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## Locate and release disappearance victims

Their families deserve answer, justice, and closure

For over a decade, hundreds of families in Bangladesh have lived with the unbearable pain of not knowing the fate of their loved ones. These individuals—mostly critics and political rivals of Awami League—disappeared during its 15-year rule, allegedly abducted by state agencies. The government's fall has now reignited the hopes of their families, but it is a tragic reflection of our times that there is still no end date on their never-ending misery. According to a report, over 100 such families formed a human chain on Saturday, demanding information about the whereabouts of their loved ones. They held up photos of their missing sons, husbands, and fathers, some of whom disappeared as far back as 13 years ago.

These families deserve answers, justice, and closure. Unfortunately, they are yet to have the chance to move in that direction. Although the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) authorities already said that there are no detainees in their Dhaka facility, popularly known as "Aynaghor", the release of some former prisoners has raised hope that many of the disappeared could still be alive in other secret internment centres of the security forces. The DGFI reportedly promised to form a joint commission to inspect 23 other facilities across the country to see if the victims of enforced disappearance were there. The question is, how many detention cum-torture cells are there, really? How many of the prisoners held illegally over the years are still alive? How many perished in obscurity?

In a report in 2021, the Human Rights Watch said there was no trace of nearly 100 out of the 600 people who had disappeared during Hasina's rule. The number of the disappeared could be more than 700, according to Odhikar, which says some 150 are believed to remain missing. Clearly, because of the cloak of secrecy in which those behind the illegal operations wrapped themselves, there remains a huge information gap which could complicate any future effort to shine a light on all such cases and indeed to pursue justice for the security officers and services responsible.

Besides enforced disappearance, the Awami League regime had also been regularly accused of allowing extrajudicial killings and custodial torture, and so the interim government must start the process of establishing justice for all such activities. The immediate priority, of course, will be to locate and release all enforced disappearance victims. For too long, these people and their families have endured unimaginable suffering, which must come to an end. The authorities should also set up an independent justice mechanism with the UN's support to investigate each of the incidents, and put the perpetrators on trial. After Sheikh Hasina's ouster, the nation finally has a chance to unearth the full horrors of enforced disappearance and rectify the state machinery involved.

## Urgent bank reforms are crucial

Recover bad loans, punish those who exploited the sector

Since the fall of the Awami League regime, there have been several chaotic incidents in the banking sector—from the resignation of Bangladesh Bank (BB) governor and other top officials to the conflicts between rival groups at the Motijheel branch of Bangladesh Islami Bank yesterday—sending out an alarming signal. These incidents are but an indication about how quickly a sector, long lying on the edge of the precipice, can unravel when push comes to shove.

A recent report by Prothom Alo sheds light on what led to the woeful state of this sector. It talks about the BB's questionable steps taken during the erstwhile government to keep several failing banks afloat by providing liquidity support without collateral; alleged unethical connections of the BB governor and deputy governors with top loan defaulters; and the change of ownership forced on several banks including the Islami Bank, creating an environment of mistrust. Moreover, the BB's choice of lending foreign currency loans from the reserve to various influential businesses through the export development fund, without proper evaluation, also resulted in many classified loans. Just think: 20 local businesses currently owe BB about \$70 million taken out of the foreign currency reserve!

The default loan amount reported by BB—Tk 1.822 trillion—is also under scrutiny. Experts estimate that the actual figure would be close to four trillion, considering rescheduled and bad/written-off loans and those currently under legal dispute. Meanwhile, depositors of the failing banks, many of which were forced to change ownership, cannot withdraw their savings. Yet, the owners of the banks are taking out loans under different names.

While some of these irregularities were mentioned in the BB's own reports, several central bank officials allege that many such activities have remained out of BB's and Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit's regulatory radar. This raises serious questions about the responsibility and ethics of top officials of not just the central bank but also the governing bodies of several private and public commercial banks. There is no doubt that political appointments in the banking sector, incorrect or manipulative accounting practices, nepotism, and lack of transparency in the lending process brought the sector to its current state.

It is, therefore, imperative that the interim government urgently launches an investigation to find out the actual amount of default loans, and identify and bring to book the big defaulters along with officials who aided these questionable borrowings. Also, the government must prioritise depositors' interests and prevent any further withdrawal of money by the unwholy nexus of unscrupulous owners, borrowers, and defaulters that are bleeding the sector dry.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Phonograph was invented

On this day in 1877, American inventor Thomas Alva Edison made perhaps his most original discovery, the phonograph, and his early recordings were indentations embossed into a sheet of tinfoil by a vibrating stylus.

# The fall of a dictator should not give rise to another



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SAAD HAMMADI

The new administration under the leadership of Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus has the aspirations of many entrusted upon him to deliver justice, create the space for a functioning economy and democracy, establish rule of law, and a transparent and accountable government. The recent violence and history of coups and staged elections give an eerie feeling that the country is not completely out of danger.

The blood and sacrifice of hundreds of people freed Bangladesh from the tyrannical leadership of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It is even more important now that Hasina and those in the command responsibility during her time in the government are not let off the hook and are brought to justice and accountability for the unlawful killings, detention and torture of hundreds of people in the country. More than 500 people were killed in 23 days since July 16, according to Prothom Alo. The violence against minorities after Hasina's exit must also be subject to investigation.

The interim government of Bangladesh has the opportunity to do this by proactively inviting the United Nations to establish a commission of inquiry and extending its full cooperation with the procedure. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk has reiterated his office's support for a comprehensive investigation. The international community must press for the same to uphold global justice and accountability under the rules-based international order.

Justice and accountability do not begin with Sheikh Hasina and her government only. The political parties that have ruled the country before her time, too, have committed serious human rights violations and promoted a culture of impunity. There is both fear and frustration that the traditional political parties will exploit this moment to return to power and make matters worse, given their competing track records of corruption and crimes.

For the longest time, the people have shown tremendous resilience to put up with corruption, politicised judiciary, and repressive laws and law enforcement that resulted in egregious

human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances, and unlawful killings. The crimes under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina must not subsidise those committed by her predecessors.

The young generation that has led



The young generation that has led the movement for systemic change deserves nothing short of a leadership that breaks away from the ugly legacy of the traditional political parties.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

the movement for systemic change, and was subsequently joined by the wider population, deserves nothing short of a leadership that breaks away from the ugly legacy of the traditional political parties. The fall of a dictator should not give rise to another. The Yunus-led government must ensure that Bangladesh does not fall back on the dictatorial aspirations of political parties and ideologies that undermine cultural, political and religious freedoms.

The young generation must be afforded with safe and secure environment, free of intimidation and

for public consensus. Institutional reforms will be required throughout the administration to develop systems for transparency and accountability in the process.

The interim government must immediately scrap all repressive provisions under laws such as the Cyber Security Act (CSA), drop the charges against all those accused under the problematic provisions of the law as well as its predecessors—the Digital Security Act (DSA) and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act. New laws and constitutional reforms must be drafted in line with

free fall of the economy and recover the state at a time when even the global economic and political orders are extremely chaotic.

The interim government must be afforded the time to make foundational changes that are inevitable for a smooth transition to a democratically elected government and for the country to move forward. This cannot be an indefinite period. The interim administration must set a deadline for itself. The success of the new leadership will depend on the trust and confidence it is able to build with the people.

# It's time to look forward with our fashion partners



RMG NOTES

Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

In the aftermath of the former prime minister's resignation, the country is now ready to put the challenges of the last few weeks behind it. The nationwide curfews had been withdrawn on August 6, and since then, banks, schools, factories, etc. have been re-opened and people have started their normal daily lives. The apparel factories of the country have resumed production on August 7.

So, what does all this mean for our country? The focus of this article is from a business perspective. However, the people of Bangladesh can attest to how the past few weeks of civil unrest have certainly taken their toll on an emotional level as well.

My overriding message, as somebody who lives and works in Bangladesh, is that our garment manufacturing sector remains very much open for business. But first, we need to look at what the business community needs from our state and non-state institutions to help Bangladesh regain the confidence of its international business partners.

As stated earlier, it has been a very challenging time, but I believe that the resignation of the former prime

minister and the installation of the army chief might help to restore stability. It is time to start looking forward.

Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971, meaning that we are still a relatively new country and the path to development has been a bumpy road. However, Bangladesh's recent problems are part of a larger historical pattern of political and social challenges. Thus, the country's history of overcoming adversity and its commitment to economic development should provide a foundation for optimism.

Over the years, the garments industry of Bangladesh has established itself as one of the key powerhouses in the country, bringing in vital export earnings. In the fiscal year 2022-23, garment exports from Bangladesh earned \$47.38 billion and the value is expected to grow year-on-year.

Despite the recent political unrest, Bangladesh's garment industry still remains a cornerstone of our economy. The industry accounts for more than 80 percent of the country's export earnings and provides employment to millions of people, particularly women.

Let us also not forget the sector has played a crucial role in lifting millions out of poverty and improving living standards. There are ambitions to increase exports well beyond US\$50bn and, in doing so, lift many millions more people out of poverty.

But in order to achieve those goals, we need the support of the international community, and the

**Going forward, our leaders need to own the conversation. Historically, public relations have not been one of Bangladesh's strong suits. However, how we project ourselves to the international community is vital given the present situation.**

backing of international fashion buyers.

It goes without saying that the international community may have read newspaper reports or even seen video footage of the political unrest that has occurred over the last few weeks, and have developed concerns about placing their orders here. Therefore, we simply cannot assume that the support from the international community will be readily available—it must be earned.

To maintain or regain the trust of the international business community, I believe three things need to happen over the coming weeks.

The first is that our country's new