

A lot needs to be done by the govt

Prof Yunus's speech marks 100 days of interim government

Amid myriad issues jostling for public attention, it was refreshing to see Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus deliver a speech conveying focused purpose and optimism at a time when deep-seated sociopolitical divisions threaten to overshadow the aspirations that led to the mass uprising over three months ago. His 34-minute address, marking the 100 days of the interim government, also reflected a sense of accountability that we hope will resonate across his administration. However, while he was quite forthcoming and persuasive on certain aspects—such as the ongoing reform drive and measures taken for the victims of the July-August uprising—he was less so on other aspects such as the economy, law and order, and, of course, the election timeline.

Prof Yunus has assured that an Election Commission would be formed "within a few days", and that the roadmap for the election would be issued as soon as decisions on electoral reforms are made. So far, the government has set up six commissions, including on electoral and constitutional reforms, which are expected to submit their reports between December and January. Prof Yunus said some essential reforms would be implemented during the election process which may delay the election "by a few months". This, along with his recent comment in an Al Jazeera interview about the government's tenure not extending beyond four years, has created an ambiguity that will test the patience of political parties, with BNP already expressing disappointment over the lack of a roadmap. The sooner the government comes clear on this issue, the better.

On other pressing issues, Prof Yunus's speech reflected some candour as he made no secret of the challenges we face with inflation, and commodity prices. He said the economy is "getting stronger" after the disaster left by the ousted Awami League government, but the administration's performance in this regard has left a lot to be desired. On the state of law enforcement, he said the government is trying to boost the morale of the police, and that there has been "visible progress" in the force. This may be the case, but progress on this front has been much slower than expected, with media reports still painting a worrying scenario of crimes. As regards the government's initiatives for the victims of the uprising—which Prof Yunus explained in considerable detail—there are areas that need to be expedited and streamlined, as recent protests by a group of injured protesters show.

These areas highlight the need to balance immediate grievances with long-term state reforms and political sensitivities. This is no easy task but the government must accomplish it anyway. That said, it cannot do all this on its own; political parties and citizen groups must also help with their patience, constructive criticism, and continuous feedback, keeping in mind the interests of the nation.

An unwise decision

Biman should not be given sole responsibility for ground handling

We are surprised that Biman has been awarded the ground handling responsibility for the third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), despite having a very poor track record. Reportedly, Biman is set to take charge for two years initially, overseeing tasks such as boarding passengers, managing baggage, handling cargo, and providing various aircraft services. However, given its history of subpar service, we have serious doubts about its ability to handle this crucial task. Naturally, the decision has raised concerns among aviation experts and other stakeholders.

Over the past years, Biman has consistently failed to satisfy passengers, with many experiencing significant delays in luggage handling while instances of staff misconduct, particularly towards migrant workers, were also commonplace. Additionally, Biman's inefficient ground handling has often severely disrupted overseas trade, while the two currently operating terminals have struggled to cope with the pressure of increasing export and import volumes. So, the main purpose of building a new terminal was to solve all these issues by improving the airport's efficiency and ground handling services. Therefore, we think this decision by the government is contradictory to this whole effort.

Internationally, no airport reportedly relies on a single ground handling provider. So why has the government made such a decision? Has it consulted all relevant stakeholders before taking such action? If not, why? According to experts, Biman does not even have necessary, trained manpower to operate the terminal. Moreover, a survey by the HSIA authorities revealed that 93 airlines favoured having multiple ground handling service providers at the new terminal, which would foster competition and improve services. We also must mention that it is this kind of monopoly that has emboldened our state carrier to engage in widespread corruption and irregularities over the decades.

The decision to award Biman this job was ill-considered, so we urge the government to reconsider it. If we want the quality of ground handling services at the third terminal to be world-class, the job should be awarded through an open competition involving multiple service providers. Although Biman is supposed to take this charge for two years, we think this period could further damage the airport's reputation.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Anwar Sadat visits Israel

After the Arab-Israeli war of 1973-74, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat began to work toward peace, and on this day in 1977 he began his historic visit to Israel, during which he offered a peace plan to its parliament.

Bread before ballots and rice before reforms

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FARIDUL ALAM

"Bhat De Haramzada, Noile Manchitro Khabo" (Give me rice, you scoundrel, or else I'll eat up the map of the land.) — Rafiq Azad (1974)

"But the audience had long since lost interest in him and could no longer understand what he was doing." — Franz Kafka, *The Hunger Artist* (1922)

The bellwether opportunity afforded by the July 2024 uprising to reimagine Bangladesh's future by reforming or dismantling the repressive apparatuses of the ousted government comes with an existential challenge: stabilising essential commodity prices amid rampant inflation and soaring food costs. This crisis—an inheritance from Sheikh Hasina's toppled government—has pushed countless households, especially among the lower income and shrinking middle classes, to the brink of desperation. Following the devastating floods in August 2024 that severely impacted eastern Bangladesh, the urgency for immediate, effective policy action has never been more apparent. For the interim government, prioritising "bread" over ballots or "rice" over reforms may be the only way to stave off popular discontent and retain public trust through clear, targeted policies. While conditions are not yet beyond repair, the admonition is to double up instead of double down, exercising prudence to safeguard public trust.

The epigrams by Rafiq Azad and Kafka highlight themes of desperate struggle for recognition, survival,

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their sense of betrayal after profound sacrifices in the independence struggle.

Kafka's *Hunger Artist*, written in post-World War I Europe, presents a protagonist whose self-imposed starvation once fascinated the public but ultimately becomes forgotten as society shifts its values. This existential alienation parallels an era of disillusionment, capturing the hunger for recognition in a society failing to value individuality. For Azad's speaker, defiance and the demand for sustenance underscore a readiness to challenge state power in pursuit of survival, while Kafka's artist embodies misunderstood dedication. Both works underscore a profound disconnect between marginalised individuals and

loans, and the Open Market Sales (OMS) programme. Yet structural inefficiencies, corruption, and inconsistent policies undermined these efforts, leaving food prices high and eroding purchasing power for low-income populations. While sporadic price controls and increased imports aimed to stabilise the market, these measures were inadequate against global price volatility. Climate disruptions added to the pressure on agriculture, while syndicates monopolising supply chains worsened inflation through hoarding and price manipulation.

These monopolies, backed by political patronage and weak regulation, intensified the food insecurity crisis by

essentials are central, especially for citizens in lower-income brackets who are disproportionately affected by price volatility. When food insecurity prevails, it risks not only social unrest but also hinders development across health, education, and economic sectors.

Economically, food insecurity has a ripple effect on productivity, limiting individuals' capacity to fully participate in the workforce and hindering long-term GDP growth. Malnutrition, stress from food shortages, and other adverse conditions tied to high food costs weaken current and future labour force capacity, ultimately stalling national development. Addressing food insecurity thus goes beyond immediate economic relief; it builds a foundation



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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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Today, food insecurity has become a global issue, affecting both developed and developing regions, including OECD countries and South Asia. Giner and Placzek (2022) noted that one in five people in OECD nations faced food insecurity in 2022—a figure largely driven by inflation and the Covid pandemic's lasting effects. In the United States, poverty, unemployment, and income inequality affect millions, especially households with children, communities of colour, and rural areas (US Department of Agriculture, 2022).

South Asia faces similar challenges, where food insecurity worsens due to climate events, economic instability, and social inequalities. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, food inflation has exceeded 35 percent in some areas, with climate disasters like flooding and drought further disrupting supply chains (World Bank, 2023). UNICEF and World Bank data show global food inflation intensifying, affecting lower-middle-income countries in over 50 percent of cases, and even some high-income countries. Across 168 countries, food prices have risen faster than general inflation, underscoring the urgent nature of this issue (World Bank, 2023).

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exploiting their control over logistics and distribution. Price regulations were often circumvented, allowing syndicates to evade anti-hoarding measures and cartel laws. Subsidies meant for farmers or consumers frequently ended up benefitting syndicate-linked actors, further inflating costs. For many households, basic survival became precarious, eroding public trust in Hasina's leadership. In both Hasina's and Mujib's cases, responses to food insecurity revealed a disconnect from public hardships, fuelling widespread resentment. Azad's poem embodies the rage of a populace facing a preventable crisis, while the July 2024 uprising culminated in disillusionment with centralised rule seen as out of touch with grassroots concerns.

The urgency in the title of this opinion piece underscores the interim government's immediate challenge. Prioritising essentials not only aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs—recognising that secure access to food precedes higher aspirations like political stability and civic engagement—but also addresses a more fundamental aspect: the bio-psycho-social well-being essential for both individual and national resilience.

Stabilising food prices impacts social cohesion and extends beyond merely maintaining order. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines well-being as a state of complete physical, mental, and social health, to which affordably food and secure access to

for sustainable development that benefits all citizens. Policies that stabilise food prices are fundamental not only for social cohesion but for enabling broader growth and civic engagement.

This emphasis on basic survival reflects Amartya Sen's basic needs approach and the capability theory he developed with Martha Nussbaum, which argue that needs like food, shelter, and healthcare must be met before societies can foster human development and civic involvement. Without addressing these basic needs, individuals cannot achieve the capabilities necessary for a fulfilling life, such as education, meaningful employment, and community participation. Banerjee and Duflo, in *Poor Economics*, note that even when faced with hunger, the poor often make strategic choices aimed at future gains, asserting that "food policy should work with human behaviour, not against it." By aligning food security policies with this resilience and strategic resourcefulness, the government can support citizens' agency in the struggle for long-term well-being.

Ultimately, the government must recognise that when push comes to shove, the conditions of existence—feeding its people—precede any abstract promises of progress or growth. To echo Sartre's angst-ridden insight, "existence precedes essence": without the basic means for survival, any higher ideals remain hollow.

A thousand days since Russia's invasion of Ukraine

This is a statement by the high commissioners and ambassadors of 13 countries, including the UK, Italy, Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Australia, Sweden, France, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Spain and Canada calling for peace in Ukraine.

1,000 days ago today, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's continuing assault on its neighbour is an unprovoked attack against a sovereign state. Putin's invasion represents a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and an attempt to challenge the international order on which our collective prosperity and security depend. Putin's actions should matter to every country, including Bangladesh, where this invasion has exacerbated inflationary pressures on crucial food, energy and fertiliser supplies.

In the face of Russia's aggression, Ukraine determinedly remains a sovereign nation, standing in defence of democracy and freedom against Putin's imperialism. Since the invasion there have been over 11,900 civilians killed and 25,900 injured, totalling 37,900 casualties. There have been over

1,786 attacks on health care facilities, and NGOs estimate that over 230 health care workers have been killed. The Government of Ukraine estimates almost 20,000 Ukrainian children have been deported by Russian authorities; reports about their fate from civil society organisations are chilling.

We cannot let aggressors like Putin succeed. Other international actors should learn this too. Putin and his proxies are sowing violence, bloodshed and chaos throughout the world.

In the face of Putin's barbarism, Ukrainians have defended their country with courage. They have demonstrated a fierce determination to defend the shared values we, Ukraine and Bangladesh, cherish. Ukraine has shown that they can defend their country. Putin is now into the third year of a war he thought would take days, thanks to the help of allies and

the bravery of Ukraine's resistance. Ukrainian forces have destroyed ammunition depots, harming Russia's ability to conduct offensive operations. They destroyed 20 percent of Russian attack helicopters in Ukraine. They have rendered inoperable almost a quarter of the Black Sea Fleet and the country is exporting grain freely again.

On the frontline, the situation is difficult, and Russian operations led to territorial gains. But these gains have come at enormous costs. Putin is callously throwing Russian, and other nationals' lives at the front, resulting in about a thousand casualties a day. The death toll of Russians following Putin's orders is horrific. To date, almost 700,000 Russian personnel have been killed and wounded. Russia is trying to overwhelm Ukrainian forces with outdated equipment and bad leadership, with no thought to

the protection or preservation of its own soldiers or civilians. For the sake of ordinary Russians, Putin must be stopped.

Though denied by Putin, there are credible reports that North Korea (DPRK) has sent combat troops in direct support of Russia's war against Ukraine. This is a significant escalation, and further evidence of Russia's growing reliance upon third country support, recklessness, and disregard for international peace and security. This escalation should trouble Bangladesh, as a DPRK emboldened by stronger ties with Russia would threaten the stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

As we cross the grim milestone of 1000 days, our support to Ukraine must continue. All voices must call on Putin to end his barbaric invasion of Ukraine.

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