

The Daily Star

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High expectations from CA’s UNGA trip

Scope for improved relations and collaborations

For Bangladesh, the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) holds more significance than usual as this is the first major global summit the country is taking part in following the fall of the Sheikh Hasina regime. Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus flew out of the capital at around 5:10am on September 23 to attend the UNGA, as well as a number of meetings. Given his international stature, we expect to see opportunities open up for Bangladesh to build meaningful, strategic collaborations that will help with its reform agenda in the short term, and with trade, economic growth and development in the long term.

The chief adviser is scheduled to address the UNGA on September 27, where he will present the context of the anti-discrimination student movement that evolved into a mass uprising in the face of state-sponsored violence, ultimately ending the 15-plus years of Sheikh Hasina’s authoritarian rule. He is also set to highlight the reform initiatives that his government has undertaken, which we believe is a crucial part of his UNGA agenda. Presenting before the world our people’s aspirations for a strong, fair and equitable justice system, impartial state machinery that serves only the people, and a democratic system where no one’s voice is suppressed is key to gaining acceptance and cooperation from the international community—both at the government-to-government and people-to-people levels.

On the sidelines of the UNGA, the chief adviser is scheduled to meet US President Joe Biden on September 24. This meeting is considered significant as it’s the reflection of US support for the interim administration in Bangladesh, according to diplomatic sources in New York. Plus, it’s not usual for a US president to hold bilateral meetings during the UNGA. So, we hope to see a new strategic partnership emerge out of this meeting that will strengthen our ties with the US and protect our interests at the same time. Another high-level meeting is set to take place between Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain and Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, which we expect to kick-start the process to normalise relations between the neighbouring countries after weeks of tension surrounding Hasina’s fall and her being sheltered in India.

The chief adviser is also set to hold bilateral meetings with several heads of governments, and some of our strategic and development partners, including the EU. Bangladesh will also host a high-level reception on September 24, marking the 50th anniversary of its UN membership, and will attend a high-level side event on the Rohingya crisis.

As it goes through a massive transformation following the events of August 5, Bangladesh has yet to find an even footing. Our economy continues to struggle, our foreign exchange reserve crisis is still concerning, and our export earnings are still not up to the mark. Years of corruption and irregularities have left some lasting wounds, and to heal them, we need help from our partners. We hope the interim government will be able to garner the support needed to smoothen Bangladesh’s reforms and aid in its interests moving forward.

Can Shilpakala Academy rise again?

Financial irregularities of the past must be properly investigated

It is quite alarming to know the level of corruption that engulfed Shilpakala Academy over the last 15 years or so. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, financial irregularities, nepotism in recruitment and promotion, and various other forms of corruption almost crippled this once guiding light of our cultural landscape. The report focuses particularly on the extended tenure of its seven-time director general, Liaquat Ali Lucky, who, since being appointed in 2011, presided over a particularly corrupt and dysfunctional period. He made arbitrary decisions and even misused funds allocated to the academy for personal gain. Despite protests from theatre activists, he was reappointed repeatedly, with the last instance being on March 29, 2023. This speaks volumes about the mismanagement that plagued the institution.

Reportedly, while the annual budgetary allocation for Shilpakala increased tenfold over the last 15 years—its current budget exceeding Tk 100 crore—financial corruption within the institution has risen in parallel. There is an allegation of over Tk 200 crore being misappropriated, which is yet to be investigated properly. Other irregularities include inflating the cost of the same costume five times, withdrawing excess funds for nationwide events, submitting fake vouchers for foreign trips, and providing fraudulent receipts for crores of taka in the name of purchasing artworks. These just sum up the financial misconduct committed during Lucky’s tenure.

In addition, while a number of officials close to the former DG received preferential treatment—promotions and postings in Dhaka—in violation of the rules, many others were unjustly denied promotions or even salary increases. Moreover, during this period, district-level cultural activities were reportedly neglected to a considerable extent, with some districts still lacking cultural officers.

The question is, how can the Shilpakala Academy be freed from such practices and restored to its former glory? To achieve this, thorough and fair investigations must be conducted into all the allegations and all those involved in corruption must be held accountable. With Syed Jamil Ahmed, a visionary theatre director, now at the helm, there is hope for a new direction. It is expected that under his leadership, the academy will be run better and become more inclusive and diverse, offering people across the country a space to enjoy or express themselves through arts. This transformation is needed for the academy to reclaim its role as a leading cultural institution.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

**Guinea-Bissau gains independence**  
On this day in 1973, Guinea-Bissau declared its independence from Portugal. On September 10, 1974, after nearly a year had passed, the declaration received recognition

Why has the government’s flood response been so slow?



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MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Kabir Ahmed, a 65-year-old sharecropper from Jagatpur village in Feni’s Fulgazi upazila, lost his two tin-shed houses when the embankment of the Muhuri River breached on August 22. Floodwaters destroyed Kabir’s home, forcing him to seek shelter at a neighbour’s house with his seven family members and his cattle.

On September 15, *The Daily Star* published a story about Kabir online. After that, an NGO visited him, offering to build him and his family a new house. Kabir refused the offer, his reason being that without repairing the embankment, any new house would be washed away by the next flood. As a result, the NGO left without providing assistance.

On September 14, we met another farmer, Md Alam, from the same village. One of his five cows died in the August flood. He is now in great distress, feeding banana plants to the remaining four cows as the flood washed away all his hay and there is no grass left on the croplands. The district livestock officer (DLO) mentioned they received only Tk 5 lakh to distribute to the flood-affected farmers for fodder.

According to an official from Bangladesh Water Development Board’s (BWDB) Feni office, around three kilometres of the 122-kilometre embankment along the Muhuri, Kahua, and Cilonia rivers in Parshuram and Fulgazi upazilas were damaged. Due to a lack of fund allocations, the local water development office could not begin repair work until September 22. Meanwhile, 200 hectares of Aman paddy fields have been buried under one to five feet of sand, which were carried by floodwaters from upstream India.

Officials from the Parshuram upazila agricultural extension advised farmers to switch to cultivating alternative crops, as paddy cultivation would not be feasible for the next three to four years due to the sand deposits.

Solaiman Ali, a farmer from West Aloka village, lost 12 bighas of land to three to five feet of sand. He now faces uncertainty about how he will provide for his family without cultivating Aman rice in the coming season.

These are some of the stories we gathered from a visit to the flood-affected areas of Noakhali and Feni on September 10-16. However, as



FILE PHOTO: STAR

**Riding a rickshaw van, a family navigate a flooded road near Feni Girls' Cadet College on their way to a shelter in Feni town on August 24, 2024.**

of September 19, a month after the floods, the government has yet to begin rehabilitation work.

According to the Noakhali district administration, around 50,000 houses were damaged by the floods. On September 17, Disaster Management and Relief Adviser Farooq-e-Azam told journalists that the August flood had caused a total financial loss of Tk 14,269.68 crore and claimed 74 lives across 11 districts in the eastern part of the country. Around 45.5 lakh people had to leave their homes and take shelter elsewhere during the flood.

from the trauma; many formerly well-off families have lost their stored food, farmland, crops, and livestock, and are living in precarious conditions.

I am familiar with the floods that occur every year in the northern parts of the country, where the Teesta, Brahmaputra and Jamuna river basins overflow due to upstream flow. Flooding in this region mainly occurs in the char areas, and people there have learnt to cope with it since childhood. Normally, if the embankment holds, there is no flooding in the mainland. But this time, the eastern mainland



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TAMINA CHOWDHURY

For over 15 years, under Sheikh Hasina’s authoritarian regime, the people of Bangladesh endured rampant oppression and untold cruelty. The regime was characterised by state-sponsored torture, enforced disappearances, maiming, and pervasive human rights abuses. Cruelty was employed as a deliberate tactic to suppress dissent and erode people’s democratic aspirations. The oppressive system was maintained with impunity by the state machinery and bureaucracy. As a result, the state is widely mistrusted and seen by Bangladeshis as anti-people.

Given the scale of corruption and brutality orchestrated by the regime, the judicial system alone cannot swiftly or adequately deliver justice. The institutional nature of the crimes and urgent demand for accountability call for a truth and reconciliation process (TRP), similar to the one guided by South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

A TRP, led by a commission or council-type body, would expose the human rights violations without relying on retribution. It would provide a platform for victims and witnesses to share their stories and give perpetrators the chance to confess their crimes, bringing the atrocities to the fore. This process would help Bangladesh (re)build a just and accountable society, by creating a culture that listens to victims and addresses past atrocities transparently.

By focusing on restorative justice, the TRP could help break the cycle of vengeance and promote a peaceful transition to democracy. This approach is essential for rebuilding a society after prolonged injustice, as it establishes a foundation for accountability, reduces impunity, and restores public trust in institutions. Additionally, by demonstrating that truth-telling and reconciliation can be powerful tools for healing divided societies, the TRP could help form a moral centre for the country, establishing new norms and institutional safeguards to prevent future abuses.

The TRP should be tailored to Bangladesh’s unique situation with a focus on: i) investigating human rights violations like killings, torture, and abductions between 2009 and 2024. The TRP would present its findings on the extent of state-sponsored violence to the public; ii) offering victims a space to tell their stories and recommending reparations and rehabilitation to address national trauma and promote healing; and iii) considering amnesty for those who fully disclose their actions based on set criteria, which may be limited to lower-level perpetrators who followed orders or helped cover up abuses.

The concept of addressing state violence and delivering accountability through the process of victim testimony and perpetrator confessions emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. Following the end of apartheid, a brutal system of racial oppression

that spanned from 1948 to 1994, the newly elected government of Nelson Mandela sought to confront past injustices without resorting to retribution or further violence.

The TRC was created in 1995 through the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, to uncover the truth about the atrocities committed during apartheid.

**Some believed that amnesty allowed perpetrators to escape justice, and others argued that it did not address systemic injustices or offer sufficient reparations to victims. Moreover, the government did not fully implement the TRC’s recommendations for reparations.**

The commission was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a respected anti-apartheid activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. His leadership was crucial in guiding the commission’s work with a moral and ethical focus on reconciliation.

The TRC had three main committees: i) Human Rights Violations Committee: investigated human rights abuses like killings, torture, and abductions committed between 1960 and 1994; ii) Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee: focused on restoring the dignity of victims by recommending reparations and rehabilitation; and iii) Amnesty Committee: assessed and granted amnesty to perpetrators who came forward and fully disclosed their actions.

The TRC held public hearings across South Africa, where victims could tell their stories and perpetrators could confess their crimes. These

was hit, leaving many people who don’t have experience of big floods to face the worst flood in their lives. The government should have acted swiftly to help them return to normal life. Instead, it remains bogged down in bureaucratic delays. Rehabilitation can only begin once bureaucrats finalise their victim lists, a process that is taking far too long. There needs to be a rapid assessment team during floods and another one to mobilise quick responses.

There are many examples where we witnessed local administrations and ruling party members distributing blankets after winter was gone and the temperature started to rise. These instances were not just laughable—they were tragic.

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the recent floods damaged 200,000 hectares of crops, including paddy seedlings. The agency has predicted that Bangladesh will have a shortage of rice compared to its target this year. Had the government taken quick actions, farmers could have replanted Aman within the necessary time frame.

The flood-affected farmers were unable to arrange seeds, fertilisers and other means of production post-flood. As a result, thousands of hectares of Aman paddy land remain uncultivated across the 11 flood-affected districts. If the government had provided cash incentives, fertiliser and seeds immediately after the water receded, these lands might not have remained fallow.

After independence, this is the first time that people from all walks of life have extended such massive help to flood-affected people, which is truly wonderful. At Dhaka University’s TSC, many children even came out with their parents to donate the savings they had collected for years. For the older generation, this was a remarkable and heartwarming sight.

Following the mass uprising and this public mobilisation, the government should consider reforming the outdated bureaucratic system. People are ready for change, and the government should follow suit. Ultimately, to bring about any meaningful reform, the government must prioritise saving farmers from natural disasters to ensure increased agricultural production.

hearings were often emotional and widely covered in the media, exposing apartheid’s horrors to the nation.

The TRC successfully revealed the extent of apartheid-era human rights violations, with thousands of victims coming forward and many perpetrators confessing. By focusing on restorative justice, the TRC helped prevent a cycle of vengeance and facilitated South Africa’s peaceful transition to democracy. Its public hearings encouraged national dialogue, essential for forging unity and healing.

However, it faced challenges and criticism. Some believed that amnesty allowed perpetrators to escape justice, and others argued that it did not address systemic injustices or offer sufficient reparations to victims. Moreover, the government did not fully implement the TRC’s recommendations for reparations.

Despite these challenges, the TRC remains a landmark effort to address a nation’s violent past. By uncovering the truth and promoting reconciliation, it played a key role in South Africa’s transition from a divided society to a democracy.

As Bangladesh grapples with the aftermath of Sheikh Hasina’s autocratic regime, it must ensure that justice is timely and effective. The nation needs closure and healing from the trauma inflicted by years of state-sponsored violence and oppression.

A well-designed TRP can offer a path to healing. By uncovering the truth, giving victims a voice, and fostering reconciliation, it can help break the cycle of violence and write a new chapter in Bangladesh’s story—one that must be different from its past.

We are at an inflection point in shaping the country’s future. How we address its dark past will define its social fabric, establish norms, and set the tone for the future. It is crucial that we get this process right.