Editor's Note

IT was not until journalist cameras arrived that we fully comprehended the scale and ferociousness of encroachment and pollution of the five rivers surrounding Dhaka. The industrialists and sand traders have been exceptionally greedy, and the authorities entrusted with looking after our rivers have been incompetent and corrupt. A series of reports by The Daily Star caught the government's attention, and there are already High Court orders against the perpetrators.

Cleaning up is the first task. We must then look into the future and plan how we can restore our rivers, our heritage, to their past glory. Dhaka is growing at an exponential rate. There is a growing need for water from its residents and there is increased awareness of the threat to its ecological balance. Restoration of its rivers is the only way this city can be sustained.

The new government passed its first budget last month, and there has been a mixed response from analysts. The inclusion of public-private-partnership is expected to have a positive impact on the economy, but the opportunity provided to whiten black money has received numerous angry responses -- from citizens, businessmen, and finally international bodies. The government has justified this as a way to increase investment, but this may be in violation of international treaties.

Just as survivors of Cyclone Sidr were recovering from the devastation in the South, Cyclone Aila hit the south-western coast of Bangladesh and took the lives of hundreds, leaving thousands homeless. Many more are still dying from various diseases and from the lack of clean drinking water and food. The salinity in the water has destroyed vegetation and arable land and internally displaced many.

India recently started construction of the Tipaimukh Dam on River Barak, close to Jakiganj in Sylhet. It was initially stalled in 2007, following protests by residents of Manipur, India. Experts have expressed deep concern about its environmental impact on the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, in view of the way the Farakka Barrage affected the northeast in the 1970s. The government of Bangladesh is continuing talks with India, while the opposition party has condemned India's actions.

Bangladesh is facing various environmental threats and Dhaka is at the centre of it all. The capital's rivers are dying, and it is going to take conscious effort of all its citizens to bring them back to life.

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