

World must not forget the Rohingya

UN chief's call to the international community is heartening

We welcome the UN Secretary-General António Guterres' call to the international community to increase funding for the Rohingya living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Mentioning that the Rohingya are on the verge of a deep humanitarian crisis caused by global aid cuts, the UN chief rightly emphasised the international community's obligation to support them. As the UN chief and Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus addressed a large gathering of Rohingya refugees at a camp in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia on Friday and shared iftar with them, he also expressed hope for the safe and dignified return of over one million Rohingya currently stranded in Bangladesh.

The Rohingya refugees living in camps face growing uncertainty as their food rations are being cut due to global funding shortages. The World Food Programme is reportedly reducing its monthly rations from \$12.5 to \$6 per person starting in April 2025. In 2024, only \$554 million—65 percent of the required funds—was provided for these over one million refugees. With the announced cuts in financial assistance, the situation will become even more dire this year. A previous round of ration cuts in 2023, which reduced food rations to \$8 per month, led to a sharp increase in hunger and malnutrition. Hence, if monthly food rations are further reduced to \$6—approximately Tk 24 per day—it could push the Rohingya refugees to the brink of starvation and even death. Reportedly, nearly 50 percent of the total humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya comes from the US government. Therefore, cuts in US funding will have disastrous consequences for them.

Bangladesh has generously shared its land, forests, limited water, and scarce resources with the refugees. However, it largely depends on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs, including food, education, and healthcare. If these fundamental rights for the Rohingya population cannot be guaranteed due to funding shortages, tensions within the camps are likely to escalate, potentially leading to increased violence, criminal activity, drug trafficking, and other issues. Therefore, we hope the UN chief's call to increase funding for the Rohingya will awaken the global conscience.

The Rohingya refugees cannot remain stuck in limbo forever. Bold and decisive global action is needed to secure a sustainable future for them. To ensure this, the UN and the global community must prioritise the Rohingya issue. They must put pressure on Myanmar to create conditions for the voluntary, safe, and sustainable return of the Rohingya. Until that can be ensured, the international community must step forward with financial assistance. Bangladesh, despite facing many challenges, has done everything in its capacity to support the Rohingyas. It's time for the world to do its part.

Properly implement rape trial reforms

Special tribunals need supporting components to deliver timely justice

As protests demanding justice for the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Magura continue, discussions to expedite rape trials have duly been on the table. Last week, the law adviser mentioned cutting the investigation and trial procedure time by half. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Judicial Service Association (BJS) has called for the establishment of 200 more Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals. Currently, 101 Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals are handling cases of violence against women and children across the country, with each one having, on average, around 1,500 cases pending.

Twenty-five years ago, under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, authorities began setting up special tribunals to ensure speedy trials—to be completed within six months. Yet, more than 33,000 cases have been pending in these tribunals for over five years because there is often a lack of a support system to ensure the completion of trials within the stipulated time. As mentioned in this column before, challenges lie in several areas, including the thorough investigation of rape and other cases of violence against women (VAW), the availability of dedicated and well-equipped investigation cells, female police personnel in every police station to handle VAW cases, and inadequate forensic laboratories. In addition, interference or intimidation by influential quarters and the lack of proper incentives for police, prosecutors, and others involved in the legal process hinder the timely completion of trials.

Setting up 200 more tribunals would undoubtedly help ease the pressure, but an in-depth assessment of the current tribunals is required to identify the loopholes that cause bottlenecks in pending cases. Additionally, the digitalisation of the entire procedure—from case filing to evidence gathering to trial—must be implemented to ensure transparency and empower the complainant/victim to track the status of the case, understand reasons for any delays, and demand remedies if necessary. A commission is also needed to probe sexual harassment and physical and sexual violence against women and children, along with policies to reintegrate and rehabilitate survivors and ensure their protection through the establishment of more victim shelters. Finally, we need to address the social, cultural, and other traditional excuses that are used to condone such violence and eradicate toxic patriarchal norms that enable perpetrators.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

US commits May Lai Massacre



On this day in 1968, during the Vietnam War, US soldiers killed as many as 500 unarmed villagers in a Vietnamese village My Lai, which they considered to be a stronghold of the Viet Cong.

EDITORIAL

RTI Act is on life support

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Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh is in danger. We have had no information commissioner to implement the RTI Act for six months. Now, another ominous development looms large—the suspension and likely termination of US government-funded projects in the country following executive orders of US President Donald Trump. RTI projects are included.

However, this allows the nation to reflect on and act upon open governance, the main objective of RTI law. This is of such tremendous national importance that its advancement should not depend upon foreign funding. As the prime movers of the law, citizens of the country have kept it alive since its adoption 16 years ago. Alternative arrangements must be found for them to continue this important task.

Our youth who spearheaded the July 2024 uprising in the country, bringing new hope for the people, can use RTI to further their objectives. The formation of the new National Citizens Party (NCP) by them raises hope. Their commitment to the law may inspire other political parties—which have shown little or no interest so far—to follow suit.

Transparency in public officials' work and responsiveness towards citizens, which enhances their accountability and acceptance, are essential features of good governance. Let us discuss some ways RTI empowers citizens to seek relevant information from public officials, strengthening our democracy.

RTI and people's participation in governance

The basic premise of democratic governance is citizens' participation in its various processes. In representative democracy, citizens choose their representatives every four to five years through the election process. After that, they have little say in their representatives' responsibilities. The RTI Act allows them to engage in the governance process on a day-to-day basis, thereby allowing them to participate in governance matters. They use the law to monitor the activities of public officials and check if they are performing their duties

with honesty and due diligence. The law obliges the latter to be responsive to citizens' requests for information. Election law and the RTI law are thus the two main pillars of democracy complementing each other.

RTI enhances people's access to governance mechanisms

Citizens' participation in the governance process is best served by their easy access to public offices, and RTI ensures such access. Using this law, citizens obtain information related to government documents,



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

services, policies, financial activities, legal rights, schemes related to governance, etc. The knowledge they receive provides a basis for participating in governance matters.

RTI and transparency

Transparency in government work, a key objective of the RTI Act 2009, is also an essential feature of good governance. RTI ensures that public authorities operate more openly by granting citizens the legal right to seek information from them and serve as watchdogs. Citizens have used the law to uncover discrepancies in school management and many infrastructure projects where funds were allocated but not appropriately utilised. Many local communities have held school administrations accountable by obtaining budget reports, expenditure details, and the functioning of school managing committees.

their constitutionally recognised ownership of all powers of the land. They can make informed decisions on governance matters by utilising relevant information, including accurate data.

RTI and combatting corruption

A particular goal of the RTI Act is to deter corruption by exposing malfeasance. It serves as a tool to uncover and reveal information on corruption, which is the first step to fighting it and building an accountable system. In 2019, a farmer from Dinajpur sought information on government agricultural subsidies after he failed to access them despite repeated efforts. His RTI application revealed that the subsidies were diverted to non-farmers with political connections. The exposure led to corrective measures.

RTI and equality

Non-discrimination, equality, and inclusiveness are critical to establishing

good governance and strengthening democracy. The RTI Act gives every citizen an equal opportunity to use the law and participate in the government's decision-making process. One of the most successful beneficiary groups of the RTI Act in the country is marginalised communities, who have used the law to obtain their rightful entitlements from the various safety net programmes of the country.

RTI and gender

The RTI Act has played an essential role in empowering citizens, especially women, to challenge systemic gender disparities and foster gender equality. After a media report in 2023 disclosed that pregnant and married female students were barred from staying in student dormitories, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) filed RTI requests to 38 public universities seeking their policies on such students. This revealed inconsistencies and discriminatory practices against female students. Based on this, BLAST filed a public interest litigation to the High Court. The court questioned the legitimacy of such discriminatory policies and directed universities to reconsider their regulations.

RTI and journalism

Journalists worldwide regularly use RTI as an investigative tool to access crucial information from public development projects. In one such example from Bangladesh, a journalist from Dinajpur utilised the RTI Act to uncover a counterfeiting scheme involving fake stamps. His efforts led to the revocation of licenses of fraudulent vendors and implementation of a strict monitoring system, thereby safeguarding government revenue and public trust.

Much of the last 16 years since the passing of the RTI law has been spent under autocratic rule. This is one reason citizens lacked trust in the government's commitment to the law. Under the changed circumstances now, we hope the law will receive the attention and support of the interim government and the governments to come to play an essential role in strengthening democracy and people's participation in governance. Given the tremendous value of the law in promoting these objectives, the interim government would do well by setting a precedent of engaging citizen groups, including NGOs, in implementing the RTI Act. However, the first thing to do is fill the three information commissioners' posts without further delay.

Global aid cuts must not hinder women's empowerment



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As the world prepares to celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) 2025, a looming crisis threatens to stall progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. The recent decision by USAID to halt funding for global development interventions, coupled with significant cuts in development cooperation budgets by governments of Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, poses a severe challenge to countries like Bangladesh, where external funding has played a critical role in advancing women's rights, economic inclusion, and social mobility.

These funding reductions come at a time when Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in gender parity. However, this progress is fragile, and without sustained financial support, many of the initiatives that have driven these achievements could face setbacks.

Historically, Bangladesh has benefited from international donor support for women's empowerment programmes in areas such as education, health, economic participation, and political representation. Initiatives like USAID's Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W-GDP), UK Aid's Girls' Education Challenge, and the Netherlands' support for sexual and reproductive health programmes have been instrumental in reducing gender disparities. The sudden withdrawal or reduction of these funds raises several concerns:

Challenges in combating gender-based violence

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 52 percent of ever-married women have experienced some form of domestic violence. Programmes providing legal aid, safe shelters, and awareness campaigns—many of which depend on donor support—may struggle to sustain their services. This could lead to increased vulnerability for women facing abuse.

Health and reproductive rights under threat

Maternal mortality in Bangladesh has significantly declined, from 574

deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 163 in 2020 (UNICEF, 2023). Donor-supported interventions, including reproductive health services, access to contraceptives, and maternal care, have been key contributors.

With reduced funding, access to these life-saving services could be compromised, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Given these challenges, Bangladesh must find alternative ways to sustain and accelerate progress in women's empowerment. The following strategies could help mitigate the impact of funding cuts:

Strengthening domestic resource mobilisation

The government must increase its budget allocation for gender-responsive programmes. Currently, only 29 percent of the national budget directly contributes to gender equality initiatives (Ministry of Finance, 2023). This needs to be expanded.

Encouraging private sector and philanthropic contributions

Bangladesh's private sector, particularly the garment industry, contributes 84 percent of total export earnings and employs nearly four million women. Companies can play a greater role in funding women's empowerment programmes, such as workplace childcare facilities, maternity benefits, and leadership training for female workers. Additionally, engaging philanthropic organisations and local businesses in corporate social responsibility initiatives can help bridge funding gaps.

Expanding microfinance and social enterprises

Microfinance institutions have empowered millions of women entrepreneurs. Scaling up such initiatives, alongside government-backed financial inclusion programmes, can provide alternative pathways for women's economic independence. Digital financial services also offer

new opportunities to expand access to credit and savings for women in remote areas.

Leveraging technology and innovation

E-learning platforms, mobile health services, and digital marketplaces can help sustain education, health, and economic participation for women. For example, Aponjon, a mobile-based maternal health service, has reached millions of women with vital pregnancy and postnatal care information.

Strengthening South-South cooperation

Bangladesh can collaborate with other Global South nations to share best practices, expertise, and resources in gender-responsive policies. Partnerships with regional organisations such as SAARC, ASEAN, and BRICS could open avenues for funding and technical assistance beyond traditional Western donors.

The funding cuts by USAID and other donors signal a worrying trend that could impact gender equality efforts worldwide. The UN estimates that achieving gender equality by 2030 requires an annual investment of \$360 billion—a goal that seems increasingly difficult without sustained global financing. Low- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh, may face setbacks in their efforts to close the gender gap if alternative funding strategies are not pursued.

However, this crisis also presents an opportunity for countries to become more self-reliant and innovative in addressing gender disparities. While external funding has played a vital role, true gender equality must be driven by national commitment, local ownership, and sustainable financing mechanisms.

The road ahead may be challenging, but with strategic action and collective efforts, Bangladesh can ensure that its women's empowerment agenda remains unwavering, resilient, and forward-looking—regardless of global financial fluctuations.