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From repression to recognition

Bangladesh named 'Country of the Year' for triumphing over tyranny

Bangladesh being named *The Economist's* Country of the Year in 2024 is a tremendous achievement for the country—one that all Bangladeshis can be proud of. Each December, *The Economist* awards this title to a country that has made significant progress over the past year. This year, Bangladesh earned the prestigious accolade for "toppling a despot and taking strides towards a more liberal government." This recognition is particularly meaningful for a nation that has recently undergone a major political transition, overthrowing an extremely corrupt and autocratic regime of 15 years through a student-led mass uprising.

The report highlights the remarkable journey of the Bangladeshi people in overcoming political repression and paving the way for a brighter, more democratic future. As the Hasina regime grew increasingly repressive—marked by election rigging, jailing of opponents, and violent crackdowns on dissent—the people united and took to the streets to assert their rights. During the July uprising that ultimately led to the fall of Sheikh Hasina, hundreds were shot dead by the regime, and around 20,000 were wounded. The heavy toll paid to oust an autocratic regime is a rare and profound example of resilience in modern history—even though Bangladeshis are no strangers to demonstrating such resilience in the face of oppression.

While the political transition has inspired optimism both nationally and globally—showcasing the resilience and determination of the Bangladeshi people—the nation now faces significant economic challenges. Rebuilding the country will require addressing the economic consequences of the previous regime. During Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule, narratives of substantial economic growth were propagated, but these claims have since been exposed as largely illusory. A government-commissioned white paper revealed that an estimated $234 billion was syphoned out of the country between 2009 and 2023. Additionally, Bangladesh has long struggled with inflation and unemployment, issues that must now be tackled urgently. However, with unity, these challenges can be overcome.

The interim government, led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, has prioritised rebuilding trust and stability. Its initiatives include economic and other reforms, restoring public order, and addressing social grievances. Despite the challenges, the progress made so far has been promising. Moving forward, Bangladesh must establish positive relations with other countries for mutual benefits, ensure judicial neutrality, and organise free and fair national elections. These steps are critical to solidifying the country's progress towards a more liberal democracy.

This is also a time for Bangladesh to correct past wrongs and begin anew—building a nation founded on equity, justice, the rule of law, and human rights. We hope the global community will continue to recognise our achievements and stand by Bangladesh as it strives to fulfil the democratic aspirations of its people.

Three DSCC hospitals crippled by neglect

Prioritise recruitment and efficient management

We are appalled by the findings of a report by *The Daily Star* on three hospitals run by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), highlighting an acute shortage of staff and underutilised facilities, which cause unnecessary suffering for patients. In a city where accessible healthcare is increasingly out of reach for ordinary citizens, it is unacceptable that these public hospitals offer substandard services. This is a direct result of neglect and apathy from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the Ministry of Health, a situation that has worsened over decades.

These hospitals are vital for low-income and lower-middle-class communities, as they offer subsidised healthcare. However, patients are forced to wait for hours due to the severe shortage of doctors, nurses, and other essential staff. As patient numbers rise, one hospital operates with half the required manpower. For instance, Mohanagar General Hospital, which installed ICU units and high-flow oxygen equipment during the Covid pandemic, cannot use them because there are no trained personnel. The surgery department has been non-functional since 2015, and high-dependency unit (HDU) beds installed in 2021 remain unused. Many posts are vacant, further crippling the hospital's ability to function.

A similar manpower crisis exists at Dhaka Metropolitan Children's Hospital, where the paediatric surgery department has been inactive since 2012, and 40 of the 100 beds remain unused. Nazirabazar Matri Sadan is also grappling with a shortage of doctors and essential medicines.

In all three hospitals, staff are spread too thin, leaving patients without the necessary medical care. Despite repeated official letters sent to the health ministry and DGHS, no action has been taken. These hospitals reflect the dysfunction plaguing public healthcare across the country, with severe staff shortages making them nearly non-functional. The DGHS and health ministry have ignored the needs of these hospitals for years. Why has this been allowed to continue? What happened to the allocated budgets? If they were insufficient, why wasn't more funding provided?

The healthcare system, especially in public hospitals, continues to be marked by gross inadequacies. And the conditions at these hospitals are a perfect example of that. We urge the interim government to immediately investigate these issues and take corrective action. The recruitment of medical personnel should be a top priority, along with the training of staff to operate specialised equipment. Meanwhile, strict management oversight is necessary to ensure that no resources go underutilised. Access to healthcare is a basic right, and the government must restore functionality to these hospitals as soon as possible.

The path to recovering our stolen assets

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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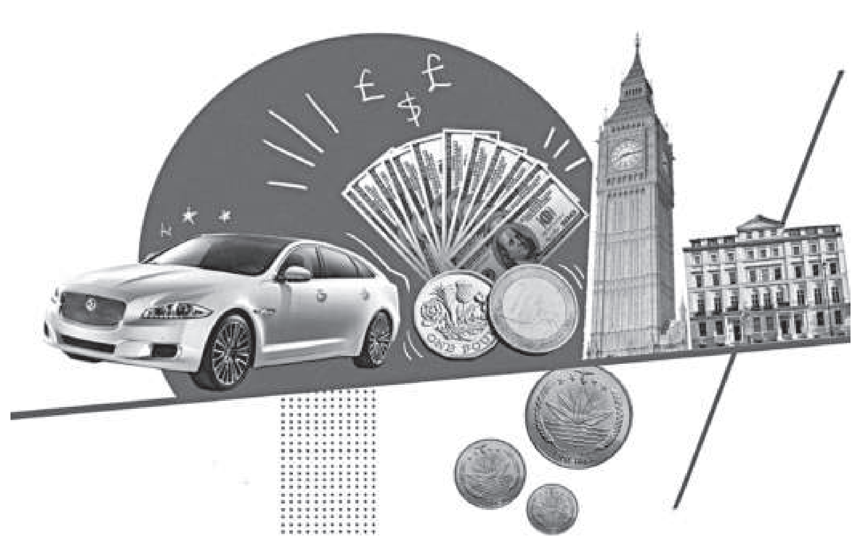
Corruption, embezzlement, and money laundering have been endemic in Bangladesh but reached new heights during the last 15 years of the now-toppled regime led by the Awami League. The recently published "White Paper on the State of the Bangladesh Economy" reported that $234 billion was syphoned off from Bangladesh between 2009 and 2023. The interim government has promised to work tirelessly to identify the perpetrators of this massive mayhem—to loot and plunder the country and its poor people—and bring back some of the ill-gotten resources.

Tax havens around the globe, particularly in the Middle East, Malaysia, the UK, Canada, the US, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, provided a golden opportunity for businesses, bureaucrats, and politicians to use a well-crafted system of patronage and crony capitalism to take advantage of the country's incompetent leaders and financial regulators to launder an average of $16 billion a year.

The White Paper documented the mechanism used for money laundering (ML)—these tricks have been well-known for a long time. The then foreign minister of Bangladesh stated during an interview with *The Daily Star* in 2020 that the AL government had information that politicians, businessmen, and government officials, including some "serving officials," had pilfered and whitewashed money by buying properties in Canada. It is no secret that Bangladesh Bank and the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) were fully aware of the scale of ML and the role played by the key protagonists!

The previous government was, on many occasions, alerted by the World Bank, multilateral financial institutions, UN agencies, and national watchdogs about the scope of illicit financial flows (IIF). In 2011, during negotiations with the World Bank to secure financing for the Padma Bridge, the bank provided "credible evidence of corruption" to the government. These were brushed aside and dismissed as "trumped-up" allegations by the former prime minister.

In my brief discussion on this matter with members of the current administration, it is clear that money laundering and its prevention are among its highest priorities. Last week, the BB governor publicly reiterated his intention to bring back stolen assets from other countries. He chairs a nine-member taskforce with representatives from important state agencies, which has been assigned to track down stolen assets abroad and support investigations aimed at their recovery. The taskforce seeks to expedite legal proceedings for asset recovery, identify and address barriers to recovery, manage frozen or recovered assets abroad, and strengthen communication with relevant domestic and international bodies to gather essential information while enhancing internal coordination and capabilities.



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

While asset recovery is a tough and time-consuming process, it needs to be done, and for many reasons. The money looted from the coffers is now being used to undermine the present government. If we reverse the resource outflow and turn back the tide, that would rejuvenate our economic development. For example, the ML activities of the owners of the S Alam Group have resulted in the bankruptcy of the various businesses they own. If their overseas resources are liquidated and the proceeds repatriated and invested in their domestic enterprises, the local economy will receive a shot in the arm.

Also, we need to send a message to the culprits. In the language of criminal justice system, the purpose would be "deterrence, retribution, and restoration."

The asset recovery stage encompasses several steps that need to be pursued diligently. To begin, a special sub-unit comprising legal and financial experts could freeze, without delay and much fanfare, the funds or other assets of designated persons or entities. Fortunately, Bangladesh can leverage the goodwill earned by the interim administration and seek assistance from three powerful international bodies: i) The World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (STAR); ii) The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), based in Paris; and iii) The US Department of Justice's Money Laundering and Asset recovery Section (MLARS).

Going forward, the taskforce must initiate and hire staff to undertake and strengthen legal action in the following areas: identifying stolen assets, including non-performing bank loans; collecting intelligence and evidence and tracing overseas assets; determining the beneficiaries of ML and ownership transparency; initiating international cooperation between involved jurisdictions; coordination between agencies participating in the taskforce; and legal actions, domestic and international.

Why is international collaboration so important? Most of the stolen money is invested overseas or stashed away in foreign banks. The process of identifying these investments and recovering them will be slow and involve tackling the lawyers, trust experts, real estate agents, accountants, and financial institutions representing the individuals—the Saifuzzamans and the Benazirs—who might have already been identified and tipped in advance. The money, once taken out of the country, is most likely to have been invested in real estate or businesses through a process known as "layering," where the ownership is completely fuzzy. We need to hire the best global investigators to trace the money since the beneficial owner may be hidden behind multiple layers of shell companies or a nominee company director.

Since the US, Canada, Singapore, and the UK have some of the strictest anti-money-laundering (AML) legislation and enforcement mechanisms, our embassies or high commissions in these countries must be notified of the business entities or persons of interest. Several newspaper accounts of Bangladeshi residents in Singapore, New York, Toronto, and London have surfaced over the last few years. The taskforce can forward the list of suspects to MLARS and target the three most corrupt sectors identified by the White Paper: financial, ICT, and power.

The ultimate goal of the current administration is to lay the foundation of an anti-ML programme that will prevent future occurrences. A comprehensive ML programme will include investment in employee education, stricter internal controls, accountability, and early detection.

We need to build stronger defences against corruption, money laundering, and fraudulent trading practices. Key sectors like banking should have guardrails against the "bad influence of party politics," to quote Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud. Various policy measures and actions recommended by the Farashuddin Commission, set up after the Bangladesh Bank heist, need to be implemented. A whistleblower programme to reward individuals who provide helpful information on illegal financial activities must be established.

Finally, this most recent money laundering and kleptocracy saga underscores the pressing need for unwavering diligence and proactive implementation of a comprehensive AML compliance framework in Bangladesh to safeguard the financial system.

The role of CITES in combating illegal wildlife trade

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Bangladesh, with its diverse ecosystems, harbours an array of wildlife species critical to global biodiversity. Yet, this rich natural heritage faces immense threats due to the illegal wildlife trade, both as a source and transit route. The role of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), established in 1973, is vital in curbing this alarming trend. However, recent developments have highlighted serious gaps in the country's compliance.

Illegal wildlife trade in Bangladesh encompasses a wide range of species, including Bengal tigers, turtles, exotic birds, and marine life. The country's geopolitical location, bordering India and Myanmar, makes it a strategic transit point for traffickers.

According to field studies, Bangladesh has 16 key trafficking hotspots along its borders, including Teknaf, Benapole, and the Chattogram seaport. Smugglers exploit porous borders and weak enforcement to move wildlife into neighbouring countries such as India, Myanmar, and Vietnam—countries with booming wildlife markets.

Since joining CITES in 1982, Bangladesh has committed to regulating international wildlife trade through strict permits and documentation to protect species from overexploitation. However, in August 2024, Bangladesh faced suspension from CITES due to persistent failures in enforcement, hindering efforts to protect endangered species such as tigers, elephants, and various marine life forms. Despite this setback, Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan expressed optimism, citing the government's commitment to stronger compliance and enhanced wildlife monitoring.

Challenges persist due to fake permits and insufficient training among port personnel, allowing smugglers to exploit these loopholes and traffic protected species via air and land routes, notably through Dhaka and Chattogram airports. And while the government has made progress in some areas, wildlife trafficking, especially through less-regulated borders, continues to thrive.

The Wildlife Crime Control Unit (WCCU), established by the Forest Department, has been at the forefront of efforts to combat wildlife trafficking. Recent seizures of animals, such as Hoolock gibbons, fishing cats, and Kalij pheasants, underscore the ongoing struggle to stop wildlife smuggling. According to law enforcement, wildlife trafficking routes often pass through major international ports like Chattogram before moving to destinations such as India and Myanmar.

In March 2021, a significant operation led to the rescue of seven Patagonian Mara, an exotic species from Argentina, in Satkhira. This demonstrates how international traffickers exploit Bangladesh as a transit point. Similar seizures of zebras, lion cubs, and other species further highlight the scale of the illegal trade operating within the country.

Bangladesh is home to several species listed under the CITES appendices:

Appendix I: Includes species threatened with extinction, such as the Bengal Tiger, Indian Elephant, and Red Panda, as well as marine species like the Olive Ridley Turtle.

Appendix II: Includes species like the Saltwater Crocodile, Gharial, and Indian Star Tortoise, which are at risk without trade controls.

Appendix III: Includes certain mangrove species from the Sundarbans and orchids from the Dendrobium genus, protected due to over-harvesting.

Despite these protective measures, enforcing CITES regulations remains challenging. Combating wildlife trafficking in Bangladesh is hampered by weak enforcement, inadequate resources, and insufficient training for the Wildlife Crime Control Unit. Online marketplaces like Facebook and YouTube complicate regulation, while domestic demand for wildlife products exacerbates the issue. Corruption and lack of expertise among port officials and border guards allow traffickers to exploit false declarations and evade detection, further endangering biodiversity.

Wildlife trafficking poses a significant threat to Bangladesh's biodiversity. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), over 390 species in Bangladesh are at risk of extinction. Poaching, habitat destruction, and trade disrupt ecosystems and push species towards extinction. Marine life, such as turtles and sharks from the Bay of Bengal, is particularly vulnerable. Bangladesh has already lost 31 species in the last century, and many more are at risk if illegal trade continues unchecked.

The Bangladesh Forest Department, in collaboration with international organisations like Interpol, has intensified anti-trafficking measures. These include:

Rescue operations: Seizures of exotic and native wildlife, including endangered species.

Public hotlines: Encouraging citizens to report wildlife crimes.

Legal frameworks: Enforcing the Wild Animals (Preservation and Security) Act, 2012.

Capacity building: Plans for a DNA-based tiger gene bank to strengthen anti-poaching measures.

However, recurring offenders and inadequate market monitoring undermine progress. Given this reality, here are some steps that should be taken to address wildlife trafficking effectively: i) Enhance enforcement through training programmes for law enforcement and customs officials; ii) Use modern technology, such as drones and checkpoints, to deter smuggling; iii) Launch public awareness campaigns to reduce domestic demand for wildlife products; iv) Strengthen international cooperation for intelligence sharing and joint operations; and v) Revise policies to enforce stricter penalties and wildlife trade regulations.

Bangladesh's biodiversity faces significant pressure from illegal wildlife trade. Effective CITES enforcement and collaborative efforts among government agencies, international organisations, and the public are crucial for safeguarding ecosystems and global biodiversity.

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