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Factors driving up child marriage persist

Rasulpur case highlights need for urgent interventions

Despite there being a specific law against child marriage as well as awareness campaigns and efforts to prevent this practice across the country, the harsh reality is that child marriage is a curse that persists stubbornly. In remote areas such as chars, where life is particularly hard, the situation is more dire. A report published by this paper on Saturday paints a grim picture of hundreds of child brides at the Rasulpur char in Barishal. Parents here are forced to marry off their minor daughters because of poverty and insecurity.

Poverty has always been a major factor behind child marriage, which increased manifold during the pandemic and continued in subsequent years as well. According to a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) report, 41.6 percent of young women were married off before the age of 18. This led to many girls dropping out of education at the secondary level, severely compromising their future potential. An uptick in sexual violence and harassment is also directly related to this evil.

In Rasulpur, girls as young as 13-15 are often married off and forced to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. This includes having children at a very early age, leading to all kinds of health complications. There are no doctors or community clinics, and consequently, many married girls develop pregnancy-related complications that are left unattended. The char is also notorious for being a major drug hub with local influentials and some members of the police being allegedly involved. The safety of young girls is, therefore, a big issue leading to so many child marriages.

Rasulpur is a blatant example of the utter neglect of local administrations towards the welfare of poorer households and neighbourhoods. Here, there are no wholesome recreation options for young people and very few opportunities for education. Instead, the drug trade thrives bringing with it a wave of crime, addiction and insecurity. Locals are, therefore, on their own and marry off their daughters to protect them. This must change.

We urge the government to focus more on chars like Rasulpur. It must cleanse the local administration of corrupt officials, clamp down on drug trade, establish more schools and healthcare centres there, and introduce youth centres that can create awareness of the devastating consequences of child marriage and drug addiction. The government also must initiate programmes to lift char people out of poverty, create education and employment opportunities for both boys and girls, and enforce the law against child marriage. Without such interventions, this curse—a formidable obstacle to the nation's progress—will not be eradicated.

Forests must not fall victim to business

Safeguarding nature should be our priority

Over the years, we have witnessed many forests falling victim to business and development—the one in Chattogram's Tulatoli area is just one of them. After 5,000 trees were felled in a five-acre area of the forest and a ship-breaking yard took their place, the Forest Department fought to reclaim the environment and won. The yard was sealed off last year, with the lease agreement being cancelled. But then, according to a report, the department's efforts were thwarted as the divisional commissioner overruled the order last month, allowing the yard to operate in full force. This is most certainly a depressing turn of events. If the divisional authority is supporting the destruction of nature, what hope is left?

The lease agreement—signed in February 2022 between the district administration and yard owner Kohinor Steel—was to use part of a 400-acre mangrove forest developed in 1983-1984 to protect the locality from natural disasters. It's ironic that the administration let the yard authorities cut down 5,000 of these life-saving trees—that too illegally, as they did not take Forest Department's permission. After the latest setback, the department is reportedly preparing to take the matter to court. But until the court intervenes or the divisional commissioner has a change of heart, the forest land is at the whim of the yard.

A ship-breaking yard operating there will likely lead to severe environmental pollution, as toxic spills from ship-breaking operations are known to contaminate coastal ecosystems and devastate local communities. It is hard to comprehend how a country that pledged to stop deforestation and increase forestland by 25 percent would let this happen. But it shouldn't be surprising, as we have seen nature being sacrificed like this countless times: plans to fell 2,044 trees in Jashore, building a safari park at Lathitila forest, efforts to take power lines through a reserved forest—the list goes on. These examples, all government undertakings, reduce the pledges to mere lip service.

If the government is really sincere about keeping its promises, it must put a stop to these incidents. The administration must remind the agencies and bodies under it that safeguarding the environment, not businesses, is paramount. No entity, public or private, should skirt or break environmental laws, and commercial operations must be assessed and monitored for environmental impacts. The ongoing heatwaves are a painful reminder that without forests and trees, we are doomed.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Lawrence of Arabia dies

TE Lawrence, known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia, dies as a retired Royal Air Force mechanic living under an assumed name. The legendary war hero, author and archaeological scholar succumbed to injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident six days before.

Message from Donald Lu's visit: Reset, rebuild, and strengthen



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The words "reset," "rebuild," and "strengthen" normally imply the use of mechanical tools to reconstruct something that needs repair. However, the same words—when put in the context of diplomacy—can, and do, have the same connotations. During the just-concluded visit to Dhaka by the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu, these words appeared in various forms at briefings from both sides. This daily saw this as "an apparent policy reset" by Washington, and did so with an abundance of logic.

The comments to the media by the Adviser to the Prime Minister for Private Investments Salman F Rahman, following his dinner for Mr Lu, were very much on the upbeat side. Both the adviser and the state minister for information sounded exuberantly happy with whatever was talked and not talked about at the dinner table, where some current and former cabinet members were also present.

While talking to the media following his meeting with Dr Hasan Mahmud, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Mr Lu did not mince his words when he said the US administration's "hard work" to promote a free, fair and nonviolent election in January this year "caused some tensions here," but was also explicit that it was now time "to look forward and not look back." He also made it known that Washington is now seeking to "rebuild the trust in its relations between our peoples and in its relations with Dhaka." In essence, he admitted that certain moves from his government prior to the election did cause a perceptible dip in the element of trust.

Although Donald Lu had visited Bangladesh more than once before the general election, this was his first visit after the polls. In fact, this was the first visit to Dhaka from anyone at this level from Washington after the January 7 election.

While sending positive signals in general on the future of the bilateral ties



Foreign Ministry Director General Khandker Masudul Alam welcomes Donald Lu at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on May 14.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

between Bangladesh and the United States, Mr Lu also highlighted his government's plans to work together to fight corruption, promote transparency of governments and accountability of officials, labour reforms, human rights and reforms in the business climate. There was no clear answer to issues like lifting the sanctions on RAB (although a US government representative later clarified that the sanctions would not be lifted) as well as visa restrictions—both of which were imposed before the elections. There were a lot of speculations about the US position on these issues.

Mr Lu also spent an hour with the Minister of Environment Saber Hossain Chowdhury. Climate change and the ill effects of global warming for a country like Bangladesh are all too well-known. However, the US's offer of free real-time

"the devil is in the details."

It is clear that Washington has decided to take the election issue out of the bilateral agenda. However, in the current and emerging global scenario, geopolitics has acquired a much greater place. When an official of the level of US assistant secretary of state talks of his government's wish to deepen its ties with Bangladesh, it is actually an expression of an intent, not necessarily an end in itself. Bringing that intent into a mutually acceptable level of fruition is the real challenge for both sides.

Bangladesh's relationship with the United States is no longer confined within the bilateral framework. The real canvas is much larger—it is the Indo-Pacific domain and how the US would want to see Bangladesh fit into this bigger picture.

Major global players are all too aware that Bangladesh today is in a position to exercise a good measure of autonomy in determining the course of its foreign and security policies, and to protect and preserve its national, political, and economic interests while maintaining strategic balance with its friends, both near and far. The visit of the Indian foreign secretary to Dhaka just a few days prior to that of Donald Lu also needs to be seen in that context. One can be sure that there will be others.

Donald Lu's visit can be seen as a first step in Washington's desire to reset its ties with Bangladesh, keeping the larger canvas in mind. How Bangladesh prepares itself for this scenario is something one needs to wait and see. The task, though, is by no means easy, and the challenges are many but not insurmountable.

ASEAN needs a longer-term approach to the Myanmar crisis

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About three years ago, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders gathered in Jakarta for an emergency summit on Myanmar at which the Five-Point Consensus (5PC)—entailing the cessation of violence in the country, constructive dialogue among parties to the conflict, the appointment of a special Myanmar envoy, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the visit of the special envoy and delegates to Myanmar to meet all parties—was agreed upon with the State Administration Council's (SAC) senior general, Min Aung Hlaing.

The 5PC has since seen very limited progress. Airstrikes by the Myanmar military and fighting among various armed actors continue, leading to the displacement of more than 2.5 million people since the 2021 coup. Inclusive platforms for political dialogue have not materialised.

While Indonesia created a new precedent of meeting with various stakeholders across Myanmar, the ASEAN chair's one-year tenure remains too short for significant breakthroughs. Hitherto, observers have described ASEAN's 5PC as "failed," "toothless," "not appropriate," and a "dead pact," and have said ASEAN centrality is "in tatters."

Nonetheless, there are three useful features of the 5PC. It is deliberately capacious: its points (except naming the AHA Centre) remain broad with

room for interpretation. It is not a peace plan and was crafted to avoid binding the actions of any successive chair.

Second, the 5PC is what ASEAN member states believe gives ASEAN the standing to be involved in the Myanmar crisis. Many may disagree that any agreement from Min Aung Hlaing is required for ASEAN engagement, but it is nonetheless significant to ASEAN.

Third, the 5PC is a measure aimed at preventing major power rivalries around the Myanmar crisis by establishing a test case for ASEAN centrality. Consequently, the 5PC carries high stakes for ASEAN's credibility in responding to the crisis through regional initiatives.

Making progress on the 5PC is crucial. Successive ASEAN chairs face at least three main challenges.

The first is discerning a medium-term strategy for ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar. The 5PC was designed to address the immediate aftermath of post-coup violence. But the desired "cessation of hostilities" will never come without a minimum acceptable medium-term strategy, accommodating the Myanmar people's visions for the future.

Second are the limits of time and operating within the one-year ASEAN chair timeframe. Sensemaking and trust-building are massive undertakings. The chair needs to understand facts, histories and perspectives on the ground, then analyse the interests of domestic and regional actors, before finally devising its policies for the year. The first two stages might already take up the best part of five months, leaving a mere two to three months to craft its approach on Myanmar for the ASEAN summit.

The third challenge is supplementing efforts at internal convening with external rallying. It must create space to bring together Myanmar stakeholders and simultaneously muster meaningful support from the international

community.

Between Myanmar, ASEAN, and regional actors, there remains a wide gap of understanding. Many Myanmar stakeholders do not understand ASEAN's processes and limitations, and many ASEAN member states do not fathom the complex relations and perspectives among the Myanmar groups.

ASEAN must continue to create the space to learn from the various relevant Myanmar stakeholders and seek the support of the major frontline states, namely China and India, for its efforts.

It is time to rethink the terms of the chair's special envoy to enable ASEAN to deal with the aforementioned challenges. After three years, it is clear that no chair has the capacity to deal with the issue alone. In fact, it is unfair to leave the responsibility to the chair alone.

Indonesia's proposal of a troika mechanism is a nod toward the need for a sustainable, more permanent mechanism. In this respect, the creation of an ASEAN office on Myanmar follows sensibly.

The office should focus on three main areas of the 5PC mandate—cessation of violence, delivery of humanitarian assistance and facilitation of stakeholder dialogues—to create the spaces and conditions for a nation-building process. A troika-plus mechanism (one that includes key ASEAN countries that have the competence, leverage and persistence to engage) could see its members share a rotating coordinator role of the office, dividing up labour by issue, stakeholders, or time periods. Importantly, the office must continue engagement with all stakeholders in Myanmar, not only with the Myanmar military, as its main modus operandi.

Finally, domestic engagement will have to be balanced with efforts on the external front, where the office could coordinate international envoys and