

Bureaucratic inertia needs an urgent fix

Report indicates prevailing sense of stagnation within the administration

We are concerned about the prevailing sense of inertia and stagnation within the administration despite more than seven months passing since its formation following the mass uprising. According to a report by this daily, the public's expectations for swift and dynamic governance have yet to be met, for which multiple factors are responsible. While part of it was beyond the control of a non-political government with a short lifespan— inheriting as it did a deeply dysfunctional system riddled with obstacles—its failure to steamroll through them with tact and firmness is also largely to blame.

Reportedly, one of the most significant disruptions in the administration has been the frequent transfers. For instance, since August 5, the regulation wing of the public administration ministry alone has seen at least four additional secretaries being appointed and then transferred in quick succession. Such inconsistency undermines the continuity and on-the-job experience needed to ensure effective governance. Equally problematic has been the effect of contractual appointees, many of whom were brought back from retirement and seemingly have little incentive to push for change while long-serving officers, deprived of promotions due to their presence, continue to feel disconnected and demoralised. One statistic that perfectly captures this chaotic shake-up combining transfers, promotions and contractual appointments is that, out of the 81 secretaries, 25 were appointed during the previous government while 56 by the current administration, including 17 on contract. This overhaul has not had the outcome intended.

Critical reforms that could have been implemented with mere administrative directives remain stalled. Our correspondent spoke to a dozen bureaucrats, ranging from deputy secretary to secretary in five ministries, who acknowledged that the lack of order, coordination, motivation, or accountability is having an effect on even routine tasks. For example, despite an Advisory Council directive on January 30 to review the quota system, no proposal has been presented to the cabinet to date. Similarly, the transfer of the Land Registration Office from the law ministry to the land ministry, a move that could improve efficiency, remains unaddressed. The absence of strong and regular engagement from top officials has also contributed to this inertia. Reportedly, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has held only one secretary-level meeting and visited the Secretariat only once since taking office. In such a vacuum, officials have defaulted to a passive stance.

This needs to change. The interim government was entrusted with stabilising the country and setting the stage for long-overdue reforms, especially in the administrative system. Allowing bureaucratic apathy and inactivity to persist will only erode public confidence in it. The authorities must take steps to ensure that all departments and offices are held accountable regularly, and that mechanisms are implemented to ensure that officials at all levels work collaboratively to serve citizens.

From flowing lifelines to dry beds

Authorities must prioritise river protection

It is alarming that at least 79 of the 1,156 government-listed rivers in Bangladesh have either dried up or are in the process of doing so. According to a recent study by the Rivers and Delta Research Centre (RDRC), all these rivers are heavily silted and either fully or partially dry up during the lean season, primarily due to upstream water diversion. As a result, livelihoods, agriculture, and local biodiversity are under threat.

It is no secret that under the previous government, encroachment—particularly by influential quarters—became rampant, with little legal action taken against those responsible. The RDRC study has found that large portions of several rivers have vanished in recent years due to unchecked encroachment. So, we urge the authorities to take steps to protect these rivers by enforcing strict measures against encroachers, reducing pollution, preventing erosion, and restoring their ecosystems. A broader plan is also needed to facilitate and promote water transportation, which experts say is crucial for river conservation.

River transportation offers several other complimentary advantages as well. For instance, the study highlights that waterways are the most economical means of transport, with rivers and canals covering 24,000 km across the country. Road transport costs range from Tk 2.81 to Tk 3.51 per tonne per kilometre, while rail transport costs Tk 1.96 per tonne per kilometre. In contrast, water transport costs only Tk 1.12 per tonne per kilometre. Given this cost advantage, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) should introduce more riverine routes and encourage their use to reduce pressure on roads and railways.

However, even these measures may not be enough. Dams and upstream water diversions have altered the natural flow of our rivers, making it increasingly difficult for millions of Bangladeshis to fish, farm, and transport goods. As water availability in these rivers becomes increasingly unpredictable, entire communities that depend on them are struggling to survive. Beyond human impact, wildlife in these regions is also suffering due to habitat destruction, further disrupting the natural balance.

Therefore, the government must adopt a more proactive approach in engaging with upper riparian countries—particularly India—to protect our interests through effective diplomacy. For years, Bangladesh has failed to secure its rightful share of transboundary water, and this urgently needs to change. Strengthening water diplomacy is essential not only for the sustainable management of the country's rivers but also for ensuring their very survival.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Namibia becomes independent

On this day in 1990, after 106 years of German and South African rule, Namibia became independent.



EDITORIAL

Why Tulsi Gabbard's statements on Bangladesh matter



H.M. Nazmul Alam
is an academic, journalist, and
political analyst. He can be reached at
nazmulalam.rijohn@gmail.com.

H.M. NAZMUL ALAM

US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's recent remarks on Bangladesh are not only irresponsible but also unfair and baseless. As the chief of US national intelligence, her words carry significant weight, making it imperative that they be backed by credible evidence and diplomatic prudence. Instead, Gabbard's comments reflect a broader pattern of propaganda, particularly one emanating from India, that seeks to malign Bangladesh's reputation on the global stage. This is not merely a diplomatic faux pas but an act with severe repercussions for Bangladesh's global standing.

Diplomacy is not just about power but also responsibility. As former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan once said, "To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for." As a senior intelligence official, Gabbard should recognise that her statements about Bangladesh carry consequences. A responsible diplomat does not make sweeping generalisations about another nation without substantial proof. Ethics in international relations demand fairness, respect, and factual accuracy—qualities evidently absent in her remarks.

Gabbard's approach to Bangladesh can be analysed through the lens of international psychology. States that perceive themselves as superior often develop a patronising attitude towards smaller nations, a phenomenon best described by political scientist Noam Chomsky. "The powerful do what they want, while the weak suffer what they must." This mindset drives nations to interfere in the affairs of others under the pretext of human rights concerns, when in reality geopolitical motives often lie beneath the surface.

Her comments mirror a long-standing psychological pattern where Western and larger states adopt a paternalistic role towards smaller, developing nations. Psychologist Alfred Adler's theory of superiority and inferiority complexes explains this well: powerful nations often assert dominance over others, under the guise of guidance or correction, to reinforce their own self-image as global leaders. Bangladesh, having



As a senior intelligence official, Tulsi Gabbard should recognise that her statements about Bangladesh carry consequences.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

fought against extremism with great success, does not need unsolicited and factually incorrect judgements from a foreign intelligence head.

As historian Edward Said noted in his seminal work *Orientalism*, the West has long held a distorted and condescending view of the East, shaping narratives to maintain ideological dominance. Tulsi Gabbard's statements reflect this enduring bias, where Bangladesh is unfairly categorised despite its strides towards progress and stability.

Gabbard's words are not just an oversight but a strategic move in the broader game of influence. By painting Bangladesh as a breeding ground for extremism, she indirectly strengthens India's long-held geopolitical ambitions in the region. This aligns with what Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci called "cultural hegemony," where dominant forces manipulate discourse to maintain control over the international order. The theme of labelling independent nations as "unstable" or "extremist" has been used repeatedly by powerful

Bangladesh as a hub of Islamist extremism, this section, which also includes some media platforms, has repeatedly sought to undermine Bangladesh's independent political and social trajectory.

The timing of her remarks is also suspect. The interim government in Bangladesh is actively working to rebuild democratic norms and restore stability after years of authoritarianism. By raising unfounded allegations at this juncture, Gabbard inadvertently or deliberately provides fodder for forces that seek to destabilise Bangladesh.

Responsible statesmanship requires basing assertions on verified facts, not political expediency. As Aristotle aptly put it, "The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold." If Gabbard had credible evidence of systemic persecution in Bangladesh, it should have been presented through proper diplomatic channels instead of being aired in a sensationalised interview.

Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, reflecting on the Iraq War intelligence failures, famously

admitted, "What we know now, we should have known then." This acknowledgment of past mistakes highlights the dangers of acting on misinformation, something Gabbard should take into account before making unverified claims.

Bangladesh's track record in protecting minorities speaks for itself. The country's constitution guarantees religious freedom, and its leadership has consistently condemned communal violence. The occasional incidents that do occur are neither state-sponsored nor reflective of the nation's broader ethos.

History is rife with examples of how unverified allegations have led to disastrous consequences. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified under the pretence of "weapons of mass destruction," remains one of the most egregious cases of misinformation being used as a tool for political manoeuvring. Philosopher George Santayana's warning remains relevant, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Gabbard's statements, if left unchallenged, could create an international perception that justifies unwarranted interventions, sanctions or diplomatic hostilities against Bangladesh. This is not just about national pride, it is about protecting the country's sovereignty against an emerging pattern of disinformation.

Gabbard, and politicians like her, should practise greater prudence when assessing another country. Reckless comments based on flawed narratives do not help Bangladesh, the US, or the cause of global peace.

The international community must demand higher standards of integrity and objectivity from political figures entrusted with global security. Engaging in constructive dialogue, rather than relying on baseless rhetoric, is the way forward.

Bangladesh has fought hard against extremism and has made commendable progress in religious inclusivity. Unsubstantiated allegations from foreign officials should not be allowed to dictate the narrative of a nation that has time and again proven its commitment to peace and progress. It's high time that international leaders remembered the words of Voltaire, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." Let's resist the politics of misinformation and stand firm against the forces that seek to tarnish Bangladesh's reputation for their own strategic gains.

Are school buses the answer to our traffic woes?



Debra Efroymson
is executive director of the Institute of
Wellbeing, Bangladesh.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

We're all familiar with the sight: rows of cars parked outside schools to drop off and pick up students across Dhaka. And we all suffer from the consequent congestion, noise, and danger to all those who are not in cars. Clearly, our system of allowing and even encouraging the elite to drive their children to and from school in their own automobiles is contributing to our urban misery. But what is the solution?

The answer that is on many people's minds is school buses. Buses, after all, can transport large numbers of children in the space occupied by only about two cars. There is logic to this solution, or at least the appearance of it.

Where's the problem? First of all, school buses only operate on the days that schools are open, and then only twice a day. The rest of the time they are parked somewhere. This is an incredibly inefficient use of space and money. In the US, the government spends \$21 billion a year just on transporting children to and from school by bus. The

investment in school buses would be much better spent on improving the overall public transit system so that not just students but everyone could benefit, and the buses would be moving throughout the day. (I'm kidding; they would mostly be stuck in traffic caused by all the cars.)

Secondly, why do we assume that children are travelling great distances to school? In most cases, children should attend a neighbourhood school that is within walking or cycling distance. If no school is available, then other schools should be encouraged to build satellite schools. It is a waste of children's time to be stuck in a bus for hours every day.

Children benefit in many ways when they travel to school actively, that is, by foot or bicycle: they are more prepared to learn when they arrive in school; they concentrate better and fidget less. In addition to the cognitive benefits are the physical ones, of gaining much-needed exercise, and the social benefits when they travel to school

with friends or family. Not only do they benefit, but streets are less congested, polluted, and dangerous when there are fewer cars and more people on foot and bicycle.

Certainly, asking children to walk or cycle to school on the current Dhaka streets may seem cruel. But if we cannot provide a positive environment for children to travel actively and safely to school, then we are failing as a city and should take measures to fix the problems, rather than allowing the elite to retreat into their steel boxes and everyone else to suffer.

The problem, though almost uniquely bad in Dhaka, is certainly not limited to our capital city. Faced with the unacceptable situation of child injury and death on the roads, New York and California both invested funds in improving the physical environment for walking and cycling. The states thus achieved, respectively, a 44 percent and 75 percent decline in injuries and crashes involving children. Paris is creating 300 "School Streets" that are accessible, cooler, and greener, and include bicycle networks, children's games, and street furniture. Barcelona, in addition to its superblocks and School Streets, is also organising a BiciBus in different neighbourhoods, in which around 50 children and parents cycle to school together. The BiciBus is a variation on the popular Walking

School Bus, whereby children are organised to walk to school safely together.

But we needn't look so far away. In India, on average, 45 children die on the roads each day. That is an outrageous figure. Rather than simply accept it as the cost of modernity, the Indian government is working to make streets safer. One such example is the "250 meters of happiness" project in Delhi, launched in collaboration with government and other agencies and led by HumanQind, a non-profit design foundation. The project enables children to take the lead in planning safe, attractive, and stimulating environments to travel actively to school. The redesigned street includes a segregated cycle way, tree plantation, an outdoor gym, learning aids, play spaces incorporated into the footpath, and spaces for vendors. While in the past, cars were parked on the footpath and children and their guardians walked in the street, the footpaths have been reclaimed for people. Whether it's the Walking School Bus, the BiciBus, School Streets, or 250 meters of happiness, there are plenty of great international examples of ways to improve the traffic situation around schools while making children's—and everyone else's—lives better. And all are far more affordable and practical than school buses.