

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## President Trump's historic opportunity

### Israel's continued genocide in Gaza demands firmer response

Nobody in the world today—or since the end of the Second World War—perhaps resembles Adolf Hitler as well as Benjamin Netanyahu. The genocide carried out by Hitler against the Jews is now being replicated by Netanyahu in killing the Palestinians, with the death toll from the ongoing war nearing 66,000, many among their children. The label given to him by many—“child killer of the century”—is richly deserved. He is now systematically targeting the surviving people of Gaza through mass starvation and blockade.

Amid this heartbreaking reality, a slight ray of hope is the unprecedented coming together of the international community behind the Palestinian cause. The recent walk-out of most UN delegates when Netanyahu rose to speak marked the global disgust at Israeli actions personified by its prime minister. Colombia's President Gustavo Petro called for the formation of an international army “as an integral part of humanity, to bring together weapons and armies to defend Palestine.” Chile's President Gabriel Boric demanded that Netanyahu and his team be brought before an international court of justice for genocide. Slovenia's president called for an immediate stop of the genocide. Earlier, with recognition by the UK and France, four out of the five UN veto power countries—UK, France, Russia, and China—recognised the Palestinian state, along with 157 out of 193 UN members.

In many ways, however, this massive UN and veto-power support for Palestine remains largely symbolic, as no one has been able to stop the daily genocide. Realism dictates that without the involvement of the United States, meaningful action is unlikely. Here, the partial good news is that President Trump has declared the US will “not allow” the Israeli plan to occupy the West Bank. We urge him to use the same authoritative language to immediately halt the killing of the people of Gaza.

Amid these developments, the BBC and *The Economist* have reported on the possibility of the formation of a “Gaza International Transitional Authority” headed by former UK premier Tony Blair, with “supreme political and legal authority” for five years, after which full authority would revert to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, West Bank. This plan, rather than restoring the rights of the Palestinian people, seeks Western concentration of power for five years, but to do what, really? Given Mr. Blair's controversial role during the Iraq invasion—where he supported the justification of war based on false claims of WMDs—and his unsuccessful tenure as the Quartet's special envoy for the Middle East between 2007 and 2015, he is hardly a person to be entrusted with the future of Gaza. Besides, the Tony Blair Institute's alleged links with the controversial “Riviera” project in Gaza, floated by President Trump, raises serious conflict-of-interest concerns.

The most urgent actions needed now are stopping the genocide immediately; forcing Israel to cease killing Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank; ending the supply of lethal and offensive weapons to Israel; and recognising the Palestinian state by truly re-enforcing Palestinian rights. Only after delivering on those can the world consider a political setup for a transitional authority. Here, President Trump has an opportunity to earn a place in history by bringing about a fair and just deal for the Palestinians. Will he do that?

## Rising HIV infections call for urgent action

### Govt must make sure preventive services are not disrupted

We are concerned about rising HIV infections and deaths in the country. While the global community has made notable progress in reducing HIV/AIDS cases over the past two decades, Bangladesh seems to be heading in the opposite direction. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the country recorded 1,438 HIV cases and 326 deaths in 2024, up from 1,276 cases and 266 deaths in 2023. Continuing this upward trajectory, 882 new HIV positive cases were recorded in just the first half of 2025. Despite the growing caseload, however, preventive services remain severely disrupted, raising concerns among health experts.

Globally, HIV infections have dropped by 40 percent and AIDS-related deaths by 56 percent since 2010. Bangladesh has not been able to replicate this success. Its first case was detected in 1989, and as of 2024, the total number of recorded cases stood at 12,422 with 2,412 deaths, according to the DGHS. True, there has been an increase in testing in recent years, from just over 83,000 in 2016 to more than 16 lakh over the past decade, but the government's preventive measures have yet to match the urgency demonstrated by the increasing death toll.

For instance, the expiration of a government programme in June 2024 has severely disrupted essential services such as the distribution of condoms, needles, and syringes among key populations, including people who inject drugs, female sex workers, and transgender individuals. These groups, comprising over 3.22 lakh people, accounted for half of the HIV cases reported last year. The DGHS now relies on foreign donors to continue testing and provide medication for HIV patients at dedicated centres. However, due to funding shortages, 25 districts reportedly remain outside the coverage of these services. There are fears that inadequate funding for preventive services could lead to a further rise in the positivity rate and make it more difficult for the country to meet its target of eliminating AIDS by 2030.

Therefore, instead of relying on foreign donors, the government must invest in HIV programmes to ensure the continuation of preventive care services across all districts. The fact that 23 percent of people potentially living with HIV remain unaware of their status is a stark reminder of the gaps in our HIV prevention and awareness raising efforts. This gap must be addressed. The government must formulate a national HIV/AIDS strategy with clear goals, sustainable funding, and active community engagement. Bangladesh cannot afford to fall behind while the rest of the world moves forward in HIV prevention.

## INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION

# A year of silence from the Information Commission

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are chairman and deputy director (RTI), respectively, at Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). They can be reached at rib@citich.bd.com.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

This year's International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI) arrives at a grim moment for Bangladesh. The Information Commission—the very body entrusted with upholding citizens' access to public information—has been essentially inactive for over a year. One may recall that all three commissioners resigned in the aftermath of the 2024 July uprising and the assumption of power by the interim government. Since then, despite petitions, protests, and even a recent High Court rule, the vacuum has persisted. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has also failed to act on its own pledge in late July to reconstitute the commission by issuing a gazette notification “within a few days.”

Undoubtedly, the interim authorities face a daunting list of priorities. But the Right to Information Act, 2009 is not just another law. Unlike most legislation, which expands the authority of the state, this act empowers the citizens. It flips the balance of power by compelling public offices to disclose information long hidden from view. In doing so, it offers transparency where opacity has been the norm.

The act is, therefore, at the core of the very ideals that inspired the July uprising. That movement demanded transparency, justice, and citizen participation in the governance process. A functioning RTI regime could serve those aims directly, providing people with a legal mechanism to ask questions, pursue accountability, and expose malpractice. It is only fitting on this year's IDUAI then to reiterate the call to restore and strengthen the system that connects citizens to the state.

When the RTI Act was adopted 16 years ago, it was hailed as a landmark in Bangladesh's democratic journey. Rooted in the principle that power belongs to the people, it granted citizens the right to know how they are governed and to demand answers from those in office. With the Information Commission dismantled, that promise lies in ruins today: requests for information go unanswered, appeals

vanish into a void, and the law itself has been rendered hollow. This is not an accident of bureaucracy; it is deliberate neglect.

It goes without saying that the costs of such neglect are borne by ordinary people. Consider the situation of a widow in Rangpur, who has been denied her safety-net allowance for months. She has no way now of knowing whether her name was dropped from the list, whether funds were misdirected, or whether she had simply been forgotten. With a working RTI system, she could have sought an explanation. Instead, she was left adrift while middlemen whispered that a bribe might “solve the problem.” Her

fall heaviest on the poor, women, minorities, and rural communities who can least afford exclusion.

The July uprising was, at heart, a demand for a new Bangladesh: democratic, transparent, and accountable. But democracy does not live by elections alone. It requires daily accountability. RTI is the bridge that allows citizens to cross into the state's inner workings, and scrutinise decisions, budgets, and policies. With the commission paralysed, that bridge lies broken.

And yet, there was a time when it worked. Farmers once used RTI to fight land grabbing. Students invoked it to secure scholarships.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

plight is echoed across the country: the farmer blocked from his land records, the student excluded from a scholarship list, the worker whose grievance disappears into a file cabinet.

When people cannot access information, they cannot defend their rights. Services become uncertain, corruption persists, and injustice proliferates. The damage is not only individual but collective. How can citizens monitor relief funds, track health spending, or question land allocation if records are kept secret? In the absence of facts, rumour replaces knowledge, mistrust deepens, and accountability evaporates. The burdens

Communities demanded clarity in the delivery of services. The victories may have been modest, but they proved the law's potential. Today, citizens have lost even that fragile leverage. State officials often dismiss RTI as disruptive, claiming it slows down governance or that citizens lack interest. Such arguments are cynical and dangerous. People do care if they are given the means to act. What they cannot do is exercise a right that exists only on paper. Each day the commission remains inactive, corruption is protected, malpractice goes unchallenged, and democracy is weakened.

should not be robbed of opportunity by favouritism without recourse. These are not isolated misfortunes. They are evidence of a systemic failure that can, and must, be corrected.

Bangladesh cannot afford to let RTI remain crippled. If we want a transparent, democratic country, RTI must be restored to life and placed back in citizens' hands. The right to information is more than the right to know. It is the right to justice, the shield against corruption, the lifeblood of democracy. To continue to deny it would be a betrayal of the nation's aspirations of a new Bangladesh.

## Takeaways from China's dollar-alternative system



Zakir Kibria is a Bangladeshi writer, policy analyst, and entrepreneur based in Kathmandu. He can be reached at zk@krishikaaj.com.

ZAKIR KIBRIA

Imagine a world where the US dollar is no longer the undisputed king of global trade—a world where transactions between nations, whether for oil, technology, or infrastructure, are settled not in greenbacks but in currencies that bypass American financial systems. This is not a distant fantasy; it is a reality being built today, largely by China. According to *The Economist*, China is “ditching the dollar, fast,” with over 30 percent of its trade in goods and services now conducted in its own currency, the renminbi (RMB), up from less than 1 percent in 2010. Therefore, it has become imperative for countries like Bangladesh that are seeking economic resilience to understand China's construction of a dollar-alternative system, and form their plans accordingly.

China's strategy is not born of mere economic convenience but of a calculated response to geopolitical risks. The increasing weaponisation of the dollar—through sanctions and tariffs—has exposed the vulnerabilities of relying on a currency controlled by a single nation. As People's Bank of China Governor Pan Gongsheng recently argued, this reliance allows financial risks from one country to “overflow to the world,” potentially triggering international crises. China's answer is a multi-pronged campaign to create an alternative financial ecosystem that reduces its exposure to dollar-dominated systems while offering other nations a hedge against

American unilateralism. This could represent both an opportunity and a call to action.

At the heart of China's strategy is the Cross Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), a growing network designed to facilitate RMB-denominated transactions without relying on the dollar-centric SWIFT system. Recently, six foreign banks, including Standard Bank and First Abu Dhabi Bank, agreed to integrate with the CIPS, expanding its reach into Africa and the Middle East. This system, coupled with bilateral currency swap agreements with over 32 countries, provides the plumbing for a new financial architecture. For a trading nation like Bangladesh, which relies heavily on cross-border transactions, the rise of CIPS could eventually offer cheaper and more efficient alternatives to dollar-based settlements, particularly in dealings with China and other Asian economies.

China's ambitions extend beyond traditional banking systems. The digital yuan (e-CNY) is poised to revolutionise cross-border payments. With an international operations centre recently established in Shanghai, China aims to use its central bank digital currency to enable direct, real-time settlements bypassing Western financial intermediaries. This push is not just about efficiency; it is about sovereignty. As Pan Gongsheng noted, traditional payment systems are “vulnerable to geopolitical risks” and

can be “weaponised” for unilateral sanctions. For Bangladesh, which is steadily embracing digital finance, the e-CNY could become a tool for reducing transaction costs and minimising exposure to dollar-driven financial volatility.

Trade is another critical battleground. China is aggressively pushing for RMB-denominated contracts, especially in commodities. From oil deals with Saudi Arabia to mineral agreements with Brazil, Beijing is persuading its partners to settle transactions in yuan. This shift is particularly evident within the BRICS bloc, where the RMB now facilitates 50 percent of intra-group trade, a stark increase from just 2 percent of global payments. For Bangladesh, which imports billions worth of energy, raw materials, and machinery from China, denominating even a fraction of these transactions in RMB could reduce exchange rate risks and dependency on dollar reserves.

The most compelling aspect of China's strategy is its pragmatic incrementalism. Unlike previous attempts to challenge dollar hegemony, China is not trying to replace the dollar outright. Instead, it is building a parallel system that operates alongside it, focusing on regional dominance rather than global supremacy. This approach acknowledges the dollar's entrenched role—it still accounts for 88 percent of global foreign exchange transactions—while creating alternatives for those seeking to avoid its reach. For Bangladesh, this means that the RMB is not an all-or-nothing choice but an additional tool in its monetary toolkit, one that could be deployed selectively to enhance economic resilience.

However, China's system is not without challenges. The RMB remains constrained by capital controls and a lack of full convertibility, issues Beijing seems unwilling to address in the near term. Moreover, the dollar's deep and

liquid markets, backed by the rule of law and institutional stability, make it a trusted store of value, something that the RMB cannot yet match. Therefore, any shift towards RMB-based transactions must be cautious and calibrated, ensuring that short-term gains do not expose the economy to long-term risks.

As China expands its influence through institutions like the Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS, it is creating a network of nations tied together by shared financial interests. Bangladesh, with its strategic location and growing economic prowess, is already part of this network. The question is no longer whether to engage with China's dollar-alternative system but how to do so in a way that maximises benefits while minimising the risks of the geopolitical reordering of global finance.

First, Bangladesh should investigate RMB-based trade settlements with China, particularly for major imports and exports. Pilot programmes could test the waters, leveraging mechanisms like currency swaps to reduce exchange rate costs. Second, policymakers should study the digital yuan's potential, both as a means of cross-border settlement and as a model for Bangladesh's own digital currency ambitions. Third, Bangladesh must strengthen its financial governance to ensure that any engagement with alternative systems is backed by robust regulatory frameworks. Finally, Bangladesh should diversify its reserve holdings cautiously, considering the RMB as one component of a broader basket of currencies.

The world is moving towards a multi-polar currency system, and China is leading that charge. By understanding China's dollar-alternative system, Bangladesh can make informed choices that enhance its economic sovereignty, protect its interests, and secure its place in the new global financial order.