birth, "everything turns away." That's what it's like for those with eyes that do not see: they calmly sail on.

If you see and think outside the hermeneutic code of Christian fundamentalism, you might be forgiven for viewing Trump as a ruthless, wholly self-interested man intent on maximising power, wealth, and carnal pleasure. What your spiritual blindness prevents you from seeing is how the Holy Spirit uses him—channelling the "secret power of lawlessness," as the Book of 2 Thessalonians describes it—to restrain the advent of ultimate evil, or to produce something immeasurably greater: the eschaton (end of history), when the messiah comes again.

In this account, what matters is not the factual truth of Trump's sinful character, but rather the higher truth that spiritual forces are acting through him—"immanentizing the eschaton," as the 20th-century political philosopher Eric Voegelin put it—rendering Trump a divine instrument to stave off the anti-Christ, perhaps to realise heaven on earth. According to this Christian fundamentalist belief, even Trump's use of totalitarian political means may be justified if that is what it takes

to destroy the ultimate evil or usher in the ultimate good.

Understanding this theological framework helps us to recognise the futility of railing against "post-truth" politics. To be sure, the use of disinformation to sow confusion, cynicism, and despair about our ability to discern truth from falsity is a familiar feature of totalitarianism.

Liberal democracies cannot long survive without a legally protected institutional infrastructure that safeguards the meaningful exercise of free speech. This is what free-speech purists fail to understand when they use First Amendment doctrine to defend illiberal attacks on the electoral process. The goal of such attacks (or "anti-speech acts") is to jam deliberation—to sow confusion and mistrust—by propagating demonstrably false information upon which others are meant, or are reasonably expected, to rely. Profiting from falsehood constitutes a fraud upon the public.

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Nonetheless, those who oppose Trump and his illiberal followers will not succeed if they think the political challenge before them is simply a matter of ensuring the triumph of factual truth over deliberate lies. An even deeper challenge remains. It concerns the very fabric of liberal democracy, a concern the founders of the US republic viewed with such urgency that they made it the subject of the very first words of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make

purchasing capacity. We can talk about the culture of rules violation that nullifies any price control measure, and also the culture of non-enforcement by relevant agencies. We can even talk about excessive greed. Many influences coalesced to create the perfect storm that is our commodity market.

But one aspect that rarely gets a mention from government functionaries is the crippling effect of patronage politics. The gaggle of syndicates, middlemen, hoarders, and extortionists who exert an oversized influence on the supply chain draw their power from their association with the ruling establishment. So when the government talks tough love, how tough can it be, really? How far or long can the deputy commissioners—who have been lately tasked with checking hoarding and ensuring the smooth transportation of supplies—go when the many beneficiaries of patronage politics push back? For they will push back, sooner or later.

Organised highway gangs are perhaps the most visible of these disruptive forces. Last month, Prothom Alo reported how about Tk 2 crore was being extorted every month from goods-laden trucks in Sylhet city. The men behind this racket? Activists of different groups and sub-groups affiliated with Sylhet Chhatra League. On Tuesday, Transparency International Bangladesh further revealed that private bus operators are forced to pay at least Tk 1,059 crore in bribes annually to unscrupulous BRTA officials, police, transport associations, staffers of city corporations and municipalities, and individuals affiliated with political parties. The list of "collectors" is really stupefying. What about goods-carrying trucks? One can only guess what insanity they, too, are subjected to on their route.

Against this backdrop, efforts like adjusting fuel prices, fixing rates of certain essentials, conducting drives against hoarding and price gouging, or occasional import tariff reductions are but baby steps that will take us only so far. To really make an impact, what we need are institutional reforms designed to prevent scope for undue influences in the market and resolve all systemic issues. If the government really wants to control or bring down prices during Ramadan and afterwards, it must be willing to go after its "own people."

no law respecting an establishment of religion."

When Alabama Chief Justice Tom Parker recently wrote in support of the court's ruling that human embryos "cannot be wrongfully destroyed without incurring the wrath of a holy God, who views the destruction of His image as an affront to Himself," he and the court manifestly abridged the First Amendment's anti-establishment clause. It is a testament to the thoroughness of Trump's ascendancy—culturally, politically, and legally—that adherents of Christian nationalism so brazenly seek to fuse Christian and US identity.

The First Amendment simultaneously protects free speech and freedom of religion, because the framers understood that these values are linked. If state officials seek to justify their exercise of power on the basis of their own particular faith, no fact or argument, no matter how eloquently expressed, logically reasoned, or empirically compelling, will suffice to oppose it. Whether native to faith's ruling code or a stranger, each will seem blind and deaf to the other.

Over a half century ago, the US Supreme Court described the "core value" protected by the First Amendment as every individual's right to participate meaningfully (either as a speaker or a listener) in a "free and unhindered debate on matters of public importance." When that right becomes a religiously coded privilege, liberal democracy, like Icarus, plunges into the sea.

Will enough US citizens take notice and act before tragedy strikes? The answer depends on whether a national consensus still holds concerning pluralism and tolerance as essential concomitants of liberty and equality for all.