

US DELEGATION VISIT

A new chapter in Bangladesh-US relations?



Shamsher M Chowdhury, Bir Bikram is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.

SHAMSHER M CHOWDHURY

As expected, the recent visit to Dhaka by the US delegation led by Brent Neiman, assistant secretary for international finance at the US Department of Treasury, accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, and USAID and trade officials, was the subject of much speculation by all and sundry here, both prior to their arrival and since their departure.

The symbolic value of the visit and its timing cannot be overemphasised, this being the first such visit from any country since the change of guards in Dhaka on August 5—that, too, from Washington. Added to this is the fact that Donald Lu, a key figure in Bangladesh-US relations, landed in Dhaka after spending four days in Delhi attending the 2+2 dialogue, a regular event in the framework of Indo-US bilateral strategic relations, in which the convergences outweigh the divergences—or more appropriately, the diversions.

Official comments from both sides following the meetings between the US delegation and Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain, Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed, Bangladesh Bank Governor Dr Ahsan H Mansur, and the foreign secretary focused, among other things, on an “expression of strong commitment [from the US] to work with the interim government.” The US embassy in Dhaka posted on its Facebook page, “Our delegation met Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, affirming our dedication to fostering inclusive economic growth, institution building, and development to benefit the people of Bangladesh. As Bangladesh looks to chart a more equitable and inclusive future, the US stands ready to support those efforts.”

On the face of it, the emphasis was on Washington’s readiness to provide economic, technical and financial support for reforms in areas such as the banking sector, which has



US delegates hold a talk with Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus in Dhaka on September 15, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

been weakened as a primary vehicle for large-scale corruption and money laundering over the last decade and a half. The signing of an agreement under which the US would provide \$200 million to Bangladesh as development support was possibly the first step in this journey.

For his part, Prof Yunus highlighted his administration’s goals to quickly “reset, reform and restart” the economy, initiate financial sector reforms, and strengthen

institutions. He then spelt out the steps taken so far in this pursuit, including the formation of six separate commissions to address reforms in key areas and state institutions, the most important of which was amending, or refining, the country’s constitution. The US delegation, in response, praised the chief adviser’s leadership and expressed Washington’s willingness to support his reform agenda.

Implicit in this is a possible assessment of the role of military junta in Myanmar. Were they alluding to a regime change in Myanmar to facilitate the return of the Rohingya? One can only speculate.

In reviewing the public language from the US delegation, three words that should stand out are “support,” “equitable,” and “inclusive.” It appears that Washington is focused on helping Prof Yunus and his team advance

Hudson Institute in Washington, where he said, “It is in everyone’s interest to support a democratic, peaceful, and lawful transition in Bangladesh,” adding that “the timing of fresh elections and the duration of the interim government is for the people of Bangladesh to decide.” Verma’s remarks should be viewed within the broader context of the US position on the dramatically changed situation in Bangladesh.

It is perhaps necessary to try and discern, if at all possible, what the hard political content of the discussions with the chief adviser was and what, if anything, was discussed in Delhi regarding the current situation in Bangladesh. Understandably, there were no public statements by either side on this. The US delegates’ meeting with the chief adviser lasted at least an hour, and it is reasonable to assume that this time was not solely spent discussing the reform process, which is already publicly known.

Further inquiry should focus on the political talking points, as well as the immediate, mid-term and long-term implications for Bangladesh on the broader geopolitical stage, especially given Washington’s visible support for the interim government in Dhaka. In the prevailing global political climate, relations between states, large and small, do not remain confined to the bilateral frame only—they spread wider into the region and beyond. Similar visits, therefore, from others including Washington’s allies before the year is over cannot be ruled out. It will also be of great interest to watch what transpires at the meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh Chief Adviser Prof Yunus on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly this month in New York, assuming such a meeting takes place.

Observers believe the visit signals a retooling of Bangladesh-US relations, which have been noticeably strained in recent times. The imposition of sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and some of its officials by the US Department of Treasury, along with a visa restriction policy affecting certain officials, did not go down well in Dhaka. At the same time, repeated public references by the former prime minister to the US seeking a military base in St Martin’s Island in exchange for Washington’s support were cases in point. Washington’s open criticism of the non-participatory and severely flawed national elections, particularly in 2018 and 2024, further strained the relationship.

WAVE OF ATTACKS IN LEBANON

Israel needs to be stopped from provoking an all-out war



Ramisa Rob is in charge of Geopolitical Insights at The Daily Star.

RAMISA ROB

For months, Israel and Lebanon—particularly Hezbollah, Iran’s powerful proxy in the nation—have been engaging in tit-for-tat attacks. At some points, such as when Hezbollah’s senior commander Fuad Shukr was killed in Beirut in late July, and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran around the same time, it seemed as if a shadow war was on the brink of erupting into an expanded conflict. Since Tuesday, that fear is now closer, when hundreds of pagers used by Hezbollah exploded across Lebanon and parts of Syria, killing more than a dozen people and injuring thousands. The next day, more explosions of electronic devices, including walkie talkies, laptops and radios, killed at least 20 people and injured hundreds, according to Al Jazeera. A Hezbollah official has referred to the ominous, action thriller movie-like attack tactics as the “biggest security breach” that the group has faced since Israel launched its military campaign in Gaza post-October 7 attacks, after which cross-border exchanges between Hezbollah and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have become near-daily occurrences.

Ahead of a high-stakes US presidential election, a regional war with Iran no less, would likely hurt the prospects of Democratic nominee Kamala Harris who has been part of the Biden administration, which stands accused of complicity in the Gaza genocide. The Harris campaign has stressed on the need for a ceasefire, which, after these attacks will definitely not happen before the elections.

The attacks, where objects used by civilians were rigged, has led experts to interpret a weakness of Hezbollah’s defense apparatus to Israeli cyber warriors and Israeli infiltration. Videos have since emerged of Hezbollah fighters blown to the floor by their own communication equipment. It is probable that Israel strategically attacked to disrupt the command centre of Hezbollah. Targeting thousands of people, breaching security, without knowledge of who held the devices or where they were located violates international law, as United Nations human rights chief

the covert operation needed to happen before Hezbollah or Iran got wind of it. Whatever the reason, these attacks, just a grim three weeks shy of one year of Hamas’ attacks and Israel’s genocide in Gaza—can have grave implications which will be seen in the days to come.

Hezbollah has now promised to retaliate but this promise now holds more weight as chief Hassan Nasrallah now faces pressure

rather surprise attacks by Israelis infiltrating Hezbollah. They underscore the capabilities of the Israeli intelligence, and signal further to Hezbollah, that Netanyahu’s Israel could also have more sadistic surprises planned. But as coordinated as they may be, Israel knows Hezbollah is, without question, one of the most well-trained and resourced non-state actors in global politics with an arsenal upwards of 150,000 rockets and precision-



People gather outside American University of Beirut Medical Center as more than 1,000 people, including Hezbollah fighters and medics, were wounded when pagers exploded across Lebanon.

PHOTO: REUTERS

within the group to respond to these attacks. There’s an important context to such pressure. Nasrallah and Hezbollah have thrived with an image of invincibility after confronting Israel in 2006, when their commandos launched a cross-border raid on an Israeli armoured patrol, killing two IDF soldiers and taking two hostages. It spiralled into a costly war, especially for Lebanese citizens, 1,200 of whom were approximately killed. More than 100 IDF soldiers were killed, while 43 Israeli civilians died in rocket attacks carried out by Lebanon. Both sides had declared victory, but victory was not defined in the number of killings but rather that Israel failed to achieve its strategic objectives, including retrieving the two hostages alive. Since then, Hezbollah has only been emboldened in the region with its military prowess—with advanced weaponry, more armed personnel, and political legitimacy beyond Lebanon.

The attacks in fact do threaten a wider conflict, and it’s the first of covert, sinister

guided munitions. According to Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, Israel is pushing the entire region towards the abyss of regional war, which would have “drastic ramifications not only for the region, but for the world.”

It must also be noted that the attack happened on Tuesday as Blinken arrived in Egypt, yet again, to discuss another ceasefire deal in Gaza. Diplomatic talks have continued for nearly a year, and proved nothing but futile. These attacks have unquestionably put the ceasefire talks on ice, and if it wasn’t clear before, Netanyahu has no interest in bringing back the hostages, over a wider war. Israel’s objective to “defeat Hamas,” as they say, still hangs in the air. Engaging in an existential fight with Hezbollah would not be the same as carpet bombing a strip, and killing civilians at historic pace. Hezbollah is no easy opponent, and a full-scale war would also harm Israeli cities and Israeli civilians.

And the implications of an all-out war are

far-reaching to the larger countries covertly or overtly involved in the conflict. In other words, once again, Israel is bringing Iran and the US closer to a confrontation. Ahead of a high-stakes US presidential election, a regional war with Iran no less, would likely hurt the prospects of Democratic nominee Kamala Harris who has been part of the Biden administration, which stands accused of complicity in the Gaza genocide. The Harris campaign has stressed on the need for a ceasefire, which, after these attacks will definitely not happen before the elections. The Biden administration will be in a more precarious position, as will the Harris campaign. They cannot sanction Israel were it to start a war with Hezbollah before November, as that would alienate Zionist voters. On the other hand, inaction and tepid diplomacy will show their continuous incompetency in foreign policy and the lack of a ceasefire will continue to alienate Arab and young pro-Palestinian voters. Domestically, Israel’s war with Lebanon is far from US interest at the moment.

Some US experts on the other hand feel that Israel is falling into Khamenei and Nasrallah’s trap. Since Haniyeh’s death, Iran has vowed to retaliate but there has been no action yet. Iran has been restrained, yet ominous, in playing with fire. One of the reasons, which have been clear, is that they too don’t want an all-out war which would also involve the US. But their desire to restrain from doing so now remains contested after the death of Haniyeh and Fuad Shukr. Iran and Hezbollah play the opposition with attrition. The opposition here, Netanyahu’s Israeli cabinet, is driven with short-term impulsive strategies with no long-term goal that can be gleaned from its actions in Gaza, its actions in the northern border with Lebanon, and recently, its attacks in the West Bank. Collectively, Israel is engaged in doing everything that would give Iran the political upper hand to justify a large retaliation, even if it may come late, and that would be disastrous for Israel itself and its allies as well.

As such, the onus is on the US, the “superpower” and the Arab states that have altogether failed to control the conflagrations in the Middle East, to make Israel stop and figure out a strategy to end the cycle of locking heads with Iran. Diplomacy efforts a little too late can be costly, as has been shown by the genocide in Gaza, which has left the world in tatters. Israel needs its most powerful ally to slam the brakes—whether it be internally—because as recent history has shown, stopping the train after it has left the station does not work with Netanyahu’s government.