

Magurchhara, Tengratila and beyond

SM ABDUR RAHMAN

In an article titled "Gas fires and living forests just don't mix" (DS, Dec. 27, 2004) I raised the issue of Unocal's Moulavibazar gas pipeline, which is being built through Lawachhara National Park in Sylhet. Ominously, the subtitle was "Heading for a repeat of the Magurchhara disaster."

At that time I could not have guessed that in less than two weeks, the Tengratila explosion would stage a nightmarish replay of the 1997 Magurchhara blowout. Flames shot up hundreds of feet into the air in a blast that had all the elements of Magurchhara--inadequate site testing, company negligence and cost-cutting, an enormous wastage of gas and money, vast property damage, and unknown long-term health and environmental consequences. Tack on to that zero accountability for the foreign company carrying out the operations, and the end result is zero chance at fair compensation for the Bangladeshi side.

Out of the 10,000 people who fled their homes in panic, only 616 families would get less than \$85 per household as compensation for their lost homes and possessions. That amount

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wouldn't even buy a single decent winter coat in North America, and it certainly doesn't go too far here either, for a family of four or more who has lost everything in bitter midwinter, just two weeks before Eid. Then again, everyone who reads the newspaper knows that third world lives are somehow cheaper. Maybe the people over at Niko Resources were just following the trend set by George W. Bush in tsunami relief, to name the most recent of countless examples.

It is not just the multinational companies that are to blame, however. We, too, have shown time and time again that our silence can easily be bought. In this case, the total that Niko Resources will pay to ordinary

Bangladeshi amounts to a little over \$50,000. Even that paltry sum might eventually be reimbursed to Niko by the Bangladesh government -- there never was a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) between Niko and Petrobangla, and so it appears that Niko is not accountable in this case. When will we ever learn? It seems that our country is not yet ready for the multinationals, let alone natural gas -- we are like toddlers playing with matches and burning our hands repeatedly. Even now we are making yet another ghastly mistake, in the case of the Moulavibazar gas pipeline.

Gas and environmental safety

To return to the environmental issues highlighted in the "Gas fires and living forests" article, however, I should first respond to a Letter to the Editor from Dr. Shahrar Ali (DS Dec. 31, 2004). He pointed out that we should be using solar power and other cleaner, safer energy sources. This is very true -- gas is not the only answer -- but it was not the point of the article. Global energy policy, true pricing systems for clean fuels versus fossil fuels, and corporate interests in oil and gas will not change overnight.

In the meantime we are dependent on natural gas, and so we must manage it wisely for both economic and environmental reasons. Clearly, this is still not happening in Bangladesh. Major gas blowouts such as Magurchhara and Tengratila are relatively infrequent and make big headlines, but smaller gas accidents go on, under-reported, all the time nationwide. Gas accidents on the whole are such a regular occurrence that we cannot guarantee that another Tengratila will not happen in the next thirty years, or even in the next ten years. As such, in addition to better safety practices at drilling sites, all gas operations must be kept well away from human habitation, ecologically sensitive areas, and areas of national importance.

Lawachhara National Park is such a site -- one of 15 areas set aside in the country for conservation, and home to several rare plants and animals. The Park is by no means a pristine wilderness untouched by humans -- there is a paved road and a railway line passing through it, and at least 14 villages in and around it. However, all of these are old and were present long before the area was declared a national park in 1996. Human disturbance is constant. Farming, firewood collection, and logging (both legal and illegal) go on quite openly within its bounds. However, even with all these pressures Lawachhara is still a unique and valuable area for residents, tourists, researchers, and nature-lovers alike. Within minutes of entering, it is still possible to sense the humbling experience of encountering a rare creature. Lawachhara is as important a part of our national heritage as any museum.

Heading for a third disaster

The existence of Lawachhara National Park is now threatened by the presence of Unocal's Moulavibazar gas pipeline. Our country has already lost much of its wild spaces to shady development deals with questionable common benefits, but the situation in Lawachhara is critical because the site is legally protected from such development. Yet today there are work teams and sections of pipe laid out in the forest, motors run noisily, digging has begun in some places, and acetylene torches are being used to weld pipe right in the jungle path.

All of this is illegal in a national park. In a mockery of the law, Unocal submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report to the Department of Environment (DoE) in December 2004. An EIA is inappropriate in this situation, as national parks are already off-limits to development under the Wildlife (Preservation) (Amendment) Act of 1974. Nevertheless, work had already begun early January even though the DoE had not fully cleared the EIA, irrelevant as it was.

The digging itself poses untold hazards to water supply and soil, but in the aftermath of the Tengratila explosion, the planned route is simply insanity. A fire hazard is even more dangerous when there is a high amount of fuel present, and trees provide a lot more fuel than crop fields and houses. Aside from the legal issues and the importance of the National Park, if we consider the combination of drilling wells located all around the park with our appalling safety records, how did this project even go beyond the draft stage? A fire in any of the wells would create an inferno several times worse than either Magurchhara or Tengratila -- and we would lose a sanctuary of rare natural beauty and wildlife that is irreplaceable. There can be no cash compensation if Lawachhara National Park is lost: Extinction is forever. If we continue this project, we walk even more surely on the path to wiping out every other creature on this land but ourselves.

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Why such violent death for a mild-mannered politician?

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We are still shocked at the death of Shah A.M.S. Kibria, the ex-Finance Minister of Bangladesh. We mourn his death and we are still grief-stricken. Given the trend of events in the last few years, however, Kibria's death is not all that surprising. Various opposition leaders, cultural activists, progressive or rather pro-active intellectuals, have lost their lives in bomb blasts or at the hands of individual assassins.

Numerous others are living under death threats under a variety of pretexts and reasons. Unfortunately, I was also not spared such threats, being cautioned not to go to Dhaka University where I teach for a period of time, or face dire consequences. In spite of all this, we somehow lead our lives and follow our daily routines. The nation however slides into more and more "irrationality."

This state of affairs can only serve the interests of the few at the sacrifice of the common good. It is an earnest hope that the government recognizes this, and the sooner the better. A democratically elected government is in danger of losing its very legitimacy unless it can control such acts of violence and bring the killers to justice. The government should also understand that the image of the country is tarnished by these acts of violence, not by protests at these acts, nor by letting others know of them.

It is in this backdrop that I wish to write a few words as tribute to Mr. Kibria. Some of us had the opportunity to work closely with the deceased as members of his consultative committee on macroeconomic issues. The committee in itself was set up to encourage more rational and informed policy making, because different individuals from different view points were brought together to



advise the ex-Finance Minister in his policy decisions, based on their experience and expertise. What was important in these meetings for all concerned was the objectivity of the analysis they offered.

These meetings, held regularly, gave us an opportunity to interact closely with Mr. Kibria. What struck me was that our ex-Finance Minister was an exceptionally mild-mannered man. He treated us all with courtesy and patience, listening to our analysis and views, though we all knew that the ultimate decision and responsibility was his alone.

In a nation prone to aggressive behaviour and settling disputes with guns and bombs, rather than words and intellect, the mild manners of Mr. Kibria were something to be admired and remembered. It is also striking that the journal that Mr. Kibria edited is called Mild Speech (Mridu Vashon). It is obvious that our ex-Finance Minister valued this attribute of mildness and cultivated this in his own behaviour. It is thus an irony that he had to face a violent death. It is also an irony that he died untreated on the long journey from Habiganj to Birdem.

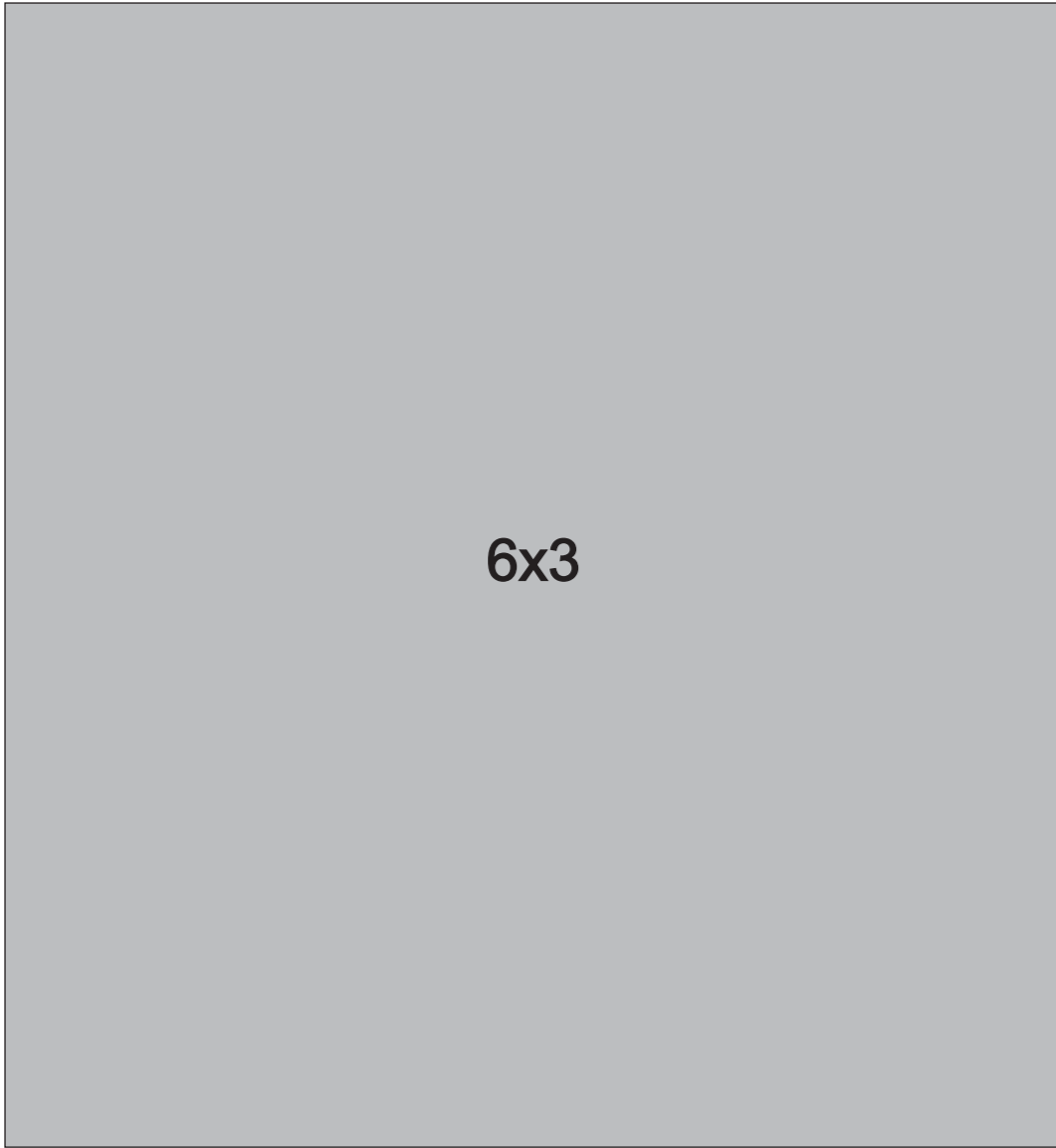
Perhaps the law enforcing agencies could not, as they say,

prevent the attack on him. Nor were they able to apprehend the killers immediately. One wonders what the constraints are. But where were those in charge of health administration or the administration in general in Habiganj? Why could not a helicopter be arranged for his transportation? Why are we spending so much money on various public services and the law-enforcing agencies unless they are able to respond to the public needs? The present

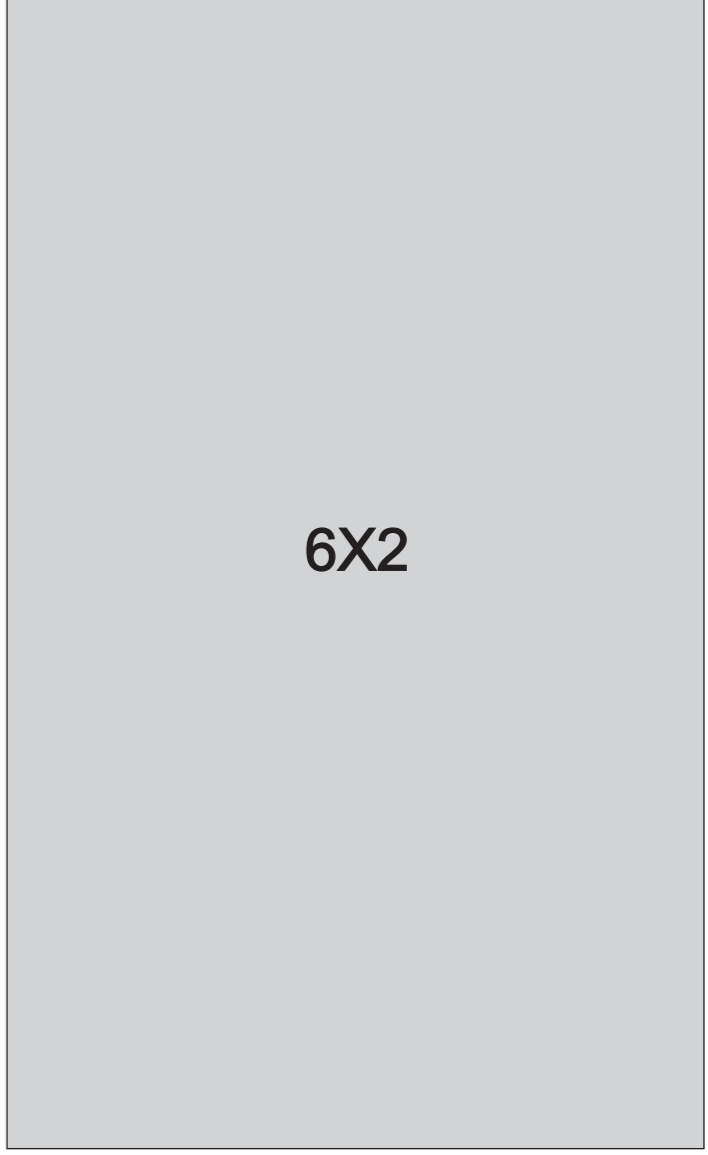
Finance Minister may well consider.

There is perhaps nothing that will console the family of Mr. Kibria and that of other victims. We can only offer them our heartfelt condolence. But is it not our moral duty to protest and prevent any further such violent deaths? May the soul of Mr. Kibria and all other victims rest in peace.

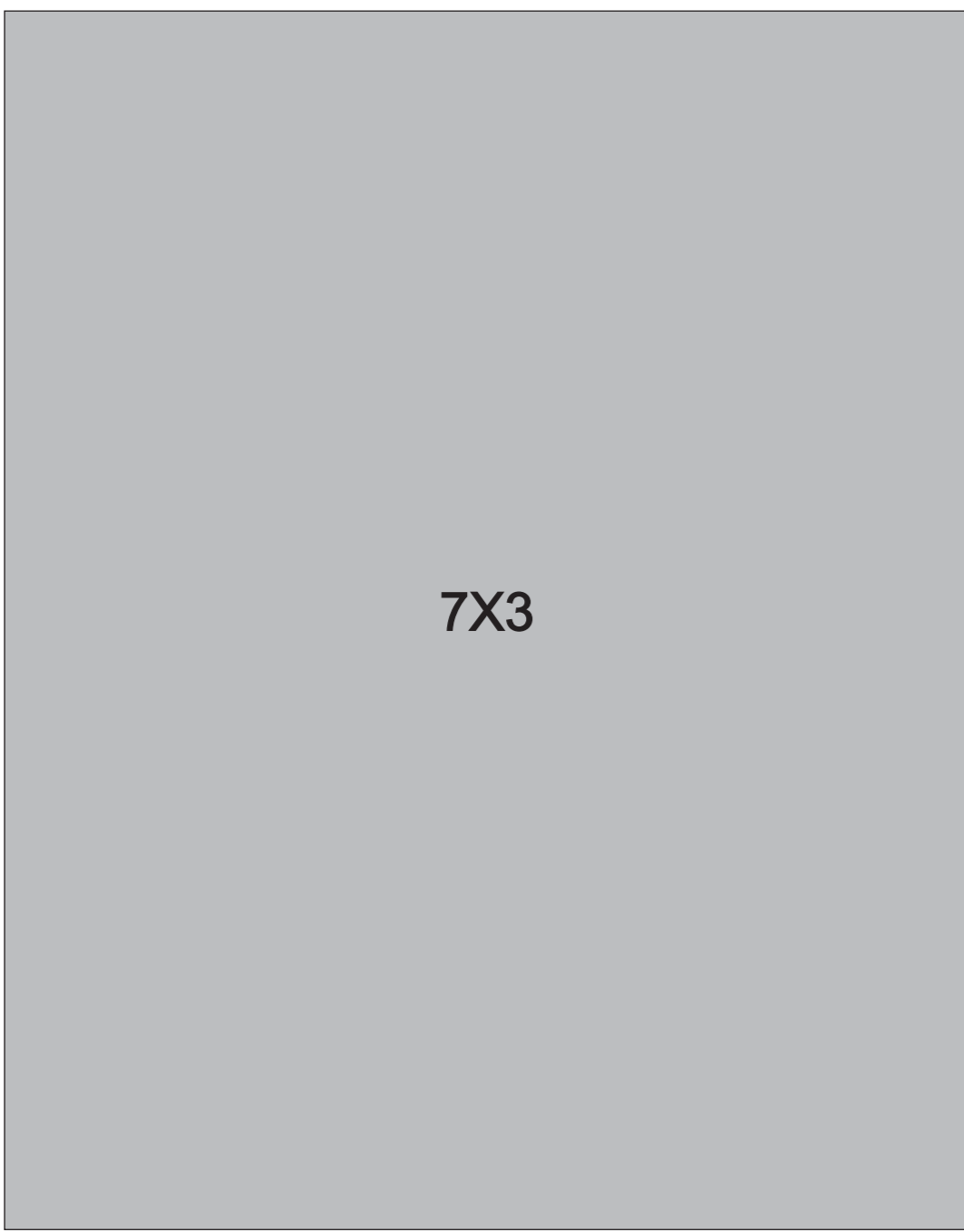
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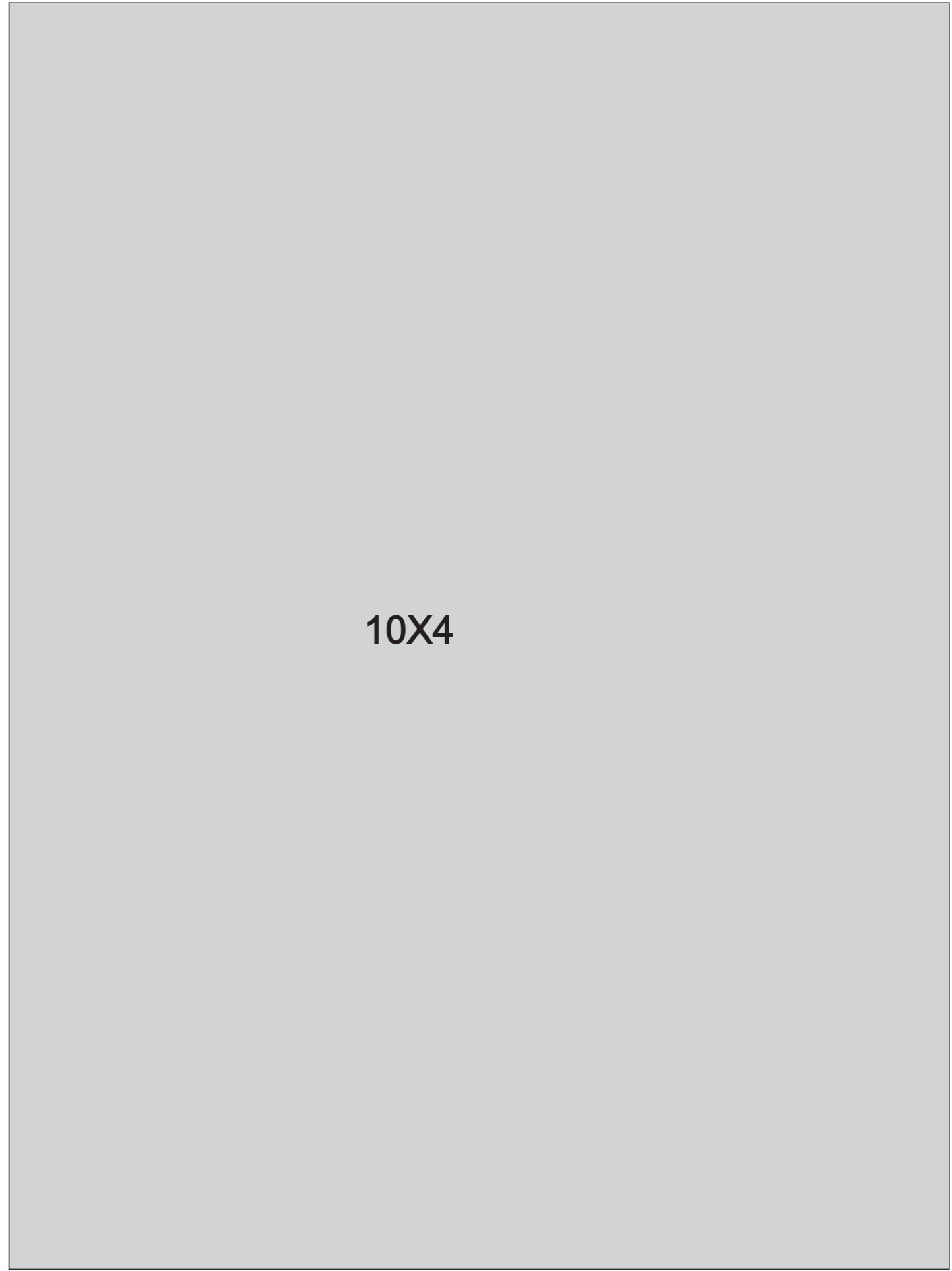
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