

Govt should now focus on reforms

Its first six months were fraught with challenges

The interim government has completed its first six months in office amid numerous challenges. The government, led by Professor Yunus, assumed power during a turbulent time, with unanimous support from students, the public, and major political parties. People had extremely high expectations of the government, which, naturally, was going to be difficult to fulfil. While there have been inefficiencies and weaknesses in governance, the previous regime's rampant corruption, irregularities, and destruction of major public institutions have also hindered the interim government's ability to meet those expectations. On the flipside, the government's own failure to address key concerns and major issues effectively has been disappointing. With recommendations to reform the constitution, electoral system, judiciary, civil service, police, and the Anti-Corruption Commission now in place, the government faces new challenges in implementing these reforms through political consensus.

Unfortunately, Prof Yunus and his advisory team have been unsuccessful in satisfactorily reducing the rising prices of food and essential goods. With Ramadan set to begin in March, a time when food prices typically increase, the government will face significant challenges if it does not implement effective measures to control food prices. The closure of major factories, particularly those associated with Awami League leaders or beneficiaries of the prior administration, has exacerbated the employment crisis due to job losses. Economic predictions for the year are bleak, showing little signs of improvement. Despite some reforms in the financial sector, the overall economy remains largely stagnant.

Additionally, the government's inability to improve the law and order situation in the country has been concerning. The general perception is that the government has taken this issue lightly, as evidenced by their lack of action in curbing petty crimes and rampant muggings in the capital. Even after six months of this government's tenure, the police force's morale remains low. Furthermore, the government has not been able to effectively handle the series of protests and demonstrations that have been taking place on our streets regularly. Whether it's job seekers, students, or deprived madrasa teachers, these ongoing protests and demonstrations continue to cause chaos in Dhaka, resulting in immense suffering for the citizens.

Now, as the six reform commissions have put forward their recommendations, the interim government has reached a crucial stage in fulfilling its mandate. Since it is the political parties that will decide the extent of reforms on each front—along with other stakeholders we hope—expediting consensus-building on the reform proposals is crucial. The interim government is reportedly proceeding according to the timeline set for the reform drive, with talks with political parties scheduled to begin in mid-February. While we hope the chief adviser will play a significant role in facilitating the reform dialogue, it is crucial for political parties as well to reach a consensus for the greater national interest.

CA's response should have come earlier

Everyone must respect the rule of law

We endorse the chief adviser's recent statement urging all citizens to restore complete law and order and to ensure that there are no further attacks on properties associated with Sheikh Hasina, her family, others associated with the Awami League, or any citizen. We support his appeal to the citizens to abide by the law and to show the world that Bangladesh is a nation that respects the rule of law—this is what should differentiate the "new Bangladesh" from the autocratic regime it has now freed itself from. While empathising with people's pent-up anger against Hasina's tyrannical rule, he urged them not to undermine Bangladeshis' sense of security and stability and stated that disregarding the law endangers the lives and property of citizens.

All that he said in this statement can only be considered wise, sensible, and befitting of the head of government. However, it is a statement that has come after the fact, when it should have come long before, accompanied by strong preventive steps. We are baffled that the government did not take adequate measures to stop the attacks when it was quite clear from announcements on social media that they were imminent. What we saw unfold on our screens was a well-orchestrated series of attacks on properties all over Bangladesh, starting, of course, with Dhanmondi 32. Those who took part in this violence were no doubt provoked by Sheikh Hasina's call to her supporters to mobilise and march towards Road 32, as well as by another one of her regular hate speeches from Delhi, where she has taken refuge.

However, that this should result in such violent reactions in the form of vandalism and arson is unacceptable. These acts have only served to increase people's insecurity in an environment where incidents of lawlessness are occurring with a sense of impunity among those who want to indulge in violent acts and crime. They have also provided fodder for Indian media propaganda, portraying the country as one where militancy is being allowed to thrive. Most of all, it serves Sheikh Hasina's agenda to show the world that without her, the country has fallen into lawlessness and mayhem.

This is the last thing we, the people, or the interim government would want. Rights organisations and noted citizens have expressed their concern over the attacks and criticised the government for its failure to take preventive measures. The government has now stated that it will firmly resist attempts by individuals and groups to vandalise and set fire to establishments across the country. We hope these are not empty words and that the government's forces will take the necessary measures to ensure that no one feels emboldened to carry out attacks on any piece of property, regardless of who it is associated with.

Impact of USAID programme freeze on Bangladesh



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The abrupt decision by the Trump administration to freeze almost all USAID operations globally has surprised millions of vulnerable people around the world, including in Bangladesh. In an unprecedented move, the White House issued an executive order on January 20 to temporarily suspend USAID's operations in over 100 countries worldwide to enhance efficiency and align with US foreign policy. The executive order has imposed a 90-day pause on US foreign development assistance, stating: "It is the policy of the United States that no further United States foreign assistance shall be disbursed in a manner that is not fully aligned with the foreign policy of the President of the United States."

USAID has a long history spanning six and a half decades. The organisation was created immediately after the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 was signed into law by President John F Kennedy. The United States has been the world's largest donor, disbursing about \$65 billion in official development assistance in 2023. Yet, US foreign assistance constitutes less than one percent of its budget, which is lower than that of some other countries. US official development assistance accounts for about 0.24 percent of its total gross national income (GNI). Most donor countries provide aid below the United Nations' ODA target of 0.7 percent of GNI.

Donor fund management is a complex task, and USAID executes it through its offices worldwide, managing thousands of contracts and agreements with international and national NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector. In 2023, USAID provided assistance to about 130 countries. The 10 largest recipient countries were Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Syria. Most of the nearly 10,000 employees of the agency worldwide have been placed on leave due to the executive order issued on January 20, except for those engaged in critical functions, core leadership responsibilities, and specially designated programmes.

USAID is now dealing with the aftermath of a sudden suspension of operations at the start of Trump's second term in office. President Trump

was already interested in overhauling the organisation during his first term. Between 2017 and 2021, he repeatedly attempted to cut US development assistance and, in fact, reduced funding for programmes related to reproductive health and climate change. This time, the president and his advisers are likely to implement far-

decision to freeze USAID funds. Additionally, beneficiaries of these NGO programmes will also be significantly impacted. I managed USAID programmes for government institutions, which facilitated upstream policy, governance, electoral and legal reforms, and health and family planning initiatives to create capacity and enabling conditions for inclusive development and equal opportunities for disadvantaged people.

The discontinuation of USAID-funded projects will have several consequences, as the future of these programmes and their funding is now uncertain. Those working on these projects will likely face frustration, as many may not be able to wait for

aid support for the Rohingya relief programme, for which USAID pledged \$121 million.

A globally reputed organisation that will be adversely affected by USAID's suspension of operations in Bangladesh is the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b). The suspension order has rendered the jobs of over a thousand icddr,b officials and employees uncertain, as they have already received termination letters. As USAID undergoes restructuring over the next three months, organisations like this should be given priority due to their critical role in delivering life-saving health interventions for thousands of children and women every month.



People hold placards as the USAID building sits closed to employees after a memo was issued advising agency personnel to work remotely, in Washington, February 3, 2025.

PHOTO: REUTERS

reaching reforms in the US aid system.

There is growing concern among USAID recipient countries about the fate of ongoing projects and the people employed in them. I have had the privilege of managing USAID funds in Bangladesh for about a decade—funds utilised by the government and two dozen NGOs to support the establishment of human, legal, land, water, employment, and other rights for disadvantaged people. Thus, I can confidently say that there is no doubt that those employed in these programmes will be directly affected by the US government's

a resolution and will struggle to find alternative employment. More than 100 projects were being implemented with USAID funds in Bangladesh, with a total value of \$200 million across various sectors, including health, agriculture, environment, good governance, and social and economic opportunity. According to a news report published in *The Daily Star* on January 26, USAID issued a letter directing all implementing partners in Bangladesh to stop, cease, and/or suspend all USAID-funded project activities immediately. However, the directive thankfully excludes

The US deserves credit for providing 40 percent of the world's humanitarian assistance. At the same time, there is a need to periodically assess the effectiveness of the over \$40 billion the US spends annually on development aid. However, such assessments could have been conducted while the aid agency remained operational. Since the government has already decided to pause USAID's operations, we hope that it has a solid plan to ensure that the many valuable contributions of USAID are not lost in the process of making the organisation more efficient and effective.

Caviar dreams, rice-and-lentil reality



MIND THE GAP

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NOSHIN NAWAL

Dhaka, my beloved city, where even the air charges rent. If breathing deeply doesn't suffocate you, the price of living surely will. Bangladesh's cost of living has soared so high that even Elon Musk might pause before buying groceries here. Meanwhile, our standard of living? Let's just say it's like serving instant noodles on a platinum plate.

Picture this: you're at the local bazaar, trying to buy onions. That quintessential Bangladeshi rite of passage where your bargaining skills are tested alongside your cardiovascular health. You approach the onion vendor, fully prepared for a duel of wit. The vendor quotes a price that could fund a one-way trip to Bangkok. You laugh nervously, hoping it's a joke. It's not. You hand over half of your monthly salary for a kilo, knowing that the next stop is the kidney exchange booth, where desperate buyers and sellers of human organs congregate to fund their grocery bills. And there you are, trading half your paycheck for a vegetable that's as essential as oxygen but priced like a Chanel handbag. By the time you're done collecting your overpriced onions, tomatoes, and

eggs, you've calculated that dinner tonight will cost more than your last vacation.

The tomatoes are staring at you like forbidden fruit, each one priced as if it were signed by Cristiano Ronaldo. Eggs? Oh, darling, eggs are a status symbol now. If you serve a fried egg at brunch, expect your neighbours to whisper about your suspiciously lavish lifestyle.

But what are you returning home to? A Dhaka apartment—a marvel of minimalist living where you pay for the square footage of your dreams but inhabit the reality of a sardine can. Your walls are so thin you can hear your neighbour's life story, unprompted, every night. The bathroom? A multi-purpose space where you can shower, brush your teeth, and scream into the void—all within arm's reach. And yet, the rent is astronomical, as if the cockroaches come with gold-plated shells and the leaky ceiling is some avant-garde water feature.

Transportation is another gem in the crown of our high-cost, low-standard economy. You can pay a hefty toll to cross the Padma Bridge in your beat-up car that will break

down halfway, forcing you to walk the rest of the way like a medieval pilgrim. Meanwhile, public transport is a lottery system where you either make it to your destination or meet your maker, whichever comes first.

Then there's the dining-out experience. A dinner date in Dhaka will cost you a fortune for mediocre food served in dim lighting (because who needs electricity when

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candlelight is "romantic?"). Your significant other might gasp at the price, but don't mistake it for love—they've just realised they won't eat for the rest of the month.

And what of education, the beacon of hope for the next generation? Schools charge fees that could fund a

small country, only to teach children how to spell "orange" as "orange." Tuition costs rise faster than Dhaka's air pollution levels, but the only thing your child learns with absolute certainty is how to pronounce "homework." University fees? Let's not even go there.

But wait—there's hope! Our government's strategic response to inflation is ingenious: import luxury cars for ministers. Because nothing screams "fiscal responsibility" like a line of black SUVs zipping through waterlogged streets while regular citizens are waist-deep in sludge, wondering how to afford next month's rice.

And while we're speaking of potholes, they're the unofficial mascot of Dhaka. No matter how much you pay in taxes, these craters remain untouched, like ancient relics. Tourists might mistake them for archaeological sites, while we locals treat them as impromptu swimming pools during floods.

And yet, we carry on. We joke about smuggling onions, make memes about egg inflation, and laugh so hard at our own misery that we forget we're crying. Dhaka has taught us resilience, and not the glossy, Instagrammable kind. No, this is the gritty, street-smart resilience that makes us experts in survival and sarcasm.

So, here's to us—living champagne-priced lentil lives, dodging manholes, and making humour our unofficial currency. Because if there's one thing Bangladeshis excel at, it's laughing in the face of absurdity. And honestly, with the price of onions, laughter is the only thing left that's still free.