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Has ICU capacity in government hospitals increased?

The second Covid-19 wave demands major ramp up

THE Health Minister has urged private medical college hospitals to make preparations to provide a hand to the government designated Covid-19 hospitals as the country braces itself for a second wave of the pandemic. He has asked them to increase their capacity by 20 percent and double their Intensive Care Unit (ICU) capacity. While this may be considered prudent advice at a time when infection rates have risen to around 32 percent as winter sets in, we cannot help but ask: have the public hospitals increased their capacity of ICU facilities? After all, the majority of patients will not be able to afford the private hospital ICU beds that may cost Tk 15,000 to 100,000 per day. Thus, the most wanted option would be ICU beds in the government hospitals.

If we just recall the reports throughout this year on the availability of ICU beds in the country, the scenario is quite bleak.

In early June, this paper reported that only 13 ICU beds had been allocated in Rangpur Division to treat critical Covid-19 patients—three in Dinajpur and 10 in Rangpur, with two additional beds for doctors affected by Covid-19 and 20 for other patients. As for the other six districts of the division—there are no ICU facilities at all, forget dedicated ones for Covid-19 patients. Meanwhile, another report found only 12 ICU beds for Noakhali, Feni, Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban, Cox's Bazar and Chattogram. In September, our paper quoted the director of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) saying that there were only seven government general hospitals that have ICU facilities, three of them in Dhaka and four in Chattogram, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Mymensingh.

While public hospitals in many districts don't have any ICUs at all and others have a scanty number, there are government hospitals where ICU beds remain unoccupied because they don't have the trained personnel to operate them. Kuwait-Bangladesh Maitree Government Hospital in Dhaka, which is devoted to Covid-19 patients, have been reported to be able to operate only 16 of its 26 beds because they do not have enough medical specialists.

So has anything changed since the last few months? The health minister has said that the government is increasing the ICU capacity in government hospitals, but is it increasing at a pace that will actually make a difference during the second wave? We have spent almost a year with Covid-19 and seen patients suffering and dying because they could not get ICU beds on time or at all. Relying on private hospitals to fill the gap in public hospitals does not make us hopeful. It is the government's job to ramp up the ICU capacity of its hospitals all over the country, along with providing trained staff to operate the facilities and strict monitoring, so that all critical patients regardless of their social status have access to such facilities.

138,000 acres of reserve forestland taken by grabbers!

The state must reclaim them urgently and take action against the criminals

WE welcome the decision of the parliamentary standing committee of the environment, forest and climate change ministry to launch eviction drives to recover 138,000 acres of reserve forestland grabbed by 88,000 individuals and organisations across the country. The ministry will write to all deputy commissioners across the country by January 31 to prepare eviction notices; by February, the DCs will serve the notices, and the eviction process will begin from March.

In early October, the ministry informed the committee that 287,000 acres of forestland, including 138,000 acres of reserve forestland, are being illegally occupied by individuals and organisations. Of the 64 districts, Cox's Bazar has lost the highest area of forestland—59,471 acres—to grabbers, according to the ministry data. Unfortunately, we have witnessed before how such land is taken by government organisations, or how the encroachers are often affiliated with members of the ruling party, which further enables them. Negligence and apathy towards enforcing land protection laws are amongst the main causes behind such criminal activities.

The authorities cannot be silent any longer. They need to come out of their slumber and hold those responsible to account. Often, leaders at the top are heard announcing that criminal elements in the party would be purged but so far, only a handful have been taken to task. We are hopeful it will now change for the better as the ministry will publish the names of the grabbers of forestland on its website and also digitise all the records and documents on forestland. While it may not be an easy task to free all the land that has been encroached, we are optimistic about the JS body's much awaited initiative to begin the eviction of grabbers nationwide. If there is political will, such remedial actions may actually rescue much of our forestland.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Farewell, legend

Aly Zaker was a revered name in our cultural arena. Apart from being an eminent theatre and TV personality, he was also one of the trustees of the Liberation War Museum. Despite not being amongst his near and dear ones, I strongly feel his void today. He will be remembered for his magnificent performances that touched the hearts of the audience. A leading light in many ways, I pray for the eternal peace of his departed soul.

Mamunur Rashid, *Sylhet*

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

AFTER a decade of ruthlessly pursuing the world's dirtiest fuel, the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources (MoPEMR) is contemplating closing down 13 of the 18 previously approved coal-based power projects around the country and apparently switching to "cleaner" alternatives. On the onset, that seems like good news—perhaps the government has finally realised its folly and decided to put the environment at the top of its agenda to match its grandiloquent claims in international climate conferences. But is that really the case?

Environmental activists, both at home and abroad, had long pointed out that coal was an unviable option not only environmentally, but also economically, thanks to increasing competition from renewables, market reforms and overcapacity in the sector, but those warnings unfortunately were dismissed by the government as ramblings of madmen. The GoB's Revisiting Power System Master Plan 2016 (PSMP) set a target of producing 60,000 MW by 2041, of which 35 percent was to come from coal. A report published by Transparency International Bangladesh, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon et al on November 2019 highlighted that Bangladesh had at least 29 coal-fired power projects with a total capacity of 33,200 MW in the pipeline which, if built, would increase the country's coal power capacity by 63 times, and cost an estimated USD two billion annually to import the large volumes of coal to power the proposed plants. At a time when coal is being phased out around the world—the number of new coal plants that began construction worldwide fell by 84 percent between 2015 and 2018 while countries such as the UK, France, Canada and New Zealand have committed to phasing out coal power by 2030—Bangladesh ranked sixth globally for the amount of coal in pre-construction and construction stages in 2019, according to Global Energy Monitor.

But now the government is being forced to reconsider. The decision to move away from coal seems less to do with environmental concerns than an astoundingly late realisation that the projects it had overzealously approved over the decade simply could not get backing from financiers. The State Minister for Power and Energy Nasrul Hamid admitted as much to *The Daily Star* when he said that they are only considering shutting down the plants which are "taking too much time to... [secure the funds and]... start the construction work even after getting approval from the government." As it turns out, despite our eagerness, global financiers and even insurers are not as keen on coal anymore—they are facing increasing pressure from regulators and climate campaigners to turn their back on the fossil fuel industry, particularly as cleaner fuels become cheaper. In 2019, over 100 globally significant financial institutions divested from thermal coal, including 40 percent of the top 40 global banks and 20 globally significant insurers, according to the UK-based Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA). The International Energy Agency meanwhile predicts that investment in coal supply will fall by one-quarter this year because of Covid-19.

Ministry spokespersons, on several other occasions, including in international climate conferences, have claimed that they are moving away from coal, responding to global concerns about carbon emissions

and environmental pollution. Why, then, would the government still retain the five mega coal power plants which have managed to get funding and begun construction in ecologically sensitive areas? Why would it insist on going ahead with the highly contested Rampal Power Plant, situated just 14 km from the Sundarbans, which, if and when completed, will irreparably damage the ecological balance of the world's largest mangrove forest and the region at large? It is frustrating, to say the least, that it is still resorting to its trite defence of using "ultra super critical technology" that will supposedly magically eradicate any and all possible negative environmental impact with the swish of a wand (by the way, the bid documents and Environment Impact Assessment state that the super-critical technology used in these plants can only reduce the damage by 10 percent at best). It seems pointless to reiterate the extent of devastation we are risking—it has been well-documented and argued over the years by environmentalists, activists, columnists and even financiers—but the government's position when it comes to the Sundarbans is sadly not much different from that of climate change

the last 10 years, Tk 50,000 crore of the taxpayers' money has been wasted simply because our planners did not have the foresight to know—or care to find out—how much electricity we'd need and what we should sacrifice to reach that goal.

After decades of impulsive and illogical investments in dirty energy, can we hope for a well-considered, cleaner future? One fears not. MoPEMR is reportedly suggesting replacing coal with LNG (liquefied natural gas), which essentially means we will be replacing one dirty fossil fuel with another. The greenhouse gas emissions of LNG are more or less equal to that of coal, if the whole product lifecycle is considered. On what possible basis is the government claiming LNG to be a "clean" alternative? As a recent report by The Global Energy Monitor notes, "Methane, the chief component in natural gas, is responsible for 25 percent of global warming to date. Measured by global warming impacts, the scale of the LNG expansion under development [globally] is as large or greater than the expansion of coal-fired power plants, posing a direct challenge to Paris climate goals." Meanwhile, from an economic perspective,

producing 100 percent of its electricity by renewable energy by 2050. But the Ministry does not seem to have plans to invest in renewables in any meaningful way—as per the current plan, a total of 1,552 MW of renewable energy has been targeted, constituting only 2.8 percent of the total capacity of 2041. There has been very little progress on existing renewable projects—four projects are currently in operation while 11 projects are in the process of implementation and 19 projects are still at the planning phase. Rather than turn the abandoned coal plants into LNG plants, CPD has recommended turning them into solar power plants, which would then be able to generate 4,779 MW of electricity—a recommendation which the ministry ought to take seriously.

MoPEMR has reportedly initiated working on revising the current masterplan in light of the widening gap between the country's demand and supply, which is a welcome move. However, it has appointed TEPCO as the review consultant, a decision that has been criticised by local and international environmental organisations, since the organisation also did the environmental impact assessment and



COLLAGE: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

deniers. They will stick to their position even if the last remaining Bengal Tiger bites them on their behinds.

This is embarrassing given that Bangladesh is now chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, a group of 48 countries most vulnerable to climate change which have vowed to meet

"100 percent domestic renewable energy production as rapidly as possible". It is well and good for Bangladesh to play the victim card when it comes to asking for funds for adaptation and mitigation measures but when it comes to actually taking responsibility for destructive and dirty energy policies, it is apparent it could not care less.

For years, the government has touted how it "had no other option" but to aggressively pursue coal to meet the country's burgeoning electricity needs. That argument simply doesn't hold anymore, given that we are barely even using half of what we are currently producing. We are producing 23,584 MW but consuming a maximum of 12-13,000 MW during summer and 7,000 MW during winter, according to the Power Division. In fact, the government is having to pay Tk 5,000 crore every year to private rental and quick rental power plants as "capacity charge" for the surplus electricity, according to Power Distribution Board, which means that over

the report also points out that expansion of LNG infrastructure faces the same risk of stranded assets and long-term financial viability as that of coal, due to falling costs of renewable alternatives.

In Bangladesh, transition to LNG would require huge capital expenditure, which would make electricity more expensive compared to renewable alternatives. Besides, current overcapacity in the power sector indicates that LNG plants too will be a drain on the ministry's budget. As it stands, we are already spending huge amounts on importing LNG—USD 115 million in 2019—and this amount would increase significantly if additional LNG-power plants are included. A study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, which assesses the government's recent initiatives regarding abandoning coal-based power plants, highlights that the unit price cited by the ministry to argue that LNG is cheaper is misleading—"unit price of LNG is presented as blended with gas; but unit price without blended with local gas would be much higher (Tk 12-21, based on a study)." It further warns that shifting to LNG would completely change the energy-mix in the power sector "from a moderately diversified to overwhelmingly dependent on single source LNG (70 percent)."

As the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, Bangladesh has committed to

engineering consultancy for the Matarbari 1,200 MW coal-fired plant and the Anowara-Matarbari 400 kV transmission line project, and as such there is serious conflict of interest.

Even if coal is abandoned altogether, we would still have a reserve margin of 27.7 percent by 2025 (considering the demand gap in the post-Covid period, the margin would be much higher, according to CPD's calculations), which gives us ample time to experiment with and invest in renewables and a more balanced energy-mix in the power sector. Environmental activists have long been advocating that we move away from destructive energy policies and design one that is pro-nature and pro-people. The National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports, for instance, have presented an alternative power and energy plan for Bangladesh that can meet the demands of the population without jeopardising natural resources, which would actually cost USD 19 billion less over the next 25 years than the government's masterplan. The government has never taken these proposals seriously, but it is high time that it listens to various stakeholders, rather than just lobbyists and foreign investors, and comes up with a plan that reflects the commitments it has made in the global arena.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Let us write new stories

LAILA KHONDKAR

"Girls do not look smart, they are pretty"—said a five-year-old Bangladeshi boy after a comment by the mother that his sister (three years old) was looking "smart". The mother had to explain that both boys and girls could be smart and pretty. How does a five-year-old develop such gender stereotyped attitudes? Most of our boys grow up to believe that girls and women are weak and dependent. In many cases, girls also become obsessed with beauty and learn to be passive. Boys and girls develop certain understandings of masculinity and femininity and their expected behaviour, which ultimately affects both of them negatively in realising their potential. But why?

"If you raised a girl in a jungle, there's no chance she would wish to play with pretty dresses or worry about her body type. These ideas come from somewhere. Deep societal changes need to start with children, so if we keep teaching them the same stereotypes and prejudices, then society will not change."

Rosie Allen wrote this to describe the "Dangers of Disney", her project on the messages that are being taught to children through most Disney films. She has given her own interpretation of various stories through paintings and added text for explanation. Visiting her exhibition in London more than a year ago was very thought-provoking, where she critically examined some of the popular stories (Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty etc) and raised questions on abuse in romantic

relationships, the importance of consent, obsession with physical beauty, fear of ageing etc.

It is not only Disney stories that are problematic. Most traditional fairy tales, including those in Bangla, are sexist. Moreover, popular television shows, magazines, films, advertisements etc continue to promote gender stereotypes. Social media is flooded with derogatory jokes and comments about women. Children are exposed to stories where a girl's aspiration is just to look beautiful, wait for a man and make him happy. It has been normalised that men have a monopoly on power and women should submit to their authority. How will girls and boys learn about respect and equality in relationships if these are the images of women that we share with them? Where are the realistic body images, the focus on personality and inspiration instead of looks and love?

Having the right legal and policy framework as well as implementing them remain very important in ending violence against women. But laws and policies have limited impact as long as social acceptance of a practice is widespread. The books children and young people read, the films/animations they watch, the games they play and the gender relations they observe in families, play a critical role in forming their own attitudes and behaviour.

What do we know about the attitudes of young men in Bangladesh? The findings of the report "Male Youth and Their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Bangladesh: A Mixed-Methods Nationwide Study," conducted by James

P Grant School of Public Health of Brac University in October, 2020, revealed that 62 percent of respondents believed that there are times when wives "deserved to be beaten". Some 63 percent, from both urban and rural areas, agreed that "wives can be beaten if they deny to have sex with their husbands". The study had 11,102 male respondents (15-24 years) and was conducted in all 64 districts.

What are the views of the women? According to "Wife Beating: A Population-Based Study in Bangladesh" published in *Violence and Gender* in November, 2014, "Of all the women who accept being beaten by their husbands, 23 percent accept it as a result of an argument, 18 percent due to neglecting their children, 17 percent due to going out without their husband's permission, eight percent due to refusal of sex with husband, and four percent due to burning the food." In this study, 17,842 women were included.

Why do both men and women of our society consider violence against women to be acceptable? We know that violence against women and violence against children are fuelled by powerful patriarchal norms, which condone violent discipline like wife beating and corporal punishment, promote masculinity based on violence and control, prioritise family regulation and blame victims, and disregard gender equality. The lower status of women in general must be challenged by ending legal discrimination and changing social norms. Boys and men will learn to respect women and treat them equally if they see women as equal in families and society. Girls and women also need positive role models

so that they become empowered and can assert themselves. Are we ensuring this?

It is encouraging to note some initiatives in various places, including Bangladesh, to portray strong girls and women through stories and films these days, but we need more. Now, some of the female characters are in charge of their own destinies and do not need to be rescued by anyone. Isn't it fascinating that Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren created Pippi Longstocking almost 75 years ago, when many cultures still did not have strong girl characters? Pippi, "the bravest girl of the world", is intelligent, funny, kind, warm, independent and friendly. Her stories have been translated to more than 80 languages. The boys and girls who celebrate Pippi books will definitely have very different approaches to gender equality than those reading or watching traditional stories.

Our girls should be raised so that they are self-confident, strong, ambitious, courageous and humane. Boys must be taught to respect girls and women. This should start in our families. Parents need to choose very carefully the types of books, films, toys etc. their children are exposed to. There should be gender equitable relationships among adult members of households. There must be efforts by media to ensure that they disseminate positive images regarding gender roles. It is the responsibility of state to treat each citizen equally. Only then can violence against women end. Each of us will have to play our part.

Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.