

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Old Khowai on the verge of death

Why are govt bodies part of this illegal occupation?

ACCORDING to a High Court directive, rivers are living entities and the National River Protection Commission is the legal guardian of all rivers of the country and has the power to take necessary measures to protect them. But in reality, it seems such directives do not mean anything and individuals and institutions have been happily grabbing river land with impunity. The latest act of complete disregard for the HC directive has been the continuous grabbing of river land of the Old Khowai river in Habiganj, which has been encroached upon by various government establishments and locally influential people belonging to both the Awami League and BNP.

This is despite a massive drive conducted last year, during which several buildings were demolished. These have now been rebuilt and are re-occupying the land. According to a report in this daily, many local influential and government bodies have set up offices and other buildings on this illegally occupied land. They include the Habiganj District Council office, the multi-storied Diabetics and General Hospital, the District and Town Freedom Fighters' Sangshad, a government library, and buildings of other government and non-government institutions.

There are at least 2,000 illegal occupants in this area. So why isn't the National River Conservation Commission being able to stop this encroachment? How is it that the government's own drive that had demolished at least 500 illegal structures has been rendered futile as the encroachers have just come back again?

It is tragic that over the years, most of the river has been occupied and even the remaining parts are on the verge of meeting the same fate. Recovering the Old Khowai is crucial to saving Habiganj town from waterlogging and important for the groundwater table of the municipality area.

If the government is serious about its commitment to saving the country's rivers, the first thing it must do is evict all illegal occupants from these areas, especially those affiliated with it. Future projects to clean up the place must include the opinions of the local people, who are the main stakeholders and victims of this encroachment. The authorities must make sure that individuals, organisations or offices associated with it are not part of this terrible practice of killing our rivers. In this regard, the National River Protection Commission must have the power to take action against all encroachers of rivers no matter who they are affiliated with.

# Survey shows children taking up riskier jobs during pandemic

Govt must take steps on an urgent basis

WE are disheartened by a recent report published in this daily on the state of child labour in our country during the pandemic. Eleven Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) partner organisations carried out a survey which shows that some 7,800 out of 30,313 child labourers, who were already involved in risky jobs, have switched to "riskier jobs" between July and September across eight districts. Around 5,600 child labourers migrated in search of jobs in the past three months, and 2,400 have been forced to join new work at minimal wage. On the occasion of National Child Rights Week, MJF organised a virtual conference on "Covid-19: Present Status and Safety of Working Children" where this field-level survey data was presented.

A majority of the population had to bear the brunt of the economic crisis that resulted from the pandemic, and the shock waves did not spare children from underprivileged backgrounds. While statistics reveal that there has been a decrease in child labour over the past decade, the reduction in the number of children engaged in hazardous work has been insignificant and is a matter of grave concern. Despite Bangladesh being one of the earliest signatories of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and expressing its commitment to ensure the rights of children in international forums, a lot is yet to be achieved. Although the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 prohibits employment of children under 14, we are all too aware of the dreadful reality, as is evident from the MJF survey. During the pandemic, we have also witnessed the horrific rise in abuse of children at home, as well as at their place of work.

At a time when their tender age is meant for fun, games and education, they toil under dire circumstances to make ends meet, often forced by their very guardians. This calls for an immediate step-by-step approach so we can successfully eradicate child labour in hazardous work conditions. It is our responsibility to rescue them from the clutches of slavery, torture, sexual exploitation and other life-threatening work that risks their health and wellbeing. Coordination between government and non-government initiatives is crucial in implementing policies that will eliminate child labour, with a priority on saving children from hazardous work. As the research reveals, the pandemic has made it all the more urgent to rescue children who have been compelled to take up even riskier jobs to make ends meet. This will require helping their families with financial assistance and creating income generating opportunities for the adults, while providing education for the children.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Second wave of Covid-19

The severity of coronavirus has not diminished, but public life is continuing as before. People are crowding bazaars, shopping malls and public transport without any care for social distancing. It will be difficult to cope with the second wave if we are not alert from now on. Even if another lockdown is not implemented, the government must take timely steps to control the movement of the public and enforce safety measures strictly.

Abu Faruk, Bandarban

# All bets are off on Hefazat

NAZMUL A KHAN

BANGLADESH'S most influential and powerful Islamist pressure group, Hefazat-e-Islam, witnessed a dramatic upheaval earlier this month. Its centenarian founder, Shah Ahmad Shafi, died hours after he was forced to relinquish power in Hathazari Madrasa, the *de facto* headquarters of the Hefazat where he ruled for decades.

Faced with unprecedented student protests, Shafi was first forced to expel his son Anas Madani from the institution before stepping down himself. In the media, the agitations and the subsequent fall of Shafi were attributed to Junaid Babunagari, the group's defiant secretary-general.

But there were several other reasons too. Students had genuine frustrations at the mismanagement of the Madrasa, internal strife among teachers and officials, corruption allegations in the Madrasa exams, and an increasingly intolerant Anas Madani.

**The context of the protest**

Albeit under his father's shadow, Anas Madani was a key player himself. He was instrumental to Hefazat's rapprochement with the government. After Hefazat's massive rally in 2013, the government employed every trick in the book to tame the Deoband-influenced religious group.

In a classic stick and carrot approach, authorities have used criminal cases and other forms of legal harassment like punishment and largesse (such as money and lucrative public lands) as rewards. The scheme has produced stunning results. Although some such as Babunagari and Nur Hossain Kashemi (the Dhaka chief) remain defiant to pressure, others such as Madani and Mufti Faizullah willingly or reluctantly acceded.

But of course, for the government, the success did not come without a cost. It had to amend the national curriculum to remove certain articles and poetry written by secular writers, soften the age restrictions designed to prevent child marriage, relocate the statue of justice to a less prominent place in the Supreme Court premises, denounce atheists, promise to prosecute those insulting Islam, and recognise the Qawmi Madrasa degrees.

Shafi often touted these as the success of his realignment with the government, but Babunagari clearly disagreed. In June this year, the discord became more visible as Shafi issued a public rebuke amid rumours that Babunagari would succeed him.

Soon afterwards, Babunagari was expelled by Shafi from the Hathazari Madrasa. Nonetheless, Babunagari's supporters blamed Anas Madani for the decision and still insist that he was loyal to Shafi's leadership.

Other senior teachers were already aghast at the brash and assertive behaviour of the younger "prince". Several teachers were removed, demoted or replaced by those close to Madani. The final straw was the corruption allegations and dysfunctionality in Befaq (the Qawmi education board), where Madani was seen

protecting controversial officials.

As a result, with Shafi's health deteriorating, several factions presented a united front and successfully captured the frustrations of the students and evicted Madani, along with most of his key supporters, and finally Shafi himself.

**A victory for Babunagari?**

Although Babunagari supporters were the key backers of the student protest, the fall of Shafi and Madani does not necessarily translate into his victory. Several factions may have found some commonality, but not all of them are equally enthusiastic to rally behind Babunagari.

In the end, Babunagari did return to Hathazari Madrasa but was forced to accept a demotion. He was not given back the deputy director post, which he last held, but assigned the role of the

local MP, Anisul Islam Mahmud (of Jatiya Party but aligned with the Awami League), recently visited the Madrasa and met with Babunagari and others. It was rumoured that he carried the government's message for Hefazat but that his exit from the Madrasa premises was not very gracious.

**Who will sit on the throne?**

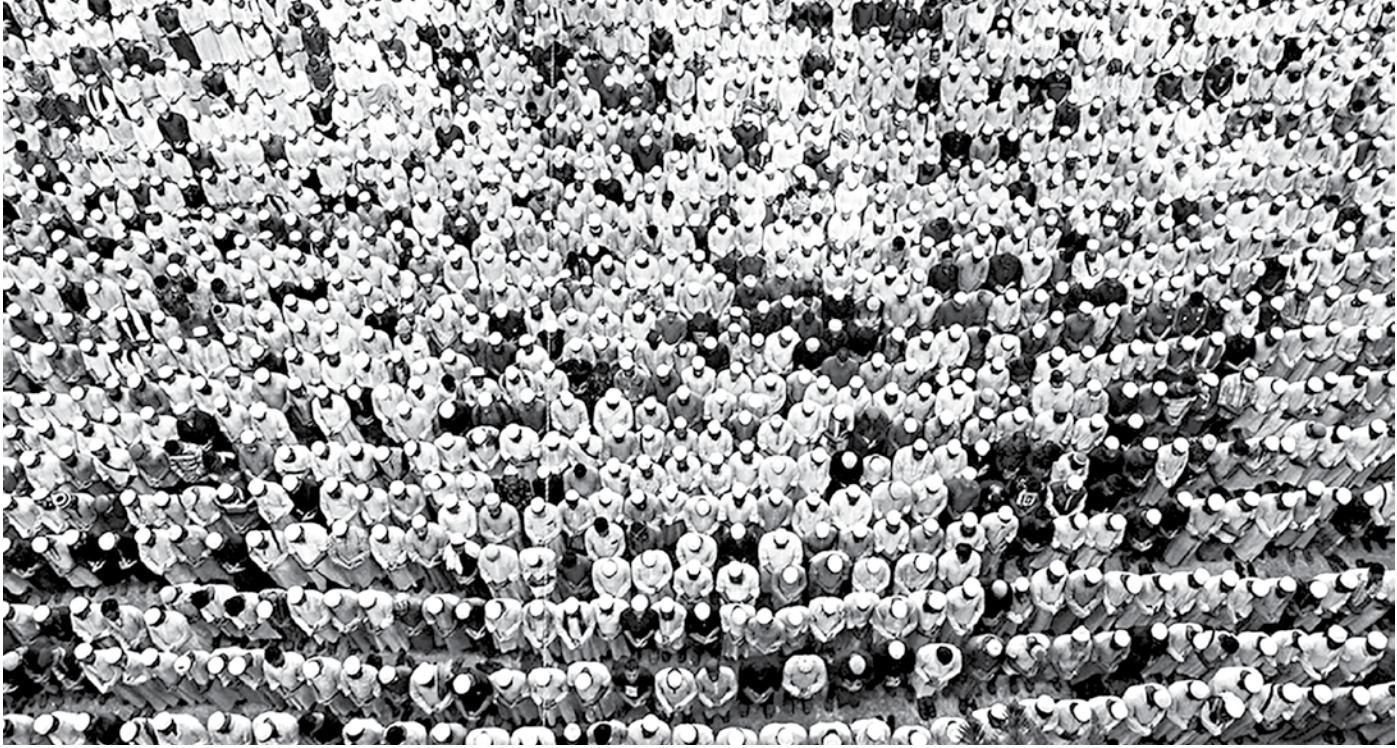
The recently concluded elections of Befaq (the Qawmi madrasa education board) offer some clues as to what direction Hefazat is heading. The government-backed cleric Mahmudul Hasan has been elected to be the acting chief of Befaq, while the BNP affiliated Kashemi (also an ally of Babunagari) was a close runner-up.

Mahmudul Hasan, however, is generally accepted by all factions. The Babunagari camp has not claimed any foul play and accepted Hasan, although

Babunagari has already demonstrated that he is willing to accept compromises twice (first, by agreeing to return to Hathazari with a demotion and second, by accepting the Befaq election).

In this context, several allies of Babunagari are also trying to claim the spotlight. Nur Hossain Kashemi (the Dhaka chief of Hefazat), for example, is sending out frequent statements on pressing issues (such as the Babri mosque demolition case, or the much-talked-about rape case in Sylhet). The senior deputy chief of Hefazat, Muhibullah Babunagari (Junaid Babunagari's maternal uncle), is also a strong contender as a compromise candidate.

Anas Madani supporters, such as the joint secretary Moinuddin Ruhi, are already hinting at a possible split.



Large crowds flocked to the namaz-e-janaza of Shah Ahmad Shafi, held at Hathazari madrasa in Chattogram on September 19, 2020.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

education director. Far from being the successor of Shafi, he was not even part of the Madrasa's three-member committee that now acts as the interim head.

However, within Hefazat, it is a totally different game. Sources say it is all but certain that Babunagari will be the successor of Shafi.

But much will depend on how accommodating the government will be to the idea of Hefazat being run by Babunagari. There are rumours that Anas Madani has been encouraged to return to the game by capitalising on the circumstances under which Shafi died (the ambulance carrying Shafi was blocked for a considerable time by protesters who were concerned that police would swoop in). After all, moments after Shafi died, Anas and his supporters claimed protesters were to blame and they have not yet retracted from their positions.

There are also signs that the government might offer an olive branch to Babunagari if he agrees to reciprocate. The

Kashemi himself issued a moderate protest that security officials attempted to influence voters (as a compromise measure, Kashemi has been selected as the senior deputy chief.)

However, Befaq and Hefazat are not the same thing. There was an emphasis that Befaq leadership should not be politicised. This is the argument that went in favour of Mahmudul Hassan. And the general secretary, Mahfuzul Haque, has agreed to step down from Khelafat Mazlish, a party founded by his father Shaikhul Hadith Azizul Haque.

On the other hand, Hefazat acts more like a political organisation. And, there are few in the organisation who can match Babunagari's political credentials and popularity. Unlike Befaq, there will also be a strong Chittagonian (more specifically, Hathazari) influence in deciding Hefazat's next leadership.

In the end, depending on the government's responses, both sides may agree to a compromise candidate.

# Failing future fast forward



Liberals hate the current inequalities but cannot agree on how to change things. But if technology is moving at Moore's Law of exponential growth, then knowledge and complexity are expanding too fast for most of us to comprehend and decide how to cope with an unknown future.

Sociologist Mauro Guillen at the Wharton School has given his projections in the book *2030: How today's Biggest Trends will collide and Reshape the Future of Everything*. All the big trends, macro and micro, will shape the future. The biggest trends are demographic—how rich countries are aging and poor ones are growing—but these numbers will push migration that creates border wars. At the same time, women will grow richer and the Asian middle class will edge out the European and American middle class. Climate change will threaten cities through rising sea levels, and water and food shortages. Technology will be the new tool to solve problems, but job disruption is a major political threat. We may no longer need to own anything, but subscribe to or rent cars, houses and smart gadgets, simply to keep up with the technology. Money will shift to digital currencies and finance will be very different with zero interest rates.

These trends are well known. In 2017, the US National Intelligence Council publication "Global Trends: Paradox of Progress (to 2035)" and the EU study titled "Global Trends to 2035", conducted thoughtful reviews of the future seen from their perspectives. Macro-trends that converge at unprecedented pace will make governing and cooperation harder, fundamentally altering the global landscape. Both studies recognise that conflict risks will grow, because the world

is increasingly fractured between ageing and shrinking rich, and growing young, poor and unemployed, packed into over-crowded cities that are ready to explode.

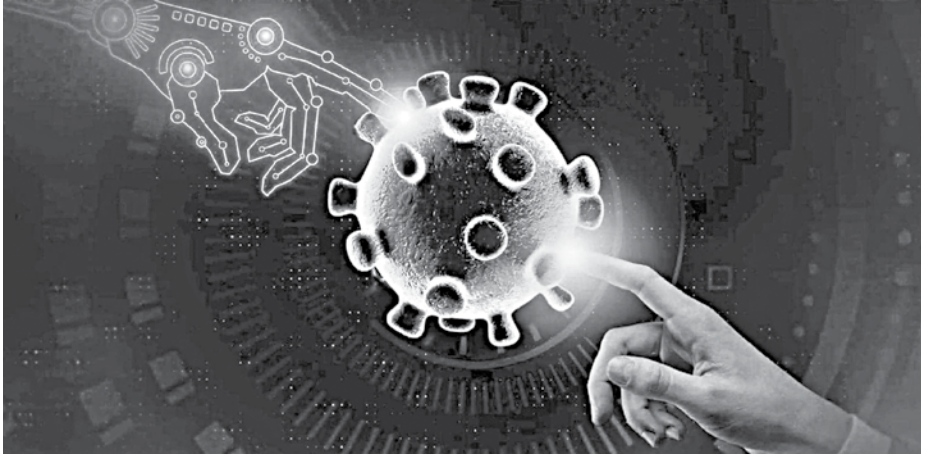
The US study surmises that the 2035 world will splinter into national "islands", regional "orbits", and sub-state and trans-national "communities" that will interact to make global and national governance harder. Interestingly, it predicted that "the global pandemic of 2023 dramatically reduced global travel in an effort to contain the spread of the disease, contributing to the slowing of global trade and decreased productivity." They foresaw the pandemic, except it happened three years earlier, and they bungled its management.

In contrast, the EU study focused on four possible scenarios: (1) Sick men of Europe: unstable Europe in stable world;

has its own timetable and if its spread is not properly controlled, the economy will suffer for longer.

Second, the global system is now more complex and harder to govern. If a 3x3x3 Rubik's Cube game has 43 quintillion (10 to the power of 19) possible permutations, we realise that seven or more key players interacting with each other at "island", national and regional "orbits", and transnational "communities" levels means that everything is possible, which is exactly why we are in the current mess.

We have sick men running sick economies in a pandemic that is out of control. Both leaders and economies are surviving on steroids. No one can think long-term. All are reacting short-term rather than dealing with the important long-term consequences.



(2) Cold War: stable Europe in stable world; (3) Hollow foundations: unstable Europe in unstable world; and (4) Europe as Global Power: stable Europe in unstable world. Europe knows it has to get it act together.

But what has the Covid-19 pandemic taught us so far?

First, the pandemic was mismanaged globally, with "UBRIC" epicentres, namely, US, Brazil, Russia, India and Colombia, having the highest infections and mortality rates. Europe and Africa are still adjusting and East Asia, being the first to be hit, was the first to control and economically recover. The coronavirus

With top leaders and their inner circle infected, new factors emerge every day that change the direction of the game profoundly. Coronavirus has turbo-charged "future fast forward" and hastened existing trends, pushing the shift to online faster as well as killing off dying or obsolete industries.

Basically, hardware can be obsolete and expendable, but people are dying, which is why we need to teach them to become more resilient and adaptable to rising risks and threats. In short, invest in people, their health, education and in re-skilling them to address technological, employment-related, military and natural

threats. Be smart and we will survive and thrive. Dumb us down and die.

Two important studies show how investing in hardware is less effective than investing in people. Jorda, Schularick and Taylor (2017) discovered that between 1870-2015, risky real returns on equity and real estate averaged seven percent per year, whereas safe returns averaged one to three percent per year, and these have been declining with lower productivity. What financialisation has done is to distort the rate of return, favouring the rich and actually slowing down productivity and the growth rate.

A World Bank study on 139 countries since 1950 showed that the average rate of return on education is nine to ten percent per year, with private returns on low-income primary education as high as 25 percent.

Simply put, the best investment in current volatile times is to invest in our people. The world is not facing a trade war, it is facing a talent war. Because East Asia has invested more in the last four decades in their young, teaching them to act cooperatively rather than to engage in narcissistic individualism, the region has been able to handle the pandemic better than other regions and catch up with technology and industries. It is not about democracy or freedom, but about inclusive education in the common sense.

If people and the planet are recognised as one, then the young will learn how to take care of other people and contribute to our common home, the planet, as Pope Francis emphasised in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. Politics and morality are people's issues.

Future threats and opportunities are coming at us fast and furious. Future fast forward is not about denial and who is to blame. Throughout the ages, humanity has survived calamities because the community taught the young common sense and survival skills. That is the true mission for surviving and thriving beyond this pandemic.

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