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FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Justice for our murdered workers in Libya

National and transnational human trafficking gangs must be stopped

THE horrific killing of 26 Bangladeshi migrants in Libya last week has once again brought to light the fact that young, hardworking Bangladeshis are frequently falling victim to the various national and overseas human trafficking gangs, as they leave their home seeking greener pastures in different European countries. According to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), more than 50 Bangladeshi nationals had been involved in trafficking the 26 Bangladeshis who were killed by their kidnappers in the North African country. The CID investigation has also found names of some Bangladeshis involved with human trafficking gangs in Libya, who are now staying in that country.

Libya has been a destination for Bangladeshi migrants since long because of its rich economy and also because of its important geographic location—it has been used as a transit station for people attempting to reach Europe across the Mediterranean. However, different human trafficking gangs became active there over the last decade, taking advantage of Libya’s civil war. And Bangladeshi migrant workers seem to be the biggest target of these groups.

While our mission in Libya needs to strengthen its efforts to ensure the safety of our workers there, we also need to gear up efforts, here at home, to apprehend members of the various human trafficking gangs that are operating across the country. There are hundreds of fraudulent recruiting agencies which must be identified; and all recruitment agencies need to be brought under a legal framework to root out fraudulent practices. The 26 Bangladeshis who were killed in Libya and those injured in the incident had to provide Tk 3-4 lakh each to the traffickers to go to the country. But in return, they were held hostage on a foreign land, tortured, and eventually killed or maimed.

It is laudable that the law enforcers have already arrested eight people, including the chairman and managing director of a recruitment agency, in connection with this incident. We hope they will soon arrest the entire trafficking gang responsible for this tragedy. We also hope that our law enforcers will always remain vigilant to stop the activities of these gangs.

We would also like to see a strong stance by our foreign ministry in this connection. It should communicate with the Libyan government to ensure exemplary punishment of the killers and their enablers and demand compensation for the victims’ families. Bangladesh should also seek help from international organisations including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for providing assistance to the Bangladeshis stuck in the war-torn country.

# A great display of community service

We are again reminded of what the youth have to offer

A group of as many as 15 young men from the Bamankhan village of Jhalakathi Sadar Upazila took the initiative and repaired about one kilometre of a damaged dirt road that connects Bamankhan, Bamankathi and Aoukhira villages. We applaud them for their good work which will make life a little easier for the residents of all three villages.

Floods from past years had already damaged the road and the super-cyclone Amphan recently inflicted the worst damage. Villagers—especially school students, women and the elderly—had not been able to use the road during the monsoon when it often went under water because of the rain. And so the villagers had, on multiple occasions, petitioned the members and chairmen of local union parishads concerned to get the road fixed. When asked, a member of Suktagar Union Parishad in Rajapur upazila claimed that they had made attempts to repair the road some days ago, but could not finish the job because of some unspecified problems. The young volunteers, on the other hand, seemed unfazed by such problems, as they completed the repair work in a matter of just days.

The work done by these young men should provide encouragement to the concerned authorities of different communities to involve members of their own areas for the development and improvement of their respective localities—as it is they who have the most stake in it. By properly planning and mobilising members of their own communities, local authorities can also help create jobs in their localities and ensure that young people in their area are involved in productive, rather than destructive, activities.

We call on the government to take note of the fact that, if given a proper chance, the youth of this country can contribute greatly to its improvement.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Human trafficking must end

Recently, we were shocked to learn about the tragic murder of 26 Bangladeshi workers in Libya, which brought renewed attention to the subject of human trafficking. Human trafficking is a serious transnational crime. People who aspire to work abroad are mainly targeted by the traffickers. A significant portion of Bangladesh’s trafficking victims are men recruited for work overseas with fraudulent employment offers. They are subsequently exploited under conditions of forced labour or debt bondage. Women and children from Bangladesh are also trafficked for exploitation.

Speaking of the Libya incident, even though the authorities have reportedly arrested the ringleader of the human trafficking gang responsible for some of the Bangladeshis killed and injured, it is not enough at all. The authorities must crack down on the local agents who lured the poor from different districts with the promise of high-paying jobs abroad. They must be punished severely for their crimes. Also, we must pressure the Libyan government to immediately arrest those responsible for killing our fellow countrymen.

Md Zillur Rahman, Dhaka



HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

WELL, the Sundarbans has done it again! As it has been doing for hundreds of years. This time, it took the blow of super-cyclone Amphan and saved us from severe devastation. When it comes to saving people from coastal flooding, Bangladesh is one of the top three countries in the world getting the most benefit from its mangroves. A recent study estimated that a 20-km mangrove stretch, especially near cities, could give more than USD 250 million flood protection benefit a year. From these numbers, we can only partly imagine the importance of the Sundarbans to Bangladesh.

Of course, protection against natural calamities is only one of the numerous benefits we get from this magnificent jungle: we have oxygen to breathe in, honey to relish, fish to savour, fuelwood to burn, materials to thatch, waterways to navigate, festivals to celebrate, Bengal Tiger to cherish, beauty to photograph—to name just a few. The Sundarbans may have officially become the world’s heritage when the UNESCO declared it in 1997, but it has always been a heritage to the people of this delta.

Speaking of the UNESCO move, since 2014, the World Heritage Centre (WHC) of this UN body has been expecting some specific actions from Bangladesh with regard to the Sundarbans. Bangladesh’s relationship with the WHC took a sharp turn in 2016 when a WHC-IUCN mission made 10 recommendations after visiting the Sundarbans, including relocation of a coal-based power plant in Rampal near the forest. Over the next three years, we saw numerous media reports on the decisions made in the WHC’s global meetings and Bangladesh’s responses to them.

In the middle of last year, Bangladesh-WHC relations entered a new dimension when IUCN recommended the WHC to put the Sundarbans on the List of World Heritage in Danger, due to insufficient compliance of the WHC’s decisions, creating an uncomfortable situation for Bangladesh in the conservation world.

However, the final decisions of the 43rd meeting of the WHC held in July 2019 in Baku, Azerbaijan, did not put the Sundarbans on the in-danger list due to interventions from a few member states. The WHC gave Bangladesh till February 1, 2020 to submit the latest report on the state of conservation of the Sundarbans as well as implementation status of the decisions of the 43rd meeting. Based on that report, the WHC would decide whether to put the Sundarbans on the list or not.

## WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

# It’s time for the Sundarbans

We have not read much about WHC-Sundarbans since last July. Nevertheless, in January 2020, Bangladesh submitted a comprehensive report to the WHC, which is basically a response to all the 11 decisions taken on Bangladesh’s side of the Sundarbans in the Baku meeting last year. In January, Bangladesh also started preparing a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the south-west region of the country, including the Sundarbans—another long-standing

and biodiversity loss. While the global efforts to halt these catastrophes are getting delayed due to the pandemic, we cannot suspend our national and local endeavours. And, mangroves are amazing natural systems that can help us tackle both climate and biodiversity crises.

When we involve people and protect our natural mangroves like the Sundarbans, restore the degraded ones like that in Nuniachhara, Cox’s Bazar, or stretch the “green belt” along the coast



Protection against natural calamities is only one of the numerous benefits we get from the Sundarbans.

expectation of the UNESCO-WHC. Both these crucial developments have, however, gone largely unnoticed by the media.

The 44th meeting of the WHC was supposed to be held at the end of this month in Fuzhou, China, which has now been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We have to wait to see how UNESCO-WHC and its technical partner IUCN respond to Bangladesh’s recent submission.

But the Sundarbans is not only a world heritage site or an ecosystem tom in the economic development vs nature conservation debates. It is also a restless, silent “trouble-shooter” addressing our societal challenges. Before the Covid-19 swamped the world, we were overwhelmed by two of the biggest crises of our time—climate change

through coastal afforestation—as we have been doing since 1965—we not only adapt to climate change or take the extra carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere to keep the world cooler or create a refuge for biodiversity, we also ensure food security, disaster risk reduction, human development, and economic empowerment of the people dependent on mangroves, thus contributing to our collective wellbeing.

Like Bangladesh, all countries of the world with mangroves are enjoying tremendous benefits out of them. Globally, mangroves give us USD 65 billion worth of coastal flood protection every year. They annually give us USD 50 billion non-market benefits from fisheries, forestry, and recreation. Putting an amount on the benefits we get from mangroves may justify

the changing situations and demands. In March, as we imposed lockdown restrictions, stopping infection spread was our top priority, putting it even before our economy. A few weeks on, we had to reprioritise people’s livelihoods and national economy over the pandemic. As cyclone Amphan approached our coast in late May, saving human lives became an immediate priority over the risk of disease spread.

As we continue facing climate crisis and biodiversity loss in catastrophic proportions, can protecting the Sundarbans and the nature as a whole be our priority now?

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PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

# Applying nature-based solutions to save lives

NUSHRAT RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

A mature tree produces oxygen for 10 people in a year. Trees remove carbon dioxide from the air and release the oxygen we breathe in. Well-established forests and tree plantations reduce the impacts of natural disasters by saving lives and properties. In a nutshell, we need trees for our survival, not the other way round. The theme of this year’s World Environment Day (WED)—“Time for Nature”—allows us to look back at this “common knowledge” and evaluate our contributions to nature. Now, the question is why I am talking about such “common” or “ordinary” stuff which we learn at school. I can only say that it is time to acknowledge the impact of nature and bring back the greenery to save lives.

### WED 2020 theme and its relevance in managing disasters

“To care for ourselves, we must care for nature”—this message is particularly important for countries like Bangladesh, which largely depends on the mercy of nature. The country lies on Asia’s largest, and the world’s most populated, delta. In the face of climate change, Bangladesh is seen as one of the most disaster and climate vulnerable countries of the world. Efforts like constructing embankments and polders, improving early warning system, and mobilising volunteers have been successful in keeping disaster death toll down to a great extent; however, saving lives as well as protecting livelihood are becoming more difficult as the frequency and severity of disasters are on the rise due to global warming.

Climate-related disasters have tripled in the last three years and the rate of global sea-level rise was 2.5 faster from 2006-16 than that of the 20th century. Two cyclones struck Bangladesh in less than 6 months—cyclone Bulbul in November 2019 and cyclone Amphan in May 2020—battering the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. The Sundarbans lost a great portion of its vegetation cover in saving local communities, while the mangrove on India’s side was the worst hit. Bangladesh is already suffering from severe environmental degradation having a coverage of only less than 11.2 percent

of forest area in the country (it needs at least 25 percent forest coverage to ensure ecological balance). All these realities have a profound impact on human development. Less vegetation cover means more vulnerabilities for human settlements. Hence, the concept of nature-based solutions has gained attention in risk management in recent years.

### Time-tested nature-based solutions in reducing risks

We need to increase our capacity to offset the negative impacts of cyclones, storm surges, floods, river erosion and landslides. Bangladesh can benefit from nature-based disaster management initiatives already practised at different parts of the country, in addition to using modern approaches (i.e. constructing embankments, polders) to manage disasters. One of the main benefits of such nature or ecosystem-based localised practices is that they not only protect life and livelihood but also provide the dependent communities with food, water, fuel and building materials. For example, the Sundarbans provides its communities with livelihood and the mangroves have been successfully offsetting surface waves and high winds and defending banks against erosion. The coastal communities plant coconut and palm trees which are excellent windbreakers. Forested slopes reduce the risks of land or mudslide. Bamboo palisade has long been used as a protection against riverbank erosion on the tributaries of the Brahmaputra. Research and assessments are thus needed to examine whether these ecosystem-based initiatives can replace embankments and polders.

However, there is no denying that modern and traditional practices can complement each other. Furthermore, natural forests provide an effective, immediate and low-cost method for removing and storing atmospheric carbon—by working as a “carbon sink”.

**Multi-stakeholder engagement to promote nature-based solutions** Bangladesh needs to strengthen its disaster management capacity, and tree plantation, afforestation and reforestation are time-tested methods to facilitate this process. The country’s Forest Development has been implementing coastal afforestation

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projects as part of its annual development plan, but engaging the wider stakeholders (other government agencies, community-based organisations, national and local NGOs, volunteers) is vital to bring about a tangible change. There have been some isolated initiatives to plant trees: for example, the Department of Disaster Management planted 3.8 million palm trees in 2019 as an effort to prevent South Asia’s one of the fastest-growing disasters—lightning strike—and the same year, nearly half a million tree seedlings were planted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and World Food Programme (WFP) to restore degraded forests and watersheds in Cox’s Bazar. However, it is important to have a coordinated approach to tree plantation, afforestation and reforestation activities as unplanned projects along with embankments and polderisation had negatively impacted coastal zones by contributing to waterlogging.

### Impacts of Covid-19

Thanks to Covid-19 which has wrecked economies in recent months, the funding landscape has already been altered, making it difficult for Bangladesh to get aid or loans to pursue high-cost and -maintenance disaster management projects in the coming days. The United Nations has called for 2.5 trillion

dollars’ coronavirus crisis package for the developing countries. Responding to Covid-19 has become the prime necessity as donors are rerouting their funds to meet this health crisis and postponing other development agendas. For example, COP15 on Biological Diversity and the UN climate convention have been postponed until 2021 due to the pandemic. Pursuing the Delta Plan 2100 was already difficult and raising funds will be more difficult in the future as developed nations and donors of foreign aid themselves might suffer from an economic downturn. Therefore, economic and cost-effective nature-based solutions need to be promoted and practised to combat disasters and climate change as the communities already have the skill, capacity and even resources for it. For example, planting trees is inexpensive and the skill is available to almost everyone, unlike the modern approaches.

Bangladesh has lost more than 2,000 hectares of forests while sheltering around 1 million Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar in the last two years. Frequent cyclones are weakening the natural barriers along the country’s coastline, further deteriorating coastal zones. Illicit logging, agriculture expansion and unplanned construction have been degrading the coastal environment for a long time now. Bangladesh needs to double its efforts in improving its vegetation coverage for two reasons: initially, to recover the forest areas lost to human settlements and economic activities, meaning greening one-fourth of its areas, and then to ensure that well-established and mature ecosystems protect the people’s lives and livelihood from disasters. It is difficult to say if we are too late to secure the multiple benefits of nature-based solutions; however, at the risk of sounding cliché, “better late than never”—we can immediately start connecting ourselves to nature. Bangladesh’s vulnerability to disaster and climate change will only increase in the future if we fail to do so.

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