

Selected extracts from January's issue of Forum

Stuck here on earth

ADNAN SIRAJEE

CURRENTLY, humankind is set in motion to create history, and what is history, indeed, but a record of change? The guided principle behind this history is none other than climate change.

As Joseph Stiglitz rightly assumes that the world is engaged in a grand experiment, studying what happens

when you release carbon dioxide and certain other gases into the atmosphere in larger and larger amounts. The scientific community is fairly certain about the outcome and it is not pretty.

What the future will bring, we cannot say, but even the present has brought us considerable warning signals sufficient to drive us towards a new direction in thinking.

change migration. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Suffice to say policy makers and planners of the world have successfully failed to put a human face on a topic.

The First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC AR1) in 1990 noted that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human migration.

monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, by droughts of unprecedented severity and duration, and by sea level rise and coastal flooding. Again, the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change in 2006 and a Christian Aid report in 2007, estimates displacement of respectively 200 million and 250 million people by climate change related phenomena.

An identity crisis Climate change and population displacement nexus is relatively a new concept. It is only in the last 20 years or

so that the international community has slowly begun to recognise the wider linkages and implications that a changing climate and environment has on human mobility. However, the notion was conceptualised in climate change chapters only recently. Despite the global manifestation of the climate change and population displacement nexus, the terms and concepts referring to climate change -- affected population are found dissimilar throughout the literature.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) termed these future migrants as "environmental refugees." On the contrary, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International

Organization for Migration (IOM) have advised that the terms like 'Climate Refugees' or 'Environmental Refugees' have no legal basis in international refugee law and should be avoided in order not to undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on January 4.

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The polluter pays principle

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THE last few months has seen startling news headlines on river pollution and a momentous High Court Directive given on June 25, 2009 to save ecologically critical rivers surrounding Dhaka. Another High Court directive was given to the tannery industry to expedite its relocation to Savar, where they will be allowed to operate using Central Effluent Treatment Plants (CETPs) to reduce the impact of their effluents on surrounding water bodies.

Background to environmental costs and the polluter pays principle (PPP) The polluter pays principle (PPP), simply put, means that the person who is responsible for creating pollution, should be made financially responsible for the damage caused to others. The PPP shifts the burden of pollution-led suffering from the affected to those who are responsible for such damage.

people, if regulators are serious about sustainable development, and have serious commitment towards ecological preservation and ecological equity, the acceptability of fault-based liability should be a cornerstone of Bangladeshi environmental policy.

The PPP is not new for Bangladesh: PPP was first mentioned in the 1972 Stockholm Declaration Recommendation by the OECD Council on Guiding Principles concerning International Economic Aspects of Environmental Policies. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Rio Declaration, which clearly enunciates the PPP via Principle 16, "National authorities should endeavour to promote the internalisation of environmental costs and the use of economic instruments, taking into account the approach that the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution, with due regard to the public interest and without distorting international trade and investment."

Consequently, the GoB has embraced the PPP in the spirit of fault-based liability in its environmental laws. The 1995 Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, explicitly says in para 7, "If it appears to the Director General that any act or omission of a person is causing or has caused, directly or indirectly, injury to the ecosystem or to a person or group of persons, the Director General may determine the compensation and

direct the firstly mentioned person to pay it and in an appropriate case also direct him to take corrective measures, or may direct the person to take both the measures; and that person shall be bound to comply with the direction."

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Electrification through biogas

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BANGLADESH still remains an agrarian country. Because of increasing population growth, the amount of per capita cultivable land is dwindling very fast. In order to survive as a nation, and to prosper in the 21st century, Bangladesh will have to shift from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. Consequently, power generation will have to increase substantially

to achieve that goal and measures to achieve countrywide transmission coverage should be initiated on a priority basis. Electricity is an essential prerequisite for technological progress and economic growth. Bangladesh has been facing a severe power crisis for about a decade. Currently, power generation in the country is almost entirely dependent on natural gas (i.e. 84.5% of total electricity generation installed capacity). At the current 10% annual rate of growth of consumption, the proven reserve of natural gas may not last more than the next 10-15 years.

One of the great promises of renewable energy technologies is the potential to provide electricity in areas not served by national power grids. The Renewable Energy Policy of Bangladesh, published in 2008, stated that renewable energy could play a vital role for off-grid electrification in the country. The main renewable energy resources in Bangladesh are biomass, solar, wind and hydropower. The hydropower potential of Bangladesh is limited due to the relatively flat topography of the country. Most of the potential sites for wind power utilisation are situated in the coastal regions. Wind power generation in Bangladesh has certain limitations due to the lack of reliable wind speed data and the remarkable seasonal variation of wind speed.

Energy situation Bangladesh's per capita energy consumption is very low, the lowest within the Indian subcontinent. The 2008 energy consumption value stands at about 250 kgOE which is quite low compared to 550 kgOE for India, 515 kgOE for Pakistan, 430 kgOE for Sri Lanka, 475 kgOE (average) for South Asia and far below the world average of 1680 kgOE. Total primary energy

consumption in 2008 was 33.50 MTOE and the energy consumption mix was estimated as: indigenous biomass 62%, indigenous natural gas 25%, imported oil 12% and imported coal and hydro combined about 1%. Two-thirds of the country's total population live in rural areas, meeting most of their energy needs (domestic, commercial and industrial) from traditional biomass fuels. Various marketing companies under the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) distribute kerosene and diesel throughout the country at a uniform tariff rate set by the government. Around 32% have access to electricity, while in rural areas the availability of electricity is only 22%.

But the quality of service in rural areas is very poor: frequent outages, voltage fluctuations and unreliable and erratic supply. Only 34% of households have natural gas connection for cooking purposes. Only about 23% households use kerosene for cooking and the rest (over 90%) depend on biomass. Contribution of biomass in total primary energy consumption of Bangladesh is around 60%. The major sources of traditional biomass are agricultural residues (45%), wood and wood wastes (35%) and animal dung (20%). Industrial and commercial use of biomass accounts for 14% of total energy consumption. 63% of energy required in the industrial sector comes from biomass fuel.

Primarily biomass and kerosene are used by a majority of households. Natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), electricity, kerosene and biomass fuels are mainly used for cooking. In areas without natural gas and electricity, biomass is used to meet household cooking needs. A good amount of bio energy is used for boiling and space heating. A recent urban household survey estimated that consumption of biomass fuel is 319 kg per capita per year.

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Reawakening

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EACH year marks a milestone in the march of time, and every year, we in South Asia, never fail to recall the anniversary of our triumph over colonialism, and somewhat less jubilantly, a historic but bitter partition. Beyond this truly liberating experience, the rewards of freedom would appear to have eluded the children of liberty. Quarter of a century onward, predictably enough, we opted to repeat history, with undiminished ferocity. What was once considered "the jewel in the crown" of the Empress of India, fragmented into India, Pakistan, and better late than never, Bangladesh. In the first instance, it was the largest mass migration in history, and in the latter, yet another chapter in the continuing saga of mass murder. In both instances, millions were massacred in the name of language, geography,

ideology, economics, politics and above all, God.

If we have learned anything from repeated "legal separation," it would be that there is no such thing as a final, absolutely irreversible parting of ways. The political map of South Asia has altered too many times to justify any such notion of finality, and famous failed relationships, are invariably miscarriages of "arranged marriages." After all the recriminations, the virtues of peaceful coexistence are undeniable. The West learned this lesson after forty costly years of the arms race and the Cold War, not to mention the thirty year war, the hundred year war, the Napoleonic wars and two World Wars of European extraction.

The divisions and rivalries of Asia, especially South Asia, are largely the by-product of this very Occidental view of the world "as it should be." From the

Suez to the South Pacific, this panoramic canvas was painted by eighteenth century imperialism, and is periodically touched up and restored, by the masters of geopolitical landscape painting.

Western civilisation was at the helm of history. To preserve this artistic international order, and ostensibly in the interests of world peace, conflicts were confined, as much as possible, far from the heart of Western culture. Proxy wars were stage managed on a grand scale, like Medieval passion plays, and native blood spilt in the backwaters of Eastern Europe, and the paddy fields of Southeast Asia, every drop in the defence of Western "liberal" democracy.

As a direct consequence of colonial chauvinism, entire populations were displaced, transported and marginalised, calmly disregarding tribal, ethnic

and religious objections, resulting in conflict and racial tensions to this day: Protestants were dumped in Ireland, Tamils brought to Sri Lanka, Indians to the Pacific and East Africa, and Africans to the Americas.

Of course, Australia and America were once upon a time exclusively non-white, a fact which in view of subsequent history, is more often than not, conveniently obscured, or simply ignored. The theft of these two continents was possibly history's cruelest and most extensive genocide yet. They were never colonised, "civilised" and cleaned up to resemble discoloured Europeans, like the brown Sahibs of the Sub-Continent. Though, in a macabre prelude to Dr. Mangle, both races suffered their lost generation of stolen children, who were used as human guinea pigs, presumably for their own good. For years, these obscenities were

never talked about, nor indeed even acknowledged as crimes, to the extent that today, Australia's absurd "history wars" are a testament to the invaders' contempt, and truly criminal intellectual amnesia. By and large, the natives were simply exterminated, or penned in remote reservations.

In our century, more Jews were butchered by Europeans in Europe than by all the suicide bombers and all the Arab-Israeli wars put together. In our half-century, more Muslims and Hindus have happily hacked each other from limb to limb, than all the infidels and all the faithful, in two hundred years of the Crusades. And I don't suppose anyone has even the remotest idea, how many slaves, bought and sold for thousands of years, have perished from starvation, pestilence and ill treatment, since civilisation first discovered cheap labour!

This has been the evolution of the dominant species, brother against brother, in impassioned intolerance. Since the end of the last Great War, there have been countless conflicts, in China, Cambodia, Korea, Vietnam, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and what was once, greater India. Today, with the exception of Iraq and Afghanistan, and to some extent Chechnya and Kashmir, relative peace prevails. With the West in decline, for a host of reasons of its own undoing, and hopefully less predisposed to intimidate, it is not unreasonable to expect that the twenty first century might usher fresh hope for an Asian reawakening.

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