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on BRICS' expansion

Wagner,
after Prigozhin

Tigers won't roam
in Chittagong

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From DSA to CSA: Back to square one?

**In conversation
with the Chinese ambassador**

Things coming to a head for Dr Yunus



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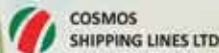


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From the Editor-in-Chief

Is the path to victory paved with megaprojects?

With three to four months left before the next national election, the government is gearing up for an impressive display of its achievements, with no less than nine megaprojects encompassing roads, bridges, railways, and aviation scheduled for inauguration in the intervening period.

The first and most visible of these is the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, to be followed in due time by the Metrorail project's remaining segment, the Purbachal Expressway, the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel (Karnaphuli Tunnel in Chattogram), the Airport's Third Terminal, the Khulna-Mongla Rail Project, the Cox's Bazar Rail Link, the Akhaura-Agartala Rail Link, and the Padma Bridge Rail Link. The pomp and fanfare with which they are set to be inaugurated suggest an electoral campaign in which the Awami League presents concrete (or steel, as the case might be) evidence of the work it has done for the country, and why the people should stick with them as the most solid guarantee of a bright future in the years ahead.

It seems they would certainly need the shine provided by these projects, to offset a feeling of growing discontent amongst the general populace. A just-published report—based on a survey titled “The State of Bangladesh's Political Governance, Development, and Society,” jointly conducted by The Asia Foundation, Bangladesh, and BIGD of BRAC University—sheds light on Bangladeshi citizens' perception of the political, economic, and social atmosphere of the country. The survey collected data from 10,240 adult men and women representing all 64 districts between November 2022 and January 2023.

The survey respondents were asked whether they thought that the country is heading in the right direction—socially, politically, and economically. Socially, a modest majority (58%) agreed that Bangladesh was headed in the right direction, while 39% disagreed. Politically, only 39% thought the country was headed in the right political direction, and about 48% disagreed. But what would really worry the government is that this perception was the lowest when it came to economic direction: only 25% thought the country was headed in the right economic direction, whereas 70% disagreed. These rates for heading in the right direction, across all three domains, are significantly lower than what they were in 2019, the last time the survey was held, indicating a considerable deterioration of the public's perception about the country's future, according to the survey report.

It appears that the lower income group's positive response regarding the country's economic direction, in particular, decreased considerably compared to the higher income group. In 2019, about 84% of respondents with a monthly income of Tk 5,000 or less said the country was headed in the right economic direction; only 32% said so in the latest survey, which is a 52% drop.

The results of the survey also dovetail nicely with those of another survey carried out by the International Republican Institute, which said 57% of the respondents felt the country was headed in the wrong direction overall. These are the perceptions the government will be looking to overcome in the days ahead, and no doubt, its penchant for implementing an impressive array of megaprojects will play a major role in these efforts. Whether they are enough or not, only time will tell. □

Enayetullah Khan



Chief Justice Hasan Foez Siddique **urged to keep the judiciary free of political influence, at a farewell reception held on the last working day of his tenure as the 23rd Chief Justice of Bangladesh on Thursday (Aug. 31).** The chief justice said the judiciary is the protector of the fundamental rights of the people. It is also the protector of the constitution, he said. Therefore, judges have to be brave and just. If the judiciary fails or deviates from the impartial application of the law, the state and citizens are bound to suffer, said the chief justice. Independence of the judiciary is essential for the development of true participatory democracy, preservation of the rule of law, ensuring the rights of weaker sections of society, and establishing social justice, he added. "It is the responsibility of judges, lawyers and every responsible citizen of the state to protect the judiciary from social, economic and political influences," the chief justice added. His successor has not yet been named. □

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has asked banks to send account details of former Bangladesh Bank deputy governor SK Sur Chowdhury, his spouse and daughter as part of an investigation

into the allegation of a tax evasion case against the three. The banks were directed to provide detailed information of bank accounts, loans, fixed deposit and investment in savings certificates and records of transactions by September 7 this year. The step comes after the ACC formed a three-member team to probe into the alleged tax dodging by the former central banker and his family members.

Earlier in July 2021, the National Board of Revenue directed banks to freeze bank accounts of the former deputy governor of central bank and his spouse Suparna Sur Chowdhury on suspicion of tax evasion. Prior to the freezing of bank accounts, the NBR had sought detailed information on all types of accounts and transactions of Chowdhury, and former Bangladesh Bank executive director Md Shah Alam, in connection with the scams perpetrated by PK Haldar. □

The World Bank approved a \$200 million loan to help improve primary healthcare services and prevent mosquito-borne diseases like dengue in Bangladesh. The loan, which was approved yesterday, will help improve primary healthcare services for treatment, prevention and referral for common illnesses,

and medical waste management in Dhaka North and South City corporations, Chattogram City Corporation, and Savar and Tarabo municipalities.

Under the funding, a project titled "Urban Health, Nutrition and Population Project" will establish a network of primary health centres offering a broad range of health, nutrition, and population services along with a direct referral system with secondary and tertiary-level facilities. Meanwhile, a total of 17 more deaths were reported from dengue in 24 hours till Thursday morning, raising the fatalities from the mosquito-borne disease to 593 in the first 8 months of the year. The total caseload for the year stood at 123,808 for the year. □

Amidst gradual fall in the country's foreign exchange reserves, banks hiked dollar purchase rate to Tk 109.5 as part of an effort to come to a unified rate for forex. Banks will sell the greenback at Tk 110 to the importers, according to a meeting between the Bangladesh Foreign Exchange Dealers Association (Bafeda) and the Association of Bankers, Bangladesh (ABB). Banks officially offered remitters Tk 109 for every dollar and Tk 108.5 for each dollar to the exporters as per the previous decision of Bafeda and ABB. Banks sold the greenback to the importers to settle import payments at Tk 109.5 each. As per the latest decision, the interbank exchange rate will be Tk 110 for every dollar. In its monetary policy for July-December period of 2023, the Bangladesh Bank said it is committed to implementing a unified and market-driven single exchange rate considering prevailing market conditions. □



The U.S. economy expanded at a 2.1% annual pace from April through June, showing continued resilience in the face of higher borrowing costs for consumers and businesses, the government said in a downgrade from its initial estimate. The government had previously estimated that the economy expanded at a 2.4% annual rate last quarter. The Commerce Department's second estimate of growth last quarter marked a slight acceleration from a 2% annual growth rate from January through March.

Though the economy has been slowed by the Federal Reserve's strenuous drive to tame inflation with interest rate hikes, it has managed to keep expanding, with employers still hiring and consumers still spending. Wednesday's (Aug. 30) report on the nation's gross domestic product — the total output of goods and services — showed that growth last quarter was driven by upticks in consumer spending, business investment and outlays by state and local governments. □

Mutinous soldiers in Gabon proclaimed their republican guard chief as the country's leader after placing the just-re-elected

President Ali Bongo Ondimba under house arrest, alleging betrayal and massive embezzlement during his long-time rule over the oil-rich Central African nation. The coup leaders said in an announcement on Gabon's state TV that Gen. Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema had been "unanimously" designated president of a transitional committee to lead the country.

Oligui is a cousin of Bongo, who earlier Wednesday (Aug. 30) had been declared the winner of the country's latest presidential election following 55 years of rule by him and his late father. In a video from detention in his residence, Bongo called on people to "make noise" to support him. But the crowds who took to the streets of the capital instead celebrated the coup against a dynasty accused of getting rich on the country's resource wealth while many of its citizens struggle. □

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and three Cabinet ministers ate Fukushima fish sashimi at a lunch meeting Wednesday, in an apparent effort to show that fish is safe following the release of treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that began last week. Kishida and the three ministers had sashimi of flounder, octopus and sea bass, caught off the Fukushima coast after the water release, along with vegetables, fruits and a bowl of rice that were harvested in the prefecture, Economy and Industry Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, who was at the meeting, told reporters.

The release of the treated wastewater into the ocean, which began Thursday (Aug. 31) and is expected to continue for decades, has been

strongly opposed by fishing groups and by neighbouring countries. China immediately banned all imports of Japanese seafood in response. In South Korea, thousands of people joined rallies over the weekend to condemn the discharge. □



A Pakistan court ordered that former Prime Minister Imran Khan be kept in jail over allegations he leaked classified documents, a day after a judge granted his release in a separate graft case. Since being ousted from power last year, Khan, Pakistan's most popular politician, has been tangled in a slew of legal cases he says are designed to stop him from contesting upcoming elections. Khan's three-year prison term for graft was suspended on Tuesday (Aug. 29), but authorities kept him in custody at Attock prison, around 60 km west of Islamabad, over the leaked documents case.

The case relates to a cable that Khan had touted as proof that he was ousted as part of a US conspiracy backed by the establishment, according to a report by the government's Federal Investigation Agency. Khan was imprisoned on Aug. 5 after being sentenced to three years jail for unlawfully selling state gifts during his tenure as prime minister from 2018 to 2022. □

CSA 2023: Ghost of DSA to live on?

Courier Briefing

The cabinet this week gave its final approval to the draft of the Cyber Security Act 2023, which will replace the controversial Digital Security Act, making offences under all but four sections bailable. Illegal access to critical information and computer infrastructure, cyber terrorism offences, hacking-related offences and desecration of the national flag and the Liberation War will not be bailable under the proposed law, Cabinet Secretary Mahbub Hossain told reporters.

The cabinet had initially approved the draft Cyber Security Act 2023 in principle in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 7. Two days later, the draft of the act was published on the website of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Department, seeking the views of stakeholders within 14 days. It received around 500 responses. There is no indication however that any of these responses have been incorporated in the bill.

The final approval came from the cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office on Monday (Aug. 28).

“In the draft law, the offences under four sections are non-bailable, the offences under the remaining sections are bailable,” said Cabinet Secretary Md Mahbub Hossain while briefing reporters after the meeting.

“The intrusion into important information infrastructures and others are in section-17, while damaging computers and computer systems are in section-19, cyber terrorist acts and committing such crimes are in section-27, and hacking related crimes are in section-33,” he said.

The cabinet secretary said the already filed cases will run under the existing law— Digital Security Act as a provision was incorporated in the proposed law. However, the government is thinking of applying lesser punishment as outlined in the new law to the previous cases, according to Law Minister Anisul Haque, who spoke on the bill the day after its approval by the cabinet.

“The thing is that Article 35 of our constitution clearly states that the first thing is that the trial will be done under the law that was in force at the time of committing the crime, and the punishment mentioned in that law



Freepik

will be given,” Haque said.

“There is a point in Article 35 that if the sentence is more than what is stipulated in the new law, then that sentence cannot be given. In the old law, that is, the law under which the crime is committed or the law that was in force at the time of committing the crime, the punishment in that law should be the same. The second is that there can be no other sentence. We’ve put a lot of thought into it here,” the law minister also said.

“If we take Section 21 of the Digital Security Act, the section carries a 10-year jail term. Here today, the new law, i.e., the Cyber Security Act, says five years. Then, the learned Court, before the passing of this Act, if a crime has been committed while the Digital Security Act is in force, the court can give this 10-year sentence. We want to make a system there that does not conflict with the Constitution,” he tried to explain.

What we could gather from his effort to explain is that in the old cases filed under the DSA where the stipulated punishment may have been more stringent, the punishments handed down by the court will be in line with the new law, in line with the provision in Section 35 of the constitution.

“Reducing the sentence should not be in conflict with the constitution,” the law minister said.

He also indicated there is still a window for stakeholder views to be incorporated in the new law, although rights advocates and defenders might scoff at the suggestion, given their experience with the DSA.

“We will put together the statements of these objects within the 10-day period given by the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) Department and present everything to the Standing Committee. We will give an opportunity to those who want to make their point here to speak before the Standing Committee as they did last time,” he said.

Stakeholders remain sceptical

Transparency International Bangladesh, in its reaction to the cabinet-approved draft of the Cyber Security Act, said freedom of expression and independent journalism would still be at risk.

The draft of the Cyber Security Act-2023 includes controversial sections of the controversial “Digital Security Act-2018”, although some changes have been

made in terms of punishment and non-bailable clauses, TIB experts said during a presentation on Wednesday (Aug. 30).

If the draft becomes a law, a person will face legal harassment if he publishes opinions and information through digital media, they said.

TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekhazzaman, Advisor and Executive Management Professor Dr Sumaiya Khair were present at the press conference titled “Digital Security Act and Draft Cyber Security Law: A Comparative Review” at TIB Dhanmondi office.

TIB’s Outreach and Communication Department Director Sheikh Manzur-e-Alam and Data Protection Officer Dr Md Tariqul Islam conducted the comparative review.

According to sections 8, 9, 10, and 11 of the proposed law, if cybersecurity is threatened, the concerned authority will ask the BTRC to remove both the data and information and 8(2) states that if the law enforcement agencies believe that any information violates the economic activities, security, defence, religious values or public order of the country or incites racial hatred or hatred. If so, law enforcement agencies can take action.

There is no specific definition of these things in this law, so there is ample scope for interpretation and misinterpretation here. In this case, we have to rely on the explanation of law enforcement, which is very dangerous.

“After all, only the name of the Digital Security Act is being changed to the Cyber Security Act. We need to be able to monitor the crimes and frauds that are taking place in cyberspace without curtailing our freedom of expression,” the presentation said.

“According to the cyber security policy, security in cyberspace was talked about by 2021, but the cybercrime that has happened in the country so far shows that our technical skills have not increased and we have failed to ensure cyber security,” it added.

While the proposed law has provided some hope for cyber security, after the draft was published, it appeared that the title had changed, but no changes had been made to the areas of concern, which is very disappointing.

TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekhazzaman said, “If the draft cyber security law is passed in the Parliament, there will be a huge risk of it becoming a black law like the Digital



Law Minister Anisul Haque



TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman



Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion & Expression

Security Act and thereby violating the fundamental rights of the people guaranteed by the Constitution.

“The elements of the draft law, such as the right to freedom of expression, freedom of speech, conscience, thought and media, remain in effect similar to the Digital Security Act. So it’s not unreasonable to think that this, like its predecessor, is going to become a restrictive law,” he said.

“The situation shows that we are moving to the point of criminalising the rights to freedom of expression, speech and media clearly enshrined in the Constitution. Therefore, the level at which the law is in place cannot be acceptable,” he added.

He suggested reviewing the draft law in the light of international experience involving all stakeholders, including experts from the relevant sectors, civil society and the media.

It’s true that many of the clauses that made a United States government spokesman brand the Digital Security Act as ‘the most draconian law against journalists in the world’ are retained in similar form in the new Cyber Security Act. The decrease in non-bailable offences is a positive. The replacement of some prison sentences with only fines is also a positive. But as TIB as well as PEN Bangladesh, the local chapter of the worldwide free speech advocacy group, have pointed out, the definition of the crimes remains such that they can still lead to false or motivated accusations.

“In the proposed law, the punishment for defamatory acts using cyber platforms is set at a fine of Tk25 lakh while the prison sentence is removed. While seemingly positive, the fine amount is large enough for it to be leveraged as a silencing tool against most Bangladeshi journalists and even smaller media outlets,” PEN Bangladesh mentioned in a statement prior to the cabinet’s final approval.

“Furthermore, if the punishment mentioned in the Panel Code of 1860 for defamation is not amended, the new law is bound to fail. Secondly, the person concerned will have to serve in jail if he or she cannot pay the fine of Tk25 lakh. Sentences could be set as per CrPC for criminal offences and sentences related to journalism,” said PEN.

PEN Bangladesh also pointed out that Section 43 of the Digital Security Act, which gives police authority to enter people’s homes, search offices, frisk people, and seize their computers, computer networks, servers and everything related to digital platforms, has been retained as is. “This allows the police to arrest anyone out of suspicion without any warrant. This is tantamount to granting the police ‘magisterial powers’. Retaining this clause as it is renders many of the other positive changes moot,” it said.

“The reduction of sentences and increase of bailable sections is positive but reducing, increasing, or changing the sentences will not protect fundamental human rights. It is meaningless if there is no difference between the character of the DSA and the Cyber Security Act other than a change in name,” PEN said.

UN recommendation brushed aside

According to the law minister, the government had been in consultation with the UN and had taken its views into account in the process of drafting the proposed CSA. But this view has been refuted by Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion & Expression, who has come out and said that the recommendations of the UN rights organisations were not reflected in the draft cyber security law.

Among the UN recommendations was the repeal of Sections 21 and 28 of the Digital Security Act. Section 28 of the Digital Security Act states, "If any person or group deliberately or knowingly publishes or disseminates on a website or any other electronic medium anything that is offensive to religious sentiments or religious values with the intention of inciting or hurting religious values or sentiments, the act shall be an offence."

"Such a provision in the law risks encouraging human rights abuses in the name of religion and is inconsistent with the requirement to provide legal guarantees under international law," Khan wrote. Therefore, she believes that Article 28 should be repealed.

"International human rights law protects individuals from intolerance, violence and discrimination based on their religion or belief, but it does not allow restriction of criticism of religious belief or sentiment, or lack of respect for religion," said Khan in a letter sent to the government on August 28, under the mandate of the special rapporteur.

Section 21 criminalises "any kind of propaganda or campaign against the liberation war, spirit of liberation war, father of the nation, national anthem or national flag." According to Section 2(u), the "spirit of liberation war" refers to "the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national liberation struggle".

"While appreciating the Government's desire to protect the distinct national historical legacy of Bangladesh, the vague and broadly framed nature of this provision could lead to unlawful restriction of political expression and is not consistent with international law," said Khan in her letter.

"I encourage the government to promote respect for the liberation struggle, the martyrs, and national symbols and values through enhanced public education, awareness

programmes and community based activities, instead of pursuing criminalisation," she added.

Irene Khan said, "Criticism of state authorities, including the head of state, and the right to express dissenting opinions about the state's flag, national symbols or historical events are protected by international law."

Khan also recommended that the government replace criminal defamation in the Cyber Security Act and in the Penal Code with a clear, narrowly defined provision on civil defamation, to limit the claim only to those who are directly affected, and to include public interest in the subject matter and truth as valid defences.

"While international law permits the restriction of speech to protect the reputation of others, it should be done through civil litigation by individuals, and not through prosecution by the state under criminal law," she wrote.

Section 29 on criminal defamation and Section 25 on "offensive, false or threatening data-information" of the DSA have been used frequently to detain those criticising the government, she pointed out.

Section 31 again states, "If any person intentionally publishes or broadcasts on the website or digital format anything which creates enmity, hatred or enmity between the various classes or communities concerned or destroys communal harmony or creates unrest or disorder, or causes or is likely to cause deterioration of law and order, such act by such person shall be an offence."

Khan said, "As this provision is formulated vaguely, the government's desire to protect Bangladesh's unique national historical heritage may create restrictions on political expression, which is not consistent with international law."

She also said criminalising the provision of "offensive or false information" is inconsistent with international standards of law and is not effective in combating misinformation and disinformation. The right to free expression applies to all information and ideas, including information or ideas that may offend people, according to the UN Special Rapporteur.

"Open access to a variety of sources of information, including independent and diverse media, and public awareness of digital media and media have proven to be more effective in preventing disinformation," she concluded. □

Hasina-Xi talks in Johannesburg showcased world example of relations between developing countries: Ambassador Yao

It would definitely add new momentum in our bilateral relations, he told Dhaka Courier

AKM Moinuddin



Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen. Photo: UNB

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen has said the Johannesburg meeting between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Chinese President Xi Jinping showcased for one more time to the world the example of relations between developing countries jointly set up by Bangladesh and China.

“It was the first face-to-face meeting between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina since the latter’s formal visit to China four years ago. We have long been waiting for this meeting. It would definitely tide up new momentum for our bilateral relations,” he told Dhaka Courier in his first interview since his arrival in Dhaka late last year, noting that it is his sacred mission to fully implement the consensus reached by the two leaders to push the “Strategic Partnership of Cooperation” between the two countries to a new level.

As briefed by Ambassador Yao, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Xi Jinping spoke highly of the traditional friendship and good relations between

Bangladesh and China “based on mutual respect and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs”. They reassured mutual support on issues of respective core interests.

Satisfied by joint achievements made under the umbrella of Belt and Road cooperation, the two leaders vowed to further strengthen integration of development strategies, deepen practical cooperation in various fields, and enhance all-round exchanges, so as to bring more benefits to the two peoples.

During this meeting held on the sidelines of the BRICS summit, Bangladesh showed interest in strengthening cooperation with China in the bloc and other multilateral mechanisms.

The Chinese leader congratulated Bangladesh on joining the New Development Bank, and vowed to enhance coordination and cooperation with Bangladesh in multilateral affairs to safeguard international fairness and

justice and serve the common interests of developing countries.

“From the minute of the meeting, all we read is mutual support and joint cooperation, with no hint of any difference,” said Yao, stressing that interactions between top leaders provide political and strategic guidance for development of bilateral relations, the importance of which would never be exaggerated.

“It is high on my agenda to facilitate more in-person visits and meetings of this kind in the days to come,” he added.

Relations in Challenging Situation

Ambassador Yao said China and Bangladesh share significant commonalities in terms of moral values, national dreams and development paths.

“Since President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina jointly upgraded our bilateral relations to Strategic Partnership of Cooperation in 2016, we have set a model of friendly ties between developing countries for the world at large,” he said.

China now stands as the single largest trade partner and a key development partner of Bangladesh. “Wherever I go in Bangladesh, the local people would always give me thumbs-up for China-Bangladesh friendship,” the ambassador said.

At international arenas, China and Bangladesh both stand for peace and development. “We share similar views on hotspot issues like the Ukraine crisis. China’s effort to help resume Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations was also welcomed in Bangladesh,” he said.

“China is working with Bangladesh in meeting regional and global challenges, such as the repatriation of displaced people from Rakhine State of Myanmar, tackling climate change, upholding the right to development, and supporting the UN peacekeeping efforts,” the envoy added.

“Based on equal footing, mutual respect, joint development and common commitment to peace, relations between China and Bangladesh infuse the power of certainty and stability to an increasingly trembling world,” he said.

Non-Intervention in Upcoming Election

“China supports Bangladesh in safeguarding national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity,”

President Xi said in the Johannesburg meeting, adding that China upholds Bangladesh’s efforts to fend off external interference and maintain domestic unity and stability, so as to ensure development and revitalization. Yao said the upcoming election is an internal affair of Bangladesh, and their policy is very consistent that China never intervenes in any country’s internal affairs.

“The future of Bangladesh shall be determined by the Bangladeshi people,” said the ambassador adding “China is full of confidence for the better future of Bangladesh as well as China-Bangladesh relations.”

For the time being, over 600 Chinese enterprises are functioning in Bangladesh, and tens of thousands of Chinese citizens are living and working here.

According to Ambassador Yao, the Chinese companies proactively undertake social responsibilities on boosting local economy, protecting the environment, providing social services to host communities, help create job opportunities, build capacity for manpower and promote charity. “With their contribution and efforts, the hearts of the two peoples are brought together ever closer,” he said.

When asked whether he is concerned about the interests of Chinese companies and citizens in the context of heated political air, Yao replied that the Chinese people are here for friendship and joint development with Bangladeshi people. “Their safety and security should surely be guaranteed, and their lawful interests should be protected,” he opined.

Priorities Ahead

Bangladesh and China will celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025. “It would be a perfect occasion to review achievements in the past and map forward for the future,” the ambassador said.

He promised that China would do its part to help Bangladesh to graduate from the LDCs by 2026, and fuel up joint development to achieve respective national dreams which are “well-connected”.

“Practical cooperation is the cornerstone of China-Bangladesh relations. While implementing projects agreed during high-level visits back in 2016 and 2019, we will take the initiative with Bangladesh to figure out more under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) on connectivity infrastructure, renewable



left: Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen and Right: Masud Khan, Deputy Managing Director, Cosmos Group. Photo: UNB

power section, blue economy, digital empowerment, so on and so forth,” said the Chinese envoy.

In terms of trade, he said, local exporters are encouraged to fully leverage China’s 98% zero-tariff treatment for Bangladeshi products and showcase the brand of “Made in Bangladesh” on expositions held in China, such as China International Import Expo, China-South Asia Expo and Canton Fair.

The Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone in Chittagong should eye on high-end and high-value industries to serve the Smart Bangladesh development strategy as well as the high-quality development paradigm of China, he said.

“We’d encourage Chinese entrepreneurs to increase investment in promising fields like new energy, ICT, advanced manufacturing, and agri-product processing,” Ambassador Yao said, adding that he would also push forward the cooperation on disaster management and relief, military exchanges, law enforcement coordination

and maritime cooperation during his tenure in Dhaka.

“Of course, as the Chinese ambassador, I’d play my role in mediating between Bangladesh and Myanmar to facilitate the early and sustainable repatriation of displaced people from Rakhine State,” he underscored.

BRI Project

“The Belt and Road Initiative has brought about tangible benefit for the Bangladeshi people,” Ambassador Yao said, “Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described BRI a ‘trailblazer’ for Bangladesh’s development.”

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the launching of BRI and the 7th anniversary of Bangladesh’s participation in the initiative.

“In recent years, we’ve witnessed completion of a good number of projects built under the BRI that have significantly changed the development landscape of Bangladesh, such as the Info-Sarker phase 3 project, the

Bangabandhu Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Center, the Payra Thermal Power Plant, the Dasherbandi Sewage Treatment Plant, among others," he said.

"Connectivity will be further improved between the Southwestern part and the rest of the country when the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel under the Karnaphuri River and the First Section of the Padma Bridge Railway Link open for traffic by the end of this year," he noted.

Asked about the latest status of on-going development projects, he said that projects like Modernization of Telecommunication Network for Digital Connectivity and the Installation of Single Point Mooring with Double Pipeline Project will be completed soon.

"The Rajshahi WASA Surface Water Treatment Plant will start its construction, and the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project is also under discussion between authorities of the two sides," he added.

Global Development Initiative

The Global Development Initiative (GDI), a twin sister of BRI, is said to be aimed at supporting the timely achievement of all 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by revitalizing global development partnership and promoting stronger, greener and healthier global development.

Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward GDI at the United Nations in 2021. It promotes international cooperation in eight priority areas, namely poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity in the digital-era.

"All these are also the focus of Bangladesh in its Vision 2041 perspective plan," said the ambassador.

According to the United Nations, over 100 countries and international organizations have expressed their support to the initiative and 68 countries have joined the Group of Friends of the GDI at the UN.

This July, the first high-level meeting of the Global Action Forum for Shared Development was held in Beijing, with more than 800 guests from 158 countries and international organizations attending online and offline.

Minister of Planning M.A. Mannan took part in the event on behalf of Bangladesh.

"It is hoped that Bangladesh would make good use of China's aid, preferential loans and the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund to actively carry out policy dialogue, experience sharing, capacity building and practical cooperation," said the ambassador.

Producing Green Energy

Responding to a question, the envoy said China, a key contributor to the Paris Agreement, pledged to peak its carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, and to reach carbon neutrality by 2060.

"By 2035, China will broadly establish eco-friendly ways of work and life, lower carbon emissions after reaching a peak, improve the environment and largely accomplish the goal of building a 'Beautiful China'," he added.

Bangladesh also faces critical challenges of environmental degradation and climate change.

"Fortunately, the country has become well aware of the gravity of these issues, and has taken plausible actions," the Chinese envoy said, noting that the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCP) adopted in 2020 plays a key role in guiding the country's development paradigm into the track of green transition by 2030.

"As Bangladesh and China converge on environmental goals, there heralds significant potentials for the two countries to synergize on green development strategies, thereby building a shared human community in harmony with nature," said Ambassador Yao.

"In fact, we've already kicked start cooperation in this regard. When I visited Cox's Bazar a few months ago, I saw photovoltaic panels of Chinese brand on top of many roofs. A wind farm project is also being built there by Chinese contractors," he added.

Next Generation of Green Traffic

It was reported that Bangladesh had its first electric vehicle (EV) charging station installed in Dhaka earlier this month.

"I read it from newspaper. But there are only 35 EV registered in Bangladesh for the time being. That is a negligible amount compared to the 170 million population of Bangladesh," he said.



China is a key designer and manufacturer of EV. There are over 16 million EV and mixed-fuel vehicles running on the road of China, and the number is still soaring up.

“We would encourage more Chinese EV manufacturers to come to Bangladesh, explore the local market, and meet the demand of Bangladeshi people, thereby helping Bangladesh transit towards the next generation of green traffic,” said the ambassador.

People-to-People Exchanges

In the interview, Ambassador Yao said people-to-people exchanges lay the foundation for Bangladesh-China friendship.

Earlier this year, Chinese President Xi Jinping replied a touching letter to Alifa Chin, a Bangladeshi teenager born with the help of Chinese navy hospital ship “Peace Ark” and named after China by her father. Expressing his hope that Chin would make best use of her youthful years and study hard to make her dream come true, President Xi encouraged her to give back to her family, contribute to the society, and serve her own country.

“President Xi Jinping’s reply letter to Alifa Chin ushers in

a new chapter for the intimate relations between the two peoples. From this start, we’d further enhance people-to-people exchanges between us,” said the ambassador.

As of now, there are more than 12,000 Bangladeshi students studying in China. Three Confucius Institutes and classrooms are functioning in Bangladesh. The Chinese envoy sees them as “seed and hope” for enhanced mutual understandings.

“The local media also play a unique role in influencing public opinion and bridging recognition gaps. It is my sincere hope that prominent media houses like UNB would keep producing objective and fair reports about China and China-Bangladesh cooperation, thereby contribute to the betterment of friendly ties between our two countries and peoples,” he said.

Those who claim situation in Myanmar ‘not conducive’ for repatriation never visited Rakhine

Highlighting the importance of joint global efforts to realize repatriation of the Rohingyas, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen has said those who keep claiming situations in Myanmar “not conducive” for repatriation have seldom visited Myanmar’s Rakhine State.

“It’s quite strange. And they didn’t answer the question whether situation in Cox’s Bazar is right for the displaced people to live a decent life. This is something they have to ask themselves,” he told Dhaka Courier in an exclusive interview.

The current influx of Rohingyas took place on August 25, 2017, which has seen its 6th anniversary Friday.

“The Rohingya issue has plagued Bangladesh and Myanmar for long. Over the years, Bangladesh has made great sacrifices by sheltering these displaced people. However, the security situation in the camps is deteriorating rapidly,” said Ambassador Yao, noting that killings, gun fights, kidnapping, drug and human trafficking are rampant in the Cox’s Bazar camps.

“External assistance is also heading down. The food ration for the displaced people has been reduced from 12 to 8 US dollars per person per month, which is far from enough for sustaining lives,” he added.

Saying that all parties have increasingly realized repatriation is the only way out, the Chinese envoy stressed that Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina has also repeatedly expressed her firm resolve and determination for repatriation.

“Though the Rohingya issue is by nature a bilateral one between Bangladesh and Myanmar, China, as a common neighbor of both countries and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, supports the two sides to settle differences through friendly consultations, so as to maintain peace and stability in the region,” said the ambassador.

In 2018, China put forward the three-step proposition on improvement of situation in Rakhine State of Myanmar, namely to “stop violence, start repatriation and focus on development.”

“Over the years, China has offered tremendous help within its capability,” said the ambassador, “We have urged Myanmar to improve the security situation in Rakhine State, helped Bangladesh and Myanmar promote conditions of repatriation and resettlement facilities, provided good office for direct talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar, and called on the international community to encourage and support both sides,” he elaborated.

According to him, China’s mediating and facilitating role has won respect, recognition and trust from both

Bangladesh and Myanmar, and helped the two countries enhance their trust on each other.

Something positive seems to be happening.

This year by far, Myanmar has shown stronger will and increasing flexibility to take back some of the displaced people, according to the Chinese envoy.

“We have witnessed several historic breakthrough in the past few months. For example, upon invitation by the Myanmar side, representatives of displaced persons and officials of the Bangladeshi government conducted the first ever go & see visit to Rakhine State. Myanmar also sent a working group to Cox’s Bazar to talk directly with the displaced persons and introduce to them the scenario after returning to Rakhine,” he said.

Under the mediation of China, Bangladesh and Myanmar have kept in close contact and communication to nail down technical details concerning the first batch of repatriation, he added.

Talking about those who are obstructing repatriation, the ambassador said those actors neglect the joint efforts made by both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

“We call upon all the stakeholders to make concerted efforts to fulfill the objective of repatriation, since there is no other alternative,” he said.

It is noteworthy that high-ranking diplomats of Bangladesh have also made intensive remarks recently, calling for understandings and support from the international community.

“Our priority is that they (Rohingyas) will return to their homeland. Myanmar is also willing to take them back,” said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen recently, noting that Myanmar needs to ensure safety and security of the Rohingyas after their return to their place of origin.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md Shahriar Alam earlier said no one should create a barrier to trial repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar, noting that such trial repatriation will help understand issues before a large-scale repatriation.

“This trial repatriation is to know the areas of problems before the large-scale repatriation. It will help examine the issues for better designing a regular repatriation initiative. No one should create a barrier,” he told reporters. □

Bangladesh to be among first four recipients of Japanese security assistance

People-to-people connectivity key factor in materialising strategic partnership, speakers say at launch of PARI

Diplomatic Correspondent



Japan has chosen Bangladesh as one of the four countries which will be the beneficiaries of its new Official Security Assistance (OSA) programme.

“This shows how much importance Japan attaches to Bangladesh,” said Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Iwama Kiminori while speaking at a discussion at the Embassy on Saturday.

Three other countries are the Philippines, Malaysia and Fiji.

To this end, Japan and Bangladesh also agreed to appoint defence attaches in their respective embassies.

This was also discussed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to Japan in April this year.

Apart from “Official Development Assistance (ODA)” which aims for the economic and social development of developing countries, Japan decided to establish a new

cooperation framework “Official Security Assistance (OSA)” for the benefit of armed forces and other related organizations by providing materials and equipment as well as assistance for infrastructures development based on the security needs of the countries.

OSA is referred to in the new “National Security Strategy” approved by the Cabinet on 16 December 2022, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh and Japan may soon sign an agreement on transfer of defence equipment and technology.

“We are in discussion on an agreement concerning the transfer of defence equipment and technology. We will not be able to disclose the details at this moment. However, the discussions are progressing in a positive manner,” said the Ambassador.

Japan-Bangladesh bilateral trade is close to \$4 billion

while the country provided the largest amount of overseas development assistance, \$24.72 billion, to Bangladesh since 1971. With Bangladesh coming out of LDC status and the era of duty-free regime gone by 2026, Dhaka and Tokyo are studying the prospects of signing an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to promote trade and investments.

Iwama Kiminori said the Japan-Bangladesh Joint Study Group, which already held two meetings on EPA, is preparing for the third round. It is aiming to start the negotiation process before signing the EPA at an early stage.

Speaking as the chief guest, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said Japan is Bangladesh's all-weather friend and the two need to grow together.

Japan will be needing a huge workforce and Bangladesh can offer such manpower, with the country enjoying a demographic dividend.

Japan is Bangladesh's fastest growing market for IT and can be a major destination for Bangladeshi skilled workers, he said.

FBCCI President Mahbubul Alam spoke as the guest of honour at the discussion held at the Japanese Embassy, marking the official launch of the Pan-Asia Research Institute (PARI).

Former ambassadors of Bangladesh to Japan Jamil Majid and Ashraf-Ud-Doula; Apex Footwear Ltd Managing Director Syed Nasim Manzur; Dhaka University International Relations Department Chairperson Dr Lailufar Yasmin; Foreign Ministry's East Asia and Pacific Wing Director Sayem Ahmed; JICA Bangladesh Senior Representative Eiji Yamada; Japanese Commerce and Industry Association in Dhaka (JCIAD) President Tetsuro Kano; and Japan-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JBCCI) Secretary General Md Anwar Shahid were present as panelists.

Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) director (local investment promotion) Md Arifur Rahman, Prof. Mohammed Ansarul Alam of Institute of Modern Languages at Dhaka University, Bangladesh IKEBANA Association president Shahinoor Baby, Kokorozashi Japanese Language School principal Okabayashi Kuniaki, Hiroki Watanabe of Ekmatra, Kazuko Bhuiyan Trust manager Masudur Rahaman, The Financial Express senior news consultant M Aminul Islam and Dhaka University

student Fahmida Binte Faruque, among others, also delivered speeches as discussants during four different sessions.

PARI president Yuji Ando, PARI vice-president Tareq Rafi Bhuiyan Jun and PARI executive director Dr Abdullah-Al-Mamun moderated the sessions.

Noted Japanologists, academics, bureaucrats, journalists, cultural activists and representatives of youth organisations, also joined the flagship event.

Appreciating Japan's continued assistance in infrastructure development, Bangladesh has sought Japan's support in resolving the Rohingya crisis considering its good relations with Myanmar.

"On behalf of the people and the government of Bangladesh, we hope that Japan will step up efforts to help resolve the Rohingya crisis," said the State Minister for Foreign Affairs.

At the event, Shahriar Alam mentioned the investment, presence of a growing number of Japanese companies and cooperation in the Matarbari project.

"We see these brilliant infrastructure projects supported by Japan as solutions to many of the problems the country and its people have been facing," he said.

Earlier, the government of Bangladesh said drastic reduction in humanitarian assistance for the persecuted Rohingya population, which is growing with around 30,000 newborns every year in the camps, is compounding the crisis.

Further delay to commence safe, voluntary and sustainable repatriation and shortage of humanitarian support may put the entire region at risk, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had said.

The socio-economic, demographic and environmental cost of sheltering more than 1.2 million Rohingyas for such a long time is pushing Bangladesh to the limit, the ministry said.

These forcibly displaced people have aspirations and rights to return to their homeland in a safe and sustainable manner.

The state minister said the achievements of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are absolutely phenomenal and



such achievements come with some challenges.

“Bangladesh needs to uphold the high aspirations of the people. We have delivered so much and people will be expecting us to do even more to double what we have achieved over the last 50 years,” he said.

“It is not going to be easy. Only friends like Japan can help us to achieve that goal,” Shahriar Alam said.

He said Bangladesh and Japan will surely work collectively and walk together on the journey for achieving a mutually beneficial future for both countries and their peoples.

The state minister said Bangladesh and Japan have presently more than just a G2G (government-to-government) partnership.

“It is growing every passing day, and today it includes C2C (country-to-country), P2P (people-to-people) and B2B (business-to-business) ties. Most importantly, P2P partnership is playing a vital role,” he said.

From here, the newly-launched think tank PARI can significantly contribute to the improvement of the Japan-Bangladesh relationship, he hoped.

“Our country being rich in all the three aspects is considered to be a vast market for Japan,” said the state minister.

Ambassador Kiminori said a common dedication to promoting peace and stability in the area and beyond characterises the relationship between Japan and Bangladesh.

To do this, both countries place an emphasis on cooperation, making diplomatic efforts and working together to address regional security concerns, he said.

The connectivity and overall relationship between Japan and Bangladesh will therefore improve as a result, said the ambassador.

According to the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh, PARI and similar research institutions can serve to improve ties between Japan and Bangladesh.

On the other hand, new facilities will also improve Bangladesh’s connections with Japan, he added.

Speakers at the event highlighted people-to-people connectivity as the key factor in materialising Japan-Bangladesh strategic partnership.

Trade barriers to foreign direct investment (FDI), investment-friendly business climate, skills development for harnessing the scope for manpower migration, Japan’s assistance in plugging the potential of the blue economy and marine resources should also be in focus, they said. □



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Migration and Hundi: Strong as ever

Since corona hit the world, the Government has been expressing concern about a drop in remittances from some Middle East countries. This of course includes Saudi Arabia, the principal employer of Bangladeshis in the outside world. Many government officials, politicians and media persons have been saying this loudly over the last few years and insisting people should send money back home through the banks. This call of course coincides with the dollar reserve crisis.

Why the drop in remittance?

However, there is some confusion on the issue. Migration dipped in the peak corona season but recovery was relatively quick. Government data shows that after the worst phase of corona was over, a comeback was in order. External employment and sending money home was significantly restored.

But this is happening much less through the formal

channels that are the banks but more through hundi or the so-called non-legit financial transaction paths. But since we don't know how big that is, we can't accurately estimate the overall remittance status inclusive of both formal and informal channels. However, the general estimation is that about 50% of the total remittance comes through the informal channels.

Hundi has always been popular but is now more so. Bangladesh Bank data on remittances indicates the trend also. Remittance from Saudi Arabia was \$5.7 billion in 2020-21, \$4.5 billion in 2021-22, and \$3.7 billion in 2022-23. This does indicate that the remittance flow is dropping. However, other data indicates a more complex picture than the official world presents.

The plain fact is that the number of migrant workers from Bangladesh to the Gulf state has gone up four times around this period. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) which is the keeper of



Freepik

data on the topic, 161,726 Bangladeshis reached there in 2020 to 612,418 in 2022. So the crisis is not about migration but transferring money home, a financial crisis.

The ability to inspire confidence in the official channels and banks is limited it seems. Informality reigns and despite so many attempts to rein in the hundi system, it continues to hold its own.

The official position explaining why the remittance has dropped is several but it doesn't always reflect ground reality. Some argue that many of the new migrants have poor paying jobs hence the returns are low. If that is so, why they use more hundi is not explained.

Its true more non-skilled are going abroad but more means more remittance but that hasn't happened. The total number has gone up so the chances of an overall dip are cancelled by that. Being jobless, being cheated upon etc have been part of life in migration since migration began so it's not a new element in the equation. Some BB officials have also cited that "global economic uncertainty and high inflation have adversely affected migrants' real incomes and consequently remittance inflow."

Fighting hundi: a losing battle?

The Government's struggle against Hundi has been long but a rather unsuccessful one. Although, migrants get a 2.5 percent cash incentive when they send money through the banking channel, many prefer hundi and for reasons of convenience, safety and higher margins. It's difficult for the GOB to admit that the Hundi regime has in fact been gaining steady traction over the last few years and incentives have failed to deter them.

The obvious reasons can't be ignored and the hundi network is a bigger one than the banking channels in Bangladesh. On top of that, many hundi networks are used by the large scale drug dealers and betting rings which are very powerful and used by many members of the formal sector involved in such rackets.

Given the size of the drug and gaming economy such as the internet based gaming and the location based gambling is concerned, it needs the hundi system. Thus it's not just remittance sending that hundi serves but several other sectors which are also flourishing Bangladesh as well. If such "criminal" rackets can't be ended by the authorities, how can the much wider and relatively innocent act of sending money home by transferring through a long term reliable system be ended?

Basically, the migration sector is informal in nature which means that the issue is that of systems rather than individuals. The formal sector has not been effective and which has led to migration costs in Bangladesh to be one of the highest in the world. Why the GOB can't do anything that can rationalize the costs, it's not much use asking one to use official channels.

What the migrants are likely to be asking is: what has the GOB done for the migrants that it wants them to use its money home through the GOB's official banks in return? That is where the problem lies. ❑

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Obama leads outpouring of support as pressure mounts on Dr Yunus

Courier Report



Obama places the Presidential Medal of Freedom around the neck of Prof Yunus at the White House. Photo: Courtesy

Ex-US President Barack Obama has written a letter of support for Dr Muhammad Yunus, expressing his hope that the Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist can continue to do his ‘important work’.

Dr Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, shared an image of the letter signed by Obama on his verified Facebook page on Sunday (Aug. 27).

“I have long been inspired by your efforts to empower people through offering them the means to lift their families and communities out of poverty. As I said when having the opportunity to meet you in the White House in 2009, your work has inspired millions to imagine their own potential,” said the letter from the 44th president of the United States.

“During this period, I hope it gives you strength to know

that many whose potential you invested in, and those of us who care about a more equitable economic future for all, are thinking of you, and I hope that you continue to have the freedom to do your important work,” it reads.

The current US president, Joe Biden, served eight years over two terms as vice president to Obama, who is still thought to wield tremendous influence within the ranks of the Democrat party in particular, and US politics in general.

Also on Sunday, 34 eminent citizens of the country expressed ‘deep concern’ over the government’s motives through a series of recent developments that have gone against Bangladesh’s first and till now only Nobel laureate, in a case filed with Dhaka’s No.3 Labour Court.

On August 20, a full bench of the Appellate Division

cleared the way for the criminal case to continue against Dr Yunus and his co-defendants, by rejecting a petition to prevent the case from proceeding. The trial commenced two days later.

In a statement circulated to news outlets, the group of concerned citizens called upon the government to stop all sorts of harassment against Dr Yunus. It notes his lawyers' contention that the allegations brought in the case are civil in nature, yet the government has pursued a criminal case.

"The government's role in disposing of the case with abnormal haste has become evident recently," the statement said. It also alleges that Dr Yunus has already been subjected to harassment in the case.

Harassing him in the garb of legal and administrative measures is hampering his work and sending a negative message to the world, the statement adds.

Later in the week, more than 160 global leaders, including over 100 Nobel Laureates, wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressing their deep concern about the safety and well-being of Prof. Yunus.

Addressed directly to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the letter is signed by Nobel laureates, elected officials, business figures, and civil society leaders. The signatories applaud Bangladesh's remarkable progress since its independence in 1971.

However, their collective concern arises from the "perceived threats to democracy and human rights" that have recently emerged within the country.

"We write to you as Nobel Prize laureates, elected officials, and business and civil society leaders, and as friends of Bangladesh. We admire how your nation has made laudable progress since its independence in 1971," the letter signed by, among others, Barack Obama, Jose Ramos-Horta, Mary Robinson, Mairead Corrigan-Maguire, Shirin Ebadi, Denis Mukwege, Nadia Murad, Maria Ressa, Oscar Arias Sanchez, Juan Manuel Santos, Ban Ki-moon, Laura Boldrini, Bono, and Sir Richard Branson, reads.

In the letter, the signatories called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to conduct the upcoming national election in a free, transparent and fair manner.

"However, we are deeply concerned by the threats to democracy and human rights that we have observed in Bangladesh recently. We believe that it is of the utmost

importance that the upcoming national election be free and fair, and that the administration of the election be acceptable to all major parties in the country. The previous two national elections lacked legitimacy," it says.

Calling the legal proceedings against Dr Mohammad Yunus "judicial harassment", the signatories called for an immediate suspension of the current judicial proceedings against him.

"One of the threats to human rights that concern us in the present context is the case of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus. We are alarmed that he has recently been targeted by what we believe to be continuous judicial harassment, the letter reads.


"We respectfully ask that you immediately suspend the current judicial proceedings against Professor Yunus, followed by a review of the charges by a panel of impartial judges drawn from within your nation with some role for internationally recognized legal experts. We are confident that any thorough review of the anti-corruption and labour law cases against him will result in his acquittal."

This latest letter was a follow up to an earlier letter sent in March.

The new letter further added: "As you know, Professor Yunus' work, which has been inspirational to all of us, focuses on how social business can be a force for international progress resulting in zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions. He is a leading example of how Bangladesh and Bangladeshis have contributed to global progress in recent decades. We sincerely wish that he be able to continue his path-breaking work free of persecution or harassment."

According to case documents in the public domain, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) visited Grameen Telecom and uncovered various violations of the labour law.

They said 101 workers were supposed to be made permanent, but were not. Workers' and welfare funds were not constituted. Additionally, 5% of the dividends of Grameen Telecom was supposed to accrue to the workers, but that didn't happen, the case filed by the DIFE in September 2021 alleged.

Dr Yunus chaired the Board of Trustees of Grameen Telecom, which is registered as a trust. The others accused in the case are his fellow trustees Ashraful Hasan, Md Shahjahan and Noor Jahan Begum. 

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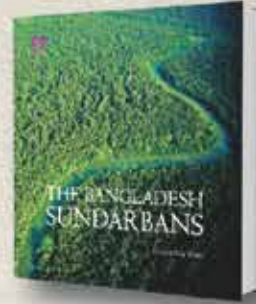
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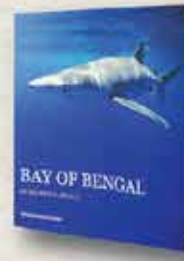
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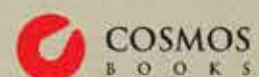


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Elevated expressway marks first of 9 megaprojects to be inaugurated before election

Masudul Hoque



As the nation gears up for the upcoming national election, a total of nine megaprojects encompassing roads, bridges, railways, and aviation are scheduled for inauguration within the tenure of the current government.

The first and most visible of these is the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, to be followed in due time by the Metrorail project's remaining segment, Purbachal Expressway, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel (Karnaphuli Tunnel), Airport's Third Terminal, Khulna-Mongla Rail Project, Cox's Bazar Rail Link, Akhaura-Agartala Rail Link, and Padma Bridge Rail Link.

Dhaka Elevated Expressway

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the first phase of the project on September 2.

Dhaka Elevated Expressway project director, AHMS Akhtar, told UNB that the construction of the expressway is being completed in three phases. Ninety-eight percent of the first part up to Banani and 54 percent of the work from Banani to Moghbazar have been completed, he said.

The section from the Airport to Farmgate is ready for inauguration in September. Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said that on the occasion of the opening of the 11.5 km elevated expressway from Kaola

to Farmgate on September 2, a rally will be held at the old grounds of the trade fair in Agargaon.

Metrorail

Metrorail's Agargaon to Motijheel section is going to be inaugurated on October 20.

Obaidul Quader mentioned that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the Agargaon to Motijheel section of the Metrorail on October 20, followed by a rally at Suhrawardy Udyan in the capital at 3pm on that day.

Additionally, the construction work of MRT Line 5 Northern Road will be inaugurated on September 16, with a gathering in Savar. From the last week of October, Dhaka residents will be able to travel from Uttara to Motijheel in just 38 minutes.

Karnaphuli Tunnel

The main construction of the Bangabandhu Tunnel under the Karnaphuli River in Chattogram has been completed. This project is set to be inaugurated on October 28, marking Bangladesh's entry into the tunnel era.

Obaidul Quader announced that on the occasion of the inauguration of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel on October 28, a gathering will be held

on the other side of the tunnel.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will also inaugurate 140 bridges and 12 overpasses from the newly constructed road building on October 22. Additionally, the Vehicle Inspection Centre (VIC) will be inaugurated virtually, he said.

Purbachal Expressway

The Purbachal Expressway will connect the rest of the city to the new city of Purbachal through a 12.3-kilometer-long, 12-lane expressway in the heart of the capital. Simultaneously, the Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Chattagram highways will experience reduced traffic congestion and improved communication with the eastern part of the country.

Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK) Chairman Anisur Rahman Mia said that a 100-foot-wide canal is also being dug from Kuril to Balu river on both sides of this expressway. This effort aims not only to resolve traffic congestion in and waterlogging in the Bashundhara and Khilkhet area.

According to Rajuk, approximately TK 10,329 crore are being invested in this government-funded project. The project is nearing completion after 8 years since it was approved at the Ecne meeting on September 22, 2015.

Third terminal of the airport

Civil Aviation Authority Chairman Air Vice Marshal (AVM) M Mafidur Rahman told UNB that the third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport will have a soft opening on October 7. The new terminal will be opened by the prime minister.

As it will be partially inaugurated on that day, passengers will be able to fully utilise the terminal by the end of 2024.

He further mentioned that approximately 85 percent of the terminal's construction work has been completed, with interior decoration currently underway. He expressed optimism that 90 percent of the project will be completed before the soft opening.

Cox's Bazar Rail Link Project

The direct rail link between Dhaka and Cox's Bazar is in its final stages of construction. As of now, 88 km of railway line has been laid from Dohazari in Chattagram to Cox's Bazar, with only 12 kilometres remaining. Currently, the

overall progress of the project stands at 87 percent.

The inauguration of this railway project has been delayed due to the renovation of the Kalurghat bridge and railway damage caused by landslides in Bandarban.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said that flood-damaged sections are being repaired promptly, and an opening date will be announced soon.

Akhaura-Agartala Rail Link Project

This project, being implemented with the Indian line of credit, might be jointly inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi during her visit to India in September.

The Akhaura-Agartala project's progress has exceeded 90 percent, with the railway line fully laid.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for this project was signed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January 2010. The project, initiated in 2016, has been extended four times until June 2024. The total cost of the project is TK 477.81 crore, with government funding of Tk 57.5 crore and Indian debt of Tk 420.76 crore.

Khulna-Mongla Railway Line

As of now, 99% of the project has been completed.

Nurul Islam Sujan said that there will be a separate inauguration program during the Prime Minister's visit to India for the G20 summit.

This project is coming to an end 13 years after its approval at the Ecne meeting in 2010.

Padma Bridge Rail Link Project

The Mawa-Bhanga section's progress stands at 96 percent, while the Dhaka-Mawa section is at 79 percent completion. The section up to Jessore's Bhanga is also at 79 percent completion, with the inauguration planned for June 2024.

The estimated cost of the Padma bridge rail link is TK 39, 247 crores.

Nurul Islam Sujan told UNB that it will be officially inaugurated on a date chosen by the Prime Minister after September 20. □

Does an Expanded BRICS Mean Anything?

Now that the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) will accept new members, one wonders if the grouping can pose a genuine challenge to the prevailing global-governance institutions. As in the past, the group's influence will depend on its effectiveness, not on its composition or size.

Jim O'Neill



When I coined the BRIC acronym back in 2001, my primary point was that global governance would need to adjust to incorporate the world's largest emerging economies. Not only did Brazil, Russia, India, and China top the list of that cohort; they also were collectively responsible for governing close to half of the world's population. It stood to reason that they should be represented accordingly.

Over the past two decades, some have misread my initial paper as a kind of investment thesis, while others have interpreted it as an endorsement of the BRICS (South Africa was added in 2010) as a political grouping. But I never intended any such thing. On the contrary, ever since the Brazilian and Russian foreign ministers proposed the idea of creating a formal BRIC political grouping in 2009, I have questioned the organization's purpose, beyond serving as a symbolic gesture.

Now that the BRICS has announced that it will add six more countries – Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – I pose the question again. The decision, after all, does not appear to have been decided on any clear objective, much less economic, criteria. Why, for example, was Indonesia not asked? Why Argentina and not Mexico, or Ethiopia and not Nigeria?

Clearly, the BRICS' symbolic power will grow. The group has been able to tap into the broader Global South's suspicion that post-World War II global-governance organizations are too Western. It has occasionally been able to present itself as the voice of the emerging and developing world – a category that of course excludes the United States and other advanced economies. Insofar as it has reminded everyone that the structure of international institutions does not reflect the global economic shifts over the past 30 years, it has succeeded.

It is true that in terms of purchasing power parity, the BRICS are slightly larger than the G7. But, because their currencies trade at prices far below their PPP-implied levels, the group remains significantly smaller than its advanced-economy counterpart, when measured in current nominal US dollars.

It is also true that China has firmly established itself as the world's second-largest economy. In nominal terms, its GDP is more than three times larger than Japan and Germany, and around 75% the size of the US. Meanwhile, India has been growing fast and now seeks to become the third-largest economy by the end of this decade. But none of the other BRICS has performed anywhere near as well as these two. Brazil and Russia account for around the same share of global GDP as they did in 2001, and South



Chinese President Xi Jinping, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pose for a group photo during the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, August 23, 2023. /Xinhua

Africa is not even the largest economy in Africa (Nigeria has surpassed it).

Of course, some G7 members are in the same boat. Italy and Japan have registered hardly any growth for many years, and the United Kingdom, too, has been struggling. Just as China dominates the BRICS by dint of being twice the size of all the others combined, so the US is now bigger than the rest of the G7 combined. America and China dominate their respective groups even more than they did in the past. What these dynamics suggest is that neither the G7 nor the BRICS (expanded or otherwise) makes much sense for tackling today's global challenges. Neither can do much without the direct, equal involvement of the other.

What the world really needs is a resurrected G20, which already includes all the same key players, plus others. It remains the best forum for addressing truly global issues such as economic growth, international trade, climate change, pandemic prevention, and so on. Though it now faces significant challenges, it still can reclaim the spirit of 2008-10, when it coordinated the international response to the global financial crisis. At some point, the US and China will have to overcome their differences and allow the G20 to return to its central position.

As for the BRICS, the group could be more effective, on the margins, if key members were truly serious about pursuing shared goals. But China and India rarely agree

on anything, and given their current bilateral relationship, neither is likely to be enthusiastic about the other gaining more influence in key global institutions (unless they are equally balanced).

That said, if China and India could resolve their border disputes and develop a closer constructive relationship, both countries would benefit, as would world trade, global economic growth, and the BRICS' effectiveness. China and India could cooperate in many areas, and in ways that would influence the other BRICS and many others throughout the Global South.

One big issue is the dominance of the US dollar. It is not especially healthy for the world to be so dependent on the dollar and, as a corollary, on the US Federal Reserve's monetary policy. The introduction of the euro could have diminished the dollar's dominance if eurozone member states had agreed to allow their financial instruments to be liquid and large enough to appeal to the rest of the world. Similarly, if any of the BRICS – especially China and India – undertook significant financial reforms to achieve that goal, their currencies would almost certainly become more widely used. But if they continue to limit themselves to complaining about the dollar and musing in the abstract about a shared BRICS currency, they are unlikely to achieve much. □

From Project Syndicate

Deterrence Is Not Enough in Northeast Asia

The new security agreement between the United States, South Korea, and Japan reflects the shifting sands of regional geopolitics, especially heightened concerns about North Korea and China. Achieving its full potential, however, will require an openness to dialogue with both countries and cooperation on domestic challenges.

Yoon Young-Kwan

In August, the leaders of the United States, South Korea, and Japan met at Camp David for their first trilateral summit. The resulting agreement to deepen military and intelligence cooperation has steered Northeast Asian geopolitics into uncharted territory.

In view of the rising threat from North Korea, deteriorating ties with China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, US President Joe Biden's administration has pursued a bold and systematic regional strategy. Multilateral coalitions like this one, the reinvigorated Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the US), and the relatively new AUKUS arrangement (comprising Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US) augment the traditional hub-and-spoke model of security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, with the US at the center of each.

From the US perspective, the strained relationship between South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) and Japan – America's most important allies in East Asia – has long been a strategic obstacle. Since he was Barack Obama's vice president, Biden has been eager to help the two countries – long at odds over historical disputes and territorial issues – mend fences.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's audacious decision early in his presidency to normalize ROK-Japan relations offered Biden a rare opportunity. Specifically, Yoon decided in March not to seek money from Japan to compensate South Korean victims of forced labor during World War II – a proposal that, at the time, only 35% of Koreans supported and around 59% opposed.

Forging closer ties with Japan is crucial for Yoon to achieve his foreign-policy goal of making South Korea a pivotal global player. Former South Korean president Park Geun-hye, for example, struggled to pursue her ambitious Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative while maintaining a hostile relationship with such a large and important neighbor. Whether Yoon can smooth over their differences and cement more positive bilateral ties



(From L) U.S. President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol pose for photos ahead of their trilateral talks in Hiroshima on May 21, 2023. Photo: Courtesy

remains to be seen.

China and North Korea will likely push back against the effort to institutionalize cooperation between the US, South Korea, and Japan. But, to reach its full potential, this new deterrence structure must be accompanied by an openness to dialogue with both countries.

To guard against misunderstandings and prevent further escalation of the situation in Taiwan, which is China's central concern, the US must step up its efforts to reestablish military communication channels with China. Likewise, South Korea and the US, supported by Japan, should communicate to North Korea that they are ready and willing to engage in diplomatic dialogue; the enhanced trilateral deterrence posture envisioned at Camp David will not achieve regional peace on its own.

The most formidable challenge to the US-ROK-Japan partnership, however, is domestic political pressure,



President Joe Biden, center, meets with South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol, left, and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, right, during the NATO summit in Madrid, Wednesday, June 29, 2022. Biden aims to further tighten security and economic ties between Japan and South Korea, two nations that have struggled to stay on speaking terms, as he welcomes their leaders to the rustic Camp David presidential retreat Friday, Aug. 18, 2023. Photo: AP/UNB

especially in South Korea. Critics of Yoon's decision to thaw relations with Japan believe that the president is naive and that South Korea is paying dearly for joining this group while getting very little in return. For Yoon, convincing these naysayers will be critical to the success of his presidency: his margin of victory in the presidential election was just 0.74%, and after almost 16 months in office, his approval rating stands at only 37.6%.

There are three ways that the US and Japan could help South Korea solve this challenge. First, while strengthened security cooperation is certainly an important foreign-policy achievement, the group must accelerate the implementation of their agreements on economic and technological assistance. Making visible progress on these fronts and delivering tangible benefits to Yoon's critics could help shift public opinion toward a more favorable view of the new partnership.

Second, if China continues to engage in coercive commercial diplomacy against South Korea, the US response will matter a great deal to South Koreans. Former US president Donald Trump's administration did nothing when China sanctioned South Korea for its deployment of a US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system in 2016. Whether the three countries can act together on this issue will be a key factor in deciding

the group's future. Moreover, the Biden administration could also turn South Korean public opinion against the US-ROK-Japan security agreement if it enacts more legislation that discriminates against foreign companies, as both the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act do.

Third, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida must be proactive in improving ties with South Korea. While Kishida has been cooperative, many believe that his actions are not commensurate with the political risks taken by Yoon. They also fear that inappropriate, and often crude, comments about Japan's long occupation of South Korea made by some members of Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party could undermine Yoon's attempt to extend an olive branch.

The challenge of winning over public opinion in South Korea pales in comparison to the risks for the region if Trump wins the US presidential election in 2024. In that case, the infant US-ROK-Japan partnership may have no future. To solidify his diplomatic achievements and to prevent a policy reversal in Northeast Asia, Biden must fully implement every aspect of the agreements reached at Camp David before next November. □

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Now Prigozhin is gone, what happens to Wagner?

Russia's defence minister Sergey Shoigu is likely to emerge as a key figure in the military contractor's future

John Lechner & Sergey Eledinov

Control of Russia's private military company Wagner is likely to fall to the country's Ministry of Defence, with several Wagner veterans already having signed with the ministry or its other affiliated military firms, sources within the group have said.

But questions remain about how far the Russian MoD will be able to integrate with private military company (PMC) Wagner, which has operations across the Middle East and Africa, with answers likely varying from country to country.

It is a week since the plane crash that killed Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and a number of other top brass from the controversial military outfit.

PMC Wagner's defining feature was a lack of any formal structure. Wagner was a social phenomenon as well as a product of Vladimir Putin's system of governance and international demand. Prigozhin thrived in an environment where Russia's political elites had disproportionate freedom to pursue foreign policy, and his PMC was well placed to profit from global trends in the privatisation of warfare.

While Wagner shared much in common with past PMCs like South Africa's Executive Outcomes or Blackwater in the US, it more reflected a historic Russian system of governance in miniature.

In the centre sat Prigozhin, surrounded by a loyal cadre who fanned out in search of opportunity. Guidance was not always forthcoming, and it was common for two or more teams inside the organisation to compete with each other. Prigozhin ruled at the strategic level. At the tactical level, Wagner's Council of Commanders was the foundational mechanism for decision-making.

This mechanism ensures that Wagner could maintain existing operations without the centre for some time. But in the week that followed Prigozhin's death, the Russian MoD under Sergey Shoigu has been moving quickly to alter the status quo.

Wagner's Council of Commanders has failed to nominate a new leader, despite the availability of several capable individuals. It seems likely Shoigu's ministry will not allow the leadership of Wagner to pass to an unknown entity. Wagner's new sponsor will likely be someone close to Shoigu, the only person to emerge from Prigozhin's "March of Justice" stronger than before.

Shoigu is a political survivor and an expert in the games inherent to government staffing. He has considerable experience acquiring and subordinating commercial enterprises to his needs, and those politically close to him have their own business empire and lieutenants. In short, like Prigozhin did, he runs his own miniature governance system.

Shoigu will have little interest in dismantling Wagner. Since 2017, Wagner has been one of the country's most successful exports. To shut down Wagner in Africa, for example, would be tantamount to losing Moscow's influence on the continent.

Shoigu will ensure, however, that Wagner's relationship to the MoD changes. According to one source in Wagner: "The MoD will take control. The real question is whether they'll be effective."

Those close to Shoigu at the MoD who take over the running of Wagner will have to choose between keeping Prigozhin's old team and appointing their own, the source believes. But, they added: "It will take a lot of time for them to figure out how everything works. In the meantime, they'll have to keep Prigozhin's guys happy."

Wagner's touchpoints with the MoD and its intelligence unit, known by its older acronym the GRU, always occurred at the upper echelons. Prigozhin's main point of contact in the MoD was first deputy minister of defence Ruslan Tsalikov, who also happens to figure prominently in Shoigu's own empire. It therefore seems likely that the passing of Wagner from one kurator to another could be sealed with a handshake, not a pen.

How Wagner's subordination to the Russian MoD will



A portrait of Wagner Group's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, who died last week in a plane crash two months after launching his brief rebellion, lies on flowers on the grave at the Porokhovskoye cemetery in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023. Photo: AP/UNB

play out on the ground depends on country and context. In Syria, where the MoD has its own presence and a history of kicking out Wagner, there is capacity to change personnel. There are reports that Syrian officials had already told Wagner to integrate with the Russian army or leave by October.

In Libya, meanwhile, deputy defence minister Yunusbek Yevkurov visited a key general, Khalifa Haftar, on 22 August – the day before the crash that killed Prigozhin – and allegedly discussed Wagner while there. Libya, however, was always contractor territory. Any significant changes in personnel will take more time.

Some of Wagner's top officers will surely bristle at the prospect of signing a contract with the MoD. But in the end, most have bills to pay and families to feed, and a sizeable number of Wagner veterans have already signed with the MoD or its affiliated military companies, according to several sources.

In countries like the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, the MoD neither has the personnel nor the knowledge to replace Wagner anytime soon. While there

are rumours that MoD-affiliated PMCs, such as PMC Redut or PMC Convoy, are recruiting for Africa, this is likely not feasible in the short-term. One source in PMC Redut, who previously served in Wagner, noted "Redut" has become little more than an umbrella term for distinct volunteer units in Ukraine. While it's possible a version of PMC Redut could become active in Africa, they said, "it's unlikely they'll replace Wagner entirely".

A rebrand of Wagner for Africa is more feasible. Changing the name but keeping the personnel is common in the industry. And several Wagner sources in Africa have confirmed they will continue going to work.

Indeed, for the average Russian mercenary, little will change. Fixed-term contracts to serve in CAR, Mali, Libya, Syria, and perhaps new countries will continue to be available. Wagner used to blacklist those who moved on to other PMCs like Redut, but still people quit and moved on. In the end, the Russian mercenary community is small, and while the names often change, the faces stay the same. □

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Regulation, Not Crypto, Is Broken

The US Securities and Exchange Commission's lawsuits against Binance and Coinbase, the world's two largest cryptocurrency exchanges, demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of this new form of money. Enacting meaningful regulations requires a fundamental shift in perspective and the creation of a central bank digital currency.

Koray Caliskan

When the Venetian merchant Marco Polo traveled the Silk Road in the thirteenth century, he encountered not only unfamiliar peoples, but also new (to him) forms of finance. In China, he was shocked to learn that Kublai Khan had introduced paper money. It was lighter, easier to transfer and store, and more valuable than the metal coins packed in his purse. After returning to Venice, Marco Polo taught his fellow merchants how to use the Khan's innovation. Even though some rejected the flat, foldable currency, arguing that it was no gold and never would be, paper money would change the world.

Like those stubborn thirteenth-century merchants, many today refuse to accept the newest form of money: cryptocurrency. The United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) recently filed lawsuits against Binance and Coinbase, the world's two largest cryptocurrency exchanges, accusing them of operating as unregistered securities exchanges. For years, Coinbase, a publicly traded company with a large US customer base, has been

asking American regulators for reasonable rules, to no avail.

Instead, government agencies have been confused about how to define crypto, often providing conflicting views. For the SEC, crypto is an asset that behaves like a security, while for the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), it is a commodity. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS), meanwhile, treats it as property. Like the fable of the blind men and the elephant, each sees only one aspect and believes it to be the whole. This apparent lack of understanding precludes effective regulation.

Let us be clear: cryptocurrency is not digital money. All metal and paper fiat currencies have been digitized for half a century – your bank account is a digital asset. Crypto, on the other hand, monetizes the exclusive right to send data by a new accounting technology called blockchain. When transferring an Avax or Ethereum to someone else, the right to transfer data is sent from one location to another,



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and this transaction is registered on the blockchain without the need for a bank or a state. Accountants, also called miners, carry out the bookkeeping in exchange for crypto.

Recognizing this radically new money and accounting is the first step in regulating crypto markets. But since the SEC, the CFTC, the IRS, and similar institutions in other countries are designed for paper currency and its digital versions, they have struggled to adjust to the realities of data-money economies. Without a profound shift in thinking about finance, no regulation will be fit for purpose.

Many policymakers also wrongly believe that crypto is a speculative vehicle. But that ignores the blockchain's revolutionary innovation: it enables economic actors to make their own monies and transact with minimal cost. Thousands of cryptocurrencies are already being exchanged for goods, services, and other (crypto) currencies by governments, companies, and individuals in more than 45,000 markets, operated by 524 centralized exchange platforms.

Regulators must understand four things about crypto. First, it is not an alternative to the dollar, the euro, or other fiat currencies. In fact, my research has shown that crypto contributes to dollarization. Second, cryptocurrency exchanges undermine blockchains by using their own centralized bookkeeping: more than 90% of Bitcoin traded in 2021 was kept as custodial assets in exchanges. That means, if markets go bust, customers lose their money. Third, many decentralized blockchains are based on centralized economic services, such as commodity trade accounting; crypto is an innovation that creates order, not chaos. Lastly, various forms of fiscal logic are already embedded in crypto economies, making them more suited to regulation than many people expect.

As for how to regulate the industry, a central bank digital currency (CBDC) is crucial, because it would provide governments with a financial instrument whose transaction speed matches that of cryptocurrencies. Currently, stablecoins are beyond the reach of central banks, imitating fiat currencies like the dollar without bearing the political and economic costs of fiat maintenance. Moreover, it would be easier to regulate exchanges by following a cryptocurrency's value once it could be expressed and transacted with reference to a CBDC.

Above all else, regulators must ensure a level playing field. That means preventing exchange platforms from issuing their own data monies or tradable crypto assets; otherwise, they will be competing on their own platforms. Crypto exchanges should also be required to keep all custodial assets beyond the reach of their own traders or owners – a simple regulatory measure that would have protected customers' investments following the collapse of FTX. Lastly, tax authorities could use a CBDC to locate more taxable events and also propose a new tax for crypto income, thus increasing revenues.

For now, policymakers continue to act like those obstinate Venetian merchants. The problem is not with crypto, but rather its regulation. It is time to accept that crypto is here to stay and put the right rules in place to govern it. □

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Trump and Big Tech are setting the tone for a violent 2024 election season

Tech giants' hands-off approach to disinformation does not bode well at a time of growing political violence

Chrissy Stroop



Former US President Donald Trump. Photo: AP/UNB

Donald Trump turned himself in at Fulton County jail in Georgia on Thursday last week, where he was fingerprinted and had a mugshot taken – just like any other accused felon. Obviously, unlike many others in the same situation, he was immediately able to post bond and leave. Nevertheless, the moment was remarkable: it was the first ever mugshot of a former president.

Back in March, before the various investigations had resulted in any indictments, Trump warned there could be consequences if he was indicted, calling on his supporters to “take back our nation”. No 6 January-style mass action has materialised, but as summer winds down in the northern hemisphere, political threats and violence do seem to be ramping up here in the US.

Fulton County district attorney Fani Willis, an African American woman and the official who indicted Trump as part of a conspiracy to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in Georgia, has faced threats. Members of the grand jury who weighed the evidence in the Georgia case have been doxxed by Trump supporters, putting them at risk of violence for doing their civic duty.

Given the deep divisions in the US, and the radicalised state of the right in particular, it is likely this trend will continue through to the 2024 election.

To make matters worse, it seems other social media platforms are taking a cue from Elon Musk’s X (formerly Twitter) and shifting away from taking a

proactive stance against the spread of disinformation. In terms of social media manipulation by bad actors, this means the 2024 presidential election is likely to resemble the 2016 election – infamously subjected to Russian interference – more than the 2020 election.

Let's hope they don't also follow Musk's lead when it comes to hate speech. Musk has reinstated accounts suspended from Twitter for disinformation, hate and incitement, including Trump's, and openly supported anti-trans accounts. These include influencer Libs of TikTok, which recently spread a story about a woman who apparently harassed staff at a clinic in Portland, Oregon that provides gender-affirming care to trans people to the point that she was barred from the clinic. Libs of TikTok and other anti-trans accounts supported the woman's absurd demand that the clinic remove a trans Pride flag as a "hate symbol". Soon after, the clinic received a bomb threat.

Meanwhile, two LGBTIQ centres in Orlando, Florida found their outdoor murals defaced with anti-gay and Nazi graffiti on Saturday. The graffiti included swastikas, rifle crosshairs and the phrases "gay is not OK" and "unity or extinction". The latter was scrawled beneath a signature of sorts from a Florida-based white supremacist group called the Knights of the Black Sun. On the same day, a white man murdered three Black Floridians in cold blood in a store in Jacksonville, an attack that the local sheriff described as "racially motivated". The shooter had drawn swastikas on his gun.

These incidents come hot on the heels of the murder of a shop owner in San Bernardino, California who refused to take down her LGBTIQ Pride flag, by a man known to have 'liked' and shared anti-LGBTIQ content on social media.

And this is a far from comprehensive list of the right's recent threats and acts of violence.

But what else should we expect in a country where

prominent members of the Republican Party threaten civil war because the criminal justice system has moved to hold their authoritarian figurehead accountable for his actions?

The fact is that whether or not US prosecutors had charged Trump with any crimes, the right-wing rage he has fed since his 2020 election loss, which he has refused to accept and continually lied about, was always going to burn fiercely during the 2024 election cycle. The radicalised Republican Party has shown its true anti-democratic colours.

With the other Republican primary candidates lacking charisma and unlikely to win their party's nomination, prospects are (I think) reasonably good for the Democrats to hold on to the presidency. But however things play out, the patriarchal, racist, unreconstructed US right's violent rage, enabled by the capitulation of the Big Tech companies on policing hate and disinformation, guarantees a bumpy ride to next November – and beyond.

The only way to bring about a better political future is to disincentivise anti-democratic and criminal attitudes and behaviours by defeating Republicans at the ballot box and holding them accountable for crimes committed in the process of attempting to destroy American democracy. There is no compromising with an authoritarian party bent on keeping all power for itself.

Encouragingly, although some in Trump's base are treating his criminal prosecution as a "badge of honour", a recent poll indicates that the indictments are likely to have a negative impact on his electability, particularly if he is convicted of a crime before the election in November 2024.

So it is a good thing that Trump was mugshot and fingerprinted in Fulton County – even if he was still treated with extreme privilege. □

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Bangladesh pauses plan to reintroduce tigers in Chittagong Hills

A feasibility study for a plan to re-establish a tiger population in the south-eastern hill forests found that conditions are not currently suitable

Rafiqul Islam

As Bangladesh seeks to increase the number of endangered tigers in the country, officials are rethinking a reintroduction plan that would involve bringing the big cat back to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), The Third Pole has learned.

The plan, which made headlines in 2020, would have entailed releasing tigers in the remote area of south-east Bangladesh, which borders India and Myanmar.

However, a feasibility study has found that conditions are not currently suitable for a successful reintroduction. While there has been no official announcement to this effect, The Third Pole's conversations with key officials have revealed that the Bangladesh Forest Department appears to have stepped back from the plan for the time being.

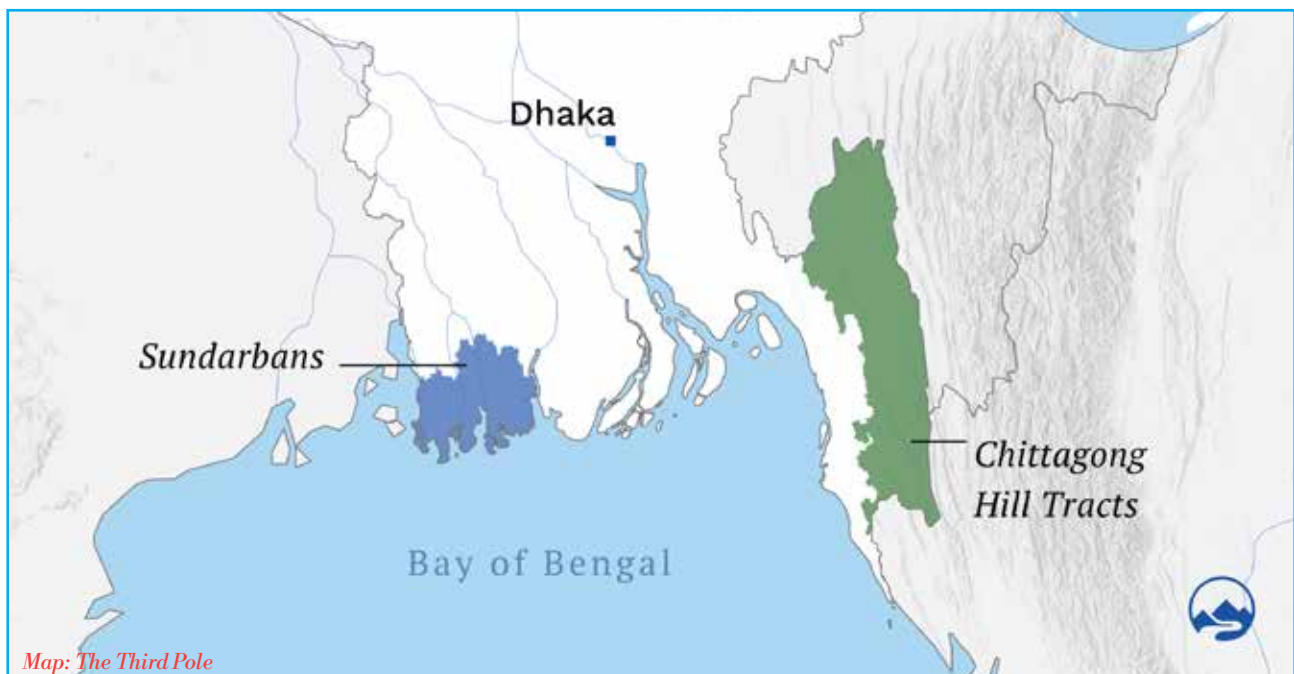
"Two things – habitat and prey – need to be considered before releasing tigers in the CHT," said Md Amir Hosain Chowdhury, the chief conservator of forests

at Bangladesh's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. "We have found that the habitat is not suitable right now and there is not enough prey for tigers in the hill tracts. Human settlements are a big problem there, too. So, we have retreated from our plan."

Tigers were once widespread in Bangladesh. As recently as the 1930s, they were reportedly present in 11 out of 17 districts in the country. "However, widespread hunting and forest depletion have reduced the tiger's range and numbers," says Bangladesh's Tiger Action Plan for 2018-2027, prepared by the country's forest department as a blueprint for tiger recovery.

The only resident tiger population in Bangladesh is found in the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove ecosystem formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal.

In 2020, when Chowdhury revealed the government's



Map: The Third Pole

intentions to reintroduce tigers to the Chittagong hills, he said that the area “was the host of a huge number of tiger populations” in the past. The announcement was consistent with the government’s Tiger Action Plan for 2018-2027, which listed ensuring a “viable tiger population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts” as a low-priority goal, and indicated required resources of 100 million Bangladeshi taka (around USD 914,000) over a 10-year period. But the plan has evidently been put on hold.

In some parts of the world, threatened predator species have made a promising comeback thanks to a combination of efforts to reduce hunting, restore habitats and reintroduce the animals in areas where they had been extirpated. But the success of reintroduction efforts depends on multiple complex factors being in place, including limiting threats to the reintroduced animals, adequate prey and the consent and cooperation of nearby communities.

Chowdhury told The Third Pole that the Forest Department is now working to regenerate forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and that it will consider releasing tigers there once the restoration is complete.

The feasibility study

Imran Ahmed, conservator of forests at the Bangladesh Forest Department, explained that a feasibility study was conducted in 2021 with a view to gather “evidence of tigers [and their] habitat suitability which includes the availability of prey species in the remote forest patches of the CHT”. The government-funded feasibility study project was conducted by the Forest Department with technical assistance from IUCN Bangladesh.

The resulting report – which has not been made public – maintains that there is no solid evidence of tigers being present in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This is despite reports of tigers being seen crossing the Kasalong River, a major waterway that runs through the region, in 2021.

According to a government official who shared the key findings of the report with The Third Pole, but who requested anonymity, factors that were considered in the study included the availability of prey species; maintenance of genetic diversity; and the local population’s response to the idea of reintroducing tigers.

Unless these circumstances change, the report says, it is unlikely that any reintroduced tiger would survive. In conclusion, Ahmed says, the study findings were not

positive, and do not support attempts to reintroduce tigers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts for the time being.

Ambiguity over tigers in the Chittagong hills

The 1,645 square-kilometre Kasalong Reserve Forest in the CHT is still relatively undisturbed, its dense, evergreen forests being mostly untouched by human settlements and cultivation. The forest is home to many mammals including Asian elephants, two species of bear, three species of deer, leopards and wild boar.

Debate over whether some tigers, too, have survived has been ongoing for years. Pugmarks (paw prints) seen in the area in 2016 were believed by some experts to be from tigers.

M Monirul H Khan, a tiger expert who was involved in the CHT feasibility study, told The Third Pole there was some evidence of tiger presence in the region. “During our expedition to Kasalong Reserve Forest, we found remains and a [tiger] skull at a hunter’s house,” he said.

Ishtiaq Uddin Ahmed, a former chief conservator of forests at the Bangladesh Forest Department, said that more scientific studies are needed to establish whether pugmarks reported in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are from resident tigers, or from tigers coming over the border from India and Myanmar.

“We will not be able to say [what] the actual status is of tigers in the hill tracts without a proper survey,” he added.

Md Shabab Uddin, Bangladesh’s minister for environment, forest and climate change, told The Third Pole: “Considering all the threats, we are not taking a decision right now to reintroduce tigers in the CHT but we have a plan to do so in the future.”

Uddin said that before making plans to relocate tigers from the Sundarbans to the Kasalong Forest Reserve in the CHT, the Bangladesh government has first to achieve another goal in its Tiger Action Plan, to “minimise poaching of tigers and prey, minimise habitat destruction, initiate habitat restoration and establish connectivity between the fragmented habitats”.

“The reintroduction of tigers in the Kasalong Reserve Forest will depend on the results of the strategic action [plan] as well as the full support of the local tribal community,” the minister told The Third Pole. □

From The Third Pole



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How Employee Benefits Can Influence Super Shop Workplace Behavior?

Dr. Mohammad Shahidul Islam

In a competitive market where businesses are always looking for ways to enhance their workforce and bottom line, it's crucial to have a firm grasp of the interconnected nature of pay, workplace behavior, and productivity. It sets to get to the bottom of this connection so that we can better understand the profound effect of a well-rounded reward system on workers, their behavior on the job, and the bottom line as a result. We provide new insight into the complex relationship between monetary and non-monetary incentives within the reward system and the resulting impact on employee performance in the workplace. To this end, it is helpful to examine the interplay between monetary and non-monetary incentives in the context of the reward system in greater depth. Job discipline, which incorporates commitments to following procedures and adherence, is also studied to see how it functions as a mediator in this multifaceted nexus.

Our research reveals a ground-breaking finding that challenges established wisdom. This paradigm-shifting discovery is that the reward system's most incredible power lies not in boosting quantitative employee performance but in fostering a culture of work discipline. The authors postulate that a positive side effect of the incentive structure is a rise in employees' dedication to their jobs, boosting their productivity. The implications of this innovative finding for our understanding of the connections between pay, job behavior, discipline, productivity in the workplace, and the success of businesses as a whole are profound.

Examining the processes of work discipline and the crucial role that work discipline plays in translating the impacts of reward systems is the first stop on this academic tour. In this talk, we use a compelling case study to shed light on the topic: the storied retail giant Super Shop X, also the name of a sizable grocery chain in the country. The case study delves deeply into the tangible results of introducing a comprehensive incentive system on the morale of the staff. The inquiry is centered on learning more about the strategic use of incentive programs to boost confidence in the workplace. This is significant since a positive work environment fosters productivity and efficiency.

The primary focus of the investigation is on making

educated guesses about what may happen if the extensive rewards program were to be abolished. Staff morale could plummet, and unfavorable impacts could cascade into actions by labor unions, among other possible outcomes. When dealing with a workforce as large as Super Shop X, disgruntled workers can quickly snowball into problems that threaten the company's bottom line, reputation, and the confidence of its stockholders. The importance of a well-thought-out total incentives system in fostering employee motivation, performance, and job satisfaction is repeatedly emphasized by academic research. Employees feel accomplished and confident when their hard work is appreciated. As a result, employees become more invested in their work, have higher job satisfaction, and feel a deeper loyalty to the company.

However, risks are associated with scrapping a whole, well-liked rewards scheme. Employees' morale and motivation can take a hit when they are given different perks and bonuses than they're used to getting. If employees feel less dedicated to their employer due to this barrier, it could affect their work performance and overall productivity. The Total Reward System (TRS) is an exciting development in organizational leadership since it provides a comprehensive approach to motivating and retaining employees. In addition to monetary pay, a total reward system (TRS) may also consist of non-financial benefits. The study's overarching goal is to learn more about how TRS manifests itself and influences different parts of an organization.

The importance of a TRS in shaping employees' careers is something that scholars stress. This exemplifies the radical transformation that has taken place in compensation models, which now consider a more comprehensive range of factors, such as the influence of corporate culture and career advancement, when determining salaries. One study focuses on introducing a comprehensive TRS to address employee compensation, recognition, and incentives. It emphasizes the essential roles of mastery, gratitude, personal development, and teamwork in the TRS paradigm. A happier workforce can be achieved by prioritizing these factors.

A total reward system (TRS) is a motivational tool that

aims to increase engagement, motivation, and work satisfaction through financial and non-financial rewards. Furthermore, another study highlights the importance of an individualized TRS that considers each worker's aspirations, skillsets, and other factors to increase their sense of satisfaction on the job. Increased productivity occurs from a dynamic equilibrium that can be tailored to different segments of the workforce, all of which benefit from an incentives system that comprises a mix of monetary remuneration, growth opportunities, acknowledgment, and tangible rewards. Successful adoption and maintenance of such a system, however, necessitates fine-tuning to strike a balance between the needs of employees and those of regulatory compliance and financial sustainability. Here are ten suggestions for improving the whole reward structure with dynamic components:

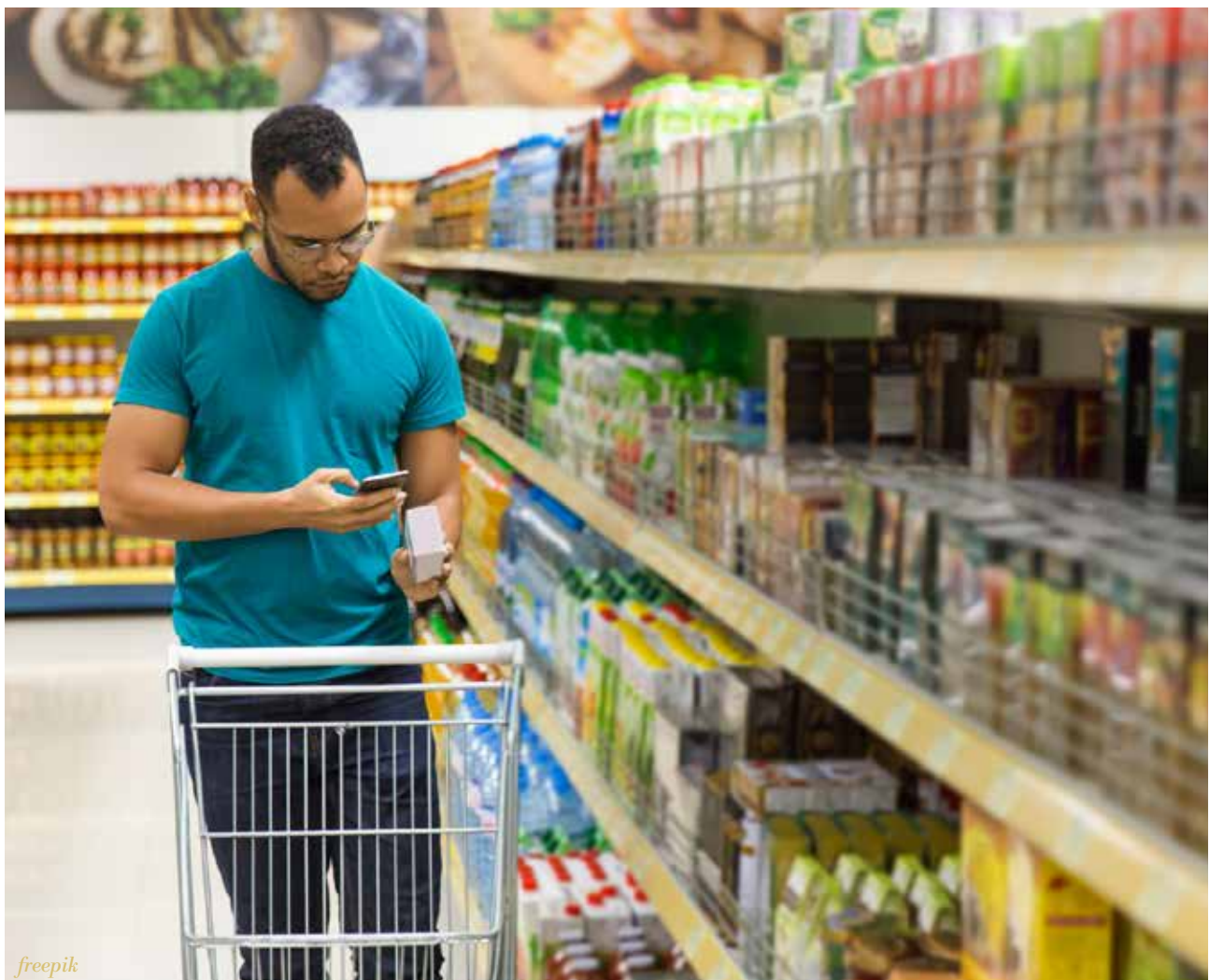
1. Organizations should create a total reward system (TRS) that goes beyond monetary remuneration and

includes non-monetary incentives like training and development opportunities, public recognition, work-life balance initiatives, and health and wellness benefits. The benefits of this TRS should extend beyond monetary compensation.

2. Tailor the TRS experience to each worker's unique requirements. Make it possible for workers to build their incentive packages from a selection of prizes by instituting systems that will allow them to do so.

3. Establishing open lines of communication with staff is crucial for ensuring that they thoroughly understand the TRS and their role in determining their compensation. Transparency fosters trust and helps clear the air when a lot is happening.

4. Aligning Performance Reviews: Embedding the TRS with performance review mechanisms ensures that rewards are commensurate to individual and group efforts. This



harmony is beneficial to fostering a meritocratic work environment.

5. Non-monetary rewards, like opportunities for skill development, exposure to cross-functional jobs, and mentorship, should be prioritized. These can be as beneficial as monetary rewards in terms of increasing motivation.

6. Continuous Feedback: Establish regular feedback loops to solicit employee thoughts and insights on the TRS. This input can aid in the system's evolution and the prompt resolution of any issues or disagreements that may occur.

7. Awards and Honors Programs There should be a system to honor people for their outstanding achievements and service. Employees that constantly exceed expectations and reflect the company's values should be recognized in front of their peers.

8. Improvement Programs for Workers: Provide opportunities for employees to learn new skills and advance in their roles to give them a sense of accomplishment and advancement within the company. The correct term for these programs is "Employee Development Initiatives."

9. Worker Happiness: Improve employees' health by incorporating TRS programs emphasizing mental, physical, and emotional fitness. Work-life balance initiatives, health and wellness programs, and mindfulness practices can boost employee engagement.

10. Persistence through Time When developing the TRS, it is critical to think about its longevity. Verify that the promised benefits are realistic and consistent with long-term goals for the company's growth and financial security.

The methodological stance taken in this study is crucial to unraveling workers' tangled feelings toward the Total Reward System (TRS). Using in-depth interviews, the study is qualitative in nature, capturing the full range of individuals' experiences and perspectives. The door to further research is now wide open. To guarantee that a broad spectrum of expertise and personal experiences are represented within the organization, great care is taken in the selection process for participation. This is done so that a thorough investigation into TRS's impacts and perspectives may be carried out. Through in-person, semi-structured interviews, the qualitative approach encourages participants to share their views and insights, leading to a richer understanding of the topic.

An interview guide is a research tool used to direct the information-gathering process. The numerous facets of the TRS, including employee engagement, job happiness, and areas for development, are probed more deeply using open-ended questions. The richness of the guide allows respondents to provide more in-depth explanations of their responses, facilitating more thorough data analysis. The method known as theme analysis will be used to analyze the qualitative information gleaned from the interviews. Repeated themes can be identified by carefully analyzing transcribed interviews, shedding light on the individuals' TRS experiences, viewpoints, and emotions. This research study aims to provide a thorough understanding of the factors that affect workers' attitudes and levels of participation.

This research effort prioritizes ethical considerations by protecting participants' privacy and adhering to strict secrecy rules. Ethical standards ensure the confidentiality and autonomy of everybody involved in the process. The subjectivity of interpretation and the potentially limited sample size are two significant drawbacks of qualitative research that must be acknowledged. Generalizing the study's conclusions may be difficult because it was conducted in a specific organizational situation. To provide a fuller picture of how employees feel about the Total Reward System, the qualitative approach digs deeper into their actual experiences and emotions. This study enhances our knowledge of the human component of TRS, which helps to counteract the dominance of quantitative methods.

The findings and ensuing discussions provide insight into the extent to which the organization values and acknowledges the efforts of its employees. Recurring tenets such as recognition, fair compensation, and individualized care indicate a culture that places a premium on its employees' health and happiness. The study's results have far-reaching implications for future strategic decision-making, the evolution of the Total Reward System, and preserving a positive work environment. This investigation into the Total Reward System from the employees' point of view reveals the company's dedication to creating a culture where employees feel valued, respected, and trusted. The research's findings can help guide strategic decisions and enhance the company's Total Reward System to support better a culture that values and rewards its employees' health, happiness, and productivity. □

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Julia Foxx/Amir Hamja/Julia Fox Gets Dirty to Come Clean © The New York Times

Capturing the world through the lens

Farid Hossain

In corner of Chattogram, Bangladesh, a young man named, Amir Hamja discovered his passion for photography, setting him on a trajectory that would eventually lead him to the global stage. Hamja's journey, marked by unwavering determination and a relentless pursuit of his craft, has earned him recognition as one of the emerging talents in the photography world.

Born in 1992, Hamja initially pursued a degree in Pharmacy at the University of Science and Technology Chattogram (USTC). However, his true calling lay in the art of visual storytelling, and he found himself drawn to the captivating camera work he encountered in international films.

This fascination with cinematography inspired Hamja to delve deeper into the world of photography. He immersed himself in online tutorials, read photography books, and eventually began exploring the art of street photography in 2014. Though he had already completed his pharmacy degree, Hamja's heart remained firmly set on a career in the visual arts.

Hamja's big break came in 2016 when his stunning photographs from the Shakrain Festival in Old Dhaka caught the attention of renowned Bangladeshi filmmaker Piplu R Khan. This chance encounter led to Hamja's first professional photography job, where he worked on a documentary project about BRAC founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed. It was an experience that would shape Hamja's future.

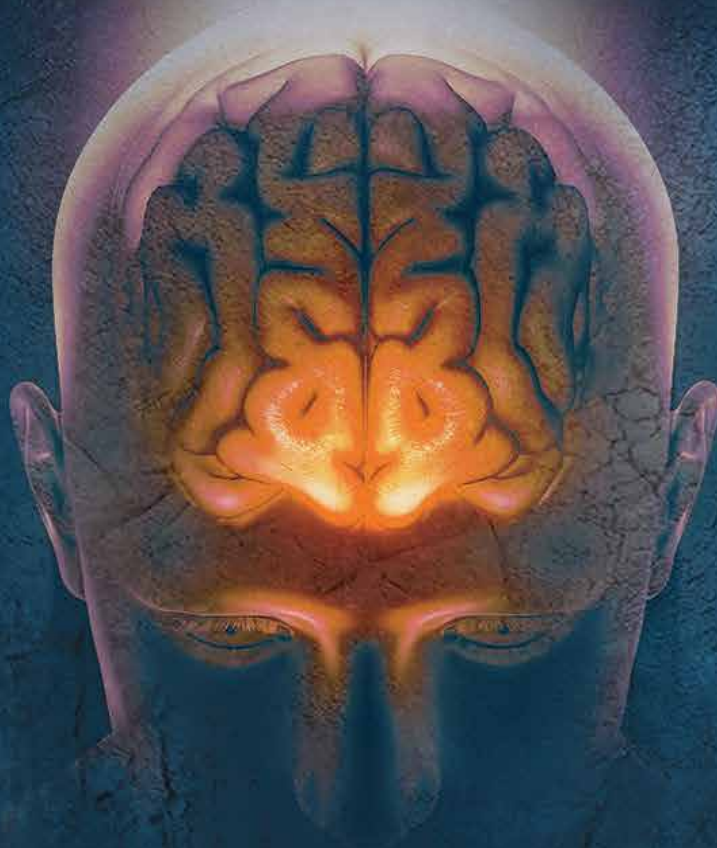
Hamja's dedication and talent continued to shine, and his work on the Abed documentary and a biographical film about the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, "Hasina: A Daughter's Tale," earned him a prestigious scholarship to the International Center of Photography in New York. The opportunity to study photography and filmmaking abroad was a pivotal moment for Hamja, as he felt his personal and professional growth was at times limited in Bangladesh.

Hamja's journey has been marked by a series of remarkable achievements. In 2017, he was honored with the prestigious Sony World Photography Award, a testament to his exceptional talent. His works have been exhibited in numerous shows around the world, further solidifying his reputation as a rising star in the photography community.

In 2019, Hamja had the chance to work on the Netflix series "Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," showcasing his versatility and ability to adapt to various creative projects. His striking photographs during the George Floyd protests in New York City in 2020 caught the attention of The New York Times, leading to his appointment as an official photographer for the renowned publication early this year.

As Hamja continues to navigate the global stage, his story serves as an inspiration to aspiring photographers and visual storytellers from Bangladesh. His glowing achievements have not only brought pride to Bangladesh but have also set a new benchmark for what can be accomplished through unwavering dedication to one's craft, even from the very root level. □

Farid Hossain is editor of United News of Bangladesh (UNB). In more than 50 years of his journalism career, he also worked for The Associated Press (AP), TIME magazine and The Telegraph in Kolkata



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