

Dhaka should plan seriously to address climate refugee issue

UNFPA Representative Arthur Erken tells *The Daily Star*

PORIMOL PALMA

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) applauds Bangladesh's proactive stance on climate change, for which the country is not responsible but is likely to witness displacement of millions of people and agricultural loss due to floods and sea level rise.

Emphasising the urgent need to further reduce the birth rate in an already highly populated land, the UN body also calls upon both developed and developing nations to find out ways to ensure that millions of people will not be uprooted from their lands.

In an exclusive interview with *The Daily Star*, the UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh Arthur Erken made this observation on the basis of his one-year experience of serving in Bangladesh and his previous experiences of working in the field of population and development.

"Bangladesh is likely to experience serious consequences of the expected rises in sea levels. Millions living in the coastal areas and on the islands will probably move to urban areas putting additional pressures on the already fragile infrastructures in those townships. Bangladesh should seriously plan for this, keeping these issues in mind," he said.

As remedies to these problems, he suggested improvements in water management, boosting agricultural production by applying the latest technologies, creating employment opportunities for rural people flowing into the urban centres and further reducing the fertility rate.

"These require good planning and investments. Bangladesh should, therefore, be vocal in the global arena. All should come together to find out a way out," he said when asked if the developed countries should come forward with more assistance for the developing nations who face serious



UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh Arthur Erken

crises like price hikes, high population growth and challenges of climate change.

Lauding Bangladesh's achievement in total fertility rate (TFR), he said according to Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2007, the total fertility rate (TFR) declined from 3 children per woman in 2004 to 2.7 children per woman, a 10 per cent decrease in just 3 years.

But the population expert did not rule out the potential for a further population boom.

Arthur said that in the early 1970s, the population of Bangladesh was less than 80 million, but right now it is close to 150 million. The UN projects that with the current fertility rate another 80 million people are likely to be added to the present population by 2050.

"The reason? Look at the demography. Very few people today are very old, but around 50 per cent of the population is younger than 14 years. That means that half of the population of this country hasn't even entered their child-

bearing years, and will still get children," Arthur said.

"With a current TFR of 2.7 or 2.5 children per woman, this means that an enormous group is still to come. This is population momentum."

So, it is imperative to urgently achieve replacement level fertility or below, meaning the level whereby each generation is as big as the next, he said. When each woman gets no more than two children, this is replacement level fertility, as she would just replace herself and her husband, Arthur said.

With populations booming in the less developed world, migration pressures will increase the pressure on cities. In Bangladesh, already a quarter of the population lives in urban areas, and the next 20 years this will double, the UNFPA representative said.

"Unless we make the much needed investments in Dhaka and other cities in the country, the absorption of newcomers will remain a huge challenge for all of us, as every day at least 1000 people

are entering the capital to seek a livelihood."

It is not only a national issue, but a global issue, Arthur said, adding: "You already have a lot of problems today. Think about it when the population goes beyond 240 million, it will undoubtedly cause even more economic, social and environmental distress in the country."

To achieve replacement level fertility as early as possible, Arthur said, achieving gender equality, universal education and the use of modern family planning methods are the best ways.

Despite the fact that Bangladesh has had enormous success with its family planning programme (with 47 per cent of couples now using modern contraceptives like condoms and pills), still too many people lack knowledge about or access to family planning.

Arthur suggested some changes in the nature of family planning programme, underscoring the need for improving the quality of counseling and moving towards the promotion of more long-term or permanent family planning methods.

"Partly, there is a psychological barrier that make people hesitate to use permanent method. Through better counseling, we have to see how we can overcome this barrier."

Coming to HIV/AIDS prevalence, he said Bangladesh has so far been spared from the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, but the country is highly vulnerable because of the high prevalence in neighbouring countries.

"I am still very worried. The potential for HIV/AIDS is still very high. The promotion of condom use is very important."

In the end, he summed up UNFPA's priorities in Bangladesh, that is to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every person free from HIV and AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.



PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

A colourful procession was brought out in Rajshahi city yesterday marking the inauguration of a three-day Mango Fair and Gambhira Festival.

Mango fair & Gambhira festival begins in Rajshahi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A three-day Mango Fair and Gambhira Festival began in Rajshahi yesterday with a call for establishing sustainable industries based on huge mangoes produced in the region.

Different local varieties of mangoes were put on display at 12 stalls set up by different government and private horticulture centres, nurseries and individuals of Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj on Loknath High School premises.

Different cultural organisations from the two districts rendered Gambhira, a popular folksong and dance of the region, in the afternoon.

Rajshahi Divisional Commissioner M Hafizur Rahman Bhuiyan attended the inaugural ceremony as chief guest while Abdul Matin Khan, president of Amra Rajshahi Basi, chaired the event.

Bangalink, a major mobile network operator in the country, has sponsored it.

President of Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce and Industry Hasan Ali, Dr Tosikul Islam, vice-principal of Shah Makhdom College, Amra Rajshahi Basi General Secretary Sayed Ashfaqul Hadi and Solaiman Alam, Bangalink head of public relation and communications, addressed the programme.

The speakers said local people feel proud for the quality and popularity of their mangoes and gambhira songs.

They however lamented that a huge quantity of mangoes worth crores of taka are damaged every year due to lack of fruit processing industries.

The speakers also called for gas and power supply in the region to set up industries.

A discussion on Rajshahi's heritage and gambhira will be held on the fair premises today while the programme will come to an end tomorrow amid a ceremony.

Call to cancel decision to raise fertiliser price

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Different political parties on Thursday strongly criticised the decision to increase the price of fertilisers and called on the government to cancel it immediately.

Condemning the decision, Communist Party of Bangladesh president and general secretary said although finance adviser in his budgetary speech strongly mentioned that they will give agricultural subsidy, but the government has increased the prices of urea and TSP more than double within two days.

They said the decision has been taken to implement the blueprint of World Bank and to hold the farmers hostage by the importers.

Bangladesh Krishak Samity held a rally at Comrade Moni Sing Road at Purana Paltan in the city on Thursday protesting the price hike of fertiliser. General secretary of Bangladesh Krishak Samity Morshed spoke at the rally.

Samajtantrik Khetmajur O Krishak Front President Shuvranga Chakrabarty and General Secretary Bazul Rashid in a statement expressed their deep concern over increase of fertiliser.

Bangladesh Krishak Sangha Convener Mallik Sultan Ahmed and Member Secretary Sheikh Shahadat, National Revolutionary Front President Abul Hossain and General Secretary Kazi Ibadul Haque Badal, Bangladesh Communist Juba Sangha President Mukles Uzzaman and General Secretary Nure Alam and Biplobi Chhatra Sangha President Delwar Hossain and General Secretary Azizul Hakim in a joint statement also protested the price hike of fertiliser.

Lift emergency for fair polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Workers' Party of Bangladesh President Rashed Khan Menon has again demanded of the government to withdraw state of emergency instead of relaxing it to prepare a level playing field for fair election.

"Any attempt to control the election and help 'selected people' win the election will not give credibility to the polls," he said while speaking at a meeting in Narayanjan yesterday.

The meeting was part of a mass signature campaign to realise its 16-point demand including introduction of rationing system across the country.

At the meeting presided over by the district committee secretary Himangshu Saha, Menon said the caretaker government is trying to overcome a precarious situation by releasing top leaders, but it has not moved from its plan to establish a "controlled regime".

"They (the government) want to establish control over local

government and national parliament by the men of a special agency, but people will not accept any designed election," he said, according to a press release.

Menon said the government has not taken steps to control prices of essentials and ensure food security.

The government has to take steps so that the people working in private sector also get dearness allowance as the government had declared it for its employees, he added.



PHOTO: STAR

Noted economist Dr Atiur Rahman speaks at a press conference on 'National budget: Gender analysis' at the Dhaka Reporters' Unity auditorium in the city yesterday. Steps Towards Development along with six NGOs organised the event.

BSRM Steels goes into operation today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

BSRM Steels Ltd, a newly built giant industrial conglomerate of Bangladesh Steel Re-rolling Mills (BSRM) Group, formally goes into operation here today with an annual production capacity of 3,75,000 tonnes of steel rods.

BSRM sources said built on a sprawling 11-acre land at Latifpur in Faujdarhat area under Sitakunda upazila, the Tk 370-crore project is one of the largest mills of its kind in South Asia and the largest engineering industry in the country.

The state-of-the-art steel mill is targeted to manufacture 3,75,000 tonnes of 500-grade steel reinforcing bars, commonly known as 'xtreme brand', per annum and it will usher in a new era in the manufacturing of high-quality steel rods in the country, sources added.

The xtreme brand rod would save the cost of construction by 15 per cent than that of the 60-grade rod of the present market and the clients would be able to buy the 500-grade rod at a price of 15 per cent less than that of the present 60-grade rod that now cost around Tk 70,000," said the sources.

The construction of the gigantic steel mill started in 2004 and completed early this year. Afterwards, the unit went into test production on April 1. Presently it is manufacturing an average of 1,000 tonnes of steel rods.

Sources hoped that BSRM steel would be able to meet one-eighth percent of the country's total demand that presently stands at around 30 lakh tonnes annually.

There are over 250 large and small steel re-rolling mills in the country, mostly in Chittagong and Dhaka, they added.

BSRM with Tk 900 crore annual turnover has been the country's leading steel rod manufacturer for over a period of 56 years.

They believe that BSRM's annual turnover would exceed Tk 2,000 crore once the new steel mill goes into full production.

Binod Bihari leaves for Kolkata for check-up

CU CORRESPONDENT

Ailing anti-British movement veteran Binod Bihari Chowdhury left for Kolkata by a GMG flight yesterday for medical check-up.

He will undergo a thorough check-up at a hospital in Kolkata, family sources said.

On May 28, Binod Bihari was admitted to Cardiac Care Unit (CCU) of Chittagong Medical College Hospital with several complications, including anaemia and cardiac and kidney problems.



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad President Ayesha Khanam speaks at a workshop on 'Participation of women representatives in local government election and budgetary allocation' at Biam auditorium in the city yesterday.

INDOOR POLLUTION

60pc under-5 children live with death or disability threat: Study

UNB, Dhaka

More than 60 per cent of the country's total under-five children is living with high death or disability threat because of indoor pollution, says a study.

It says 90 in 100 children on an average are affected by indoor air pollution every hour. People living in urban slums, high-rise apartments or in old and dark houses suffer the most. The indoor air pollutants infect almost 88 per cent of the total population.

Citing statistics of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and EPA, the article says about 2.8 million premature deaths occur every year due to indoor air pollution. As many as 80 per cent of all diseases in the world are associated with water usage or poor environmental hygiene. The household environment of the poor people, especially women and children in developing countries, carries the biggest risks to health.

A study conducted by Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO) mentioned that both the urban and rural areas face the greatest threat from indoor pollution, where about 11 crore people continue to rely on traditional fuels such as firewood, charcoal, and cow dung. LPG or natural gas and crude oil for cooking and heating.

Concentrations of indoor pollutants in households that burn traditional fuels are alarming. Burning such fuels produces large amount of smoke and other air pollutants in the

confined space of a home, resulting in high exposure. Women and children are the groups most vulnerable as they spend more time indoors and are exposed to the smoke.

The study says people spend their day in different places -- indoors at home and at work and outdoors on fields and crowded roads. These different places can have different levels of air pollution. How much pollution a person breathes depends very much on whether he or she is rich or poor, man or woman and infant or elderly.

The study indicates that particulate matters concentrate in kitchens due to the burning of bio-fuels which are known to be as higher as 30-55 times as per the WHO standard, while concentrations at the workplace for primary workers can be as high as 15-25 times the standard.

Though outdoor concentrations are about 2.5-3.5 times in urban and rural Bangladesh as per the WHO standard, it is 10-15 times the standard in the country's slums.

Air pollution causes a range of health impacts from increasing the risk of death to increased asthma attacks, causing losses of income and greater medical expenses.

The study estimates that the deaths and asthma attack due to various forms of indoor pollution are three times higher nationwide than outdoor pollution. Though most research efforts and media attention have focused on outdoor air pollution, the indoor air situation, which is most important for human life, has been ignored.

The study found that about 80-

100 per cent of women and children are exposed daily to indoor pollution. The ESDO study targeted infants living in slums at Dhaka and also studied their health status.

The study conducted by Dr Hossain Shahriar says the World Bank in 1992 designated indoor air pollution in the developing countries as one of the four most critical global environmental problems. Daily averages of pollutant level emitted indoors often exceed the current WHO guidelines and acceptable levels.

He says although several hundred separate chemical agents have been identified in the smoke from bio-fuels, the four most serious pollutants are particulate, carbon monoxide, polycyclic organic matter, and formaldehyde.

According to the study of the ESDO and EPA of the USA, in urban areas, exposure to indoor air pollution has increased due to a variety of reasons, including the construction of more tightly sealed buildings, reduced ventilation, the use of synthetic materials for building and furnishing and the use of chemical products, pesticides, and household care products.

Indoor air pollution can begin within the building or be drawn in from outdoors. Other than nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and lead, there are a number of other pollutants that affect the air quality in an enclosed space.

"Unfortunately, little has been done to monitor the poor indoor environment both in rural and urban areas," the study says.

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