

Forest crisis and the purpose of forests

The forest department should play a central role in healthy and sustainable economic development. The government can act today to introduce a new set of priorities for the department, with an explicit shift away from the former revenue focus and a shift towards maximising the ecological and social contributions of forests

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TELEVISION scenes of cash found at the chief conservator of forests' home has stimulated a torrent of discussion about corruption in general, and forest corruption in particular. Conversations most often focus on sharing stories heard of how much money has been stolen by this or that official. It would be helpful to get beyond such discussions and look at the causes of forest corruption, and possible remedies.

For corruption to occur, a set of conditions must be present. The most immediate and obvious is the personal willingness to break established rules. But this willingness alone does not explain the stories of wide-ranging corruption we have read about in recent weeks.

A second, and important, contributor to corrupt practices in the forest sector is the de facto forest policy that has put a high priority on generation of non-tax revenue from forests for the government budget. In the light of this policy, the department has evolved increasingly in ways that ensure that these government targets are met.

At the beginning of each year, the government gives the chief conservator of forests (CCF) a target figure for revenue generation from the forest department for the coming fiscal year. In the past five years, this figure has hovered around Taka 100 crore per year. In

May, the CCF sits with his conservators and divisional forest officers and divides up the responsibilities to achieve this target.

The annual recurrent costs of the forest department happen to be the same as the government revenue targets, or almost Taka 100 crore. The government seems to have set revenue targets so that the forest department would not be an extra burden on the national budget. In essence, the department, as it operates now, pays for itself. This may seem sensible to someone responsible for reducing government expenditure, but the policy has had a strongly negative impact on the forests.

Although the figures are not exact, evidence from recent forest inventories conducted by the department suggests that forested areas in reserved lands have decreased precipitously.

The fact that higher-level political actors have benefited greatly from this tree felling business explains in part why this revenue generation from timber continues in spite of the dwindling forests.

The means of generating this government revenue are well known, and include: (1) proceeds from felling operations; (2) auction revenue of seized timber; and, (3) issuance of permits. While these are legal operations, any forest officer open to corruption will find these processes a perfect means of aligning public and private interest. Permits given for legal felling operations can be abused, as can

operations of transit checkpoints.

In short, the high priority given to meeting government-fixed revenue targets encourages both, an ever-increased amount of tree felling and the corrupt practices that are so easily associated with it.

Cost of revenue-generation focus

What is the cost to the forest sector, and to society, of this policy and the corrupt practices associated with it? By encouraging legal and illegal tree felling, the policy has contributed to a more rapid loss of the forests of the country than might otherwise have occurred. With the forest department having nominal authority over forests, which once covered 10.1% of the country's area, or 1.53m hectares, this is an enormous resource loss.

As forests fall, and are not successfully replanted, other costs follow. Water runoff and topsoil are no longer regulated by the forests; fragile diverse ecosystems are destroyed; the aesthetic and recreational values of forests are lost; and carbon is no longer retained within the living trees.

Then there is the opportunity cost to the local level forest official. Because he places such a priority on this generation of legal and illegal revenue, he has little time left for the dialogue with local stakeholders and sustainable forest management practices.

Forest and wildlife conservation objectives in particular have suffered from this revenue focus.

Since no legal felling operations can be undertaken in lands under the Wildlife Act (all "Protected Areas"), many forest officials see them as "free for the taking" to meet personal need or revenue generation objectives. Although forest lots within the protected areas cannot be sold, the wood that is seized from these areas can be, and is being.

The revenue focus has also slowed progress on a forest department proposal that protected area revenue be directly shared with those local stakeholders who are contributing to protection and conservation. This makes sense, the local stakeholders involved in protection of forests should benefit from their efforts. But the proposal has been rejected by the government twice, on the grounds that all revenue must come to the central treasury.

The way forward

The National Forest Policy, 1994 (Amended) refers to the importance of managing forests for the people, for economic development, and for wildlife. But the policy is so all-inclusive (it includes 28 different thematic "statements," or recommendations, on widely varying subjects) that it says all things to all people. In the end, the forest policy has had little working impact on the department, because it does not set a clear and unequivocal agenda for ways in which the department can manage forests for the public good.

A recent regional forum on "Protecting Forests and Forest Dwellers: Role of Law," organised by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), recommended a more "pro-people" forest policy and legal framework.

In his speech at this same forum, Dr. Ainun Nishat of IUCN urged a



radical evaluation of the purpose of the forest department, and wondered whether the revenue generation focus was an appropriate one.

India, Nepal, and other countries have evaluated their forest policies in recent decades, and explicitly recognised that forests contribute more to society when managed for public service than when managed as revenue generators. The 1988 Indian Forest Policy states categorically that the "local communities have the first charge on forests, followed by ecological functions of

forests." Nepal has developed unequivocal policies supporting community management of forests, in ways that go beyond our more narrowly defined social forestry operations.

The forest department should play a central role in healthy and sustainable economic development. The government can act today to introduce a new set of priorities for the department, with an explicit shift away from the former revenue focus and a shift towards maximising the ecological

and social contributions of forests. By allowing local communities to benefit directly for their work in conserving forests (e.g. through direct sharing in entry and other fees), the government would send a strong message that forest conservation can serve the public good.

New models of social forestry and community forestry can be proposed, that would allow for a greater role by neighbouring poor stakeholders. The forest department's work in developing new models for protected area collabo-

rative management under Nishorgo should be extended to other forest areas.

As the "house-cleaning" at the forest department takes place, it is now imperative to put this critically important department on a sound footing to serve the nation and our future generations.

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England goes smokefree from July 1, when Bangladesh? Sudan: Africa's new Serengeti

MIR LUTFUL KABIR SAADI

IT will be against the law to smoke in virtually all enclosed public places and workplaces from today, July 1, 2007 in all over England. This includes places like cafes, bars, pubs, clubs, shopping centres, railway stations, garages, work vehicles, taxis, factories and staff rooms. Anyone who breaks the "smokefree" law could face a fine or end up in court. Virtually all enclosed public places and workplaces in England will become smokefree from this time. It was expected that a "smokefree" England will ensure a healthier environment, so everyone can socialise, relax, travel, shop and work free from secondhand smoke.

The government in England is not taking away people's choice to smoke, but recognises that exposing others to secondhand smoke, especially within enclosed environments, is seriously harmful to health. There is no doubt breathing second-hand tobacco smoke (SHS) is dreadfully dangerous to health. It causes cancer, as well as many serious respiratory and cardiovascular diseases in children and adults, often leading to death. There is no safe level of human exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.

Secondhand smoke is simply other people's tobacco smoke. Wherever people smoke, there is secondhand smoke in the air. Breathing in secondhand smoke is sometimes called passive smok-

ing. Secondhand smoke hangs around for ages and most of it is invisible and odourless. Smoking in a car is even worse because all of the smoke is concentrated into a small space.

Interestingly people cannot see or smell 85 per cent of second-hand smoke. So no matter how much one try to avoid it, it is point-less. When breathed in, second-hand smoke increases one's risk of getting lung cancer by 24 per cent and heart disease by 25 per cent. Secondhand smoke is a dangerous cocktail of over 4,000 chemicals, including 69 cancer-causing chemicals, such as arsenic, benzene and formaldehyde.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that around 700 million children, or almost half of the world's children, breathe air polluted by tobacco smoke, particularly at home. Tobacco is the second major cause of death in the world. It is currently responsible for the death of one in ten adults worldwide (about 5 million deaths each year). If current smoking patterns continue, it will cause some 10 million deaths each year by 2020. Half the people that smoke today -- that is about 650 million people -- will eventually be killed by tobacco.

Second-hand tobacco smoke (SHS) has officially been classified a carcinogenic -- cancer causing -- in humans. It also causes severe acute and chronic heart disease. Other adult conditions linked to SHS are bronchitis,

pneumonia, asthma, and in children: lower respiratory infections, asthma, middle ear infection, sudden infant death syndrome and low birthweight for babies of women exposed to SHS during pregnancy.

The Global Youth Tobacco survey developed by WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, interviewed students between 13 and 15 years old in 132 countries between 1999 and 2005. The results of the survey show that 43.9 per cent of the students are exposed to second-hand tobacco smoke at home, while 55.8 per cent are exposed to smoke in public places. Support for smoking bans in public places is global, with 76.1 per cent of the students surveyed in favour.

The costs of second-hand smoke are not limited to the burden of diseases. Exposure also imposes economic costs on individuals, businesses and society as a whole. These include primarily direct and indirect medical costs, but also productivity losses. In addition, workplaces where smoking is permitted incur higher renovation and cleaning costs, and increased risk of fire, and may experience higher insurance premiums.

There is considerable evidence from countries that have already introduced smokefree laws that the impact on business can be positive. New York's Smokefree Air Act came into effect in March 2003. After the first year, a report

found that business tax receipts in restaurants and bars were up by 8.7 per cent. Ireland (2004), Norway (2004), Scotland (2006), New Zealand (2004), various Canadian territories and Australian states are examples of places which have introduced comprehensive smokefree legislation. California has had statewide smokefree public places since 1998. Today, over sixteen US states have smokefree legislation that required completely smokefree restaurants and bars.

Comprehensive smokefree legislation has proved to be effective in protecting people from the health risks of secondhand smoke. For example, research published in The Journal of the American Medical Association found rapid and significant improvement in respiratory health of bartenders after the implementation smokefree workplace legislation in California.

A recent survey revealed that in around 70 per cent of smokers in England say they want to stop smoking, and the new smokefree law could provide extra motivation to do so. Smokefree England will help to improve the health of the whole community. The new law will protect all people in virtually all enclosed public places, workplaces, public vehicles and work vehicles, from the harmful effects of secondhand smoke.

If someone do not comply with the new smokefree law in England, will be committing a criminal offence. The fixed penalty notices and maximum fine for each offence are: Smoking in smokefree premises or work vehicles, a fixed penalty notice of £50 (reduced to £30 if paid in 15 days) imposed on the person smoking. Alternatively a maximum fine of £200 if prosecuted and convicted by a court.

Recent survey carried out in England also reveals widespread support for the legislation. Findings include: 93 per cent of the overall population are aware that smokefree legislation is coming, however 45 per cent do not know that it comes into force on 1st July 2007. However, 71 per cent of regular pub-goers support the legislation, as well as 76 per cent of the overall population. It is interesting to note that more than one in ten (15%) businesses in England do not realise that their smoking room will have to be closed by 1st July 2007 and more than half (53%) do not realise that work vehicles will also be covered. New research from the Department of Health shows that although three quarters (75%) of

businesses are aware of the forthcoming legislation but many are unsure of the detail.

The government in England has already launched a massive campaign to prepare businesses for July 1, including advertising in TV, radio, newspapers, buses, billboards and a mail-out of guidance to more than a million businesses. A dedicated website has also been set up to help businesses and the public to prepare. Not only smoke cigarettes, biri or the hookah, chew tobacco in paan or gutkha are also came under focus at this stage. Smoking rates are much higher in South Asian communities. There are also many health risks, in particular chewing paan makes five times more likely to get oral cancer.

According to WHO about half of Bangladeshi men and one-fifth of women use tobacco in either smoking or smokeless form. Bangladesh, being a member of WHO, made an anti-smoking law named "Smoking and Tobacco Usage (Control) Act" in March 2005, which prohibits publication of advertisements of tobacco products in newspapers, electronic media, books, magazines and cinemas.

The law also bans smoking in public places and transport means with a provision of penalty. Though very slowly, however the situation has been improving because of these measures. In Bangladesh, the awareness level about the harmful effects of tobacco is awfully low. Traditionally, Bangladeshi men smoke cigarettes, biri and hukka, and chew tobacco leaf with betel quid (pan). However, women usually do not smoke but chew tobacco with pan.

WHO revealed that there are estimated 20 million tobacco users in Bangladesh, 5 million of them are women. These estimates include smokeless tobacco also. A considerable amount of tobacco is produced in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was the world's 18th leading tobacco producer in 1994, and continues to be the 4th largest producer of cigarettes in the region. Tobacco-related illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases are already major problems in Bangladesh as in most countries of this region.

Most of the victims in which heart attacks that occur below the age of 40 are heavy smokers. Tobacco poses a major challenge not only to health, but also to economic development.

Tobacco and poverty are inextricably linked. Many studies have shown that in the poorest house-

holds in some low-income countries, like Bangladesh as much as 10 per cent of total household expenditure is on tobacco. This means that these families have less money to spend on basic items such as food, education and health care. In addition to its direct health effects, tobacco leads to malnutrition, increased health care costs and premature death. It also contributes to a higher illiteracy rate, since money that could have been used for education is spent on tobacco instead. Unfortunately tobacco's role in exacerbating poverty has been largely ignored by researchers in both fields.

It was reported that London business will boom once the smoking ban comes into force. Jennette Arnold, Chair of London Health Commission said: "The ban is good for everyone as more people will go out and enjoy London." Restaurants and pubs will sell nicotine patches and gum after the smoking ban comes into force.

To help smokers kick the habit, manufacturers will target areas where people are most likely to suffer cravings. Government watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency plans to allow the more general sale of patches and gum. An estimated four million people are expected to try to quit smoking after the ban.

Tobacco is the fourth most common risk factor for disease worldwide. The economic costs of tobacco use are equally devastating. In addition to the high public health costs of treating tobacco-caused diseases, tobacco kills people at the height of their productivity, depriving families of breadwinners and nations of a healthy workforce. Tobacco users are also less productive while they are alive due to increased sickness.

At present all over England there is an enormous campaign and red alert that it goes smokefree from July 1. Bangladesh has also enacted a tobacco control law in 2005, which is more rhetoric than reality. However, for a greater interest of the nation, future generation and thriving economy Bangladesh needs drastic measures to diminish smoking and it should implement its own tobacco control law. England goes smokefree from July 1, when will we see a smokefree Bangladesh?

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ALEXANDRA POLIER

MIKE Fay pilots his four-seater Cessna down a short, dusty runway in Mabior, southern Sudan, and up over a landscape of cattle and *tukuls*, traditional huts that look like giant Hershey's Kisses. A few minutes later, tall yellow grass dotted with emerald-green Balanites trees stretches to the horizon.

Fay spots a brown patch and heads toward it -- a herd of antelope, which suddenly darts to the right. A few minutes later Fay spots a roan antelope, thought to have gone extinct in Sudan. "Wahoo!" he yells, banging his hand on the steering wheel.

Fay, National Geographic's explorer in residence, has been crisscrossing Africa for 25 years searching for wild animals in need of help. He's found thousands of elephants in Chad, and jungles full of chimpanzees, gorillas and forest elephants in Gabon, and he's seen animal populations in Angola and Mozambique, devastated from years of civil war.

When he started surveying the 360,000 square kilometers of southern Sudan earlier this year, where government forces once fought the Sudan People's Liberation Army, he wasn't hopeful. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Sudan, it turns out, is teeming with animals. Fay and his colleagues from the Wildlife Conservation Society found that vast stretches of grass and wetlands, once the site of heavy fighting but long since abandoned, serve as a safe haven to almost a million white-eared kob and hundreds of thousands of antelope, numbers that rival those of Africa's Serengeti.

He's also seen giraffes, feared extinct in Sudan, as well as buffalo, lions, leopards, eland, crocodiles and hippos. Once all the counting is done, Fay thinks that Sudan could turn out to support the biggest animal migration in Africa. "Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that this kind of abundance in nature existed in a region after 25 years of civil war, virtually unknown to the world at large," he says.

Conservation of wildlife can sometimes be a silver lining to military conflict. Korea's demilitarized zone has become a haven for hundreds of plant and animal species no longer existing else-

where on the Korean Peninsula. The Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia is now a sanctuary for tigers and elephants.

In Sudan, much of the fiercest fighting took place in the central and southern regions in the 1980s and 1990s, but even as late as 2002, bombs were still being dropped on some communities. Millions of people fled the southeast, but the animals stayed behind, continuing their migration through the vast plains and swampland.

When the fighting ended in 2004, it had been years since people had set foot in much of the southeast. As a result, animals were free to wander a vast area unimpeded; in one survey Fay saw a mass of kob, gazelles and other herd animals fill an area about 50 kilometers by 80 kilometers.

The animals could prove to be a tourist gold mine for Sudan. Kenya rakes in almost \$1 billion a year in tourism due to the great migration in the Masai Mara. Gen. Alfred Akwoch, Sudan's under secretary of Environment, Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, says he's taking steps to protect the animals for tourism.

The Wildlife Conservation Society is working closely with the government on a plan that would integrate thousands of ex-SPLA soldiers into wildlife services. "We could start tourism here tomorrow," says Paul Elkan, the society's local director.

Competing pressures on Sudan's leaders to develop oilfields and other industries could pose a threat to wildlife, however. Industrial permits have already been awarded in many of the migration corridors.

Development of the oilfields could threaten the Sudd, the largest freshwater wetland in Africa and home to 10,000 elephants. With the road network being extended into the migration area and a big supply of guns still at large, government officials fear a rise in the bush meat trade.

Preserving the unexpected wealth of wildlife will pose a challenge for Sudan and for conservationists. For the moment, Fay and his colleagues are grateful the animals have survived at all.

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