

## A message to US officials

Verify Bangladesh's ground realities before making sweeping comments

We are disappointed by US intelligence chief Tulsi Gabbard's remarks regarding the alleged persecution, killing, and abuse of minorities in Bangladesh. In an interview with India's NDTV, Gabbard suggested that this issue has been longstanding and that the "threat of Islamic terrorists" in the country is "rooted" in the "ideology and objective" to "rule and govern with an Islamist caliphate." When did all this happen, if at all? Under Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh was seen as India's best friend. Were we trying to establish an "Islamist caliphate" at that time? At a time when the interim government has been actively engaging with the new US administration, such a statement—unsupported by facts or substance—is deeply regrettable.

After years of authoritarian rule, Bangladesh has reembarked on the path to restoring democracy. It is true that, following the fall of the Awami League regime, some attacks against minorities did occur. However, most of these incidents took place when the country lacked a functioning law enforcement system in the immediate aftermath of the August 5 changeover. Moreover, many of the attacks were politically motivated rather than communally driven. Regardless, the interim government has categorically condemned all such incidents and undertaken legal actions. It has even invited journalists from around the world to visit and witness the situation firsthand. Despite these efforts, segments of the Indian media and political class have repeatedly misrepresented Bangladesh—often with completely fabricated reports.

We urge Tulsi Gabbard and other US government officials to independently examine all available evidence before making sweeping statements that unjustly link an entire country to global terrorism. Bangladesh has never been part of any global extremist movement. In fact, the only major instance of terrorism on its soil—the 2016 Holey Artisan attack—had Bangladesh as a victim rather than a perpetrator. Bangladesh has consistently been an ally in global counterterrorism efforts, including those led by the US, and remains committed to this cause. Given this reality, we hope that responsible officials, particularly in the US, will take care not to reinforce harmful stereotypes that misrepresent Bangladesh.

The people of Bangladesh have unequivocally expressed their desire for democracy by overthrowing the former authoritarian regime through great sacrifice. To ignore this and broadly suggest that Bangladeshi's wish to establish an Islamist caliphate undermines their struggle and sacrifices. If anything, Bangladesh has been one of the least communalistic countries in the region, particularly compared to its neighbours. Our chief adviser, a Nobel laureate, has clearly stated that Bangladeshi's of all backgrounds belong to the same "family."

Bangladesh seeks to build a stronger relationship with the US, one that requires deep mutual understanding. To achieve this, we urge the US administration to rely on firsthand information gathered through its local embassy rather than external sources. The US is also welcome to send its own journalists or fact-finding missions to assess the ground reality and engage directly with the Bangladeshi people.

## Enforce ceasefire in Gaza by any means

World leaders must take action against Israel's renewed offensive

Israel has turned the word "ceasefire" into a farce through its renewed airstrikes on Gaza on Tuesday, killing at least 330 Palestinians, most of them women, children, and the elderly. Its offensive, with a green light from the US, has literally buried the three-phased ceasefire truce announced on January 15 under piles of dead bodies across Gaza.

It is evident now that Israel never intended to honour the truce between itself and Hamas, negotiated by the US, Qatar, and Egypt in May 2024. The first phase of the truce, which began on January 19, ended on March 1. During these 42 days, Hamas released 25 living and eight deceased Israeli hostages, while Israel released about 1,900 Palestinian prisoners and detainees and allowed aid trucks into Gaza. However, Israel then refused to proceed to the second phase that called for a permanent ceasefire, a complete withdrawal of Israeli troops, and the return of all remaining hostages by Hamas. Instead, it came up with a new plan. Reportedly, White House envoy Steve Witkoff advanced Israel's proposal to Hamas, offering to extend the first phase of the truce—requiring Hamas to release the remaining hostages—without any promise of Israeli troop withdrawal or a permanent ceasefire agreement.

This raises serious questions about Israel's intentions in ending the conflict, especially given its backtracking from the original agreement and its support for President Donald Trump's absurd plan to build a "Middle Eastern Riviera" in Gaza. What Israel is doing amounts to ethnic cleansing—a genocidal plan to create a Gaza without Gazans. After 15 months of relentless strikes that killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, Gazans returned to the rubble of their homes in mid-January, only to face even deadlier attacks now. And by giving Israel the nod for Tuesday's assault, the US has discarded whatever veil of humanitarian standards it once pretended to uphold.

Under these circumstances, countries that still believe in justice and humanity must not only condemn Israel's crimes but also take action to prevent further loss of lives, using whatever means necessary. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council must wake up and fulfil its mandate to maintain international peace—not as mere observers of an ongoing genocide, but by actively enforcing measures to stop it. We cannot allow a rogue state's refusal to honour a ceasefire agreement to become a death sentence for the Palestinians.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Iraq War begins

On this day in 2003, US President George W Bush ordered air strikes on Baghdad, thus launching the Iraq War to oust dictator Saddam Hussein, who was believed (wrongly) to be manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.

# EDITORIAL

## Rethinking char development in Bangladesh



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MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

Recently, I read with great interest the editorial in *The Daily Star* on the plight of char dwellers, who have been long neglected and denied the basic necessities in life. The editorial highlighted the "dire living" conditions in chars and the struggle to earn a living in the face of year-round flood, drought and erosion disasters in the floodplain. Finally, it recommended a "bottom-up" approach to address the struggles towards improving the conditions of char dwellers in the country.

As I recall, in 2015, the First National Char Convention, attended by government officials, politicians, academics, local and international NGOs, and some vocal representatives from char areas, clearly recognised the need for assistance to alleviate poverty in chars with a longer term sustainable development strategy for inclusive development and a better governance structure. But then, between 2015 and 2025, nothing tangible happened in terms of policy, legal reforms with regard to charland tenure/ownership and administration and other institutional and governance issues.

Why this inaction when it comes to chars and char dwellers? In fact, there has not been any attention to char development in post-independence Bangladesh except for some amendments in the legislations related to charlands. For instance, the Agricultural Khas Land Settlement Policy, 1997 calls for redistribution of new khas land in char areas to the landless on long-term lease agreements. However, that, too, has been abused by the locally powerful and politically connected leaders, making the entire process of khas land distribution futile.

There are compelling evidence that the old systems and the alluvial and diluvian land laws derived from the colonial period have not worked for the benefit of the char people in Bangladesh. In effect, char dwellers have very little control over the chars. The current legislations as practised today favour the powerful landowners from the mainland and breed malpractices in leasing and redistribution of khas land. The sociopolitical dynamics are against the

poor and the marginalised, who are victims of quiet violence in the chars in the country.

In the past, I have written extensively on the Jamuna chars and char life dynamics. Char land constitutes nearly eight percent of the total land area in the country, with an estimated two crore people living on the chars of major river systems and in the coastal regions. These chars are pockets of poverty, particularly those in the northern districts; people living there

government to address the problem with new approaches, policies, and institutions. There are strong reasons for rethinking char development issues that can benefit the char dwellers. Based on my three decades of work on flood/erosion disasters, displacement, migration, and resettlement of char people, I propose a set of measures to draw attention of the relevant government departments and agencies. These measures will require paradigmatic shifts from current policies and practices in order to realise the potentials of development in the char lands of the country.

First, no national figures are currently available on the extent of displacement caused by erosion. Millions have already been displaced over the past decades, a large number of them taking refuge in the chars. Furthermore, there is no reliable data on the number of char people in the country. Estimates vary from one to

(e.g. Char Livelihoods Programme, Char Development and Settlement Programme, Sandbar Technology for Agriculture in Gaibandha, etc), focusing on health, housing, income, education, women's empowerment, and social protection, may help design future char development programmes in a more holistic manner.

Fourth, a Char Development Policy (CDP) and a dedicated agency such as Char Development Authority (CDA) are the only means towards the goal of better char administration.

Fifth, a bottom-up governance with devolution of power and participation of the char people is required to replace the current dysfunctional char land administration.

Sixth, any fundamental changes in the chars would require leadership at the community and local/national levels and a sense of purpose (i.e. equity, justice, and ethics) among the policymakers and programme



The chars of Bangladesh are pockets of poverty, particularly those in the northern districts.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SABUJ

are by and large poor, isolated and highly vulnerable, both physically and socially, without land rights and sustained sources of living. Don't these people deserve any attention from the policymakers and planners? What kind of reforms and changes can we suggest for any "bottom-up" planning, development and administration of the char areas?

We must keep the focus on the plight of char people alive and draw attention of the current interim

two crore people.

Second, a new and more appropriate land law should be formulated to replace the existing laws on char lands, ensuring the rights of the displaced and the char dwellers. Also, local economic diversification would be essential for the welfare of char communities. This was also strongly voiced by the char people at the First National Char Convention in 2015.

Third, lessons from char development experiences in the past

administrators. Therefore, advocacy by NGOs and civil society organisations should be taken into account in future char development programmes.

Clearly, the chars represent a unique environment demanding unique solutions. Ensuring land rights for char people and introducing a decentralised and democratic system of governance for them are vital for achieving char development. All these call towards rethinking char development in Bangladesh.

## It's time we built our own global brand

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MUHAMMAD ISMAIL HOSSAIN and NASRIN AKTER

Several years ago, while preparing for one of our brand management classes at Dhaka University, we searched for a suitable example of a brand that significantly contributes to a country's GDP. We found a few well-known brands from the US, such as Coca-Cola, Google, and Amazon. However, their contributions to GDP were not substantial, given the vast size of the American economy. One brand that caught our attention in Asia was Samsung, which seemed to have a significant impact on South Korea's GDP. According to a 2015 article published in *The New York Times*, the Samsung brand accounted for one-fifth of South Korea's exports and contributed approximately 17 percent of its GDP. Reflecting on the considerable impact of a single brand on a country's economy, we began to contemplate Bangladesh's RMG industry. The RMG industry contributed about 82 percent of total exports and 12.69 percent of our GDP in FY2015-16. We tried to identify notable brands from the sector, but could not find any. Consequently, we intended to raise this point during the next brand management class discussion, but unfortunately, it was unsuccessful.

After further investigation, we realised that Bangladesh primarily manufactures products for others,

concentrating significantly on lower-value-added goods. While the sector does produce some higher-value-added products for major brands, the quantities are relatively small. Further analysis indicated that we have substantial expertise in both lower- and higher-value-added manufacturing, as the sector has been operating for over 35 years, and we possess the necessary hard and soft resources to produce all types of RMG products. This encouraging discovery led to some questions: when we are highly equipped, why do we only produce for others? Why can't Bangladesh have its own global brand? We only get paid for stitching; the company that owns the brand enjoys the major share of the pie.

In 2017, Dhaka University hosted a seminar outlining the roadmap for Bangladesh to achieve its \$50 billion target for the RMG sector by 2021. We posed a question to the chief guest, who was both an RMG businessman and the state minister of an important ministry. We asked how realistic and sustainable the roadmap could be without our own Bangladeshi brand.

He replied that we are not yet at a stage where we can have our own brand. This made me wonder why, despite having a mature industry and exceptional expertise in both hard and soft resources, we do not recognise the significance and necessity of establishing Bangladeshi RMG brands for the international market. Later, while conducting an ILO funded research in the RMG sector, we asked the same question to several decision-makers from major RMG firms in Bangladesh. Most of their responses were along the line of "creating a brand is expensive and demands a

significant time commitment. It also entails considerable risks, as we are collaborating with big brands. We certainly want to avoid threatening our existing business."

The insights they shared are indeed true. However, Bangladesh has a comparative advantage over other nations from both the supply and demand sides. We have the necessary infrastructure, manufacturing efficiency, and the presence of feeder industries; thus, the upstream value chain is mostly well-established, except for occasional vulnerabilities in yarn supply. Additionally, Bangladesh is familiar with the downstream value chain as it effectively utilises it for its buyers. Consequently, establishing this chain would be less challenging, aside from the need for acceptance from independent international retailers and their willingness to feature Bangladeshi brands on their shelves, as well as consumer preference for these brands.

Bangladesh is strongly positioned to gain preference from both retailers and consumers. This is because these key downstream actors recognise that Bangladesh can produce high-quality products as a country of origin. Bangladesh has been manufacturing top-notch clothing for brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Giorgio Armani, Hugo Boss, Zara, and H&M, with "Made in Bangladesh" tags on the clothing that customers see. Therefore, the country-of-origin-based points of differentiation are already acknowledged by both retailers and end customers. If customers encounter a new brand that is of good quality and carries a "Made in Bangladesh" tag, they are unlikely to dismiss the brand outright.

Besides those who are hardcore loyal to a particular brand, many customers will certainly be interested in trying the new brand from Bangladesh.

According to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), our apparel exports worldwide reached \$38.48 billion in 2024. Although we still have considerable progress to make to achieve the previously set \$50 billion target, there are ample opportunities to extend this goal within the \$1.84 trillion global market. Unfortunately, without owning brands and benefiting from the premiums that established brands command in the value chain, it will be challenging for Bangladesh to capitalise on the available opportunities in the global clothing market. Creating and sustaining a brand in the international market is an expensive endeavour. However, a few companies have the financial capacity to do so. If it seems too costly and risky for major RMG players, a consortium could be established to create and develop a Bangladeshi apparel brand, allowing for shared risks. BGMEA could lead this initiative.

Let us conclude with the Samsung story. Samsung has inspired other South Korean brands like SK, Hyundai, and LG, and nearly half of South Korea's GDP comes from Samsung and its success-inspired brands. These companies compete globally—most are going head-to-head and succeeding in their respective industries. They are sometimes viewed as the frontrunners of innovation in their fields. When will Bangladesh witness a day when it can proudly say our apparel brands are the market leaders and innovators in the global apparel industry?