



MY DHAKA

The Mughal fort that became A BRITISH PRISON

RIDWAN AKRAM

Walk down the lanes of Old Dhaka today and it is hard to imagine that the city once revolved around a single building -- Dhaka Fort. Back in 1610, when Islam Khan, the Mughal subahdar of Bengal, shifted his capital here, the fort was the nerve centre of Mughal power.

According to historian Dr Abdul Karim, it stood opposite today's Chawk Bazar, on the site where Dhaka Central Jail would later rise.

The fort was no silent spectator. It housed Mughal subahdars, the royal mint, and most ominously, a prison. Unlike the British jail that came later, this one held political detainees. Local zamindars and rebel leaders often ended up there, awaiting orders or verdicts.

The fort's fortunes shifted over the years. Renovated in 1690 by Subahdar Ibrahim Khan the second, it gradually lost importance as new palaces and administrative quarters were built across Dhaka. By 1765, after the East India Company assumed control of Bengal, the fort was in their hands. Two decades later, in 1788, its prison wing expanded, and by the turn of the 19th century it had assumed a new identity -- Dhaka Jail.

Dhaka in the early 1800s was a shadow of its Mughal glory. Once-bustling Ramna had turned into a jungle so dense it was thought to endanger public health. Charles Doss, then magistrate of Dhaka, intervened. With little government



Ruins of Dhaka Fort, Sir Charles D'Oyly (1808-1811).

funding available, he turned to the 'free labour force' at Dhaka Jail. In 1825, prisoners were put to work clearing Ramna. After three months of hard labour, they had cleared an oval-shaped section.

By then, Dhaka Jail had grown into a formidable institution. Reports from 1839 describe 10 wards, each with its own courtyard, and a massive wall enclosing the compound. The jail held around 800 criminals and about 30 civil prisoners, convicted of crimes ranging from murder and robbery to cattle theft, forgery, arson, rape, and adultery. Prisoners frequently fell ill, prompting the construction of a hospital inside. Built in the 1830s, it was a simple structure -- a long hall with arched passages, verandas, and rooms for isolating

the sick.

By the mid 19th century, Dhaka Jail was one of East Bengal's most important prisons. Inmates were put to work producing chairs, tablecloths, curtain fabrics, mustard oil, and even lime paint. Some of these items were sold in the market. Jailers, mostly Europeans, earned a modest 100 rupees a month, but supplemented their income by taking a 5 percent cut from sales. Some even set up private businesses inside the jail.

Arthur Lloyd Clay, joint collector of Dhaka in the 1860s, noted that prisoners often left the jail looking healthier than when they arrived. Adequate food and care made the difference, though treatment was not equal. European inmates received prime mutton and could complain if the quality fell short, while native prisoners had no such privilege.

By the 1860s, Dhaka Jail had become the main facility for "difficult" prisoners across East Bengal. Convicts from Sylhet, Tripura, and Faridpur were sent there, and by 1879 the prison was officially declared the Central Jail for Dhaka and Chattogram divisions. With its new status came new responsibilities.

A superintendent replaced the magistrate as head, and expenses soared. By 1893, the annual cost of running the jail -- food, clothing, hospitals, and staff -- totalled Tk 51,328, a significant sum for the time.

8 years on, repatriation still elusive

FROM PAGE 1

REPATRIATION ATTEMPTS

Since the repatriation deal was signed with Myanmar in November 2017, Bangladesh tried but failed to send Rohingyas back. China then stepped in as mediator.

After the trilateral move slowed during the Covid-19 pandemic, another attempt at the end of 2023 fell through as fighting between the Myanmar military and AA intensified.

"Earlier, the Myanmar military was against the Rohingyas and now the Arakan Army is against us," said Saiful, a Rohingya youth in Cox's Bazar's Kutupalong camp.

With the AA now controlling most of Rakhine State, Myanmar's military has halted supplies, creating shortages and forcing more Rohingyas to flee.

On August 23, Rohingya leader Mohammad Zubair said, "Many Rohingyas have gathered in Laldia ... People are trying to flee before horrors are repeated ... There could be another large scale influx into Bangladesh."

A foreign ministry official said, "Repatriation at this point is impossible due to security concerns in Rakhine. But we're trying to find different ways to do it."

Rohingyas say the situation is not conducive and there is no guarantee of safety or citizenship.

A Chinese embassy official in Dhaka said China tried to mediate but the Myanmar military and AA are now refusing dialogue. "We're waiting for a ceasefire."

DHAKA'S DIPLOMATIC DILEMMA
Since the 2021 military coup, much of Myanmar has fallen under rebel control, including the AA in Rakhine.

Bangladesh must maintain relations with the junta while also keeping ties with the AA for border security, said National Security Adviser Dr Khalilur Rahman.

A UN official said this leaves Dhaka in a dilemma -- needing AA for repatriation but the junta as Myanmar's recognised authority.

Analysts warned that engaging with the AA could be seen as recognising a non-state actor, straining ties with Naypyidaw. They added Bangladesh must also watch how China and India position themselves.

Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, executive director of Center for Alternatives, said one does not need to follow track-1 diplomacy. "If needed, you must follow tracks two and

REPATRIATION ATTEMPTS

Nov '17: Dhaka, Naypyidaw sign bilateral pact

Sep '19: China brokers trilateral mechanism

Jan '21: Myanmar agrees in principle to repatriation

May '23: Rohingya "go-and-see" visit to Rakhine

2023-24: Rakhine conflict halts process

Apr '25: Myanmar clears 180,000 names for return

JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

Nov '19: The Gambia brings genocide case at ICJ

Nov '19: ICC opens deportation probe

Nov '19: BROUK files case in Argentina

Jan '20: ICJ orders provisional measures

Jan '23: Complaint filed in Germany

Nov '24: ICC prosecutor seeks arrest of Min Aung Hlaing

Feb '25: 25 arrest warrants issued

three."

Track-1 diplomacy is formal government engagement; Track-2 involves non-state actors like academics or NGOs; Track-3, or citizen diplomacy, takes place at the grassroots level.

SECURITY CONCERN RISE, AID DWINDLES

Meanwhile, only \$338 million, or 36 percent, of the required \$934 million

funding has been received for 2025-26 amid US cuts.

Several hundred UN and NGO staff and over 1,100 host community teachers have already lost jobs.

Unicef Representative Rana Flowers said education for Rohingya children has been compromised, while health, nutrition and protection will also be affected.

RRRC Mizanur said locals who once welcomed Rohingyas are now agitated as refugees work outside camps, hurting jobs and wages. He warned crimes such as drug and human trafficking, already rampant, will rise if funds keep shrinking.

Meanwhile, with clashes between the AA and junta spilling across the border, Border Guard Bangladesh has stepped up patrols.

JUSTICE ELUSIVE

UN investigators described atrocities against Rohingyas as "genocide", and The Gambia in 2019 filed a case with the International Court of Justice, which ordered Myanmar to prevent further acts.

In November 2024, the International Criminal Court prosecutor requested an arrest warrant against Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. The request is still pending.

Touhid said both sides emphasised the need to expand trade and investment, but Dhaka highlighted the trade imbalance.

"We sought greater market access in Pakistan, especially under SAFTA, for our textiles, energy, pharmaceuticals, agro-products, and IT sector," he said, adding that there is potential in agriculture, fisheries, and livestock, while Pakistan mentioned initial interest in energy exports.

Bangladesh is meanwhile trying to engage the global community. Ahead of the UN conference in New York in September, it is organising a stakeholder dialogue in Cox's Bazar.

Apart from China, India and Japan, it is also reaching out to ASEAN. During Chief Adviser Prof Yunus's recent visit, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said his government will send an ASEAN peace mission to Myanmar.

At a recent press briefing, National Security Advisor Khalilur had said, "We want an urgent, permanent solution. How long can we keep them with international aid? They have to return home."

In Brahmanbaria, BNP and NCP held separate protest programmes over the scuffle.

Rumeen's supporters blocked the Dhaka-Sylhet highway in the Shahbajpur area of Sarail upazila for over one hour from 6:00pm. They placed tree trunks and set fire to tires on the highway. This led to severe traffic congestion on both sides of the highway.

Local BNP leader Anwar Hossain said they took part in the demonstration in protest against the "attack" on Rumeen in Dhaka.

NCP activists held a rally in front of Brahmanbaria Press Club in protest against the assault on Attaullah. They demanded trial of Rumeen and resignation of the CEC.

Yesterday's hearings at the EC also covered Brahmanbaria 5; Cumilla 1, 2, -6, 9, -10, -11; Noakhali 1, 2, 4, -5; Chandpur 2, -3; Feni 3; and Lakshmpur 2, -3. The hearings will continue until Wednesday.

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[Our correspondents in respective districts contributed to this report]

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Pak FM claims 1971 issues settled

FROM PAGE 1

presented theirs."

Touhid was speaking to journalists at the Foreign Service Academy following the meeting.

"However, we acknowledged that the issues of 1971 cannot be solved in a day and agreed to continue discussions to that end," he added.

Dar's visit, the third ministerial trip since the political changeover in Bangladesh last year, is an effort to boost ties that went frosty after Pakistan condemned the 2013 execution of Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah for 1971 war crimes.

Pakistan's interior minister visited Dhaka in July, after a 15-year hiatus, while its Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan arrived here on August 21 to advance trade relations.

Bilateral trade reached \$865 million in FY 2024-25, with Bangladesh's exports rising 20 percent to \$78 million and Pakistan's exports up 28 percent.

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Yunus, Dar discuss Saarc revitalisation

BSS, Dhaka

Mohammad Ishaq Dar, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Pakistan, paid a courtesy call on Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday.

During the meeting at Yunus' official residence Jamuna, the two leaders discussed strengthening bilateral ties, boosting trade, increasing education and cultural exchanges, and people-to-people connections, particularly among the youth.

They also discussed reviving the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).



Prof Muhammad Yunus showing Pakistan Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar the book "The Art of Triumph".

PHOTO: PID

Highlighting the importance of revitalising all potential avenues of regional and bilateral cooperation, Yunus said, "I encourage SAARC, and I see our relationship with Pakistan and other SAARC countries as one of the highest priorities."

While acknowledging that some sensitive issues remain, the chief

SEE PAGE 5 COL 3

UK vows to speed up asylum claims as hotel protests spread

AFP, London

The UK government vowed on Sunday to overhaul its asylum system after weekend protests broke out across the country at hotels housing migrants, with more planned.

The government said that it will establish a new independent body to hear appeals by failed applicants more quickly as it attempts to end the costly use of so-called asylum hotels, which have become the subject of discontent among a portion of the public.

The Labour government said on Friday it would appeal a court ruling blocking it from housing asylum seekers in a flashpoint hotel in southeast England.

The ruling triggered the announcement of a wave of protests and counter-protests outside hotels accommodating asylum seekers around the country.

Demonstrations under the "Abolish Asylum System" slogan were held on Saturday in British cities and towns, including Bristol, Exeter, Tamworth, Cannock, Newcastle, Liverpool, Wakefield, Nunton, Newcastle, Aberdeen, Perth and in central London.

Mounted police separated rival groups at the Bristol event, with officers scuffling with protesters.

"Our officers have dealt admirably with a really challenging situation," said Keith Smith, from Avon and Somerset Police.

Until 2021, no Rohingya leaders or activists were asked for comment. In Burmese-language media, we were called "Bangalees", treated as invaders. However, the same media outlets used "Rohingya" in English to secure foreign funding," he said.