

BNP must control errant party activists

Infighting, crimes by grassroots members contrast its call for reforms

The fall of Awami League on August 5 following a mass uprising marked a historic shift in Bangladesh's political landscape, but it has also exposed deep cracks within the BNP, as long-suppressed party activists, leaders, and supporters scrambled to fill the void left by their Awami League counterparts. Over the last month and a half, we have had various reports on the disruptive effects of this transformation. Turf wars, factional infighting, extortion business, and political capture of public sector by BNP-affiliated groups have made frequent headlines, despite stern warnings and occasional disciplinary measures by party high-ups. This is not only hurting its credibility—it also risks derailing the broader vision of reform that drove the uprising.

Since August 5, according a report by this daily, at least 14 BNP members have lost their lives, eight of them linked to factional clashes. The latest incident occurred on Friday, in Chattogram's Changaon area, where a Jatiyatabadi Jubo Dal activist was stabbed to death during a clash between rival factions. The same day, there were heavy clashes between two BNP-linked groups in Chandpur, leading to the injuries of at least 30. These violent power struggles—often centered around the control of extortion rackets—mirror what plagued Awami League while it was in power, with over 150 of its leaders and activists reportedly killed mostly in internal feuds since its 2018 election win.

The question is, why can't BNP control its activists? And how sincere is it in this endeavour, really? True, the party has recently expelled several local leaders for engaging in such activities. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir's statement that repeating the mistakes of Awami League may bring the same fate for BNP suggests an awareness of the changing reality. But official actions have not been convincing enough for grassroots leaders and activists, especially because of their confidence about returning to power when the next election is held. This is nothing but opportunism, fuelled by a sense of impunity that the party has failed to dismantle.

Historically, politics in Bangladesh has been held hostage by the patronage system that defined the interaction between parties and their grassroots enablers. While this has richly rewarded some parties, it has brought nothing but misery for citizens. For BNP to really stop its errant members and to credibly support the present campaign of reforms, it must first demonstrate its ability to reform itself. The changes it envisions for the state must start within its own rank and file. The creation of a democratic, transparent and accountable party structure—with zero tolerance for indiscipline, infighting, crimes, or any illegal capture of public institutions—will only enhance its standing as a party committed to genuine reform, not just power.

Dubious cases will only hamper justice

Falsely accused victims must be relieved without delay

Amid concerns about the dubious nature of many cases filed over the killing of protesters during the July–August uprising—and the risk that it poses to the chances of justice—a report in this daily has brought to the fore six instances where the killings took place in the capital, but most of the accused were found to be residents of remote districts and upazilas. Given the country's situation during those tumultuous days, there is little chance that the accused listed in these cases could have been present at the crime scene.

One case filed by Ayesha Begum on August 28 accused 50 people from Cumilla's Chandina of killing her husband, Muhammad Habib. He was fatally wounded on July 20 at Dhaka's Kadamtali area when police and Awami League men opened fire on protesters. Ayesha told this daily that her husband's friend, who hails from Cumilla, prepared the list of accused, and that she just signed the complaint. In another case, Mirazul Islam's father filed a case against 36 residents of Lalmonirhat, including three former lawmakers of the district, although Mirazul was shot in Jatrabari on August 5 and died three days later from his injuries. No policemen or AL members seen by the eyewitnesses were made accused in the case.

We have written about the pitfalls of filing false cases with fabricated FIRs in this column before. These cases, aimed at harassing political rivals and with no credible evidence against the accused, are less likely to pass the initial stage of trial. As a result, the victims killed during the uprising as well as their families might not get justice. Although the police headquarters on September 10 issued a directive ordering officers to drop the names of individuals against whom there is no evidence of perpetrating the corresponding crime, it is important that primary investigations of these questionable cases are expedited to ensure that innocent persons are relieved without delay.

The interim government should also heed experts' suggestions about compiling and providing the list of dubious cases to the Supreme Court authorities so that the latter can issue necessary directives. The other issue that should be looked into is the role of investigative officers in filing these cases. They should be held accountable for their role in falsely implicating innocent individuals both before and after August 5. We cannot let political rivalries, sloppy police work, or the culture of appeasing power get in the way of ensuring justice for the martyrs of the mass uprising.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Saudi Arabia founded



On this day in 1932, by a royal decree, the two kingdoms of Hejaz and Najd, along with their dependencies, were unified under the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. That date is now a national holiday called Saudi National Day.

The challenges of SDG implementation in LDCs



MACRO MIRROR

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At the United Nations Summit of the Future, which is taking place in New York, US on September 22–23, the progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has taken centre stage in global discussions. Adopted in 2015, the SDGs are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030. However, as the deadline for SDG implementation approaches its final year, the global community finds itself grappling with significant challenges, with progress uneven across regions. Developing countries, in particular, face mounting difficulties in achieving these goals, exacerbated by external shocks such as the pandemic, economic pressure, climate change, and the ongoing geopolitical instability.

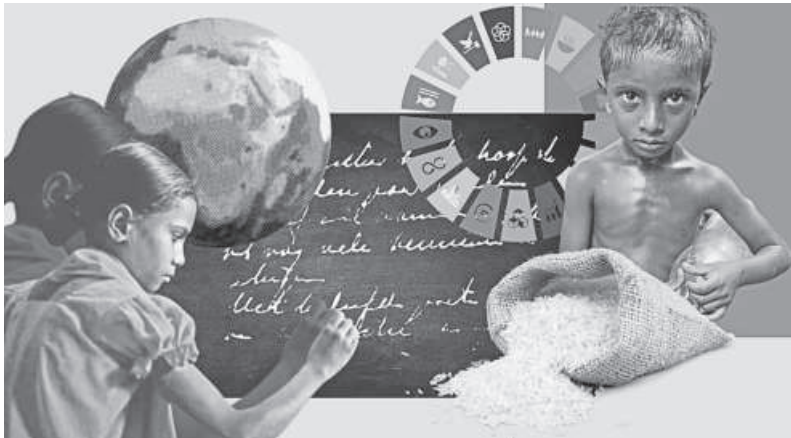
A mixed picture of global progress

The global progress on the 17 SDGs has been inconsistent. The UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 highlights a sobering reality: only 17 percent of the SDG targets are on track to meet the 2030 deadline, while about half of them show moderate or minimal progress. More worryingly, progress on more than one-third of the targets has either stalled or regressed. For example, SDG 1, which aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms, has suffered significant setbacks, with the pandemic pushing millions back into extreme poverty. The situation is similar for SDG 2, which targets zero hunger. Global food insecurity has worsened due to conflicts, climate-related disasters and economic slowdowns.

The report also highlights significant progress in some SDG targets. For instance, decline in child mortality, HIV infections and the cost of remittances as well as improvement in access to water, sanitation, energy, and mobile broadband are all encouraging trends. However, it is important to note that the current trajectory of indicators under SDG 3, which focuses on good health and well-being, is not sufficient to meet the targets by 2030, despite most health-related indicators showing positive progress globally. The pandemic has led to setbacks in healthcare services, with millions missing routine vaccinations and a surge in preventable

diseases. In education, while SDG 4 aims for inclusive and equitable quality education, school closures during the pandemic have exacerbated learning disparities, particularly in low-income regions.

Climate action, addressed under SDG 13, remains one of the most urgent challenges. Global carbon emissions have continued to rise, and despite growing awareness and initiatives towards renewable energy, the world is not yet on course to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The recent increase in climate disasters, from wildfires to floods, underscores



VISUAL: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

the urgency for enhanced global cooperation to achieve environmental sustainability.

Challenges for the LDCs

Least developed countries (LDCs) and low-income countries face unique challenges in pursuing the SDGs. Economic constraints, political instability and vulnerability to climate change have left many nations struggling to make significant progress. The pandemic has been particularly devastating, reversing years of development gains and exacerbating inequalities across various sectors.

In LDCs, SDG 1 (No Poverty) remains a daunting challenge. These countries have high extreme poverty levels, more evident in rural areas where access to basic services such as healthcare, education and clean water remains limited. Similarly, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) is far from being achieved, with food insecurity worsened in poor countries

by droughts, conflicts, and rising food prices due to global supply chain disruptions.

Climate change is a significant hurdle for developing nations, many of which are disproportionately affected despite contributing the least to global emissions. Countries in South Asia, Africa, and island nations in the Pacific face increased risks of extreme weather events such as floods, cyclones and droughts, threatening food security and livelihoods. The financial and technical capacity to adapt to these climate challenges is often lacking, making the achievement of SDG 13 (Climate Action) highly complex.

Moreover, access to finance remains a critical issue for developing countries in achieving the SDGs. While SDG 17 emphasises the need for global partnerships to mobilise resources, the reality is that financing remains inadequate. The Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024 (FSDR 2024) estimates SDG financing and investment gaps at between \$2.5 trillion and \$4 trillion annually, which has ballooned due to pandemic-



related economic disruptions. International support and private sector investment have not kept pace with the growing needs of these countries, leaving them struggling to fund crucial infrastructure, education, and healthcare projects.

Health and education are the critical sectors for LDCs

The situation remains dire for LDCs in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). For SDG 3, the progress that has been achieved in combating diseases such as malaria, HIV and tuberculosis is now at risk. These countries also struggled to provide adequate healthcare services in the wake of the pandemic. In many regions, healthcare infrastructures are weak, leading to high maternal and child mortality rates, inadequate vaccination coverage, and a lack of access to essential medicines.

Education is another area where the impact of the pandemic is acutely

felt. SDG 4 aims for inclusive and equitable education, but in many countries, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, millions of children remain out of school. The digital divide has worsened this issue, as many students in low-income regions lack access to online learning resources, which were vital during the pandemic. The long-term impact on human capital development could be devastating, as millions of children face a lifetime of reduced opportunities due to loss of learning.

Role of global cooperation in moving forward

Intensified global cooperation is needed to accelerate progress in the SDGs, especially in LDCs. One of the key focuses of the summit is on building stronger global partnerships, as emphasised by SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). These countries require increased financial support, technology transfer, and capacity-building efforts from more developed nations. There is also a pressing need for reforming global financial institutions to ensure that low-income countries can access affordable financing for sustainable development projects.

Addressing climate change will also require global solidarity. Developed countries must sustain their commitments to provide \$100 billion annually in climate financing to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to climate impacts. Without this support, many vulnerable nations will struggle to achieve sustainable development in the face of worsening climate conditions.

In addition to financial and technical support, global leaders must address the inequalities within and between countries that are hindering SDG progress. This includes promoting fair trade policies, reducing debt burdens on developing nations, and ensuring that the benefits of technological advancements reach those most in need.

The world is at a critical juncture as it assesses the overall SDG progress. LDCs, in particular, face a confluence of challenges that require urgent attention, including economic constraints, climate vulnerability and widening inequalities. The UN Summit of the Future offers a vital opportunity for nations to recommit to the SDGs and to foster greater international cooperation in addressing these challenges. With only about six years left to meet the SDGs, the next few years will be crucial in determining whether the world can achieve a sustainable and equitable future for all.

UNGA 2024

A pivotal moment for our trade diplomacy

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For Dr Muhammad Yunus, the United Nations is more than just a global platform—it is a “second home.” Over the decades, he has been a frequent presence at the UN, advocating for social business, poverty eradication and inclusive development. The UN's endorsement of his work, including his role as a key voice in the fight against global inequality, solidifies his profound connection with this multilateral body. As head of Bangladesh's interim government, his return to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) stage feels like a natural continuation of his lifelong mission, bringing his vision for a more equitable world to the forefront of global diplomacy.

In recent years, Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts have often been characterised by symbolic gestures, such as “hilsa diplomacy,” where the export of the prized fish to neighboring countries like India served as a goodwill token. Similarly, “mango diplomacy,” which involved gifting the country's famous sweet mangoes to foreign dignitaries, aimed to foster friendly ties. While these gestures contribute to soft power, Bangladesh now needs to pivot toward more pragmatic and results-driven trade diplomacy.

This UNGA provides a well-timed platform for Bangladesh to rectify the recent borderline diplomatic demarche on alleged “megaphone diplomacy,”

where public pronouncements have been seen as taking precedence over bilateral diplomatic negotiations. Additionally, strategic engagement on its sidelines offers an opportunity for spot-on bilateral or multilateral discussions as to the emerging “exile diplomacy” or “asylum diplomacy.” The talks could highlight the involvement of neighbouring power in facilitating exiled leaders to partake in a form of pre-empted “reverse megaphone diplomacy.”

Similarly, Bangladesh can remain open to “track II diplomacy” to address regional conflicts or disputes. It could facilitate more effective negotiations, which are also beneficial to mutual trade, by involving academics, think tanks, and NGOs in discussions with neighbouring countries like India and Myanmar on sensitive topics. Additionally, through “humanitarian diplomacy,” particularly by providing critical support during crises like the Rohingya situation—where it has already played a prominent role by hosting refugees and seeking international assistance—Bangladesh strengthens its position on the global stage.

Bangladesh can further promote the sustainable use of ocean resources through “blue economy diplomacy” by building partnerships focused on maritime security, sustainable fisheries, and ocean resource management, thus establishing itself as a leader in harnessing the Bay of Bengal's potential while preserving ecological balance. Additionally, through “green trade diplomacy,” Bangladesh should strive to lead in sustainable production by implementing green manufacturing

practices, especially in the RMG sector, and strengthening collaborations with EU countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Germany, pioneering green technology to enhance its green production capabilities.

Bangladesh's potential to strengthen its international economic position is immense given the global economic shifts and opportunities for near-shoring or friend-shoring and diversified trade relations, albeit its economic landscape is undergoing significant transformation. Just as African nations effectively utilised UN platforms and strategic partnerships to secure and advance the African Continental Free Trade Area, Bangladesh now has a valuable opportunity to similarly leverage the UNGA to invigorate South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, address the longstanding challenges and set the stage for enhanced regional cooperation and economic growth.

The recent postponement of EU-Bangladesh partnership agreement negotiations also highlights the need for renewed engagement to resume these stalled discussions. It offers a strategic chance to address outstanding or unresolved issues, such as strengthening current trade relations and negotiating future post-LDC Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+). This is crucial for preserving the competitiveness of Bangladeshi garment products, particularly in light of its impending safeguard measures. Additionally, it offers a scope to help diversify our export basket beyond the RMG sector, which has driven the country's economic growth but also poses risks due to over-reliance.

Through sideline meetings, Bangladesh can actively advocate for potential trade deals, such as Free Trade Agreements and Preferential Trade Agreements, to stimulate growth in key sectors like apparel, pharmaceuticals, leather goods, and information technology. Strengthening connections with emerging markets in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East can further enhance these efforts. For instance, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between India and the UAE illustrates how successful collaborations can flourish through diverse dialogue platforms.

Similarly, France has established strong trade connections with African nations through initiatives like the Francophonie Summit, while Spain leverages its tourism sector to strengthen trade relations through platforms like FITUR (International Tourism Fair). India's Act East Policy also exemplifies effective enhancement of trade relations with Southeast Asian countries via various bilateral agreements. To further its digital trade capabilities, Bangladesh should pursue e-commerce agreements with leading ASEAN and Nordic countries, to improve its digital infrastructure, strengthen fintech initiatives, and implement robust cybersecurity measures, which would attract foreign investment and boost digital exports.

The sidelines of UNGA 2024 offer a crucial opportunity for Bangladesh to enhance its trade diplomacy and safeguard its economic future. By focusing on key sectors, Bangladesh can effectively position itself for a successful transition from LDC status.