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Protect Sangu reserve forest from destruction

Take action against the timber traders and forest officials involved

As is happening with many of our reserve forests, the Sangu reserve forest in Bandarban's Thanchi upazila is also being plundered by unscrupulous timber merchants and forest department officials in collaboration with local powerful people. According to our report, a vast number of century-old trees have been cut down by loggers at the remote reserve forest and wildlife sanctuary in the last two months. Satellite images show that about a hundred acres of it have been totally razed over the last few years. Speaking to locals, our reporter has found that trees from Andarmanik, Dungdung Para, Milinga Para, Mronggong Para, Narisha Jiri, Boromodok Jiri, and Singapa Mouza Jiri areas of the reserve forest are being felled indiscriminately by the loggers.

Unfortunately, such mindless plundering of the forest has not only been done by greedy, influential timber traders and local influential people, some forest department officials are also involved, as locals have alleged. While the forest department officials claim that they cannot take action against the plunderers or remain vigilant in the reserve forest because of a "shortage of manpower", the timber merchants, on the other hand, allege that in most cases, forest department officials directly or indirectly assist loggers in smuggling timber from the reserve forests in exchange for hefty bribes.

Understandably, it is not possible for the loggers to erase such large parts of the forest without the knowledge of the forest department officials or the law enforcers. Why then has no action been taken against the unscrupulous timber traders?

Sangu reserve forest was declared a protected forest in 1880. The forest is home to 36 species of mammals, 48 species of reptiles, 19 species of amphibians, and 11 species of rare birds. There are also many rare species of old trees in the forest including Gamar, Garjan, Chapalish, Toon, Goda, Gutguta, Champa, Civit, and Shimul. This unique forest must be protected from human greed at all costs. We have already lost many of our forests, we just cannot afford to lose any more. We urge the government to seriously look into the matter and take action against those responsible for plundering the forest. The government should also consider forming a separate wildlife department to conserve the remaining forests of the country, as experts have suggested.

Rules for compensation claims

Another victim of bureaucratic slumber

While we welcome the government passing the Road Transport Act 2018, we cannot but wonder why some of its provisos have not been put into effect as yet. For example, the rules for the Trustee Board set up to deal with compensation claims are yet to be framed.

We recall that the final version of the Road Transport Act was very long in coming. A new law for governing the road transport sector to replace the archaic Motor Vehicle Ordinance of 1983 was in the works for decades, and it took two young lives that led to a passionate student movement, for the Bangladesh Road Transport Act 2018 to be passed in the parliament. But it was another year before it could be implemented since the rules of procedures that were required to enforce it were not formulated sooner.

It is interesting that while the Road Transport Act 2018 and the Digital Security Act 2018 were passed on the same day, the latter became effective immediately. The authorities did not feel inhibited by the need to have the necessary rules in place before putting it into effect, while it is taking years to implement the new transport act fully.

It may not be irrelevant to mention that there has been a lot of foot dragging on the matter. And the common public refrain that the authorities have baulked under the undue pressure of the road transport owners and workers is not unfounded. Unfortunately this sector is in the grip of people with strong political links, who have forced much of the dilution in the originally proposed levels of punishments. We suggest that the back and forth movement of the draft rules should stop somewhere. There is no reason why the relevant rules should have taken so long to be formulated and that too in an incomplete form. Victims' or their relatives should not have to wait indefinitely to get their claims because of lack of rules of procedures. The Road Transport Act 2018 should be implemented immediately and in full.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Adverse effects of violent video games

There are a number of violent video games out there that people are getting addicted to. I mention this because my younger brother is one such individual. When I noticed how violent the games he plays are, I tried to stop him but he is only interested in playing these games.

I am afraid that excessive violence in video games can have adverse effects on the mindsets of not only my brother, but many other youngsters who play them. Parents should keep an eye on such things to protect their children.


Rejia Sultana, Sylhet



How effective have stimulus packages been?

And what more should be done?

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

A year has passed since the world learnt about the attack of the novel coronavirus. Countries around the world are still grappling with the fallout from the devastating Covid-19 pandemic. They have introduced stimulus packages to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the economy and society. The amount of stimulus packages varies from country to country based on their capacities and requirements. The strategies of providing the stimulus packages and their effectiveness are also different across countries.

During all economic crises, while rolling out stimulus packages, three issues are critical. These are timeliness, targeting and exit plan. The effectiveness of the stimulus packages announced by the government of Bangladesh can be assessed within this framework.

First, to tackle the immediate crisis due to the pandemic, Bangladesh's policymakers announced the crisis-phase support as soon as the pandemic hit the economy. The government announced several stimulus packages since the end of March 2020 to help the affected people stay afloat and boost economic activities. According to the Ministry of Finance (MoF), government's support measures include increasing government expenditure, providing loans at low interest rates, expansion of social safety net programmes, and raising the money supply. Broadly, these fall into two categories—fiscal and monetary measures.

According to a report published by the MoF in November 2020, the government announced Tk 121,353 crores worth of stimulus packages. This is equivalent to 4.3 percent of gross domestic product of the country. One of the important features of Bangladesh's stimulus packages is that these are more of liquidity support and less of fiscal stimulus. Of the total stimulus packages unveiled so far 80.7 percent (3.5 percent of GDP) is liquidity support and 19.3 percent (0.8 percent of GDP) is fiscal stimulus. However, given that Bangladesh has resource constraints, the introduction of the stimulus package is a welcome move.

Second, the government also targeted sectors for support through an assessment of the sectoral distress and need. Liquidity support has been provided to the export-oriented industries, large industries and service sector organisations, and cottage, micro small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs). Additionally, such support has been announced in the form of increased Export Development Fund of Bangladesh Bank, pre-shipment credit refinance scheme, refinancing scheme for the agriculture sector, low-income farmers and small traders, loans for job creation, government subsidy for interest waiver of deferred bank loans for the

month of April-May 2020 and credit guarantee scheme for SMEs.

On the other hand, fiscal support was announced for doctors, nurses and health workers, and distribution of free food items, rice at Tk 10 per kilogramme, and cash among the poorest. The government also allocated resources for allowance programmes, construction of houses for homeless people, procurement of boro paddy and rice, farm mechanisation, agricultural subsidies, and social safety net programmes.

However, not all sectors have been able to access the allocated funds with the same success. Only the export-oriented industries used 100 percent of its allocation. In the large industries category, a total of 2,549 large business entities have accessed 71 percent of the allocated loans till October 31, 2020. Disbursement from the Export

households were to be provided Tk 2,500 as cash support. A total of about 35 lakh households (70 percent) received this support till October 2020. Among the recipients, 75 percent households are headed by males and 25 percent are headed by females. In case of agricultural subsidies, 76 percent has been disbursed during the same period.

Overall, in case of targeting, the stimulus packages covered several sectors, some of which have benefitted due to the support. However, disbursement to a number of sectors including CMSMEs, women entrepreneurs, migrant workers and youth employment is still low while they are in dire need of support. Besides, direct cash transfers to the poorest households are inadequate compared to the need of both the existing and the new poor. The selection criteria of the beneficiary of this cash support has been fraught with challenges of mistargeting.

Second, this stimulus should be utilised for economic revival in the long-run.

The success and effectiveness of the first round of stimulus packages can be a valuable lesson for the second round. One of the lessons is that crisis of such scale and extent requires stronger fiscal measures than monetary measures. In a depressed economic situation, demand for bank loan is low. This is the time when aggregate domestic demand has to be boosted through higher public spending so that jobs are created and people have money to spend. A large number of poor people will also need cash handouts. Fiscal measures will clearly require creation of fiscal space which is currently narrow. Domestic resource mobilisation efforts have to be scaled up. Therefore, reform of the tax system will have to be pursued parallelly along with support measures to protect people's livelihoods, save businesses,



Women sit on the ground maintaining social distance while waiting to receive relief supplies provided by local police authorities in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on April 2, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Development Fund was 81 percent and for agriculture refinancing scheme 45 percent till October 2020.

The progress in other disbursements is much lower. For example, in case of CMSMEs, only 32 percent of the allocated fund has been disbursed as of October 2020. An amount of Tk 3,200 crores has been allocated for self-employment and business for migrant workers from abroad and trained and unemployed youths. Four organisations such as Village Savings Bank, Ansar-VDP Bank, Expatriates' Welfare Bank and Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) will distribute Tk 500 crores each while the Employment Bank will distribute Tk 1,200 crores. PKSF has started the loan programme with a fund of Tk 250 crores. The other four organisations have disbursed Tk 428 crores as loans.

In case of fiscal stimulus, disbursement for rice distribution at a lower price was fully implemented. However, information on the number of people who benefitted from this support is not known. A total of 50 lakh

Third, all crisis-period support measures have to be temporary in nature to avoid fiscal burden on the government in the long run. The government must have an exit plan for phasing out the support. A successful exit plan will depend on how successfully the stimulus packages have been utilised. The government has set timelines for the stimulus packages for each sector. Since most of the stimulus is in the form of bank loan, this facility must be time bound. There is also a need to have strong supervision and monitoring of bank loans to avoid the risk of loan default.

In view of the second wave of the pandemic, some countries have announced a second round of stimulus packages. Bangladesh will also have to do the same soon. The new package should serve two broad objectives. First, they should support those who remained outside the first round but are suffering financially. These must include the informal sector workers, the urban poor, women, the elderly and the youth.

consolidate what has been achieved and move forward to rebuild the economy.

Thus, for Bangladesh and countries with limited resources, fiscal stimulus should have a number of specific long-term objectives. First, in order for people to absorb future shocks, universal social protection and universal healthcare should be introduced. Second, the increased public expenditure should be on healthcare and education sectors for improving the quality of human capital. Third, government investment should be for technology and innovation to cope with the changing mode of education, work, business and service delivery. Fourth, public investment should be made on institutional strengthening for better quality of services. Fifth, fiscal stimulus should be provided for green infrastructure to make economic recovery sustainable.

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Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of her organisation.

After a no deal scare, Brexit is finally over



KAMAL AHMED

IT'S finally over. On Christmas Eve, when exhaustion from long haggling was about to set in, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared, "We have taken back control of our laws and our destiny". His counterpart, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen announced, "It's time to leave Brexit behind". These two near simultaneous announcements came following a free-trade agreement that took almost a year to finalise.

The deal makes Britain a third country like any other outside the European Union, but grants tariff and quota-free access to the USD 668 billion single market. But, claiming sovereignty has a cost and Britain had to agree to a mechanism, with arbitration and possible tariffs for violations that would keep its regulations and subsidies roughly in line with those of Brussels, to prevent unfair competition. The deal will require inspection of goods to prevent smuggling, especially of live animals. The deal also covers many crucial matters like visas, health insurance, and air, rail and road travel. It treats Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, as within the EU customs area to prevent the need for a hard border on the island, but requires some checks on goods going from Britain to Northern Ireland.

Only a week before, both sides hinted that a deal is very much unlikely. So, how did it become possible to strike a compromise at the last moment? Critics argue that it was intentional to avoid intense scrutiny due to people's preoccupation with Christmas festivities leaving very little time for parliamentary approval of the deal. Another theory is Joe Biden's election as US president effectively killed off prospect of a no deal as he has repeatedly said that anything that jeopardises the Good Friday agreement risking a return to borders between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic would be unwelcome. But, many observers believe that the sudden emergence of a more contagious strain of Covid-19 was the real game changer. They say the chaos caused by an unexpected and unprecedented 48-hour travel ban from UK to Europe following the news of the new Covid strain made everyone realise how catastrophic a no deal Brexit will be.

Britain has rarely seen such a fast deteriorating situation. And, it came just before Christmas, which the Conservative government was desperate to save from ruin. But, on December 21, it became clear that it was unavoidable. Only three days earlier during PM's Question Time, Prime Minister Boris Johnson ruled out any further tightening of health rules during the five days of "shorter" and "smaller" Christmas. His U-turn was so sharp and sudden that rail stations in London had to witness some of the worst overcrowding amidst peoples' desperation to escape de-facto lockdown in London.



PHOTO: AFP

The last-minute compromise has come as a big relief as Britain was already struggling to cope with the huge surge in coronavirus infections and deaths.

The news of the new strain of the virus rang alarm bells all over the world and within hours, the UK became a nation in isolation. Besides European neighbours, dozens of other countries including Canada, Australia, India and Hong Kong slapped travel bans from UK.

The travel bans caused such a nightmarish situation that the businesses started to scream over a likely shortage of essential supplies, perishable food items in particular. To help restock UK supermarket shelves, 80 tonnes of fruit and vegetables had to be flown in. Hundreds of people were left stranded on both sides of the channel and were angry about the prospect of

not being able to unite with their family for the biggest festival of the year.

Despite EU's call to lift restrictions on UK citizens with a reminder that they have the right to free movement until December 31, the French at the end of the 48-hour period had agreed to ease restrictions. Netherlands and other neighbours followed suit, but, only for EU nationals and residents subject to corona negative tests. Freights movement also resumed, but the backlog created during the travel ban continued throughout the Christmas period. The British government had to draft in the army to help in testing drivers stuck on the M20 and at Manston airport which was turned into an emergency lorry park. Furious truck drivers at one stage scuffled with police and sounded their horns in protest.

German newspaper *Die Welt* wrote, "the continental blockade could well be preparing the British for what Brexit might actually mean". It even speculated that in the event of a no deal transition to Brexit, corona chaos would merge seamlessly into Brexit chaos. Few will then be able or willing to tell which bottleneck and which new emergency measure is due to what. The *New York Times* was even more scathing and blamed PM Johnson for the chaos. Describing Britain a "Plague Island" led by a man who thinks "optimism is a substitute for hard truths and proper management"—which is currently getting a good lesson in "what 'reclaiming sovereignty' means".

UK companies started reporting on goods shortages and border disruption even before the new variant of coronavirus and French travel ban had emerged. The Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply said UK firms experienced the worst shipping delays since 1992 in early December due to a combination of pre-Brexit stockpiling, Christmas demand and backlogs in global shipping caused by the pandemic.

Certainly, the last-minute compromise has come as a big relief as Britain was already struggling to cope with the huge surge in coronavirus infections and deaths. Britain's government-backed independent forecaster, the Office for Budget Responsibility, projects Brexit will shave 4 percent off GDP in the medium term. It may take a while to find out all the implications of the agreement. But, the new variant of Covid-19 has given some lessons as to what isolation within a continent really means.

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