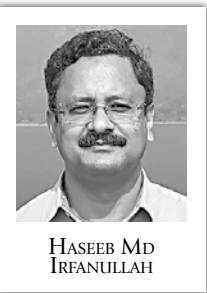


Will nature conservation remain a priority in post-corona Bangladesh?



THE coronavirus pandemic has revealed three alarming connections between us and nature. First, viruses like the one causing Covid-19 often jump into people from wild animals. Ebola, Nipah, SARS, Yellow Fever, and Zika are the same, to name but a few. So, hunting, selling or eating wildlife or destroying their habitats must be stopped, if we do not want to see such pandemics again.

Second, while we enjoy the pleasant photographs of wildlife roaming around human settlements under lockdown, the pandemic could not stop us from destroying nature. According to the National Space Research Institute of Brazil, more than 1,200 square kilometre of the Amazon rainforest—an area 10 times larger than Dhaka city—was destroyed in January to April this year during the pandemic. This deforestation is 55 percent more than that in the same period of 2019. A recent Greenpeace report has already warned that the Amazon may become the source of the next zoonotic pandemic.

Third, nature-based industries have been hit hard due to the pandemic. In Africa, wildlife tourism is a USD 30 billion-industry employing about four million people. As safari tourism is now closed due to Covid-19, unemployment and food insecurity are on the rise in many African countries, leading to a significant increase in wildlife poaching as a source of income and food.

However, before the “corona crisis”, we were alerted about the unprecedented global “biodiversity crisis”. Last May, the United Nations reported that one in every eight plant and animal species of the world would be extinct in the next few decades unless we

take drastic actions. Subsequently, 2020 was named a “super year for biodiversity and nature”, which called for desperate measures to halt catastrophic biodiversity loss. As a part of that, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has already drafted a “Global Biodiversity Framework” with ambitious goals and targets to be met by the countries by 2050. The framework was supposed to be approved by all countries in a conference in October 2020, in Kunming, China, but has now been postponed.

As the governments press the restart button and the paused global economy starts gaining its momentum, will nature conservation remain a priority in the post-coronavirus era?

We are already seeing billions of dollars of stimuli being sanctioned by governments to stabilise their economies. We may therefore see significant budget cuts in global development assistance in many sectors, including nature conservation. We saw similar reductions a few years ago when the refugee influx hit Europe. We may see major budget revisions in ongoing conservation projects and programmes to meet increasing livelihood demands from local people. This may allow less resources for restoring degraded habitats, protecting important ecosystems, and conserving threatened plants and animals.

The pandemic may further highlight the relationship between poverty and over-dependency on nature. Through a country-wide survey, BRAC has recently shown that extreme poverty increased in Bangladesh by 60 percent, accompanied by increased food insecurity. These are disappointing numbers for a country which reduced its poverty from 56.7 percent in 1991 to 20.5 percent in 2019. Nevertheless, a loss of livelihoods and food insecurity would push old and newly poor people to depend more on harvesting natural resources, leading to over-exploitation of biodiversity and further degradation of ecosystems.



Dolphins spotted in Istanbul, coming further up the Bosphorus than usual. PHOTO: AFP

When it comes to nature conservation, Bangladesh took some amazing actions over the last 50 years. The country, for example, passed the Bangladesh Wild Life (Preservation) Act, 1974 soon after its independence, which was later updated in 2012. In 2011, the constitution was amended to make biodiversity conservation a responsibility of the state. And last November, the Bangladesh Parliament unanimously adopted a resolution on “Planetary Emergency” considering the dire climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

So, as the Government of Bangladesh allocates resources to tackle the pandemic and its aftermath, and continues reviving its economy, we expect its visionary leadership also in protecting biodiversity. Bangladesh can do so by taking immediate major actions to

plan, manage and fund nature conservation.

First, a quick analysis of relevant strategic and planning documents of Bangladesh show that we have widely embraced nature-based activities to ensure people’s well-being and resilience to climate change—be it the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2009), the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, or the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2015–2020). We plan to harness benefits from nature in numerous ways—sustainably managed forests and wetlands give us food, water, fuel, medicines, and a liveable environment, while coastal plantation protects us from cyclones and storm surges. In the post-corona era, we must continue putting nature at the centre of our development, as we prepare the Eighth Five-Year Plan (2020–2025)

or an immediate coronavirus recovery plan, for example.

Second, as soon as the pandemic is over, we must revitalise our nature conservation governance systems already in place. We have more than 20 years of learning and experience in community-based natural resource management and participatory protected area management. The Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017, the Ecologically Critical Area Management Rules, 2016, and the Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 give our nature governance a strong legal basis. Bangladesh Forest Department and the Department of Environment should capitalise on those pre-coronavirus developments and stop any unsustainable management of our ecosystems in the post-coronavirus era.

Finally, it has been more than three years since the Bangladesh Parliament passed the Biodiversity Act. Among many provisions, this law expects to establish a Biodiversity Conservation Fund to protect the country’s biodiversity. As the government prioritises sectors and allocates resources, it is the high time to establish this Fund to complement the Planetary Emergency resolution endorsed by our parliament. Ten years of experience of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in managing the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund can be of immense value in this regard.

Nature conservation *per se* cannot protect us from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Only large-scale testing, medical facilities, social distancing, and maintaining hygiene can flatten the “coronavirus curve”. However, we need to protect our nature and biodiversity more than ever before to avoid similar pandemics in the future.

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US military drawdown in Saudi Arabia threatens to fuel arms race

The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw Patriot anti-missile defence batteries from Saudi Arabia is likely to fuel an already brewing arms race as the kingdom attempts to catch-up with Iran’s nuclear development as well as its space, ballistic missile, and drone capabilities



ONE thing is certain, the recent US military pullback from Saudi Arabia will fuel a brewing arms race in the Middle East at a time when the region, struggling with the public health and devastating economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, can least afford it. Saudi Arabia is likely to see the withdrawal, despite a seemingly reassuring phone call between Saudi King Salman and President Donald J Trump, as further evidence that it cannot fully rely, for its defence, on the United States.

The drawdown involves two US Patriot anti-missile systems that were sent to the kingdom last year to bolster its defences in the wake of alleged Iranian watershed attacks on Saudi oil facilities and oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. The withdrawal came on the heels of the successful launch of Iran’s first military reconnaissance satellite that not only catapulted the Islamic Republic into an elite group of about a dozen countries capable of orbital launches, but also signalled its capabilities despite crippling US economic sanctions and a public healthcare crisis.

The satellite “will play a role in identification missions and in providing strategic assistance to the armed forces in identification, communication, and navigation missions... We must use these satellites and provide services to the armed forces,” said Iranian General Ali Jafarabadi, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards’ space division. Iran hawks in the United States and Israel worry that the satellite will enhance the Islamic

Republic’s ballistic missile capability, a pillar of its defence strategy, as well as the ability of Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Shiite militia in Lebanon, to convert its rocket and GPS-guided weapons stockpile into smart munitions.

The Trump administration’s drawdown decision was announced amid estimates that Iran’s gradual backing away from a 2015 international agreement—that curbed its nuclear programme in response to a US withdrawal from the accord in 2018—had

warning, at the time that Trump was gearing up to withdraw from the nuclear agreement, that “without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible.”

A report last week by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) suggested that talks with the kingdom on US help to create a Saudi civil nuclear programme had stalled because of Saudi reluctance to agree to enrichment and reprocessing restrictions and signing of an Additional Protocol with the

is a pillar of Prince Mohammed’s troubled Vision 2030 plan, designed to streamline and diversify the Saudi economy that has been thrown into doubt by the global economic depression. The kingdom this week tripled sales taxes from five to 15 percent and suspended cost-of-living allowances for government employees to cope with a fiscal crunch.

Anthony Cordesman, a Washington-based Gulf military analyst, warned that the Saudi plan to build a defence industry was not the best way to diversify the kingdom’s economy, even if it would create some jobs and boost its technology sector. There is “virtually no way to waste money more effectively than trying to create an effective technology base or fund a weapons assembly effort in an area of industry and technology which is so demanding, offers so few real-world benefits in job creation, and where there often is so little ability to use the technology needed for specific weapons or purposes—particularly civil ones,” Cordesman said.

“Such an effort would involve other problems—the domestic needs for such weapons is limited and Saudi Arabia would likely be unable to compete in selling these weapons on the international market,” Cordesman went on to say.

Iran’s satellite launch is the latest building block in an arms race that Iran, like the UAE, is ironically better placed than Saudi Arabia to compete in, given its already existing defence industry and more diversified industrial base. Ballistic missiles and drones are other building blocks. Satellite images revealed last year that Saudi Arabia had a facility deep in the desert designed to test and possibly manufacture ballistic missiles that potentially would be capable of delivering nuclear warheads to targets thousands of kilometres from their

launch point. The facility is believed to be intended to counter Iran’s far advanced ballistic missile programme.

The kingdom is similarly set to begin next year producing military drones that would match Iran’s bomb-carrying unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that reportedly have a range of 1,500 kilometres.

China agreed in 2017 to build a facility in Saudi Arabia to produce UAVs, the People’s Republic’s first overseas military manufacturing site.

“The Middle East has become a drone warfare theatre,” said Alessandro Arduino, a drone warfare researcher at Singapore’s Middle East Institute. “Their deployment has ushered in a new era of post-coronavirus deterrence and turned conventional military doctrine on its head. From Yemen to Libya and Syria, warring parties resist calls for a truce, emboldened by the role of armed UAVs.”

The reality on the ground, however, is neither of these countries can presently afford the extraordinary financial and technological cost of such militaristic endeavours when their economies are battered by a far-reaching global depression, a collapse of oil prices, and a health pandemic. Iran, moreover, is struggling to grope with US sanctions while Saudi Arabia faces painful fiscal problems and structural reforms.

This story was first published in Inside Arabia. A podcast version of this story is available on Soundcloud, iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, TuneIn, Speaker, Pocket Casts, Tumblr, Podbean, Audacibel, Patreon and Castbox.

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In 2019, the US sent Patriot missile batteries to Saudi Arabia to bolster its defences in the wake of alleged Iranian watershed attacks on Saudi oil facilities. PHOTO: SEBASTIAN APEL-U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE VIA AP

cut in half the time it would need to produce enough weapons-grade fuel to build a nuclear weapon.

The risk of an arms race was explicit in Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which would allow IAEA to obtain expanded information about Saudi nuclear activities and grant it access to facilities.

The development of a local defence industry

JOHN STUART MILL
(1806-1873)
British philosopher and economist.

One person with a belief is equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Tie
- 5 Acid's opposite
- 9 Michelangelo work
- 10 Smooths out
- 12 Raring to go
- 13 Showed over
- 14 Jail, in slang
- 16 Thurman of "Kill Bill"
- 17 -- Aviv
- 18 Unpopular mailer
- 20 Folk-blues singer
- 22 Land in the sea
- 23 Roulette bet
- 25 Movie pooch
- 28 Basswood tree
- 32 Fraud

DOWN

- 1 Used a rotary phone
- 2 Entertain
- 3 "Up and --!"
- 4 Grows fond of
- 5 Hall of Fame catcher
- 6 Broad st.

- 7 Virus fighters
- 8 Paint type
- 9 Trattoria sauce
- 11 Catch
- 15 Shoulder ornament
- 19 Bearing
- 21 Trolley's kin
- 24 Tall grazer
- 25 Sean of "The Lord of the Rings"
- 26 Frightens
- 27 Knock back a few
- 29 Coy
- 30 History makeup
- 31 Bookish, perhaps
- 33 Precursor of Windows
- 37 Irrelevant
- 39 Stretch of years

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	O	P	I	S	P	E	R	P	T
T	R	I	A	D	E	X	E	R	T
U	N	C	L	E	S	A	F	E	R
B	A	T	P	R	O	M	I	S	E
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N	I	C	E	R	N	O	T	E	D
S	E	N	D		N	B	E	S	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

WHEN I LET THEM HAVE "CASUAL FRIDAY" I DIDN'T MEAN THIS!

YOU SHOULD BE MORE SPECIFIC

NEXT WEEK, IT'S "FORMAL FRIDAY"

GREET MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

MOM, CAN I HAVE A SLEEPER WITH MY FRIEND BROOKLYN THIS WEEKEND?

SURE!

BWAA-HA-HAAAA

AND CAN HANNIE BE STUFFED IN A CAGE UNTIL IT'S OVER?

SORRY, HE'S PART OF THE PACKAGE.