

Air pollution is a national crisis

And the authorities should act accordingly

ACCORDING to a report that is the first to assess the global cost of air pollution, in 2018 air pollution cost the world an estimated USD 2.9 trillion. The World Health Organization (WHO) already approximates that globally air pollution accounts for 29 percent of all deaths and disease from lung cancer, 17 percent from acute lower respiratory infection, and a quarter from stroke and heart disease.

Bad air quality is one index where Dhaka consistently tops the global chart—and more recently, it has cemented its place at the very top. A World Bank report previously estimated that Bangladesh loses about USD 6.5 billion every year due to pollution and environmental degradation in urban areas. However, given that the study is a few years old, and that air pollution has gotten significantly worse over the past years, the cost can safely be assumed to be higher now.

The environment, forest and climate change minister said that brick kilns are responsible for more than half the air pollution in the capital, followed by smog from a staggering number of unfit vehicles plying the city streets. But then again, we all know this. Different health and environmental groups have repeatedly highlighted this problem. And the media has time and again covered this issue. It is the authorities who have not done their part to address it. Given that the major causes of air pollution are well known and a number of clear-cut solutions have already been suggested to the government, the fact that the government has not responded timely is shameful, particularly because air pollution is responsible for the deaths and health problems of countless people including children.

The minister has also said that the authorities are looking into the matter. But what the authorities must realise is that people's lives and health are at stake here, which is why they must stop dithering about and act quickly.

Celebrating the changemakers

Daily Star honours the selfless acts of two farmers

WE are delighted to be able to honour the extraordinary contributions of two farmers at the 29th Anniversary programme of *The Daily Star* on Wednesday. They have shown the world how the dedication and determination of a single individual can bring about change in society. Considering their modest backgrounds and their reality of constantly struggling to make ends meet, it is truly humbling that these individuals have sacrificed their time, energy and resources to do something for their community and, consequently, their country.

We applaud Mohammad Soinuddin Miah's initiative to build a 1.5 km earthen road for his village, Chakgadadhar, in Tangail, and Abdur Rahim for building Kaliganj Pratibandhi Bidyalay, a school for disabled children.

These two men, both farmers, have taught us that conviction, hard work and years of sacrifice can bring any dream to fruition, regardless of one's socio-economic background. It's admirable when people, despite many setbacks, come forward to help others; such visionary individuals set a positive example for us.

However, where sustainability of their projects is concerned, there needs to be more support from the government. While Soinuddin Miah has sold his family's paddy to work on building a road, Abdur Rahim spends his income from selling crops and vegetables to run his school. Additionally, they are helped by their communities and relatives. In order to help their projects to become sustainable in the long term, they both require a steady source of funding as their household incomes and donations alone won't be enough to foot the bill in the future.

Here we must point out the importance of the contributions of these two men. Selflessly they have tried to make a difference in their community. One built a road so that people, especially children going to school, could travel without hassle and the other provides education and hope to the children with disabilities. These are projects normally taken up by the state and therefore the state should assist these individuals so that they can continue to contribute to the development of their communities.

We request our government and policymakers to recognise the contributions of these two individuals and provide them with the necessary financial and technical support so that they may continue and even expand their work. It is the contributions of such individuals, when added together, that constitute nation building.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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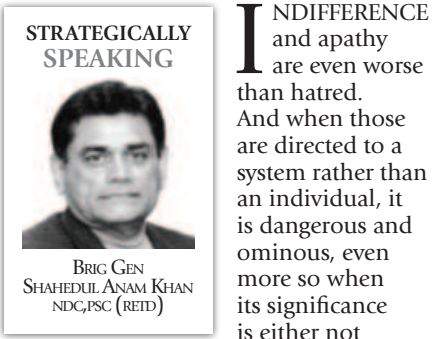
Save students from drugs

While the purpose of higher education should be gathering knowledge and skills and of course becoming a good human being, for some students the purpose seems to be the opposite as they indulge in activities likely to have contrary effects. I am talking about the students' exposure to drugs. A student has to work really hard for getting admission to a university, especially a public one, since the competition is high and only those with high calibre get the chance to get into their desired institutions. But unfortunately, after getting admission, many of these brilliant students get addicted to drugs and lose their interest in studies.

There are many who even fail to complete their education due to drug abuse. My question is, what are the university administrations doing to ensure that their campuses remain free from the clutches of drugs? Reportedly, those who killed BUET student Abrar were not only politically powerful but also used to taking drugs. The university administrations should give the issue due attention and raise a social campaign against drug abuse.

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Don't take voters' apathy lightly



INDIFFERENCE and apathy are even worse than hatred. And when those are directed to a system rather than an individual, it is dangerous and ominous, even more so when its significance is either not comprehended or disregarded wilfully. Thus, amidst the constant barrage of hyperbole springing from some office-bearers of the ruling party on the causes of the very low turnout in the recently held election in Dhaka city corporations, a sensible explanation was offered by the party's secretary general. He ascribed the reason for the voters shunning the polling centres to public apathy. It was not surprising to the careful observers—the scant presence of voters attending the dry-run practice of EVMS a couple of days before the polls betrayed a lack of enthusiasm among them. It was an indicator of things to come.

However, in the midst of the political theatrics, the only redeeming feature was the EVM, which, despite all its demerits, prevented inflation in the voter turnout figure by the EC, something we witnessed done after the 2014 elections. But nothing is foolproof if the system is operated, and the environment hogged, by only one side. Eyewitness accounts—and there were many in the media—narrated the manner in which the EVMS were used to cast the votes as per the suggestions of those who controlled the system.

It was surprising to hear all kinds of narratives to justify the indifference of the voters of the metropolis, less than 30 percent of whom turned out to choose who they wanted to be the ones holding the important posts of mayors and councillors. It was equally astounding to see the two winning mayoral candidates taking a self-gratifying pleasure in their victory without realising the serious consequences of people's indifference to democracy and democratic institutions in the country. It should be a matter of concern for anyone seeking public office to find himself or herself a winner in a supposedly democratic contest where the vast majority of the stakeholders preferred to remain absent.

Reportedly, the polling booths were not left to the voters alone, as there were other people extraneous to the system present there. While it is not the intention to dwell on the inviolability of the EVM—incidentally, most countries who had introduced the machine in the system have done away with it—it is difficult to explain the symmetry in the pattern of voting as released by the EC in the two

city corporations polls.

One wonders whether the ruling party high-ups are aware of this either. If that were the case, the people would have been spared the imprudent comments describing this election as being the "best" in the country's electoral history. One senior AL office-bearer, in his unfathomable wisdom, even accused the BNP, holding it responsible for the low turnout, without offering any plausible explanation. Where, may one ask, were the local AL leaders? What is it that

and disregard for the decline of the state of democracy and democratic institutions in the country. Both are dangerous and portend an ominous future for our democracy. The DNCC/ DSCC polls have served as a damning indictment of our polity and democratic dispensation. There is no need to undertake any research into the reasons of the low turnout, as one Bangla daily had suggested after the polls. What is needed though is to cogitate on the only reason that the AL secretary general, in

equally worse when it comes to the manifestation of a relationship between the state (government) and the citizens, and can wreak immense damage, as warned by many philosophers, statesmen and politicians. French philosopher Montesquieu considered the apathy of a citizen in a democracy as being more dangerous to public welfare than the tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy.

What one hopes our politicians would do—particularly the ruling party—is to determine how people's apathy and



A combination picture shows different moments from the near-empty polling centre at Mohammadpur Government High School during the election in Dhaka city corporations on February 1, 2020.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

demotivated even them from turning up or herding their supporters to the polling centres? Are we to believe that AL supporters were also swayed by BNP arguments, whatever those were, to keep their distance from the polling centres? It is hard to believe that the BNP has the power to coerce ruling-party supporters into keeping away from voting, when very few of its own agents managed to get inside the centres.

What was betrayed in those insensible, and some might say puerile, comments was either that the ruling party is not aware of the consequences of the issue, or their total indifference to

a welcome display of objectivity, had suggested—APATHY of the voters.

The word "apathy" should not be taken lightly, as our politicians have done, not in the case of human relationship and even less in the case of elections, voting and voters. A display of apathy or indifference, which is worse than hatred, reflects an abysmal situation in the state.

American author Helen Keller termed the apathy of human beings as the worst kind of evil for which science has discovered no remedy yet. She was, of course, speaking of it in terms of human relationship. But it can be

the eventual slide to cynicism can be arrested. The reasons for people turning their back on elections are not far to seek. It is only the politically blind and deaf who are unable to get the message that the people's abstention conveys. Such an eventuality will be detrimental to politics, democracy and public interests. That is something totally unacceptable. Is it not the time to ponder on the matter, particularly in the centenary year of the colossus who had dedicated his life to democracy, the rights of people and freedom of speech?

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Intellectual property raises costs of living

CLAIRE LIM and JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

MANY medicines and medical tests are unaffordable to most of humanity owing to the ability of typically transnational pharmaceutical giants to abuse their monopoly powers, enforced by intellectual property laws, to set prices to maximise profits over the long term.

Most basic research is funded by government grants, and in recent years, by philanthropic initiatives. When a profitable opportunity presents itself, venture capitalists fund "last leg" efforts to patent an innovation and "take it to market", as the patent holder "takes all".

Patents, a form of intellectual property rights (IPRs), are believed by many to be necessary to incentivise innovation, and to recover research and development costs, by creating a temporary legal monopoly.

IPRs are monopoly rights

After securing patents, patent holders typically take additional measures to deter and undermine potential competitors, and to consolidate and extend their monopoly position for as long as possible by any means available. Private companies have then used their monopolies to charge exorbitant prices.

In 2015, Turing Pharmaceuticals bought the rights to Daraprim—a drug used by cancer and HIV patients to fight deadly parasitic infections—raising its price 50-fold from USD13.50 to USD 750! The "price gouging" company was controlled by Martin Shkreli, dubbed "Pharma Bro" by the US media and once deemed "America's most hated man".

Private companies eager to extend their monopolies try to "evergreen" them, by registering "follow-on" patents involving minor variations closely linked to the original invention. By evergreening, the patents system has been used by companies to create long-term monopolies.

Others engage in "patent trolling", obtaining many patents to profit from litigation or licensing, without inventing anything or making products of their own. Trolling enables patent owners to blackmail those in need of their patents, sometimes by creating "patent thickets"—webs of overlapping IPRs—and related bottlenecks, limiting the utilisation of patented knowledge and effectively hindering further innovation.

Before the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017, TPP provisions would have extended IP protections to cover "biologics", i.e., naturally occurring substances, such as insulin for diabetes

patients. These onerous TPP provisions have been suspended in the successor Comprehensive and Progressive TPP (CPTPP) following US withdrawal, but can easily be reinstated, e.g., to induce the US to rejoin the TPP.

Tripping up public health

Through various means, US-style IPR regimes have spread worldwide since the adoption of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Under TRIPS, all WTO members have to provide a minimum level of IPR protection which includes, among other things, patent protection for a minimum of 20 years, including for imported IPRs registered in other countries.

from pharmaceutical giants and their governments to limit, if not eliminate, the scope of these exceptions.

Malaysia is the first country to use "compulsory licencing" under TRIPS to produce sofosbuvir for Hepatitis C treatment. The drug, from patent owner Gilead, costs almost RM 300,000 (USD 68,000) for the full course, while generic substitutes cost just over RM 1,000. US "big pharma" has applied pressure on Malaysia to stop using its compulsory licence.

IP for intellectual piracy

Developing countries are generally unable to check the monopolistic practices of transnational pharmaceutical conglomerates due to underdeveloped antitrust regimes, weak law enforcement



People segregate expired medicines outside a chemist store in New Delhi, India, on February 2, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/SAUMYA KHANDELWAL

TRIPS also stipulates conditions for using the "compulsory licence" concession allowing governments to license the use of a patented invention to a third party or government agency without the consent of the patent-holder.

There is moot evidence that TRIPS benefits developing countries by attracting foreign investment, promoting technological transfer and increasing innovation. Instead, TRIPS has imposed substantial, avoidable costs on developing countries.

Where developing countries have made use of TRIPS concessions, they have faced international pressure

capacities and their influential partners. Such companies may re-package medicinal products and processes from developing countries' "traditional knowledge systems" to secure patents on them, including naturally occurring substances known as biologics.

Turmeric is widely used in India for medicine, food and dye, among other things. In 1995, the US granted the University of Mississippi Medical Center a patent for the use and administration of turmeric powder to heal wounds, granting it an exclusive right to sell and distribute turmeric.

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The Indian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) objected, arguing that turmeric had been used in India for centuries, providing historical references in Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi and other languages. The US patent was eventually revoked because it lacked the "novelty" element, but it required herculean efforts.

Alternatives

Developing countries are now no longer able to require technology transfer, further limiting their ability to develop their own technological capacities and capabilities. Hence, many developing country governments are told they have no other way to industrialise except by generously inducing transnational companies to locate parts of their "value-adding" activities in their economies.

The book "Innovation, Intellectual Property and Development", by Joseph Stiglitz, Dean Baker and Arjun Jayadev, suggests alternatives to incentivise innovation, especially relevant for developed economies. These include: centralised direct R&D financing; decentralised funding through tax breaks for research spending; using prizes to recognise and reward innovative research; and establishing open source platforms to promote free knowledge flows.

Without the strong private monopolies enabled by current IP rules, the currently unaffordable prices of medicines and other products can be significantly reduced while developing countries will have much better prospects for developing internationally competitive industrial capacities and technological capabilities.

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