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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

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A large, intricate decorative floral pattern in a light brown color, partially overlapping the right edge of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and organic shapes.

BANGLADESH 2019-2020: ISSUES OF DEMOCRACY,
DISASTERS, DEVELOPMENT

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In 2019-2020, the Awami League maintained its grasp on power by resorting to repressive measures. Political dissent was silenced through both legal and extrajudicial means. Poor civil rights protection confirmed that negative trends already emerged in previous years worsened further, as the country continued losing its democratic features.

Bangladeshi economy kept growing, but in 2020 the pandemic affected its current and projected growth rate, and the unemployment and inequality indexes. It also prompted the Government to adopt emergency policies for economic relief. Furthermore, amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the country was struck by catastrophic cyclone Amphan and monsoon floods. These added to the damages caused in 2019 by seasonal floods and cyclones Fani and Bulbul. All such events highlighted the vulnerability of Bangladesh's economic growth, human security, and socio-economic equality to external shocks and climate change. Reducing gender violence proved challenging. However, the country proceeded towards its Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation targets.

China remained Bangladesh's main partner in the fields of infrastructure, trade, and defence. Relations with India were intense but marred by old and new issues, including border killings, water sharing, and India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Remarkably, Pakistan signalled its intention to revive relations with Dhaka. Lastly, while Bangladesh deserved commendation for it continued hosting one million Rohingya refugees with tremendous efforts, it also pursued their controversial relocation from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char. Relations with Myanmar deteriorated as attempts to repatriate the refugees to Rakhine failed, favouring China's and the Organization of Islamic Conference's (OIC) involvement in the crisis.

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; development; disaster; freedom; gender violence; Hasina; human rights; LDC graduation; Mujib Borsho; Rohingya.

1. Introduction

Much happened in 2019 and 2020 in Bangladesh in terms of domestic politics, economy, and foreign policy. Focusing on these three facets of Bangladeshi politics, this paper offers a critical review of major events.

The paper highlights domestic developments concerning the protection of civil and political rights, including press freedom, police intimidation,

tion and enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and violent politicised student activism. It reflects on what consequences the repression of political dissent carries for the country's democratic outlook. It also reviews the latest facts regarding the management of the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar; the War Crime Trials connected to the 1971 Liberation War; and the incidence and prevention of gender violence, including the recently reformed legislation on rape and child marriage.

As far as the economy is concerned, the paper considers the impact of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak on Bangladesh's growth indicators by comparing pre- and post-pandemic trends. Other questions considered are recent natural catastrophes and Bangladesh's progress vis-à-vis its graduation from LDC status.

Finally, the paper updates and assesses the state of Bangladesh' bilateral relations with China, India, Pakistan, and Myanmar. Bilateral relations with Myanmar revolve around the Rohingya refugee crisis, whose international ramifications are also examined in the third and last section of the paper.

While reviewing these events, the paper highlights relevant trends, contextualising facts into broader policy endeavours and historical phenomena. The analysis is based on both primary and secondary sources, including government statements and ministerial data reports; articles published by major national and international newspapers; studies carried out by independent national think tanks; reports by Bangladeshi, foreign, and international non-government organizations (NGOs); data and reports by intergovernmental organizations and international development agencies and banks; latest country-focused journal articles.

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *Civil and political rights under threat*

During the years 2019-2020, the Awami League (AL) headed by Sheikh Hasina further strengthened its grasp on power. For years Hasina's Government and party have been an object of criticism from both within and outside the country due to scarce protection of civil and political rights, such as the right to a free vote, the right to assembly, the right to expression. The 2018 national elections had confirmed the party to yet another mandate among irregularities, protests, and episodes of violence. Following its latest electoral win, the Government appeared to use both legal and extrajudicial means to repress dissent. Since its inception in 2016, The Digital Security Act (DSA) has provided the prime minister and its party with a powerful tool to prosecute those who criticise them online, con-

demned as anti-national propagandists.¹ Many writers were arrested under the Act, including poet journalist Henry Sawpon,² and lawyer-activist Imtiaz Mahmud in 2019.³⁴

According to Amnesty International, the use of the DSA for the purpose of censorship has intensified, as the number of cases filed under it kept growing year by year⁵ and further increased during the COVID-19 outbreak, as authorities took advantage of the state of emergency to crack down on the opposition.⁶ Leading Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star* reported that the total cases filed under the DSA were 34 in 2018, 63 in 2019, and 111 in the first six months of 2020: «205 people sued; 53 of them journalists; 20 political activists, 5 teachers and 8 students».⁷ Among the latest arrests of 2020 there was that of journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, who had disappeared in mysterious circumstances in March as soon as two Awami League members filed against him. He then reappeared in May under police custody, to be produced in front of the court and eventually jailed. Islam was released on 25 December 2020. Forced disappearance is another strategy used by the police to threaten critics of the Government, although the latter denies all allegations.

Another repeated occurrence was the interruption of public political gatherings of antagonist forces and their supporters, carried out by the police. Furthermore, on various occasions, permission to hold political gatherings was often denied to AL's opponents, and the police charged anti-government protestors. For instance, in December 2019 the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was denied permission to stage a march in remembrance of the 2018 national elections to condemn the irregularities that had then taken place.⁸ On the same day, the police attacked other groups who had gathered to hold similar protests.⁹

1. An Amnesty International report explains why the DSA, under the cover of digital security, gives government authorities the possibility to persecute political opponents, thus infringing human rights: 'Muzzling Dissent Online', *Amnesty International*, November 2018.

2. 'Poet Henry Sawpon gets bail in Digital Security Act case', *The Daily Star*, 16 May 2019.

3. 'Bangladesh SC lawyer sent to jail under ICT', *New Age*, 16 May 2019.

4. On the question of freedom and safety of Bangladeshi journalists see: Mubashar Hasan & Mushfique Wadud, 'Re-Conceptualizing Safety of Journalists in Bangladesh', *Media and Communication*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2020.

5. 'Bangladesh: escalating attacks on the media must stop', *Amnesty International*, 8 October 2020.

6. 'Bangladesh: stop intimidating activists, victims' families', *Human Rights Watch*, 24 October 2020.

7. 'Bids to silence journos deafening', *The Daily Star*, 2 November 2020.

8. 'BNP denied permission for today's rally', *The Business Standard*, 30 December 2019.

9. 'Clash, protests mark first anniversary of 2018 elections', *New Age*, 31 December 2019.

The repression of dissent was carried out also by student organisations affiliated to the AL. The case that possibly caused the country's biggest outcry occurred in October 2019, when members of the Bangladesh Chatra League beat to death a Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) student, Abrar Fahad. The victim was targeted for criticising the Government on social media regarding deals signed with India.¹⁰ The horrific murder testified – yet again – to the violence of Bangladeshi university activism and showed that affiliation to the ruling party allows certain militant groups to act with impunity. The year 2020 saw new cases, including that of Shah Uddin Sifat, a Dhaka University student who was beaten by the Chatra League, and that of Ashraf Mahdi, who was abducted and later released. Both victims were close to political circles antagonist to the AL.¹¹

In January 2019, protest by garment workers against insufficient minimum wage increase were repressed by the police, resulting in the arrest of unionists, and the dismissal of thousands of workers. According to Clean Cloths Campaign, a year later «hundreds of workers still face retaliatory charges».¹²

The Government received strong condemnation also for its tough approach to the trafficking of Yaba, a popular and cheap synthetic drug to which millions of Bangladeshis are addicted. Hasina's war on drugs started in 2015, backed by considerable popular support, and has resulted in the death of hundreds of individuals allegedly involved in the drug trade. These have been killed by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in what according to many are staged «gunfights», a way to cover extrajudicial killings reminiscent of Duterte's anti-narcotic campaign in the Philippines. Over the years, the issue received attention from international news outlets, and in October 2020 the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee urged the US Government to impose sanctions on RAB's senior officials.¹³ In November of the same year, Amnesty International released the report *Killed in Crossfire*, an investigation into RAB's *modus operandi* that demonstrates a violation of human rights by the Bangladeshi Government.¹⁴

The enduring use of torture was denounced by the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) and Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar in their most recent joint report on Bangladesh, published in July

10. 'Buet student beaten to death: critical FB post costs him his life?', *The Daily Star*, 8 October 2019.

11. 'Bangladesh people with dissenting voice target of disappearance: AI', *New Age*, 2020.

12. 'A year after crackdown on wage protests in Bangladesh, hundreds of workers still face retaliatory charges', *Clean Cloths Campaign*, 13 January 2020.

13. 'Extrajudicial killings: us senators seek sanction on senior RAB officials', *Dhaka Tribune*, 28 October 2020.

14. 'Killed in «Crossfire»: Allegations of Extrajudicial Executions in Bangladesh in the Guise of a War on Drugs', *Amnesty International*, 4 November 2019.

2019.¹⁵ Its findings were echoed in the «Concluding observations on the initial report of Bangladesh» by the Committee Against Torture (CAT), released in August 2019 in response to Bangladesh's recently submitted report, which was due since 1999. Besides denouncing torture, the CAT report recommended intervention also with regard to: «inadequate investigation of complaints of torture», «enforced disappearances», «Rapid Action Battalion», «independence of the judiciary», «Reprisals, harassment and violence against human rights defenders and journalists», «excessive use of force by members of the security forces, intelligence services and the police», and «arbitrary detention».¹⁶

Finally, as far as party politics are concerned, there were some developments regarding the opposition's leader, BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia. In March 2020, Zia was released from prison for six months to receive medical treatment, on condition she would not leave the country. The former prime minister and widow of former president Ziaur Rahman is Sheikh Hasina's principal political adversary: the two are divided by an antagonism rooted in both ideological divergence and a political dynasties feud. Zia had been jailed in 2018 after being convicted in a corruption case. In September, the Zias applied for an extension of her sentence suspension, which was conceded for another six months.¹⁷ According to the party, Zia has not legally re-joined politics but will do so after her recovery.¹⁸

Because of its poor protection of civil rights, scholars increasingly defined Bangladesh an «electoral authoritarianism»,¹⁹ or a «competitive authoritarianism»,²⁰ or «more a case of authoritarianism interrupted by intervals of competitive democracy than the reverse».²¹ Overall, the years under review confirmed that Bangladeshi domestic politics are further losing in democratic features and gaining in authoritarian ones.

2.2. War crime trials

The years 2019-2020 saw the continuation of the trials for war crimes connected to the 1971 Independence War, conducted by the International

15. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) & Odhikar, 'Cycle of Fear: Combating impunity for torture and strengthening the rule of law in Bangladesh', *World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)*, 25 July 2019.

16. Committee Against Torture, 'Concluding observations on the initial report of Bangladesh', *OHCR*, 26 August 2019.

17. 'Khaleda Zia' s release to be extended by another 6 months', *Prothom Alo*, 3 September 2020.

18. 'Khaleda' s recovery first, politics later', *Prothom Alo*, 27 March 2020.

19. Ali Riaz, 'The pathway of democratic backsliding in Bangladesh', *Democratization*, (First View), 21 September, 2020.

20. Shafi M. D. Mostofa & D. B. Subedi, 'Rise of competitive authoritarianism in Bangladesh', *Politics and Religion*, (First View), 13 July 2020.

21. Harry Blair, 'The Bangladesh Paradox', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, Issue 4, October, 2020, p. 146.

Crimes Tribunal (ICT). Significantly, in 2019 the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court resumed hearing appeals of the war crimes cases after the interruption occurred in 2016, following a corruption scandal within the Supreme Court. On 31 October 2019, the Appellate Division upheld the death sentence of former Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) Assistant Secretary-General ATM Azharul Islam.²²

In 2019 the ICT imposed 14 new death sentences on former militants of JeI or Razakar Bahini.²³ In January 2020, the Appellate division upheld Syed Mohammad Qaiser's death penalty, and on 22 October the tribunal issued a death warrant. Qaiser is a former state minister from the Jatiya Party, condemned to death for having fought against the liberation forces during the 1971 war, siding with West Pakistan with his Qaiser Bahini.²⁴ In March, based on an ICT arrest warrant, the police reportedly arrested 13 people of unknown political affiliation accused of war crimes during the war of independence.²⁵ Moreover, in November, six people were sued for war crimes in Khulna.²⁶ Meanwhile, in February 2020, another top member of JeI awaiting judgement died in prison. Maulana Abdus Subhan was condemned to death for crimes against humanity and genocide in 2015 and had appealed to the Supreme Court.²⁷

ICT's trials continued receiving criticism from within and outside the country. The Government started them in 2010 backed by considerable parliamentary and popular support after they formed a crucial point in the AL electoral manifesto for the 2008 elections. However, many consider that they do not meet the standards of a fair trial and that the party is using them as a tool to eliminate opposition leadership: as seen, most of those prosecuted come from the high ranks of JeI.²⁸

Lastly, on 12 April 2019, former Army captain Abdul Majed, one of the six men condemned for the murder of the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman «Bangabandhu», was hanged in Dhaka after being arrest-

22. 'How are the war crimes appeals proceeding?', *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 December 2019.

23. 'Death sentences and executions 2019 (Amnesty International Global Report)', *Amnesty International*, April 2020, p. 23.

24. 'War Crimes Trials: progress so far', *Dhaka Tribune*, 24 October 2020.

25. 'Police in Bangladesh arrest 13 war crime suspects', *Anadolu Agency*, 9 March 2020.

26. 'Six people sued for war crimes in Khulna', *United News of Bangladesh*, 5 November 2020.

27. 'War Criminal Abdus Subhan dies at DMCH', *United News of Bangladesh*, 14 February 2020.

28. Suzannah Linton, 'Completing the Circle: accountability for the crimes of the 1971 Bangladesh War Of Liberation', *Criminal Law Forum*, Vol. 21, Issue 2, June 30, 2010; Ridwanul Hoque, 'War Crimes Trial in Bangladesh: a legal analysis of fair trial debates', *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, 30 June 2016; 'Bangladesh: death penalty will not bring justice for crimes during Independence War', *Amnesty International*, 29 October 2014.

ed upon his return from India, where he allegedly found shelter for years.²⁹ The execution acquired a heightened political and nationalist meaning as it took place during Mujib Borsho, i.e. Mujib's Year, a celebration of the centennial anniversary of Rahman's birth declared by the Hasina Government, from March 2020 to December 2021.³⁰

2.3. *The enduring Rohingya crisis: growing frustration and violence*

Bangladesh deserved commendation for it continued hosting with tremendous efforts a Rohingya population of about one million. At the same time, the Government promoted controversial measures that are considered to be a violation of refugees' rights, showing that the relation between refugees and their hosts is increasingly conflictual.

In late August 2019, based on an agreement with Myanmar, the Bangladeshi Government prepared to repatriate about three thousands refugees, but the attempt failed.³¹ Soon after, on 25 August, about 200 thousand refugees gathered in a peaceful rally, to mark the 2nd anniversary of the beginning of their exodus from Myanmar and request citizenship and rights.³² Refugee representatives want the day to be internationally acknowledged as «Rohingya Genocide Day», hoping this will force Myanmar's stance towards accommodation and pave the way to their dignified return back home. The rally highlighted increased mobilisation on the Rohingya side and possibly prompted the Government, already frustrated by the failed repatriation attempt, to adopt measures limiting Rohingya's movements and expression. In September, the Government limited internet access in the camps and prohibited SIM cards' sale to refugees. Additionally, Bangladesh's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence recommended installing a wired fence around the camps to increase safety, reducing the freedom of movement of their inhabitants. Furthermore, violence in the camps increased, and tens of refugees were killed by the police for being allegedly involved

29. 'Bangladesh hangs killer of country's founding President', *New Age*, 12 April 2020.

30. Mujib Borsho was initially supposed to run from March 2020 to March 2021. However, the Government subsequently extended its duration to Victory Day 2021, i.e. 16 December 2021, in light of delays in the scheduled celebrations caused by the pandemic. 'Mujib Borsho extended till V-Day 2021', *Dhaka Tribune*, 16 December 2020.

31. 'Rohingya repatriation attempt fails again', *Dhaka Tribune*, 23 August 2019. Guaranteeing a safe environment in Rakhine is a fundamental condition for Rohingyas to resettle there. Both Bangladesh and Myanmar acknowledged the absolute importance of creating conditions conducive to the Rohingyas' return. However, Naypyidaw did little to ensure such conditions were actually met, thus causing repatriation plans to fail. See below, section 4.4. *The enduring Rohingya crisis: bilateral and multilateral ramifications*.

32. '«Genocide Day»: thousands of Rohingya rally in Bangladesh camps', *Al Jazeera*, 25 August 2019.

in drug trafficking and the murder of an AL member.³³ In August 2020, Genocide Day was again remembered by Rohingyas of Cox's Bazar, but this time silently.³⁴

In addition to this, the UN Committee against Torture's 2019 report mentioned «more than 100 reported cases in which Rohingya have been subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking within Bangladesh and that, in some cases, Bangladeshi border guards and military and police officials have been involved in facilitating the trafficking of Rohingya women and children». The report also drew attention to the fact that «the Bangladesh High Court has refused to entertain anti-trafficking cases filed by Rohingya and the authorities have failed to open investigations».³⁵

2.4. Addressing gender violence: rape and child marriage

Rape is widespread in Bangladesh. Based on national news reports, Bangladeshi NGO Ain-o-Salish Kendra estimated that 1351 women were raped in January-November 2019, and 1349 in January-October 2020.³⁶ Actual numbers are certainly much higher, considered that victims often avoid reporting due to scarce faith in the outcomes and fear of social backlash. Low conviction rates drastically reduce victims' incentives to access and obtain justice.³⁷

The years 2019 and 2020 saw several cases of sexual violence that sparked outrage, eventually triggering the Government to enhance the punishment for convicted rapists.

In April 2019 a 19 years-old girl from Feni, Nusrat Jahan Rafi, was burnt to death by teachers and fellow students inside the madrasa where she used to study, after having reported to the police her teacher for sexual harassment.³⁸ The horrific murder sparked protests in Feni and Dhaka, triggering the prime minister's direct involvement in the matter. In October, six months after Nusrat's death, all accused were sentenced to death, in

33. 'The Bangladeshi government cracks down on rohingya freedom of expression and movement', *ASEAN Today*, 12 September 2019; 'Let Us Speak For Our Rights: human rights situation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh', *Amnesty International*, 15 September 2020, pp. 22-23.

34. 'Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day: in silence they remembered', *The Daily Star*, 26 August 2020.

35. Committee Against Torture, 'Concluding observations on the Initial Report of Bangladesh', p. 13.

36. 'Violence Against Women -Rape (Jan-Oct 2020)', *Ain-o-Salish Kendra*, 5 November 2020; 'Violence Against Women Rape (Jan-Nov 2019)', *Ain-o-Salish Kendra*, 11 December 2020;

37. Committee Against Torture, 'Concluding observations on the Initial Report of Bangladesh', p. 12.

38. 'Nusrat Jahan Rafi: burned to death for reporting sexual harassment', *BBC News*, 18 April 2019.

an exceptionally speedy trial for a case of sexual violence in Bangladesh.³⁹ On 25 September 2020, a group of young men abducted a newly married couple and gang-raped the woman in Muraru Chand College's premises in Sylhet. The perpetrators were former students, living illegally in the University dorm, members of AL-affiliated Bangladesh Chatra League.⁴⁰ Again in September, a woman from Noakhali was harassed, stripped and gang-raped. However, the authorities allegedly came to know about the crime only one month later, when the perpetrators published the video of the rape in order to obtain a ransom from the victim. As the video went viral, not only the police took action, but outraged people across the country protested against the lack of protection offered by Government and authorities to women victim of sexual violence.⁴¹

The events highlighted once again that rapes are frequent occurrences and victims face strong disincentives to report, while rapists are subject to little accountability. In particular, the Noakhali gang-rape sparked widespread protests in Dhaka and prompted the Government to amend the Women and Children Repression Prevention Bill by introducing death penalty as a punishment for rape, earlier punishable only by lifetime imprisonment, death penalty being only applicable in the case of gang-rape. The Amendment also established that rape cases must be processed by the speedy trial tribunal and completed by 180 days.⁴² The Government passed an ordinance with immediate effect on 13 October 2020; the Parliament later approved the Amendment bill on 17 November 2020. However, the decision received criticism, including from women's organisation, in light of questions of both human rights and effectiveness. Human rights activists highlighted that death penalty violates the right to life and leaves no space for rectifying wrong sentences. Moreover, in a country plagued by gender violence at the systemic level, merely raising the severest punishment for rape to death penalty does little to address the root causes of rape culture.

Importantly, it remains in place in Bangladesh the «special provision» (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, sec.19) allowing the marriage of girls under 18 in certain instances, thus increasing their vulnerability to child marriage.⁴³ Child marriage is widespread in the country: in 2020 UNICEF estimated that 51% of Bangladeshi women married before their 18th birthday and ranked the country 1st in South Asia and 8th in the world

39. 'Murder and deliverance in Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 26 October 2019.

40. 'Bangladesh gang-rape by BCL activists at MC College triggers protests', *New Age*, 26 September 2020.

41. 'Noakhali rape came to be known after 32 days', *The Business Standard*, 5 October 2020.

42. 'Bangladesh clears death penalty for rape', *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 October 2020.

43. Committee Against Torture, 'Concluding observations on the Initial Report of Bangladesh', p. 12.

in terms of child marriage incidence.⁴⁴ Human rights organisations and scholars continue calling for a review of the law.⁴⁵

3. *Economic policy*

3.1. *The economy before and after the COVID-19 pandemic*

In 2019 Bangladesh recorded a GDP growth of 8.2%.⁴⁶ Following the disruption caused by the pandemic, GDP growth was projected to 5.2% for 2020, and 6.8% for 2021.⁴⁷ COVID-19 produced a considerable shock on the Bangladeshi economy, that is highly integrated with the global supply chains and dependent on exports, remittances, and foreign direct investments. The pandemic also cluttered the supply chain domestically. However, in econometric terms, the shock was relatively contained due to several factors, including a good agricultural production, the return of European RMG⁴⁸ buyers soon after the first European COVID-19 wave, and a sustained remittances inflow.⁴⁹ Remarkably, remittances surged just before the Bangladesh outbreak of the virus and went on to record a historical high, thus supporting the national economy during and after the shock. Most likely, in light of the emergency posed by the looming pandemic (and simultaneous natural disasters),⁵⁰ migrant workers rushed to send extra money back home, and many prepared their return to Bangladesh. The Government offered incentives for transferring through formal banking the remittances, often sent via *hundi*.⁵¹

Econometric indicators aside, in a country where most of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector, the health sector is under-funded and social safety nets are lacking, the pandemic did have a devastating impact on daily wagers. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the

44. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Ending Child Marriage: a profile of progress in Bangladesh*, 20 October 2020.

45. Plan International & Girls Not Brides Bangladesh, 'A Review of the Effectiveness of the New Legal Regime to Prevent Child Marriages in Bangladesh: Call for Law Reform', *Plan International*, September 2020.

46. World Bank, *GDP Growth (Annual %) - Bangladesh*, 2020; Asian Development Bank, *Economic indicators for Bangladesh*, 2020.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Ready-made garments.

49. '«Exports, remittance, agriculture lead path to economic recovery»', *Dhaka Tribune*, 4 October 2020.

50. See section 2.2. *Natural disasters*.

51. *Hundi* is a traditional informal remittance instrument popular in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Based on honour and connections, it allows people to transfer money from one place to another through intermediaries. Because *hundi* functions outside the world of formal finance, remittances transferred via *hundi* are not reflected in a country's balance of payments.

pandemic caused «an increase of national (upper) poverty rate to 35.0 per cent in 2020 from 24.3 per cent in 2016. At the same time, consumption inequality, measured by the gini-coefficient [sic], rose from 0.32 in 2016 to 0.35 in 2020».⁵² According to experts, struggling households resorted to child-marriage and interruption of girls' education as strategies to cope with reduced budgets.⁵³ Thus, the pandemic increased both inequality in general and gender inequality in particular.

The Government approved a relief package for BDT (Bangladeshi Taka) 121,353 crores (US\$ 14,329.11 million), equalling 4.3% of the country's GDP.⁵⁴ Most of it (80%) consisted of liquidity support to be disbursed by the commercial bank aimed at big, medium, and small enterprises. However, it resulted hardly accessible to small cash-based businesses. The package also included a fiscal stimulus, i.e. procurement of rice at subsidised prices, cash distribution to marginalised population, and agricultural subsidies.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the pandemic adversely affected Bangladesh's economic effort to manage the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, while further worsening already critical living conditions in the camps. About one million registered refugees live in the 34 camps of Cox's Bazar, where the most crowded inhabited areas have reached a density of one person per mere five sq meters.⁵⁶ Lacking sanitation facilities made infection prevention extremely challenging for dwellers.⁵⁷ The disease's real incidence is unknown and likely underestimated due to refugees' reluctance to access screening facilities.⁵⁸ While both refugee and host populations were negatively affected by containment measures, a report by a team of agencies active on the ground showed that the pandemic had a particularly harsh impact on non-male refugees. Like elsewhere, women were the least empowered to

52. 'Challenges of policymaking in times of pandemics: state of the Bangladesh economy in FY2020', *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, 7 June 2020, p. 16. The Gini coefficient, or Gini ratio, or Gini index is a measure of statistical dispersion developed by the Italian statistician and sociologist Corrado Gini in order to measure the distribution of wealth. It varies between zero (perfect equality) and one (absolute inequality). Accordingly, to write «gini-coefficient» is inaccurate.

53. UNFPA & UNICEF, *Adapting To COVID-19: Pivoting The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme To End Child Marriage To Respond To The Pandemic*, 23 September 2020.

54. Fahmida Khatun, 'How effective have stimulus packages been?', *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, 28 December 2020.

55. *Ibid.*

56. World Health Organization Bangladesh, *Rohingya Crisis Situation Report #31*, 10 November 2020, p. 6; OCHA, 'Cox's Bazar: Rohingya refugee population density by camp and block as of 30 April 2019', *OCHA Services – Humanitarian Response*, 22 May 2019; UNHCR Bangladesh, 'Rohingya Refugee Response - Bangladesh Operational Dashboard: 2020 Indicators Monitoring', *data2unhcr.org*, 31 March 2020, p. 1.

57. Rajon Banik *et al.*, 'COVID-19 pandemic and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: what are the major concerns?', *Global Public Health*, 15 October 2020, p. 1579.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 1578.

make life-saving decisions and burdened by increasing unpaid care work. Violence against women, transgender people and sex-workers increased, while girls became more vulnerable to forced/child marriage and schooling interruption.⁵⁹ To reiterate, the sanitary emergency caused by COVID-19 put at risk the progress achieved by Bangladesh in terms of gender equality, including in the refugee camps.

3.2. *Natural disasters*

Amid the pandemic, a catastrophic super-cyclonic storm (the first since 1999) named «Amphan» hit the country's coastal area on 20 May 2020, soon followed by monsoon floods in July. That of cyclones and floods is a yearly occurrence for Bangladesh. The country is morphologically prone to cyclones, that appear periodically; similarly, monsoon rain in July and August cause the rivers to flood the fields, providing fundamental nutrition to the soil. Due to aggressive anthropisation and climate change, however, cyclones are more frequent and monsoon destructive.

These natural disasters represent a massive threat as they cause casualties, population displacement and migration, and destruction of houses and livestock. Cyclones, in particular, cause also long-term damage to water resources, agricultural land, and fishponds due to water salinisation, and wound the delicate eco-region of the Sundarbans. The year 2019 alone saw two cyclones: «Fani» (3 May) hit 28 districts,⁶⁰ and «Bulbul» (10 November) 13.⁶¹ In 2020 «Amphan» affected nine south-western districts. Initial government estimates set the overall value of its damages at BDT 11 billion (US\$ 130 million),⁶² including BDT 217 crore (US\$ 25.62 million) in the export-oriented fisheries sector,⁶³ 1.5 billion in mangoes production (US\$ 17.7 million), and 10.5 million (US\$ 124,000) in livestock.⁶⁴ Putting in place early-preparedness plans before the storm reached its apex, authorities and aiding organisations managed to save lives: government sources reported that more than 2.4 million people were evacuated, and casualties

59. Inter-Sector Coordination Group Gender Hub and others, 'In the Shadows of the Pandemic: The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Rohingya and Host Communities', UN Women - Asia Pacific, 14 October 2020, p. 4.

60. Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG) Bangladesh, 'Cyclone «Fani» – Joint Situation Analysis', OCHA Services – Humanitarian Response, 13 May 2019.

61. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 'Operation Update Report Bangladesh: Cyclone Bulbul', International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (adore.ifrc.org), 6 January 2020.

62. 'Country Briefs - Bangladesh', FAO, 10 June 2020, pp. 163-64.

63. 'Coastal farmers take the brunt', The Daily Star, 22 May 2020.

64. 'Cyclone Amphan wipes Tk 11bn off Bangladesh, Government says', BD News 24, 21 May 2020.

amounted to 26.⁶⁵ Still, the storm overall affected the lives of 10 million Bangladeshis.⁶⁶

«Amphan» and the following protracted monsoon floods have been exceptionally destructive as they presented Bangladesh, already struggling to cope with the pandemic, with additional economic and logistic challenges. These were given by the magnitude of necessary relief and reconstruction works and the difficulty to observe prescribed COVID-19 prevention measures for the thousands of people who had been displaced by the cyclone and resettled in temporary accommodations.⁶⁷ When Amphan hit, rural households were already suffering as hundred thousand people were left jobless by the pandemic-induced lockdown of urban areas⁶⁸ and the closure of 25 state-owned jute mills, once the backbone of Bangladeshi exports, wanted by the Prime Minister in July as part of the Government's privatisation programme.⁶⁹

In conclusion, while the natural calamities discussed above highlighted Bangladesh's remarkable progress in terms of disaster prevention and management, they also stressed the urgency of climate change mitigation for a densely populated and resource-poor country, which is home to a growing number of climate refugees and paupers. The Government tackles climate change through the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), implemented through its various ministries,⁷⁰ and the National Adaptation Plan, supported by the UN Development Partnership (UNDP).⁷¹

3.3. *Towards the Least Developed Country graduation*

Because the pandemic's profound economic consequences will extend beyond the year 2020, they introduced a potential hurdle for Bangladesh's upcoming graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status, thus sparking a debate on the matter within the country.

65. 'Bangladesh: Cyclone Final Report Early Action', International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, 31 October 2020.

66. United Nations Bangladesh, 'HCTT Response Plan Cyclone Amphan', OCHA Services – Humanitarian Response, 20 June 2020, p. 5.

67. Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG) Bangladesh, 'Monsoon Floods 2020: Coordinated Preliminary Impact and Needs Assessment', OCHA Services – Humanitarian Response, 25 July 2020.

68. Many daily wagers working in big cities come from villages. For the impact of the pandemic on daily wagers, see section 3.1. The economy before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

69. Badiuzzaman Bay, 'End of state-owned jute mills: why close when you can reform?', *The Daily Star*, 4 July 2020; Wimal Perera, 'Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand reopening of closed mills', *World Socialist Web Site*, 2 November 2020.

70. Ministry of Finance of the Government of Bangladesh, *Climate financing for sustainable development: Budget Report 2019-20*, June 2020.

71. 'National Adaptation Plan', UNDP Bangladesh, 2019.

Bangladesh qualified for the first time for graduation in 2018, having met all three criteria, namely national income per capita (GNI pc), human asset index (HAI), and economic vulnerability index (EVI).⁷² The Committee for Development Policy (CDP), a subsidiary advisory body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), oversees the graduation process. Bangladesh's first triennial review is scheduled for February 2021. The graduation thresholds for 2021 are $\text{GNIpc} \geq \text{US\$ } 1,230$; $\text{HAI} \geq 66$; and $\text{EVI} \leq 32$.⁷³ In 2018 Bangladesh had scored 1,274, 73.2, and 25.2, respectively.⁷⁴ While the pandemic affected all indexes, Government and experts estimated that based on the projected GDP growth, Bangladesh would meet the GNIpc threshold. Renowned Bangladeshi economist Debapriya Bhattacharya argued that «the pre-pandemic scores had been high enough to withstand certain level of erosion. Moreover, even if the country does not fulfil one of the criteria, it will still be eligible for graduation based on the two other criterions».⁷⁵ Additionally, aware of the pandemic's impact on LCD economies and their graduation prospects, the CDP declared it would take into consideration not only the usual criteria but also «supplementary graduation indicators and country-specific analysis».⁷⁶

Ability to meet the thresholds aside, policy circles have discussed whether the Government should request to defer the graduation or stick to the old schedule, considering that with graduation comes the loss of a set of benefits exclusive to the LDC status, which have been beneficial especially to the country's exports. These advantages concern trade measures (e.g. preferential market access, lower tariffs), development cooperation (grant aid eligibility; loan terms), and participation in the UN and other fora (lower contribution to the UN budget).⁷⁷ The dilemma of graduation *versus* LDC benefits is not new for Bangladeshi policymakers; however, it came back to the fore in light of the unprecedented economic crisis induced by COVID-19.

72. To qualify for graduation, countries need to meet two out of three criteria, or have a GNIpc equal to twice the GNIpc criterion for graduation. The graduation criteria shall be satisfied for two consecutive triennial review. For more information on how the indexes are calculated, see: UNDESA, *LDC identification criteria & indicators*, 2020 (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldc-criteria.html>).

73. UNDESA, *Graduation from the LDC category: Eligibility*, 2020.

74. World Trade Organization & Enhanced Integrated Framework, *Trade impacts of LDC Graduation*, 8 May 2020, p. 12.

75. Debapriya Bhattacharya, 'Bangladesh's LDC Graduation: To Be or Not to Be Is NOT the Question', *The Daily Star*, 15 November 2020.

76. UNCDP, *Covid-19 and Graduation from the LDC Category*, 12 May 2020.

77. For a detailed explanation of how graduation could impact Bangladesh and other LDCs, see the abovementioned: World Trade Organization & Enhanced Integrated Framework, *Trade Impacts of LDC Graduation*.

A last but not least point to note is that the upcoming review's coincidence with the 50th anniversary of the country's independence heightened the political meaning of the review itself. As the country, led by Sheikh Hasina, goes ahead towards the 2021 graduation milestone, the review further enshrines the LDC graduation and the AL leadership into Bangladesh's national development narrative.

4. *Foreign policy*

4.1. *China*

Since 2016, the Bangladesh-China relationship has been framed as a «strategic partnership of cooperation». According to former diplomat and senior political analyst Iftekhar Chowdhury, this placed Bangladesh «perhaps a notch below the 'all-weather friendship' with Pakistan, but one at a very high pecking order, nevertheless». ⁷⁸ In 2019-2020 Bangladesh continued enjoying positive relations with China, and the highlight event was Hasina's official visit to the country (1-5 July 2019). ⁷⁹ Additionally, the year 2020 marked the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a fact that got frequent mention in Chinese and Bangladeshi news and official statements, proving the healthy state of the bilateral relationship.

While in China, Hasina attended the 13th Summer Davos Forum in Dalian and had meetings with Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping. ⁸⁰ The two Governments confirmed their commitment towards a sustainable solution for the Rohingya crisis. ⁸¹ They also pledged to complete the undertaken infrastructure projects, and deepen their cooperation in the field of defence, where China remains Bangladesh's main partner. Additionally, they signed new MoUs and deals covering a range of sectors. They also renewed their commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the BCIM Economic Corridor connecting India and China via Bangladesh and Myanmar. The BCIM has now become particularly relevant in light of India's boycott of the BRI, as it presents both China and Bangladesh with an opportunity to pursue projects without officially displeasing New Delhi but rather with its involvement. ⁸²

78. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in China: bilateral, regional and global implications', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 18 July 2019, p. 1.

79. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 7 July 2019.

80. *Ibid.*

81. See section 4.4. The enduring Rohingya crisis: bilateral and multilateral ramifications.

82. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in China: bilateral, regional and global implications', p. 2.

Bangladesh's trade balance with China – its largest trading partner – remained strongly tilted towards imports, including nuclear machinery, textile raw materials, electrical machinery, plastics and chemicals, iron and steel, ships, and paper.⁸³ On the other hand, the country exports to China RMG, fish/seafood, home textiles, jute manufactures, leather and leather manufactures, and raw jute.⁸⁴ Goods flows were naturally affected by the pandemic. On 16 June 2020 China offered Bangladesh a duty-free facility. This became effective in July, covering 97% of Bangladesh's export basket.⁸⁵

<i>Bangladesh's trade with China and India</i> (in US\$ million)						
	April-June 2019		July-September 2019	January-March 2020	April-June 2020	
Country	Export receipts	Import Payments	Export receipts	Import Payments	Export receipts	Import Payments
China	143	3224.3	119	2881.8	80	2205.8
India	222	1834.6	248	1710.8	109	885.2

Source: elaboration by the author, based on data from the Bangladesh Bank: 'A comparative position of country-wise Import Payments under Cash, Buyers credit, IDB/ITFC Loans and loans & grants for the quarters April-June, 2020, January-March, 2020 and April-June, 2019 are given below in TABLE-V (Total import payments by country)', Bangladesh Bank, *Country-wise export receipts of Bangladesh*, 2020.

The China-Bangladesh Free Trade Agreement (FTA) saw no conclusion but in Beijing Hasina and Li committed to «continue joint feasibility study on China-Bangladesh Free Trade Agreement (FTA)».⁸⁶

The pandemic-generated «COVID-19 diplomacy» represented for Bangladesh, that found itself in the throes of the crisis during the summer, an opportunity to get support; and for China, already beyond the peak of infections, a chance to gain in goodwill and advertise its «Health Silk

83. Bangladesh Bank, *A comparative position of import payments under cash, buyer's credit, long-term loans/grants, IDB/ITFC loans (short-term) by major top ten countries/commodities* is given below in TABLE-III for the quarters April-June, 2020 and January-March, 2020, 2020, p. 1.

84. Bangladesh Bank, *Review of export receipts of goods and services, 2017-2018*, 2020, pp. xii, xvii.

85. Ministry of Commerce of the Government of Bangladesh, নটেশি চীন কর্তৃক প্রদত্ত ৯৭% বাংলাদেশী পণ্যে শুল্ক-মুক্ত কেটা-মুক্ত প্রবণোপকারণ সুবিধা প্রদান সংক্রান্ত তালিকা, 2020 (<https://mincom.gov.bd/site/notices/90aa0371-9c9c-41db-9d66-df11b-b56eb14>).

86. 'Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the People's Republic of Bangladesh'.

Road».⁸⁷ In March 2020 Bangladesh received medical supplies from The Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation,⁸⁸ and, in April, from the Chinese Embassy in Dhaka.⁸⁹ Also in April the two Governments exchanged medical information with the participation of Chinese enterprises⁹⁰ and Chinese medical experts.⁹¹ The state-owned China Harbour donated food supplies in view of the pandemic, and again in August in support of flood-hit households.⁹² In May, over the phone, «Xi reaffirmed China's firm support to Bangladesh in fighting COVID-19»⁹³ and, in June, China sent to Dhaka a medical expert team.⁹⁴

As elsewhere, COVID-19-related negotiations and partnerships got enmeshed in the geopolitics of the region. In May 2020, during a meeting between CCP and AL members, China proposed six Bangladeshi cities join its Sister-cities programme. In general, the Sister-cities programme's official aim is to foster mutual understanding through people-to-people contact and goodwill between the partnering cities and countries; in this specific case, the Chinese deemed it useful to smoothly enable joint relief efforts.⁹⁵ However, China detractors saw it as one of «China's coercive tactics abroad»⁹⁶. Because the offer appeared as a condition for receiving support, critics denounced it as a Chinese attempt to gain strategic advantage in Bangladesh in exchange for relief aid.

Similar power politics developed around the question of vaccine provision. In July 2020, Sinovac, one of the three Chinese pharmaceuti-

87. 'China and Bangladesh create a new chapter in the fight against COVID-19', *Global Times China*, 10 August 2020.

88. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *The Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation donate medical supplies to Bangladesh*, 31 March 2020; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has written a letter to Jack Ma, thanking him for providing 30 thousand testing reagents and 300 thousand masks to the friendly people of Bangladesh in the fight against COVID-19, 29 April 2020.

89. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Cultural Counselor Sun Yan hands over anti-COVID-19 medical materials to Bangladesh local cultural and art organizations*, 29 April 2020.

90. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Chinese Enterprises' Aid to Bangladesh to combat COVID-19*, 30 April 2020.

91. 'China and Bangladesh create a new chapter in the fight against COVID-19'.

92. 'China Harbour donates rice for Corona-hit people of Anwara Upazila', *The Financial Express*, 6 April 2020; 'China Harbour provides relief to 1000 flood-hit families in Chattogram', *The Business Standard*, 9 August 2020.

93. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *President Xi Jinping speaks with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh on the phone*, 20 May 2020.

94. 'Chinese Medical expert team arrives in Bangladesh to help fight COVID-19', *Xinhua*, 8 June 2020.

95. 'China wants «Sister Cities» in Bangladesh', *Dhaka Tribune*, 19 May 2020.

96. U.S. Department of State, *China's coercive tactics abroad*, 2020.

cal companies involved in vaccine research, applied for carrying Phase-3 trials in the country; the Government took its time to review the plan, approving it in August. Soon after, Bangladesh was offered vaccine supplies from the Serum Institute of India. In October, the Chinese trials in Bangladesh were reportedly suspended due to disagreements concerning their funding.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, in August the Bangladeshi pharmaceutical giant Beximco invested in the Serum Institute to secure priority access to the to-be-developed AstraZeneca vaccine, and become its exclusive distributor in Bangladesh on the public and private markets. In November, Beximco and AstraZeneca signed a new deal, allowing the former to buy 30 million doses of the vaccine.⁹⁸ As governments around the world strived to obtain preferential access to the vaccine, for powers like China and India the fight against COVID-19 turned into an opportunity to further their influence: Bangladesh proved able to navigate the China-India rivalry to its advantage also in this situation.

Meanwhile, in May, China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) approved a US\$ 250 million loan, co-financed by the Asian Development Bank, to help Bangladesh cope with the pandemic's impact on the most vulnerable.⁹⁹ This is part of the total US\$ 1.244 billion loans signed with the AIIB between July 2019 and June 2020.¹⁰⁰

As far as major infrastructure is concerned, Bangladesh and China are currently partnering on numerous projects, some financed under the BRI and others via other bilateral agreements, through a mix of loan and grant aid. The status of most projects is «ongoing», except for a few for which no progress has been recorded since the initial pledges were made (this is the case of the China Economic and Industrial Zone in Chattogram; the National ICT Infra-Network for Bangladesh Government Phase III; and the Purbachal smart-city). Other projects suffered considerable delays in 2020 due to the pandemic that caused Chinese workforce to abandon the country and return only in October.¹⁰¹ These are the Installation of Single Point Mooring (SPM) with Double Pipe Line Project in Chattogram¹⁰² and the Expansion and Strengthening of Power System Network under DPDC

97. 'Bangladesh will not co-fund Sinovac's vaccine trial - Health Minister', *Reuters*, 3 October 2020.

98. 'Bangladesh signs Covid-19 vaccine deal with Serum Institute of India', *Pharmaceutical Technology*, 6 November 2020; 'Bangladesh's Beximco signs COVID-19 vaccine deal with India's Serum Institute', *Reuters*, 28 August 2020.

99. 'China-Backed AIIB approves \$250 million loan for Bangladesh's COVID-19 response', *Reuters*, 21 May 2020.

100. Economic Relations Division-Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Annual Report 2019-2020*, 2020, p. 41.

101. 'China-funded projects back on track', *The Daily Star*, 7 October 2020.

102. 'Covid-19 to further delay single point mooring (SPM) project in Chattogram', *United News of Bangladesh*, 8 May 2020; 'Coronavirus outbreak: SPM project moves at snail's pace', *The Financial Express*, 30 June 2020.

(Dhaka Power Distribution Company Ltd) Area Project – whose contract was signed in 2019.¹⁰³ The Multi-lane road tunnel under the river Karnaphuli instead, whose construction started in 2019, progressed despite the COVID-19 emergency,¹⁰⁴ while the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project got delayed due to design faults,¹⁰⁵ but got close to completion nonetheless. Other projects in progress include the modernisation of telecommunication Network for Digital Connectivity, whose works started in 2019;¹⁰⁶ the Power Grid Network Strengthening Project under PGCB, whose deal was signed during Hasina’s 2019 visit and loans secured in August 2020;¹⁰⁷ and the Establishment of IV Tier National and Dasherbandi Sewage Treatment Plant.¹⁰⁸

In August 2020 the Bangladeshi Government signalled its intention of moving away from coal-based energy and appraise the ongoing energy projects. It will confirm those nearing completion, and cancel those whose progress is deemed unsatisfactory. Currently, China is building two major power plants, in Payra and Banshkhali. The first one is already in production, whereas the second one –whose construction earlier had caused protests from displaced locals and even casualties– is among the project destined to a likely review.

In any case, China had already entered Bangladesh’s renewable energy generation plans, earlier in 2019, through a US\$ 400 million joint venture.¹⁰⁹ The two governments have reportedly considered to partner in additional endeavours, including the construction of a bridge connecting Barisal and Bhola¹¹⁰ and the expansion of the seaport in Payra (under the

103. ‘DPDC faces delay in project implementation as Chinese engineers yet to return to works’, *United News of Bangladesh*, 14 July 2020; ‘DPDC to implement Tk 205b mega project with Chinese funds’, *Prothom Alo*, 19 September 2019; ‘Underground cabling project faces delay due to Coronavirus fallout’, *The Business Standard*, 18 February 2020.

104. ‘Construction of Karnaphuli Tunnel gaining momentum’, *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 October 2020.

105. ‘Padma Bridge Rail Link Project’, *PBRLP*, 2020 (<https://pbrlp.gov.bd>).

106. Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, *Ambassador Li Jiming attends the commencement ceremony of modernization of telecommunication Network for Digital Connectivity Project*, 13 January 2020; ‘ZTE is working on the Telecommunication Network Modernization Project’, *Bangladesh Post*, 9 September 2020.

107. ‘BD gets \$1.0b China loan to improve power grid’, *Financial Express*, 8 August 2020;

‘Reliable power transmission replacing old lines in offing’, *The Business Post*, 19 September 2020.

108. ‘Construction of China-funded sewage treatment plant starts in Bangladeshi capital’, *Xinhua*, 19 August 2018.

109. ‘Chinese firm to build renewable power projects in Bangladesh: official’, *Reuters*, 28 August 2019.

110. ‘Longest bridge to link Bhola, Barishal’, *The Daily Star*, 14 January 2020.

BRI and the BCIM).¹¹¹ Bangladesh invited offers for funding for these and more projects in 2020.¹¹²

Additionally, China insinuated itself in yet another issue that used to be a bilateral Dhaka-Delhi matter: water-sharing. India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers. One of these is the Teesta that, sprung from the Himalayas in India's Sikkim, runs through West Bengal before entering Bangladesh. The two South Asian nations engaged in negotiations for years without ever reaching an agreement. The situation has left Bangladesh at a loss because its northern region relies on the Teesta waters and suffers floods in monsoon and water shortage in the dry season. In July 2019 Bangladesh sought a loan to implement the «Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration project», and in September 2020 the Government was reportedly considering Beijing's US\$ one billion engineering scheme aimed at altering the river bed for increased manageability.¹¹³ Besides raising doubts about the intervention's environmental sustainability, China's proposal alarmed India, that in October promptly offered Bangladesh to resume the long-delayed meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission.¹¹⁴

Overall, in 2019-2020 China-Bangladesh partnership faced certain inconveniences because of red tape, some delayed disbursements, and the exceptional complication presented by the China-originated pandemic. However, their relations kept expanding, as China remained Bangladesh's leading defence supplier, trading partner, as well as a fundamental development partner in the fields of infrastructure and energy as a source of both development aid and investments.

4.2. *India*

In 2019-2020, intense diplomatic exchanges between Bangladesh and India stood proof of the enduring importance of the bilateral relationship for both countries. Although Hasina missed Modi's swearing-in in May 2019 (substituted by President Hamid, who had a meeting with Modi in Delhi),¹¹⁵ she paid an official visit to India on 5 October 2019. On this occasion, Hasina and Modi inaugurated via videolink three completed projects and pledged new ones, aimed at boosting connectivity and transport of goods. They also

111. 'Payra Deep Seaport to see more delays as infrastructure development takes time', *Maritime Gateway*, 25 November 2020.

112. 'BD seeks \$ 6.4b Chinese fund for new projects', *The Financial Express*, 29 June 2020.

113. Pinaki Roy, 'To India's chagrin, Bangladesh turns to China to transform Teesta river', *The Third Pole*, 28 September 2020.

114. 'India, Bangladesh in talks for Joint Rivers Commission Meeting', *The Hindu*, 23 October 2020.

115. 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina won't attend PM's swearing-in for second time', *NDTV*, 27 May 2019; Press Information Bureau Government of India, *PM's meeting with President of Bangladesh*, 31 May 2019.

signed various MoUs and bilateral agreements, including those for building a Coastal Surveillance System in Bangladesh; for India's withdrawal of water from the river Feni; and for using Chattogram and Mongla Ports for India in-bound/out-bound goods, duty- and transit fee-free.¹¹⁶

The following month Hasina, invited by BCCI¹¹⁷ President Sourav Ganguly, reached Kolkata to watch India's maiden day-night cricket test match against Bangladesh. On this occasion, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee met her. Although the discussion's content was not revealed, it likely included the Teesta question, as Banerjee – with whom Hasina reportedly has good relations nonetheless – is the main stakeholder opposing the deal.¹¹⁸ In February 2019 Foreign Affairs Minister Momen was in Delhi for the 5th Meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC).¹¹⁹ Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar visited Dhaka in August 2019 and met Hasina and Momen.¹²⁰ The 6th JCC occurred virtually in September 2020, as the pandemic prevented it from taking place in Dhaka as per initial plans.¹²¹ In March 2020, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla spoke at an event by the Bangladesh Institute for International Strategic Studies (BISS), Bangladesh's official think tank.¹²² In August he called on Prime Minister Hasina during his official visit to Bangladesh.¹²³

Also, Bangladesh and India joined in celebrating important events that consolidated national narratives in the two countries. Cultural cooperation, often mediated by embassies, included the commemoration of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (2019), Bangabandhu's birth centenary (2020) and the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh War of Liberation (2021). In March 2020 Modi's high-level visit to Dhaka for the Mujib Borsho celebrations was cancelled, giving way to speculations regarding a worsening in the bilateral relations. The cancellation was officially justified with pandemic-related risks.

116. For full details, see: Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *India-Bangladesh joint statement during official visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India*, 5 October 2019.

117. Board of Control for Cricket in India.

118. 'Mamata Banerjee, Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina discuss bilateral issues', *India Today*, 23 October 2019.

119. Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *Joint Press Release on Joint Consultative Commission between India and Bangladesh*, 8 February 2019.

120. Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations*, 31 January 2020.

121. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh, *Joint Statement on the Sixth Meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission*, 29 September 2020.

122. Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *Foreign Secretary's Speech at Bangladesh Institute for International Strategic Studies (BISS) Event*, 2 March 2020.

123. Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *Statement on Foreign Secretary's Visit to Dhaka on 18-19 August 2020*, 26 August 2020.

Indo-Bangladeshi trade, development, and defence partnerships recorded positive outcomes. Bangladeshi exports, that enjoy duty- and quota-free access under SAFTA, grew in 2019, although trade flows were negatively affected by the pandemic in 2020. In April 2019 India's Exim Bank provided US\$ 500 million Defence Line of Credit.¹²⁴ During the 17th joint steering committee (JSC) on energy (August 2019), the two Governments agreed to develop a cross-border electricity interconnection between Katihar (India, Bihar), Parbatipur (Bangladesh, Rangpur) and Bornagar (India, Assam). Furthermore, Modi and Hasina held a virtual meeting in December 2020, resulting in the signing of additional cooperation agreements in the sector of energy, connectivity, culture, health, border management and security.¹²⁵

India dispatched COVID-19 relief aid to Bangladesh in three tranches, including masks and caps (25 March 2020), gloves and tablets (26th April 2020), and test kits (6 May 2020).¹²⁶ India also offered under the ITEC umbrella online courses for health professionals.¹²⁷ This aid was provided under the SAARC COVID-19 Fund announced by India with a contribution of US\$ 10 million, following PM Narendra Modi's call for a collective response to the emergency among SAARC members. Indian diplomatic sources reiterated that Bangladesh was a priority recipient of such aid in force of India's current «Neighbourhood First» approach to foreign policy. Bangladesh too contributed to the fund with US\$ 1.5 million.¹²⁸

India also provided humanitarian help to Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, an endeavour started in 2017 and continued in 2019-2020.¹²⁹

At the same time, while remaining relevant, active, and intense, Indo-Bangladeshi relations suffered for new and old problems.

A long-standing bilateral issue, border killings kept occurring along their 2000 km-long semi-porous land border, surveilled by Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and India's Border Security Forces (BSF). Killings of Bangladeshis at the hands of BSF have continued throughout 2019-2020 despite the latter's repeated pledges of bringing them to zero and using

124. 'Exim Bank provides USD 500 mn credit to Bangladesh for defence procurement', *Economic Times*, 6 December 2019.

125. Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, *Joint Statement on India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit*, 17 December 2020.

126. High Commission of India to Dhaka, Bangladesh, *3rd Tranche of Medical Assistance from India for Tackling Covid-19*, 6 May 2020.

127. High Commission of India to Dhaka, Bangladesh, কবেডি-১৯ ব্যবস্থাপনা বিষয়ে বাংলায় ই-আইটিসি কে রেস, 30 April 2020 (<https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in>).

128. High Commission of India to Dhaka, Bangladesh, প্রধানমন্ত্রীর শ্রী নরেন্দ্র মোদী এবং গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশের মাননীয় প্রধানমন্ত্রীর শেখ হাসিনার ফোনলাপ, 29 April 2020 (<https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in>).

129. High Commission of India to Dhaka, Bangladesh, ভারতের মানবিক সহায়তা, 27 February 2020 (<https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in>).

non-lethal weapons to stop smugglers.¹³⁰ In 2019 an Indian soldier was shot dead from across the border too.¹³¹ BSF and BGB kept holding semestral Director General-level meetings. On 22 December 2020, these took place in Guwahati, capital of Assam (an Indian state owning an approximately 260 km-long chunk of the Indo-Bangla border). The two parties differed on the extent of infiltrations, but agreed to conduct joint night patrols and to construct single row fences in priority patches of the border (The Hindu 2020).¹³²

River disputes remained another long-standing issue between the two countries. As mentioned, China's proposed Teesta project ruffled feathers in New Delhi. Moreover, it caught India amidst escalating border tensions with China. Also, as it is planned, the project lets the Chinese work not far from the delicate Siliguri corridor. These elements suffice to explain why China's proactivity on the Teesta question alarmed India. On the other hand, from Dhaka's point of view, the fact that New Delhi was unable to solve the issue so far and paid attention again to it only when it seemed to involve its strategic interests has reflected negatively on India's image of reliable neighbour.

Last but not least, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Citizens Register (NRC), finalised by India in 2019, are deemed Islamophobic and met criticism across broad sections of the Bangladeshi society. Critics fear that the CAA-NRC synergy will degenerate identity politics in Bangladesh and escalate illegal border-crossing from Northeast India, where the BJP has often advertised the measures as aimed against illegal Bangladeshi migrants.¹³³ The Hasina Government's official stance is that although unnecessary, the measures are India's internal matter. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi media and citizens condemned them.¹³⁴ When Modi's mentioned March 2020 trip was announced, it caused protests in Dhaka. The visit was later cancelled, officially because of risks related to COVID-19. The protests, no doubt, proved that anti-India sentiment in the country persisted and were possibly on the rise.

130. 'Border Violence (Jan-Dec 2019)', *Ain-o-Salish Kendra*, 6 January 2020; 'Border Violence by BSF (Jan-Oct 2020)', *Ain-o-Salish Kendra*, 5 November 2020. 'Bangladeshi man shot dead by BSF along Kurigram Border', *Dhaka Tribune*, 21 November 2020; 'BSF guns down two more Bangladeshis', *Dhaka Tribune*, 8 December 2020.

131. 'BSF soldier killed in firing by Bangladesh Guards at Bengal Border', *NDTV*, 17 October 2020.

132. 'Reports of large-scale Bangladeshi ingress into India denied', *The Hindu*, 25 December 2020.

133. Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, 'Does India stand to lose Bangladesh's friendship over CAA & NRC?', *ORF*, 21 December 2019.

134. Elizabeth Roche, 'Bangladesh PM says CAA «not necessary», but it is India's «internal affair»', *Mint*, 19 January 2020.

In conclusion, according to both governments, in 2019-2020 India-Bangladesh relations were at a high; yet they remained marred by enduring bilateral issues, an expanding Dhaka-Beijing partnership, and, last but not least, the persistent lack of trust for India, on the part of the Bangladeshi public opinion.

4.3. *Pakistan*

Relations with Islamabad have been strained for decades ever since East Pakistan declared independence as Bangladesh in 1971. A partial rapprochement occurred under Ziaur Rahman's BNP rule, traditionally closer to the erstwhile western wing. However, the prosecution of former pro-Pakistani and Islamist forces, vigorously pursued by the AL since the late 2000s, as well as Hasina's perceived closeness to India have cast a long shadow on the two nations. Relations have been almost non-existent in the latest years, and the 2016 execution of Bangladeshi members of JeI, condemned by the Pakistan National Assembly, marked their lowest point. In May 2019, the two countries seemed to have even suspended reciprocal visa issuance temporarily.¹³⁵

However, a series of gestures initiated by Pakistan in 2019-2020 gave room to speculations about a U-turn. Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi phoned his Bangladeshi counterpart A.K.A. Momen in September 2019 to apprise him on Pakistan's position over Kashmir 2019 (India had revoked art. 370 in August, and Pakistan would attempt to internationalise the issue). The two talked again in March, this time on the pandemic.¹³⁶ In July 2020 Pakistani High Commissioner I.A. Siddiqui met Momen in Dhaka. Days later Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a courtesy call to Sheikh Hasina, exchanging views on the COVID-19 emergency, Kashmir, and inviting the prime minister to visit Islamabad. Khan also expressed commitment to deepen relations.¹³⁷ This was reiterated on 3 December 2020, when the Pakistani High Commissioner Imran Ahmad Siddiqui and Hasina had a courtesy meeting in Dhaka.¹³⁸

135. 'No Block on visas for Pakistanis, says Dhaka High Commission', *Arab News Pakistan*, 23 May 2019.

136. 'Pakistan Foreign Minister calls Momen on telephone over Kashmir issue', *Dhaka Tribune*, 3 September 2019; Prime Minister's Office, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, *Foreign Minister Qureshi holds telephone conversation with Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen of Bangladesh on the COVID-19 pandemic*, 24 March 2020.

137. Prime Minister's Office, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, *Prime Minister Imran Khan spoke to H.E. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of People's Republic of Bangladesh*, 22 July 2020.

138. 'Pakistani Envoy meets Bangladeshi PM in sign of warming ties', *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2020.

The unusual Pakistani overtures to Bangladesh alarmed Indian analysts in particular, as they took place in a turbulent period for India, dotted by protests in many parts of the country, the imposition of *de facto* military rule in Kashmir, border tensions with China, and a general deterioration of its relations with regional neighbours.

Additionally, Pakistan expressed interest in deepening the trade relationship with Bangladesh, especially in terms of jute imports, and partnerships and investments in the textile sector.¹³⁹

While these moves signalled Pakistan's interest in revisiting the state of bilateral ties, they left critical bilateral issues untouched. These issues are rooted in the irreconcilable narratives of the 1971 facts that Pakistani and Bengali nationalisms have produced. The AL and most Bangladeshis remain determined that Pakistan owes a formal apology for its actions in East Bengal. On the other hand, Pakistan does not acknowledge the accuse of genocide, nor the number of victims alleged by Dhaka. Also, various individuals convicted in Bangladesh as war criminals are believed to have found shelter in Pakistan. Meanwhile, to Pakistan's dismay, the war crime trials continued.¹⁴⁰ Also, Bangladesh's official stance on Kashmir remains non-intervention, as it considers Kashmir an «internal issue» for the parties directly involved.

4.4. *The enduring Rohingya crisis: bilateral and multilateral ramifications*

Last but not least, a reflection on Bangladesh's foreign policy in the years 2019-2020 cannot but include a review of the international developments concerning the already mentioned Rohingya issue. This is because the refugee crisis remains at the centre of Bangladesh's bilateral, regional, and multilateral relations, namely with neighbouring Myanmar, with the Bay of Bengal region, and with international organisations – first and foremost the United Nations (UN) and its High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

As far as Bangladesh and Myanmar are concerned, despite promising signs in 2018, the year 2020 closes with a negative assessment of both their effort to jointly repatriate the refugees and – as a consequence – of the relations between Dhaka and Naypyidaw.

The two states are the key national stakeholders of the ongoing crisis, one being the place of origin of the migratory flows, and the other the destination and host-country of most of them. The Myanmar Government has historically considered the Rohingyas as foreigners of Bengali ethnicity originated from the Indian subcontinent, whereas for Bangladesh they

139. 'Pakistan exports to Bangladesh', *Trading Economics*, 2020; 'Pakistani entity to invest heavily in bangladesh', *The Financial Express*, 3 February 2020; 'Pakistan-Bangladesh ties: more than meets the eye', *The Express Tribune*, 31 July 2020.

140. See section 2.2. War crime trials.

are «Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals».¹⁴¹ However, the two countries seemed to have found a compromise long-term solution in January 2018, when they agreed to cooperate in repatriating Bangladesh-hosted Rohingyas to Myanmar. Initially scheduled to begin on 23 January of the same year, the plan was expected to bring back 1,500 refugees per week on a voluntary basis, excluding those already settled in Bangladesh before October 2016, when a Tātmadaw military crackdown had triggered the most recent (and heaviest) migratory flow.¹⁴² Human rights observers criticised the ambitious plan because as a bilateral deal it excluded the UNHCR, nor did it include any condition that could guarantee Rohingyas rights once they resettled back home – namely the obtaining of Burmese citizenship.¹⁴³ This made refugees strongly averse to repatriation.

A year later, addressing the UN Security Council in February 2019, Md. Shahidul Haque, then Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, deplored the absolute lack of results as far as the plan was concerned. He condemned Myanmar for not having created the necessary conditions for a voluntary and safe re-integration of the refugees in the country. He also added that Bangladesh «would no longer be in a position to accommodate more people from Myanmar».¹⁴⁴ However, in May 2020, under pressure from the UN, the Bangladeshi Navy rescued about 300 Rohingyas, stranded at sea for weeks. Rather than joining the camps in Cox’s Bazar, the refugees were quickly moved to Bashan Char, a recently built artificial island in the Noakhali District, located in the middle of the Bay of Bengal and further away from Rakhine.

A plan to resettle Rohingyas from the mainland to Bashan Char had been advanced by Bangladeshi authorities in 2015, attracting strong criticism from development and aid agencies as, among other things, they considered the island inhabitable and flood-prone.¹⁴⁵ While the Government had temporarily suspended the resettlement plan due to international criticism, the most recent arrival of refugees amid the COVID-19 pandemic brought Bashan Char back to the fore. The rescued refugees were moved to the island in order to be quarantined and avoid direct contact with the over-crowd-

141. World Health Organization Bangladesh, *Rohingya Crisis Situation Report #31*, p. 3.

142. ‘Rohingya Crisis: Bangladesh and Myanmar agree repatriation time-frame’, *BBC News*, 16 January 2018; ‘Bangladesh Agrees with Myanmar to complete Rohingya return in two years’, *Reuters*, 16 January 2018.

143. ‘Myanmar/Bangladesh: plan puts Rohingya at risk’, *Human Rights Watch*, 2 November 2018.

144. Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, *Statement by H.E. Ambassador Md. Shahidul Haque, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh during a UNSC Briefing Session by Special Envoy of UN Secretary-General on Myanmar*, 28 February 2019.

145. Ruma Paul, Clare Baldwin, & Andrew R.C. Marshall, ‘Floating island: new home for Rohingya refugees emerges in Bay of Bengal’, *Reuters*, 22 February 2018.

ed population of the camps.¹⁴⁶ This decision brought on Bangladesh widespread condemnation once again. Although in June 2019 the Government invited the UN agencies to inspect the island,¹⁴⁷ international agencies and observers like Human Rights Watch contend that «the government has gone back on this promise by refusing to return the refugees to their families, preventing UN agencies from visiting the refugees to provide protection, medical, and verification services, and refusing to allow UN agencies access to the island to conduct a transparent assessment of its habitability».¹⁴⁸ In early December 2020, the Government relocated to Bhasan Char another 1,600 refugees, followed by another 1,800 later in the month.¹⁴⁹

In the meanwhile, the pandemic paralysed economies across the world, including the economy of international aid. According to the UN-HCR, in 2020 the UN «appealed for more than US\$ one billion to meet the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh», receiving less than half the requested funds. The agency thus co-hosted a virtual donor conference in October 2020 together with the United States, United Kingdom and European Union to support the critical needs of both the refugees and Bangladesh's host population.¹⁵⁰ While the Rohingya conundrum keeps unfolding as one of the worst humanitarian crises in history, delayed repatriation and the pandemic have increased Bangladesh's financial and psychological strain. It is also feared that unemployment, misery, and frustration increasingly expose the camps-settlers to the risk of trafficking and radicalisation, thus creating a potential security threat for the country and the region.

Myanmar's unwillingness to take concrete steps towards repatriation is a major thorn in Bangladesh's side: Dhaka condemns the refugee crisis as a Burmese problem, rooted in the discriminatory and persecutory policies pursued by the Tatmadaw in the Rakhine state. Naypyidaw's lack of political will to take concrete steps towards repatriation might be partly explained by the fact that the country had been awaiting national elections in 2020, and a commitment by the National Democratic League (NDL)-led Government towards an unpopular cause could have jeopardised electoral results for the party.

Although currently Myanmar faces widespread political ostracization, it has been supported by China, which countered attempts to internationalise the crisis in 2017, 2018, and 2020. In November 2019, the Gambia,

146. 'Bangladesh quarantines hundreds of Rohingya rescued from sea', *Al Jazeera*, 8 May 2020.

147. 'UN agencies invited to assess Bhasan Char situation', *New Age*, 19 June 2020.

148. 'Bangladesh: move Rohingya from dangerous silt island', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 July 2020.

149. 'Bangladesh moves nearly 2,000 Rohingya refugees to remote island', *Al Jazeera*, 29 December 2020.

150. UNHCR, *UNHCR calls for solidarity, support and solutions for Rohingya refugees ahead of an urgent donor conference*, 20 October 2020.

backed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) lodged a case to the International Court of Justice against Myanmar alleging that its actions against the Rohingya accounted to genocide.¹⁵¹ In January 2020, the ICJ ordered Myanmar to enact provisional measures to protect the ethnic minority. However, enforcement remains problematic, as China promptly frustrated a UN Security Council's attempt to discuss the matter.¹⁵²

At the same time, China remarkably demonstrated a willingness to work within the dispute as a 'mediator' between the two neighbours. In September 2019, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China agreed to form a tripartite working group on repatriation,¹⁵³ although this did not produce any concrete follow-ups, as mentioned above. However, in October 2020 during a foreign minister-level exchange, China reassured Bangladesh of Myanmar's commitment towards repatriation. It also proposed to hold a meeting after the Burmese elections,¹⁵⁴ held the following month and resulted in another victory for Aung San Su Kyi's NDL.¹⁵⁵ China is a powerful and influential neighbour for both countries. It is Myanmar's primary development partner and practically its only political ally. Bangladesh is a recipient of Chinese foreign aid too, and state-owned Sinohydro has reportedly been involved in setting up infrastructure in Bhasan Char.¹⁵⁶ Thus, China made its way between Bangladesh and Myanmar as a potentially determinant player for the future of the Rohingya crisis and – by reflection – of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. Chinese involvement in the matter also has the potential to influence relations between Dhaka and New Delhi, as the latter competes with Beijing for hegemony in South Asia and is averse to any exertion of Chinese political influence in the region.

5. Conclusion

Having reviewed the major events of the years 2019-2020, this paper has presented a mixed picture. As a small state surrounded by mightier neighbours, Bangladesh proved its ability to navigate regional power rivalries and, to a great extent, turn them to its own advantage. Bangladesh also

151. International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)*, 23 January 2020.

152. 'UN fails to take action on order against Myanmar on Rohingya', *Al Jazeera*, 5 February 2020.

153. 'Myanmar, Bangladesh, China to form Joint Working Group on Rohingya repatriation', *The Irrawaddy*, 26 September 2019.

154. 'Tripartite talks on Rohingya repatriation after Myanmar general polls, China Foreign Minister tells Momen', *Prothom Alo*, 23 October 2020.

155. Richard Horsey, 'A deeper look into the Myanmar elections', *Myanmar Times*, 16 November 2020.

156. Ruma Paul, Clare Baldwin, & Andrew R.C. Marshall, 'Floating island: new home for Rohingya refugees emerges in Bay of Bengal'.

continued making remarkable progress on its development goals agenda. Its achievements in terms of disaster prevention and management, and post-pandemic growth rates stand witness to this.

However, in the case of Bangladesh relentless pursuit of economic growth and maintenance of stable political leadership have come at a high price for citizens' rights and for the overall health of the country's democratic institutions. Also, the fruits of Bangladesh's development are not shared proportionately, and, on the top of it, the crisis caused by COVID-19 further exacerbated growing inequality. The country remained highly susceptible to external shocks and climate change, with the most vulnerable sections of the population inevitably bearing the biggest burnt of any disruption.

