

## Collaboration a must to resolve national crises

To implement reforms, past attitudes must be discarded

Prof Rehman Sobhan raised an important point on Thursday, at a book launch ceremony, about why, after years of studies and research, the fundamental problems of our economy do not get solved. Why do we have this history where findings, recommendations, and knowledge of researchers, experts, and think tanks on crucial aspects of the country repeatedly get ignored and shoved aside by political leaders and implementers? We believe that the answer lies in the fact that there's a basic disconnect among the academia, political leaders, and bureaucrats in the country.

Numerous studies have been conducted on every single social and economic sector in Bangladesh, yet in nearly 54 years since our independence, no fundamental reforms have been carried out based on the findings of those studies. One glaring example of this phenomenon is the recommendations of the 29 task forces created in 1991 under the leadership of Prof Sobhan. As the planning adviser in Justice Shahabuddin's caretaker government, Prof Sobhan called upon 250 experts of the country and formed the task forces—which dealt with topics ranging from the economy, environment, and energy to the revival of the jute industry—to reconstruct Bangladesh after the fall of Ershad's autocratic regime. However, none of the succeeding elected governments, which included both the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), implemented the recommendations of the task forces. The political parties' inaction shows how policymakers or political leaders in our country distance themselves from research and in-depth economic and social guidance provided by academia.

Globally, governments and policymakers depend on academia, experts, and think tanks for policy advice on fundamental issues in a nation. However, in Bangladesh, we have this dubious record of ignoring and shunning proposals made by experts and think tanks. Sadly, even when political leaders acknowledge expert advice, the proposals face obstacles from policy implementers, i.e. the bureaucrats. They often let their narrowmindedness get in the way and choose to promote megaprojects and allocate resources to programmes that are often unnecessary or require huge investments. Such bureaucratic preferences have created the path for unbridled corruption in the past, serving the interest of a select few in the process.

Now that we are looking at reforms again, we must ask ourselves whether we want to take lessons from our past. Crucial recommendations submitted by all the reform commissions formed under the interim government led by Prof Muhammad Yunus will face the same fate as previous expert proposals if we fail to establish a line of communication and a path towards adherence and commitment among the three tiers of our society: academia, policymakers, and policy implementers. The distance between these three tiers must be reduced to solve the problems that have affected our society and economy for the last five decades.

## Climate refugees must be protected

Govt must effectively tackle slavery suffered by climate migrants

We are alarmed by the findings of a recent survey that reveal that climate refugees from vulnerable regions across the country are falling victim to various forms of modern slavery, both at home and abroad. The survey, conducted on 648 households across 33 climate-vulnerable villages in Sylhet and Pirojpur districts, found that 92 percent of the internal migrants face at least one type of modern slavery, while over 52 percent endure more than three types. The situation is even more severe for international migrants, with 99 percent experiencing at least one type of modern slavery and 81 percent enduring more than five types. Those surveyed reported experiencing wage withholding, restricted movement, abusive conditions, threats, intimidation, and even physical violence.

Over the last six decades, climate-related disasters have reportedly almost doubled in Bangladesh—from four per year before 1990 to seven per year after—significantly impacting agriculture and livelihoods. Cyclones, river erosion, and saltwater intrusion have forced many families to relocate. The most recent example of climate-related disasters is last year's devastating floods, which affected millions of people. As the government's efforts to rehabilitate them have been largely inadequate, migration has become a common livelihood strategy for them. Sadly, their desperate attempts to survive often lead them to further predicament.

In climate-vulnerable areas such as Pirojpur and Sylhet, the majority of residents report rising temperatures and worsening river erosion, which has led to a surge in both internal and international migration. Since 2011, approximately 84 percent of affected families have relocated to cities like Dhaka, Khulna, and Chattogram in search of work, often in exploitative industries. Additionally, 88 percent have sent their relatives abroad, mainly to Gulf countries, where they have to endure harsh working conditions. Another recent study found that migration driven by debt repayment further worsens the financial conditions of these migrants.

This situation must be handled with urgency. We urge the government to take immediate and effective measures to rehabilitate climate refugees and address the challenges posed by climate-related migration. It is crucial to identify vulnerable communities and implement targeted action plans, including comprehensive social protection programmes and job creation initiatives. Additionally, developing disaster-resilient infrastructure could provide significant support to those most affected by extreme weather events. Addressing the plight of our climate refugees should be a top priority for the government.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### First adult mammal cloned

On this day in 1997, a team of British scientists working under the direction of Ian Wilmut at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh announced the birth of Dolly the sheep, the first clone of an adult mammal.

# How climate change drives social conflicts



Dr Dwijen L. Mallick is fellow at Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS).

DWIJEN L. MALLICK

The impacts of climate change are visible in all crucial aspects of life, be it agriculture and food security or access to healthcare and human potential to work. In vulnerable regions, climate change, which is rapid and forceful, is aggravating the existing social and economic problems such as extreme poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, social conflicts over resources, and gender inequity. The 2022 Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) asserted that climate change is pushing us into a high-risk-centred world, where the growing impacts of climate change are limiting the adaptive capacity of humans as well as the ecosystems.

The National Adaptation Plan (2023–2050) of Bangladesh has identified several climate-induced stresses that are affecting regions, people, their livelihoods, and ecosystems across the country. Traditional occupational groups such as small farmers, fishers, daily wage earners, and people dependent on natural resources are suffering the most. The poor, particularly women and socially marginalised communities, are severely affected in all the climate hotspots; they are highly exposed and sensitive to climate disasters like extreme heat stress during summer, frequent and devastating floods, cyclones, tidal surges, and landslides. They lack adaptive capacity in terms of awareness, motivation, disaster preparedness, and resources to address climate change impacts.

It is evident that many climate-vulnerable people in Bangladesh mainly depend on their wage earnings and livelihoods based on natural resources (such as subsistence agriculture, fishing, and horticulture), which are again very sensitive to climate change. Furthermore, natural resources like forests and wetlands are very often captured and controlled by local influential people. Thus, climate change is increasing deprivation and social conflicts in the existing social systems, where local government institutions are weak and biased towards the power elites. Recent studies suggest that all the climate



Indiscriminate shrimp farming has destructed local ecology, fresh water sources, and common property resources in the coastal villages of southwest Bangladesh, leading to social conflicts in the region.

SOURCE: BCAS

hotspots in Bangladesh have high levels of poverty, livelihood insecurity, and gender inequity. Many of the poor, especially women, are forced to migrate to the cities in search of livelihood options, where they live in the slums and fringe areas, in degraded social and environmental conditions.

The NETZ Bangladesh, an international development agency, recently conducted an exploratory study to understand the physical causes—like climate-induced stresses—as well as social causes of vulnerability and gender inequity in three climate-affected regions: southwest coastal areas, northwest drought-prone areas, and north-central river basin. The study also explored the nature and types of social conflicts triggered and aggravated by climate change. The surveyed people (covering 400 respondents) in the three study areas agreed on the rise of social conflicts (63 percent) during and after a climate disaster. Social conflicts were found to occur the most in the coastal region (82 percent), compared

frequent natural disasters, salinity intrusion, high tides (linked to sea level rise) and waterlogging in coastal villages. Conflicts are increasing while collecting drinking water from limited sources of water, as the demand for fresh water is on the rise in climate-affected localities. Public water distribution points (like piped water supply and rainwater harvesting systems) are inadequate compared to the growing needs of the vast number of poor people. The poor are not allowed to send their cattle on the grazing lands. Agricultural lands owned by marginal farmers are often converted into shrimp farms forcefully. These are the main sources of social conflicts in coastal villages. Local rich people and power elites very often win in the fight since they are well connected to political parties and local government institutions (LGIs).

The existing conflict resolution mechanisms do not protect the interest and rights of poor women, ethnic groups, and marginalised people. There

is an urgent need for strengthening alternative and transformative conflict resolution mechanisms, where civil society groups and local partners can play a significant role in empowering the poor, particularly women, to pursue social justice and gender equity. LGIs like union parishads and sectoral agencies in the upazilas should be made more accountable and

responsible to the poor, women, and socially excluded groups.

Furthermore, gendered drivers, such as women's lack of mobility and participation, as well as the patriarchal norms and values affect the decision-making power of women, girls, and socially disadvantaged groups. Hence, the social capitals of the poor and women, in terms of organisational capacity, cohesiveness and raising collective voice, should be advanced with institutional linkages for locally led solutions, conflict resolution, and climate-resilient livelihoods. LGIs, NGOs, and civil society should promote gender-responsive and pro-poor adaptation and social protection mechanisms for poor women and marginalised groups, which will build resilience of the vulnerable communities and empower them, in order to ensure gender equity as well as a peaceful and just society in the long run. These should be supported by rights-based organisations and their networks.

# A truth, justice and harmony commission can heal post-Hasina Bangladesh



Dr Shamaruh Mirza is a senior scientist based in Australia.

SHAMARUH MIRZA

Having emerged from years of authoritarian rule, Bangladesh stands at a crossroads at present. Addressing past human rights violations and restoring public trust in governance requires a structured, transparent, and inclusive approach. A proposed truth, justice and harmony commission (TJHC) offers a vital mechanism to reckon with the past, ensure accountability, and promote national healing. Without such an initiative, the country risks repeating the cycle of impunity and division.

For over a decade and a half, Bangladesh has faced systemic human rights abuses, enforced disappearances, torture, and killings. The Sheikh Hasina regime brutally suppressed dissent, including those by the political opposition and student-led movements against entrenched corruption and inequality. According to a report by the UN human rights office, security forces, acting under direct orders from top officials, engaged in extrajudicial killings, mass arbitrary arrests, torture, and gender-based violence. An estimated 1,400 people, including children, lost their lives, with thousands more injured, shot by state forces and Hasina's street-level political muscle during the student-led mass movement in July-August 2024. The report details targeted killings, police obstruction of medical

care, and systematic suppression of evidence, suggesting possible crimes against humanity. These atrocities demand urgent accountability and institutional reform to prevent future abuses.

Sheikh Hasina's departure from power presents a unique opportunity for a transitional justice mechanism that not only seeks justice, but also fosters healing and national unity. The TJHC is envisioned as a transformative platform to confront the human rights abuses by the Hasina regime, promote collective understanding, and lay the foundation for a just and harmonious society.

Historically, nations emerging from authoritarian rule or a civil conflict have established truth commissions to address past injustices and facilitate healing. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Rwanda's Gacaca courts, and Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons have provided models for transitional justice. While each country's approach was unique to its historical context, they shared a common goal: acknowledging past crimes to prevent their recurrence. Bangladesh must learn from these examples and tailor the TJHC to its specific needs and historical experiences.

The proposed truth, justice and

harmony commission is designed to fulfil several crucial tasks, including comprehensive investigations into human rights abuses from 2009 to 2024, creating an official historical record of past atrocities, allowing victims to share their narratives, identifying perpetrators, and ensuring legal action. At the same time, fairness through public transparency will

**Historically, nations emerging from authoritarian rule or a civil conflict have established truth commissions to address past injustices and facilitate healing. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Rwanda's Gacaca courts, and Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons have provided models for transitional justice.**

be maintained while encouraging dialogue between affected communities, integrating community-based initiatives for collective well-being, addressing systemic inequities contributing to violence, and supporting those affected by past injustices.

Beyond documenting past injustices, the TJHC must focus on institutional reforms to prevent future human rights violations. Strengthening judicial independence,

reinforcing public oversight of law enforcement agencies, and ensuring free and fair elections are critical components of this reform agenda. Without systemic change, transitional justice risks being a symbolic exercise rather than a transformative process.

The success of the TJHC depends on broad-based support and participation. The legal community, civil society organisations, affected communities, and the international community must actively engage in shaping and monitoring the commission. International human rights organisations and multilateral institutions should provide technical expertise and oversight to ensure the commission's credibility.

Furthermore, the government must commit to providing the commission with the legal authority and resources needed to conduct its work effectively. This includes enacting legislation to formalise the TJHC, protecting witnesses, and ensuring that findings lead to meaningful policy and judicial actions.

Bangladesh has a historic opportunity to break the cycle of impunity and lay the groundwork for a society rooted in justice, accountability, and collective healing. Establishing the TJHC must not be delayed or diluted; it must be an urgent priority that will take our country towards healing

and rebuilding trust in governance. The time for justice is now. The victims and the nation deserve nothing less than a comprehensive, transparent, and effective process of truth-seeking and national unity. Bangladesh must seize this moment to ensure that its citizens can move forward with renewed hope, dignity, and a shared vision for a harmonious future.