



MY DHAKA

Dhaka’s Signal Economy

Unveiling trade at traffic stoplights

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Often, on my way to the office from Dhanmondi to Mohakhali, I pass through at least three or four major traffic signals – the stubborn standstill at Dhanmondi 27, the long, impatient pause at Khamarbari, and the inevitable gridlock at Farmgate. However, it does not end there. The legendary bottleneck at Bijoy Sarani awaits, followed by the guarded patience required at Jahangir Gate. And if luck chooses to mock me, as it often does, the Mohakhali Railgate signal delivers the final blow.

So yes, wedged between the relentless chorus of horns and the glow-stick rave of brake lights, I have cultivated an oddly fascinating pastime – calculating the city’s “invisible” GDP – the minutes we waste subtracted from the minutes gained by the signal vendors who spring into action the moment the signal bleeds red!

Within those few minutes, or sometimes hours, of a red light or VIP signal, you can buy roses, sunglasses, tea towels, phone chargers, balloons, peanuts, cold water, “original” Ray-Bans, and occasionally, moral guilt.

Welcome to what I call the Signal Economy!

Here, while most of us lose precious time, a few cleverly turn those lost minutes into opportunity and profit. I am sure all of us have encountered



them. Some, to me, are true lifesavers – selling cold water or juice on a sweltering summer day, they appear like angels out of nowhere. And then, of course, there are others – those who feel more like a nuisance, testing the limits of our already diminishing patience.

“It’s my office,” says Manik with a grin on his face while balancing a mountain of tissue packets in his hands near Dhanmondi 27. The teenager adds, “The longer the signal, the better the business.”

In Dhaka, the signal is not a stop. It is a stage. And the performers are these sellers – of all ages! This is a setup that I am sure no marketing team could ever dream of. The products are seasonal, tactical, and as adaptive as Dhaka’s

weather. During summer, they sell sunglasses and water bottles. During the monsoon, umbrellas and plastic shoe covers emerge like magic!

And sometimes, no matter the season, if you are packed inside a sweaty, overburdened bus, brace yourself. Sooner or later, a vendor will weave through the crowd, waving a tiny miracle – a 10-taka tablet that claims to cure everything from migraines to heartbreaks, putting even the best doctors to shame!

If you listen long enough, you will be half-convinced that it might fix your headaches, your heartbreaks, and maybe – just maybe – your stubborn bachelorhood too.

“We sell what the eyes want,” says Liton, a man offering “designer” mobile

covers near Farmgate. “If your face says you are tired, I will show you a stress ball. If you look romantic... a flower for you!” he winks. Clearly, a man who has mastered microeconomics in its rawest form.

There’s a certain choreography to it too – a glide between cars, a delicate tap on the window, a quick smile, a flash of the product, and a retreat if the driver scowls. This is salesmanship under pressure, with a moving, impatient audience and a ticking clock.

Then, of course, Dhaka being Dhaka, the gig economy is not always “legal” nor “organised”. But it is efficient. Sellers need patience, agility, and a sharp sense of who might roll down a window and who will look away. Authorities sometimes crack down, clearing intersections, but like every underground market, the sellers return – new faces, new tricks, same survival story.

At a certain level, it’s hard not to admire the sheer hustle. No one taught these entrepreneurs about pricing, supply chains, or customer retention. Yet, here they are, running a parallel economy under the nose of an impatient city, turning every red light into a flash sale.

So, the next time you are stuck at a traffic stoplight, maybe, just maybe, buy a packet of tissues or a flower. It’s not charity. It’s the small price of admission into Dhaka’s liveliest street theatre.

Step up diplomacy as US tariff clock ticks away

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of organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank to advocate on Bangladesh’s behalf.

Speed to market should be another priority. “Timely deliveries and high-end, high-quality production are crucial,” Sung said. He also called for a permanent trade negotiation team based in the US. “On-and-off discussions will not yield lasting results,” he said.

Bangladesh must position itself diligently, Sung added, as the US administration actively pursues trade agreements with Korea, Australia, Japan, India and the UK.

To address US trade imbalance concerns, Sung proposed increasing imports from the US by at least \$1 billion annually over the next three years. He stressed the need for a detailed and quantifiable plan rather than empty promises.

Sung also emphasised the importance of working closely with the US Embassy in Dhaka. “The embassy can play a pivotal role in advocating for Bangladesh,” he said.

AK Azad, chairman and managing director of Ha-Meem Group, described the situation as “very critical.”

“After the imposition of tariffs, customers are asking us to share the burden. Some customers are being illogical, asking us to absorb a portion of the tariffs, which is unethical,” said Azad, whose company exports \$800 million worth of goods annually, 90 percent of it to the US.

While the US government has suspended the new tariffs for three months, Azad said buyers are demanding discounts for at least one season. He called for the immediate appointment of lobbyists and the formation of a high-level committee, headed by a government

adviser, with private sector representatives.

Reflecting on past cooperation during the export quota phase-out, Azad criticised the current government for failing to consult exporters properly. Citing talks with US officials, he said Bangladesh must propose specific measures to reduce the trade gap.

A n w a r - U l - A l a m Chowdhury (Parvez), chairman of Evince Group, said the government’s approach remained half-hearted. “Some officials still doubt the need for lobbyists,” he said.

He said Bangladesh was trying to import more US goods such as raw cotton, LNG, soybeans, and medical instruments, but warned that “this will take time.”

NEGOTIATION MUST BE STRATEGIC

Abdur Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), warned that “doing nothing is not an option.”

Engagement with the US administration is important, but Bangladesh must be cautious, he said, because many experts believe the tariffs are unsustainable and might eventually be reversed.

Bangladesh must find its bargaining chips, Razzaque said, as larger economies like India have stronger leverage.

Although Bangladesh exports about \$8 billion worth of goods to the US, only 40-50 percent of that value is actually created domestically, after accounting for imported inputs like fabrics and accessories.

This means, Razzaque said, the net value-added exports are closer to \$3.6 billion. At the same time, Bangladesh imports around \$2.6 billion worth of goods from the US, such as cotton, LNG and agricultural products.

As a result, Bangladesh’s

true trade surplus with the US is only about \$1 billion – much smaller than the headline figures suggest, he said.

Negotiations must begin without making premature commitments, he advised. Otherwise, Bangladesh could be disadvantaged if the US policy shifts later.

Razzaque also pointed to opportunities if US imports shrink. “Chinese container traffic to the US is down 45 percent, and ship arrivals at US ports are down 33 percent,” he said. “Shelves will soon start emptying.”

He recommended maintaining export incentives even beyond LDC graduation under WTO flexibilities, and suggested reviewing some supplementary duties to signal openness.

Md Fazlul Hoque, managing director of Plummy Fashions Ltd, said that with just two months remaining before a final US announcement on tariffs, large structural adjustments such as a full FTA negotiation were unrealistic.

“Even starting discussions might take more than two months,” he said. Realistic goals should include full engagement with the US administration and signalling willingness, without making definitive commitments.

Hoque believes the tariffs are unsustainable and that Bangladesh is not the main target of the US measures. After Trump temporarily reduced tariffs, he became more confident that a reversal is possible, Hoque said.

NEED FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, chairman of the Labour Reform Commission, argued that organisations like the ILO or the World Bank cannot speak on Bangladesh’s behalf.

He proposed the creation

of a National Social Dialogue Forum, bringing together the government, private sector, labour groups, international organisations, embassies, and trade partners for regular discussions.

Currently, he said, Bangladesh’s approach is fragmented, with different groups working separately.

Faruque Hassan, managing director of Giant Group and former BGMEA president, said the Trump tariffs were not about reciprocity but about the US trade deficit.

He argued that Bangladesh could frame its response by highlighting imports of American goods such as cotton, soybean oil, LNG, fire safety equipment, and hardware – the products already being purchased, often through regional hubs.

“We have to explain to the US that we are importing more agricultural products – all at zero tariff,” Hassan said.

Humayun Rashid, chairman of Energypac Fashions Ltd, dubbed the crisis the “3T issue” – the Terrible Tariff of Trump.

He advocated a “watch and see” approach, noting that shortages on US shelves could shift the political scenario within months. Bangladesh, meanwhile, should focus on expanding into Asian and South American markets.

Drawing lessons from China’s earlier experience with high US duties, Rashid urged the BGMEA to set up dedicated desks monitoring market trends across different regions.

B a n g l a d e s h i ambassadors, he added, must be judged by economic results, not just political reporting.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, delivered the opening remarks, while Arun Devnath, deputy editor, moderated the discussion.

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The BNP standing committee met at its chairperson’s Gulshan office on Monday night. Party’s acting chairman Tarique Rahman presided over the meeting virtually from London.

At the meeting, it was decided that all standing committee members would make specific recommendations on the issue, detailing their observations.

Each member has been tasked with thoroughly analysing the political, diplomatic, and security implications of the matter to ensure a comprehensive response, said meeting sources.

After gathering the documents, the BNP plans to hold a press conference to present its position to the public. It also decided to consult its allies on this issue.

Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain on Sunday said that Dhaka agrees in principle with the UN proposal for a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine, but certain conditions must be met for its implementation.

BNP Secretary General

Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir on Monday slammed the interim government for making such a move without consulting the political parties.

Chief Adviser’s Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam yesterday said that the government has not held any discussions with the United Nations or any other entity regarding the creation of a “so-called humanitarian corridor” through Bangladesh to Myanmar’s Rakhine State.

BNP Standing Committee member Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku said, “The foreign affairs adviser spoke on a matter that is directly linked to the country’s sovereignty. After his statement, various political parties expressed their positions. But suddenly, the press secretary claimed that no such discussion had taken place.”

“It appears as though the government is playing a childish game. A country cannot be governed in this manner.”

In a statement issued yesterday, the Communist Party of Bangladesh said the “so-called humanitarian gesture” could have serious

consequences.

“An interim government has no authority to make such a policy decision,” reads the statement from CPB President Mohammad Shah Alam and General Secretary Ruhin Hossain Prince.

It said the move violated the constitution and could jeopardise the country’s independence.

The CPB warned that allowing the corridor would leave Bangladesh’s borders exposed.

“The Myanmar junta could exploit the corridor under various pretexts, creating new threats to our security,” the statement added.

The CPB also questioned the motivation of Western countries, suggesting their sudden interest in the Rohingya issue was “part of a broader imperialist conspiracy.”

“The UN and its allies could have opted for alternatives like Sittwe Port or other coastal routes into Myanmar instead of involving Bangladesh,” it said.

Don’t get used by anyone

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the 13th parliamentary election would be held in the country between December this year and June next year.

“The role of police members is very important in ensuring that the election is held in a fair and peaceful manner.”

Yunus urged police to ensure equal treatment to all candidates in the polls and an environment where voters can exercise their right to vote without fear or hindrance. A fair and impartial election is very important so that the police force is never used as a party force or for wrongdoing in the future, he said.

“This period before the election is a very difficult time,” Yunus said, urging the police members to remain vigilant so that the “defeated forces” do not get the chance to destabilise the country.

Describing the police as friends of the people, Yunus said the police force must establish that image.

For the first time, a meeting will be held with religious leaders, journalists, and leaders of different communities during the Police Week.

“The public’s expectations from the police will be discussed in this meeting. I hope that this continues,” the chief adviser said.

Yunus said they dream of building a discrimination-free and democratic Bangladesh based on fairness.

He said the people of the country want to see the police playing a very strong role in preventing violence against women. “I urge you to work with utmost sensitivity for the safety of women and children.”

He urged the police to ensure that women of all classes and professions, who call the police hotline, get the maximum help in any harassment incident.

Acknowledging various limitations and challenges, including insufficient manpower, logistics and insufficient budget, Yunus said, “Our biggest challenge is to reduce the distance between the police and the people in the last 16 years, and to restore people’s trust

in the police force.”

Starting from the field level, the law enforcement agencies at all levels will have to work to gain the trust of the people, he said.

He said the interim government has taken initiatives to reform the police, and urgent measures have been taken in several matters for the welfare of police members working at the grassroots level.

When the interim government took office last August, Yunus said the law and order situation in this country was fragile and there was a distance between the police and the people.

“The government has taken all necessary measures to improve the situation. Necessary measures have been taken to eliminate chaos and public suffering on roads and highways, conduct special operations, strengthen police’s communication with stakeholders, and increase the morale of police members,” he said.

“You are trying your best to take immediate action against all the crimes that are happening in the country. With the joint efforts of the police and other forces, the law and order situation in the country has now been brought under control to a great extent.”

On the eve of the Liberation War in 1971, on the night of March 25, police members first staged armed resistance at Rajarbagh Police Lines, Yunus said.

“This is an important chapter in the glorious history of the Bangladesh Police Force,” he said, paying his deepest respects to the police members who were martyred during the Liberation War.

During the 15 years of the dictatorial regime, Yunus said all kinds of measures were taken to turn the country’s police force into a party force.

While carrying out the illegal and unjust orders of the dictatorship, the police force faced widespread public anger, Yunus said, adding that many honest police members also had to pay the price for this.

‘Govt can’t decide unilaterally’

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Govt willing if support to Rakhine is UN backed

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Khalilur said the aid route was only at a “consultation stage” and would require consensus among multiple groups.

“We are in touch with the UN and other concerned parties in this regard,” he said.

Touhid Hossain, foreign affairs adviser in the interim government, on Sunday said that Dhaka would consider a “humanitarian passage”, provided the UN agrees to certain conditions.

But that prompted worries among Bangladeshi political parties. The BNP secretary general on Monday said the government should have consulted the issue before deciding to provide “humanitarian corridor” for Rakhine state, as it is related to the country’s security and

sovereignty.

Louise Barber, from the UN office in Bangladesh, said the proposal required the approval of the authorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

“Any humanitarian support, or supplies across the border from Bangladesh to Myanmar, will first need to be agreed between the two governments,” Barber said.

Meanwhile, Chief Adviser’s Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam yesterday said the government has not discussed the so-called “humanitarian corridor” with the UN or any other entity, but it would be willing to provide logistics support to the transportation of aid to Rakhine state through Bangladesh, reports our diplomatic correspondent.

“Our position is that

should there be an UN-led humanitarian support to the state of Rakhine, Bangladesh would be willing to provide logistics support,” he said in a Facebook post yesterday.

After a visit to Bangladesh in mid-March, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told media in Dhaka that he discussed with Bangladesh authorities the possibilities of channelling humanitarian aid inside Myanmar via Bangladesh as a means of creating conditions for Rohingya repatriation to Rakhine state.

He admitted it would, however, require the “authorisation and the cooperation of the parties to the conflict.”

Citing the UNDP, Shafiqul yesterday wrote on his verified

decision-making” on such a sensitive national issue.

In a statement, he described the corridor as “aligned with the US agenda in the region”, warning that it would compromise Bangladesh’s sovereignty.

Meanwhile, Islami Andolan Bangladesh’s Ameer Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim said the government must build a national consensus before taking such a decision.

“This is not merely a humanitarian matter, it is a national security issue,” he said, adding, “Such decisions are inappropriate without broad understanding and agreement between all political quarters.”

H e f a z a t - e - I s l a m Bangladesh’s Joint Secretary General Mamunul Haque strongly opposed the move.

“Imperialist powers are trying to implement their agenda by using Bangladesh. As a patriotic force, Hefazat-e-Islam does not support this in any way,” he said at a press conference yesterday.

He also warned that such decisions could drag Bangladesh into unwanted geopolitical entanglements.

Facebook page that Rakhine is facing an acute humanitarian situation, and that Bangladesh has a stellar record in helping countries in times of distress, as exemplified by our aid to Myanmar following a recent devastating earthquake.

“Moreover, we are concerned that persistence of suffering may lead to further inflows of people from Rakhine into Bangladesh, which we cannot afford.

“We also believe that the UN-supported humanitarian aid would help stabilise Rakhine and create conditions for the return of the refugees to Myanmar.”

He said that given the present conditions, the only viable route for delivery of aid to Rakhine is through Bangladesh.