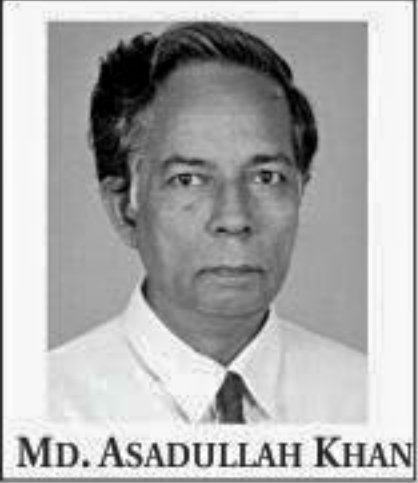


BITTER TRUTH

Only awareness can help save environment



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

FOR the last three decades scientists and world leaders have been trying to cope with the consequences of exponential growth of humans and their increasing demand for resources that only nature can provide. They have been working to save threatened species from extinction and give nature's process the chance to maintain a healthy global biosphere. This means sacrifices and restraint because we can no longer pursue short-term prosperity without a thought for long-term survival.

Some people in industrialised countries mistakenly think that conservation of nature will threaten economic welfare. But it cannot be denied that both material well-being and a healthy, productive and beautiful natural environment are necessary for good quality life. For those in the less prosperous parts of the world, care and conservation of natural resources, restraint and cautious disposal of toxic wastes, hazardous effluents and sludge from industries are ways to improve conditions.

Build-up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and toxic landfills to ozone depletion are causing degradation of the natural environment and extinction of the natural species of plants and animals. Humans are in conflict with nature, and the world's biosphere is all that keeps us from extinction. We must preserve the web of life, and any action that we take to threaten it or exploit it beyond its natural capacity is a threat to the quality of life of those who will come after us.

To preserve our environment, we need to limit the release of carbon dioxide, solve the problem posed by chlorofluorocarbons (CFC); cut pollution and waste -- like toughening fuel efficiency standard for autos -- launch large-scale tree plantation programme; ban dumping of waste by industrialised countries; make birth control information and devices available; develop educational programmes to teach people the value of genetic diversity; promote waste recycling; and encourage nature swaps.

CFCs have been linked to the depletion of the ozone layer which shields the earth from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. In deference to Montreal protocol, some industrialised countries have phased out CFCs from their production lines.

Pollution occurs largely due to industrial inefficiency, increase in motorised transportation and some modern agricultural practices. Humanity has used the world as a waste bin -- but the bin is now overflowing. Every year, millions of tonnes of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are released by industrialised nations, causing acid rain.

These airborne pollutants are no respecters of national boundaries, and tackling them successfully

depends on international cooperation. Thus, acid rain is creeping into Bangladesh, India, and most countries of Asia.

The strange tree disease that is causing extinction of trees in the Sundarbans must be attributed to acid rain. Surely these forest resources have to be protected by all possible means. Nature is like business. Business sense dictates that we preserve our capital and live from the interest. Nature's capital is the enormous diversity of living things. Without it, we can not feed ourselves, cure ourselves or provide industry with the raw materials of wealth creation. Prof. Edward Wilson of Harvard University rightly says: "The folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us is the ongoing loss of genetic and species diversity."

So far as is known, only 150 plant species have been cultivated. Yet over 75,000 edible plants grow in the



A.M.AHAD/ DRINKNEWS

Rajuk, Wasa, DCC and BIWTA, mandated to save city environment from being fouled, water bodies from being encroached and open spaces from being invaded, seem to be busy creating new residential and commercial plots violating Environmental Regulations.

wild. With world population growing by 90 million each year, this extinction of plant species needed for human survival is tragic. Over 5,000 plants are known to have potential for fighting diseases including cancer. Scientists estimate that the number of species is between 10 and 30 million -- with only around 1.4 million identified. The places that support most diversity are tropical rain forests, mangrove swamps and coastal wetlands. But these are being degraded. Habitat destruction triggers large scale extinction of species.

The Sundarbans might be a vast trove of medicinal plants that are undiscovered. Most children with leukemia now survive by the use of the chemicals found in Rosy Periwinkle (*sarna lata*). Many people with heart ailment depend on Foxgloves (*shialkata*). People with hypertension and high blood pressure get relief from the Indian Snake Root (*sorpo mul*). The

enormous benefit and relief that human beings can get from plant diversity is still a subject of continuing research.

Large quantities of hazardous wastes are still being generated in the industrialised countries. Bangladesh has to bear the brunt of the progress achieved by others. It is high time that our country entered into an agreement detailing legislation that would stop trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes.

Issues relating to dumping of hazardous wastes, cross-sectoral linkages among biodiversity, land, and water use; sustainable growth; forest management, and desertification control on regional basis, must come up in the next UNFCCC meet in Doha in December.

In Bangladesh, things are at variance with the oft-repeated proclamations preached at high levels. Rajuk, Wasa, DCC and BIWTA, mandated to save city environment from being fouled, water bodies from being encroached and open spaces meant for park and recreational facilities from being invaded, seem to be busy creating new residential and commercial plots in flagrant violation of the Master Plan as well as Water Bodies Protection Act relating to Environmental Regulations.

A report in *The Daily Star* (May 12) indicated that government action in demarcating the Dhaka rivers excluding the foreshores that, by legal definition, are part of the river, will turn these rivers into streams unfit for navigability.

Rivers, lakes and wetlands have become lifeless receptacles of human wastes and toxic materials, pesticide residues, and effluents from the dyeing units and textile industries, fertiliser factories, paper and pulp mills. Effluent treatment plants (ETP) have not yet been set up in all these factories and plants. These poisoned waters now symbolise not life but death. The country has already encountered the danger of arsenic pollution as a result of excessive use of ground water and chemical fertiliser. All these are indications of our long and dangerous neglect of the environment.

The question is how to prevent our environment wallowing in waste and poisonous materials that we are producing. Higher fines, taxes, and strict enforcement can force the manufacturing industries to curb waste and toxic materials. We can also separate out waste that can be reused and use alternative raw materials instead of hazardous substances.

Recycling is, of course, the best way to reduce waste. Experts point out that even with most efficient recycling, there will still be refuse. If we dump waste in land fills, it should be covered with impermeable clay or synthetic liners to contain toxic materials and have pumps to drain out liquid waste for treatment elsewhere. In line with the technology used in Delhi, landfill waste could also be burned to generate electricity.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

Where do we need a government?

REAZ AHMAD

WE must thank the government for telling us the recipe for getting a Nobel Prize. Courtesy a government minister's in-depth knowledge about how things operate in the Western world, we now know it for sure that having cheese sandwiches and drinking wine, the white one, brightens the prospect of one's getting world's most coveted prize -- Nobel.

Over six years into Prof. Muhammad Yunus getting a Nobel Prize, the minister in question also subtly questioned the prudence of the Nobel committee by making a query that why he (Yunus) was bestowed with the prize in the peace category and not in economics, particularly when the micro-credit guru had not helped any war to be defused.

And another minister asked Yunus as well as one of the world's best known development practitioner Sir FH Abed to join politics if they want to talk politics.

Wait a minute. Are these the issues that the currently average Bangladeshis are haunted by? Do we really need a government to tell us the recipe for getting a Nobel or set for us (those who are not involved in active politics) a boundary beyond which we would have no voice unless we choose to join their political bandwagons?

In fact, where we need the presence of a government more urgently is in the areas where we, the general citizenry, suffer the most -- the areas where governance is pathetically missing, areas where people face insecurity and areas where the rule of law, at times, sounds a misnomer.

Look at the death galore on our roads. An average of 10 to 20 lives are taken away everyday mainly because we let loose a band of transport drivers equipping them with no training, no road-safety knowledge whatsoever, but just some 'fake and date expired licenses.'

I wonder that if one in the likes of Yunus and Abed are not allowed to talk politics unless they join politics, would we be allowed to talk about road safety issues without joining the relevant government agencies. But people are asking questions on a daily basis on what the government functionaries are doing for redress. How many more lives have to be sacrificed before the reckless driving is brought to a halt?

We actually need a government to bring discipline in the existing haphazard and choked road traffic systems that we have now and free the roads from the hands of drivers with 'licenses to kill' in their possessions.

Little do we need a government for giving people sermons on how they should talk on issues concerning politics and whether or not they should go for cheese sandwiches and white wine to grab a Nobel or two.

Just the other day, a senior reporter of a national English daily fell prey to a road accident involving the motorbike he was riding on and a rashly driven town service bus. If one takes the bus driver's profile, s/he would conclude that it was rather a case of 'homicide' and not an accident per se.

The driver in question, who goes by the name Mofiz, acknowledged before law enforcers and newsmen that:

- a) He is illiterate,
- b) He never appeared for any driving tests to get the license,
- c) He managed a license illegally by paying hefty amount to BRTA (Bangladesh Road Transport Authority) middlemen, and
- d) The one (license) he was possessing had already become invalid as it expired in 2009.

Interestingly, while we get our government, its functionaries and its political leaderships omnipresent in taking swipes against their opponents, 'perceived' opponents and never tired of tirades, we hardly see the presence of a government when it comes to the point of providing people with safety and security in their daily lives.

We need the government's presence to safeguard public rights, where people don't mysteriously disappear. We need a government where people can see their rights to access information is well established and people are empowered to the level that can demand for further transparency and accountability in the whole governance procedures.

Now that Mofiz is caught after we lost a spirited young journalist in yet another incident of 'road killing,' would the government take the onus upon it to answer to the citizenry that how is it that a driver was able to manage a license without appearing into any driving test? How could he manage running a town service bus years after years with an illegally-managed driving license that had already expired three years back?

Government must soul-search and give us answers to what roles its machineries -- that include regulatory bodies and traffic law enforcers -- are playing after feeding on tax payers' money. After all Mofiz is not the only one at fault here. Some heads from within an inept nexus of government functionaries have to roll before we get our roads free from all the Mofizs.

The writer is a News Editor of *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: reazahmad@yahoo.com

Natural disasters, women's vulnerabilities

AUDITY FALGUNI GAYEN

THE widely acclaimed English poem "The Sands of Dee" by Charles Kingsley narrates the tale of a pretty girl named Mary who would bring home her family's cattle that grazed in the sands of the river Dee. One day Mary went out but never returned. A few days later some boatmen saw the glint of the golden tresses of a beautiful maiden. The poem ends with the supernatural echo of Mary's calling the cattle home still resonating along the coast line.

3,500 people died in cyclone SIDR (2007), most of whom were women and children. Interviews, field surveys and research works carried out by different national and international NGOs and media revealed several reasons behind higher ratio of women's deaths in SIDR.

First, the traditional long hair of rural Bengali women and ends of feminine costumes like *saree* or *orna* got entangled with the huge stems and branches of large trees uprooted during the storm. This prevented many women from reaching a safer abode even though they could swim.

Second, when the men fled for safe shelter during the storm, they did not take their women with them. Rather they ordered women to look after crops and livestock. Even in cases where the men were out of home for work, women themselves decided to stay in home to protect the crops and livestock as *ghar er lakshmi* (angel in the house).

Third, a number of women also did not rush for safety because men did not return home and it is the custom not to go out without the permission of the 'male' guardians.

Local, national and International NGOs have been offering disaster preparedness training to the men and women in coastal villages since after SIDR. Women are being trained to make a high knot of their hair and wrap it in cloth during storms or cyclones. Today this disaster preparedness training is highly relevant for the coastal men and women.

For example, a 18-feet high tsunami was supposed to hit Barguna on April 11 soon after the tsunami in Indonesia with the mild earthquake at Dhaka. I was staying that night in Barguna. A large storm did strike on the April 10 night. Everybody in this small coastal town had already been informed about the imminent tsunami through community radio. I was advised by my office to rush to our three storied office building before the tsunami hit. But, thanks God, another SMS from Dhaka office said that the tsunami had crossed the Bangladesh coast.

It is estimated that 40% of the total world population lives within 100km of a coastline (UNDP, 2000). Approximately 4.72 millions hectares of land under 147 upazillas of 19 districts (Bagerhat, Barguna, Barisal, Bhola, Chandpur, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Feni, Gopalganj, Jessore, Jhalokathi, Khulna,

Long hair of rural Bengali women and their saree or orna got entangled with the huge stems and branches of large trees during the storm, preventing many from reaching a safer abode even though they could swim.

Lakshmipur, Narail, Noakhali, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Satkhira and Shariatpur) belong to the coastal zone of Bangladesh.

The size of the female population is 17.1 million compared to the male population of 17.9 million in the Coastal Zone (CZ). It is estimated that this female population in CZ is expected to grow to 20.7 million in 2015.

Just like in the other parts of Bangladesh, the rate of girl child mortality is higher than boy child mortality in the Coastal Zone (CZ) areas. The disproportion between boys and girls immediately after birth may be a reflection of the social neglect of the girl child, perceived severity of the antenatal and post natal complications, poor delivery care, early marriage and lower nutritional status as a whole.

However, the yearly cyclones and natural disasters lead the women of CZ to internal migration within country challenging the 'non-mobile' image of the women.

The CZ provides 33% or 17.4 million (BBS, 2002) of the total national labour force of 53.5 million. Of this, 37% are female. Various research reports suggest that low female wage rate is a vulnerability factor among the female rural wage laborers in coastal areas. Severe child malnutrition in CZ is slightly higher at 6% than the national average of 5%. In CZ it is higher in girls at 8% than in boys standing at 4%.

The state of reproductive health among coastal women is worse than elsewhere in Bangladesh. Nearly 96% as against 92% (national average) women have home deliveries. Most cases of acid throwing and rape cases remain unreported to the police as the law and order situation in coastal areas remain precarious.

On April 18, I met some Sitara Begum at the *ferry ghat* of the Amtoli river while going from Dhaka to Barguna via Patuakhali. This lady has lost her fisherman husband in SIDR who was in the mid sea during the cyclone and did not return back. She has also lost her two sisters and one child. Of her three children, two adolescent sons are still alive.

Sitara now works as a daily labourer and her sons help her by rickshaw pulling and fishing. "Our region is the area of storms and sea surges. Our parents have witnessed the huge cyclone of 1970. I was yet to be born then. But I have seen SIDR and AILA. One sea cyclone comes and hundreds of mothers loss their children. Many families get ruined. I am hearing that this year may witness another large cyclone. What will happen to us then?"

As an humble development professional, I implore the government, donor countries, media, national and international development agencies to work in a more pragmatic, innovative and holistic approach to meet the goal of disaster preparedness for coastal men and women.

The writer is a Development Professional.
Email: audity.falguni@gmail.com