

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## The world must do more to stop Israel's unjust war on Gaza risks causing all-out regional conflict

As we mark one year since the start of Israel's devastating war on Gaza, which erupted after the attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, it is staggering to think of the massive humanitarian toll and suffering that have since ensued. Over the past 12 months, Gaza has endured relentless ground invasions and airstrikes that have flattened entire neighbourhoods, destroyed vital infrastructure, and driven millions of Gazans from their homes. Even as we write this, reports have emerged of yet another deadly air strike on a mosque and school housing displaced Palestinians, taking the total death toll to 41,870 with more than 97,000 injured.

All this to achieve what end? Could any end whatsoever justify the use of means that have long passed into the realm of genocide? To this day, Israel stands by its narrative: that its mission in Gaza is to neutralise Hamas. It does not matter that no one is buying into this narrative anymore. Emboldened by the support of its Western allies, Israel is now using the same excuse to ravage Lebanon. This time, its so-called target is Hezbollah, the Iran-backed group that supported Hamas from the beginning. In the end, however, it is the innocent civilians who are having to pay for this, often with their lives. The fast-escalating conflict has now drawn in Syria and Iran through proxy forces, with the latter launching more than 180 missiles towards Israel last week.

At this rate, fears of an all-out regional conflict in the Middle East look increasingly likely. Many have even begun to wonder if World War III is on the horizon, with the US presidential candidate Donald Trump also joining the bandwagon recently, despite himself being an enabler of Israel's war efforts. This, in other words, only underscores the duplicity of the US and other Western countries. Had they not blindly supported Israel, both militarily and diplomatically, throughout the past year, the Israeli government would not have been so emboldened to act with impunity and cause so much tragedy and destruction. As a BBC expert recently said, there are no "off-ramps" or deterrents convincing enough for Israel "unless the US and other major Western governments make it their business to change the direction of events on the ground."

That being the case, and with Israel showing no signs of heeding the countless warnings by the United Nations or the International Court of Justice, the onus really lies on Israel's Western allies to stop its forever war. They have delayed action for too long. They have consistently ignored calls for halting deliveries of arms feeding Israel's forces of death. That has to stop. One year on from the beginning of Israel's military campaign, they must do something decisive to force it to accept ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon before more territories are pulled into this meaningless conflict, and before it results in more unnecessary casualties.

## Beware of health hazards in plastic toys

### Reducing children's exposure to toxic chemicals is crucial

The extent to which our children are routinely exposed to toxic chemicals in their daily environment is deeply concerning. One of their sources is plastic toys, with a recent study on toys sold in different retail outlets in the capital revealing heavy presence of harmful chemical substances, including lead, mercury, cadmium, and chromium. This deserves scrutiny from the authorities and parents.

The study, conducted by the Environment and Social Development Organisation and BAN Toxics, tested 150 children's products, primarily made from recycled plastics, and found that 80 percent of them contained alarmingly high levels of heavy metals. More worryingly, the harmful chemicals in these toys enter children's bodies through contact with skin, inhalation, and even saliva, as children below six often tend to put objects in their mouths. Research says that sustained exposure to these chemicals can impair their physical, cognitive, and neurological development. For example, lead exposure can cause kidney damage, while cadmium can affect bone density and respiratory function.

Many foreign economies, such as those under the European Union, use strict laws to regulate the use of toxic chemicals in plastic toys by setting out clear guidelines for manufacturers, distributors, and importers. In Bangladesh, where 80 percent of plastic toys are manufactured locally and the rest imported from China, such regulations are absent. Clear guidelines at the manufacturing levels are required since the contaminants enter production at different stages. For example, lead is used in toy paint and to soften plastic, while mercury is often used in adhesives.

In the case of imported toys, regular testing is necessary to ensure that the products follow internationally set standards for permissible levels of heavy metals. Unfortunately, children's toys are not even on the product lists tested by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI), which needs to change. Moreover, labelling these toys with hazard signs can educate parents. Mass campaigns can raise awareness about the presence of toxins in plastic products and encourage reduced use of plastics in daily lives. At the same time, we must promote the use of alternative toys that are chemically and environmentally safe. Also, we should reflect on creating a social ecosystem where friends, families, sports and nature—rather than gadgets and plastic toys—dominate the formative years of our children.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### German Democratic Republic formed

On this day in 1949, a constitution went into effect in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany that formed the country of East Germany, which existed alongside West Germany until 1990, when the two Germanys reunited.

# We must rethink our foreign reserve strategy



Ghulam Mohammed Alomgir is a BUET graduate and chairman of a group of companies. He is the founder president of BUET Graduate Club Ltd.

GHULAM MOHAMMED ALOMGIR

In the intricate dance of international economics, Bangladesh finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. As we grapple with the challenges posed by dwindling foreign reserves and escalating project costs, the nation's ability to manage foreign reserves effectively and negotiate loans prudently has never been more critical. Yet, the glaring inefficiencies in our current approach to government-to-government (G2G) funded projects are cause for alarm. If Bangladesh is to safeguard its economic stability and ensure sustained growth, the time for reform is now.

### The negotiation crisis

At the heart of the problem is a failure in negotiation strategy. Too often, we find ourselves locked into agreements that seem to serve everyone except Bangladesh. Project delays, cost escalations, and contracts signed under unfavourable terms have become the norm. These outcomes stem from a lack of expertise and patriotism among the negotiators representing our national interests.

Effective negotiation requires more than just a senior government official with academic credentials. What Bangladesh truly needs are skilled negotiators—successful businesspeople with substantial international experience who possess both the knowledge and confidence to engage with countries like the US, China, and India. Such individuals must be fluent in the language of international trade, able to protect not only their company's interests but, more importantly, those of Bangladesh.

### Reassessing the management of foreign reserves

The interim government's foremost challenge is the preservation of our foreign currency reserves. Maintaining even the current levels will be difficult unless we renegotiate existing contracts with countries like Russia, Japan, China, and India. Such renegotiations must be conducted strategically, without animosity, but with firm resolve.



VISUAL: BIPOB CHAKRABORTY

Bangladesh is not a minor player on the global stage. With a population of 170-plus million, we represent a significant market, and our geopolitical importance should not be underestimated. We are not in the business of begging for loans. Instead, we seek win-win agreements, ensuring that both Bangladesh and its lenders benefit equally.

Our immediate focus should be on renegotiating the terms of projects like the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant and the Padma Bridge. These mega-projects, funded through G2G agreements, were often politically motivated, with large portions of the funds diverted to local agents and commissions. As a result, the terms were not negotiated in the country's best interest. This is evident in the case of the Rooppur project, where repayments are set to begin before the plant becomes operational—an inexplicable failure in negotiation.

### Learning from the Adani Power deal

One glaring example of poor negotiation is the contract signed with Adani Power, rushed through in just 30 days under highly unfavorable

terms. The rate at which Bangladesh buys power from Adani is nearly double that of other sources in India. Local entrepreneurs, who set up power plants with their own investment, offer electricity at better rates. This contract, like others, needs to be re-examined and renegotiated.

A skilled negotiation team can sit down with foreign governments and

fostering job creation and increasing productivity.

### Addressing project delays and cost escalations

One of the most significant obstacles to Bangladesh's economic growth is the repeated delays in completing foreign-funded projects. Extending a project's timeline from three years to five or seven years inflates loan commitment charges, worsening our already unfavourable terms.

A primary culprit in these delays is the practice of hiring consultants on a man-month basis, which incentivises them to prolong projects to increase their fees. This system must be overhauled. Consultants should be hired with a vision for the country's development, and project management teams should prioritise national interests over personal gain.

For 20 years, we have seen the same cycle of delays and cost escalations. A new approach is long overdue.

### Reforming the G2G scheme

Finally, we must confront the inherent weaknesses in the G2G funding model. Lack of international competition, high-interest rates, and politically motivated contracts are just a few of the systemic problems. Worse, Bangladeshi companies are often excluded from joint ventures, preventing the transfer of technology that could benefit our economy.

Foreign reserves do not benefit either, as funds from these projects are repatriated directly. This must change. Bangladesh must negotiate terms that allow for joint ventures and local involvement, ensuring that our economy reaps the rewards of these mega-projects.

### A call for reform

The path forward is clear—Bangladesh must take control of its future by engaging in more effective negotiations and selecting the right individuals to represent its interests. We need to introduce deferred payment systems and renegotiate existing projects to alleviate the immediate pressure on our foreign reserves. Above all, we must stop signing unfavourable contracts that burden future generations.

By taking these steps, Bangladesh can achieve economic stability, foster growth, and avoid the traps of cost escalations and project delays that have plagued us for far too long.

It's time for change, before it's too late.

# Tofazzal's murder may have unseen political roots



Shawkat Hussain is a former professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAWKAT HUSSAIN

The horrific murder on the Dhaka University campus a few weeks ago still haunts me, and I'm sure I am not the only one. I was a part of this university for four decades, and anything that happens here touches me in a way few things do.

As I read personal text messages, social media posts, and watched news and videos of the student movement with immense pride from thousands of miles away, I was completely mortified by the brutal killing of 35-year-old Tofazzal by a group of students in the guest room of Fazlul Haque Hall.

For more than four hours, they beat him, fed him dinner, gave him hope that he would live to see another day, then beat him again. From 6:30pm until almost midnight, the mentally-challenged man, ostensibly accused of stealing a mobile phone, was tortured and beaten, and no one said a word. Although the hall provost has been removed, the house tutors, who are surely culpable, remain unreprimed.

The murder immediately reminded me—and many others, I'm sure—of the killing of Abrar Fahad in BUET a few years back. These were practised killers, I thought. We now know that five of the six killers who were arrested were AL members.

I find it hard to believe that this was

an isolated, random, wanton act of brutality, in the heart of the city, and on the premises of the nation's highest seat of learning. Now, I strongly suspect it was not. These were hired murderers, sent to kill a student—any student—or, if a student could not be found, any random individual, to strike terror into the heart of a nation struggling to renew itself.

The police now know, as do we, that the killers are Chhatra League members. The police might also know how much they were paid to commit this monstrous act with such insouciance. Someone must have paid the killers, even if the orders came from afar.

I do not say these words irresponsibly. Anybody who has read the book written by Motiur Rahman Rentu, former private secretary of the former prime minister, would understand the modus operandi: when you are not in power, create as much trouble as you can so that you make it difficult, if not impossible, for the incumbent government to function.

Rentu's book covers the period from 1981 to 1997. During most of this time, Sheikh Hasina was not in power, except from 1996-2001. By then, seasoned in the art of realpolitik, she likely no longer needed Rentu's services for her dirty work. She fired him and declared

him persona non grata, in the classic style of a dictator-in-the-making. It is not surprising that Rentu's book, *Amar Fashi Chai*, published in 2001, was immediately banned.

Let me give just one example from Rentu's book to explain what I mean by modus operandi. When the SAARC summit was scheduled to be held in Dhaka under Khaleda Zia's chairmanship in 1992, with the then Indian prime minister attending the inaugural ceremony, Rentu was instructed to orchestrate a riot—burn a few Hindu homes, kill a few people—and generally create mayhem. Cash was disbursed, a localised riot was organised just on the eve of the

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summit, Narasimha Rao cancelled his visit, and the summit was postponed.

When Sheikh Hasina came to power the second time in 2009, she ruled without interruption until August 2024. We all know how she did it—with support from sections of the army, police, RAB, thugs from Jubo League and Chhatra League, looters and plunderers masquerading

as businessmen and politicians, sycophantic "intellectuals" and activists, and much more than can be written here.

Given what we know about her psychopathic nature, her limitless greed for power and money, it is not difficult to imagine that Hasina will continue to try to disrupt the efforts of the interim government to bring hope to the people of Bangladesh. The murder of Tofazzal is likely part of this vicious effort.

The murder, therefore, is not an isolated incident, but part of a concerted, multi-pronged strategy, with unrest among the Ansar members, restlessness of the garment workers, pandemonium in the Baitul Mukarram mosque, being just a few examples.

In addition, unimaginable amounts of money are available both within the country and outside to advance this strategy. The ousted prime minister, I believe, will try her best to use this money through her still-loyal underlings to foment trouble. They are everywhere—in the police, BGB, RAB, among businessmen turned MPs, whether hiding within the country or somewhere abroad, among university teachers, journalists, cultural personalities, and student killers in the universities.

We must be on guard, and try to find out the true motive behind the murder to uncover the real source of the evil. I have recently seen a photo of US President Biden hugging Dr Yunus and offering him full support on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. I wish this support was extended to Gaza as well, but we cannot afford to look a gift horse in the mouth now. This gives us hope of a better Bangladesh, at least.