

Down with the hills!

It is annoying as the government fails now and then to protect the hills when the High Court has repeatedly been ordering the government to ensure that no hills are razed without prior permission of the environment regulator.

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THOUGH Bangladesh is prominently a plain land, its Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban and Sylhet have hilly areas with forests and rich biodiversity. These areas are full of natural resources fulfilling needs of the people and other living species.

But at present, the destruction of hills in every area has become so alarming that many concerned people have been upbeat against the greedy grabbers who are out to convert these hilly areas into plain lands to set up industries and houses or just to steal soil.

Besides the individuals and private firms, government agencies are also involved in such suicidal activities. It is alarming because of the after effects, which the hill cutters do not take in consideration when they move ahead with their unconscionable acts.

Concerns are raised by the High Court, environmentalists and locals as the rate of razing hills has been increasing unabated. Lack of commitment of government high ups to address the issue sincerely and loopholes in law and its poor execution by law enforcers are the causes behind such poor state of the hills.

In a poor country like ours, natural resources like hills and woods are perhaps the most valuable raw

materials as they are easily available, and in many cases free! But, why should we deliberately do such harm to our own resources to save or earn money, illegally?

Razing hills doesn't only mean levelling the area and taking away the soil for other purpose, but the whole biodiversity is destroyed. Let's leave aside the loss of natural beauty, hill cutting also accounts for soil pollution adding to the adverse impact on the environment.

And in more economic perspective, cutting down of hills minimises the tourism prospects we currently have in Sylhet, Cox's Bazar, Chittagong and the three districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

The present grave scenario is witnessed more in Chittagong and Sylhet where industrialisation is growing rapidly, while in Cox's Bazar the magnificent spot of tourist attraction hills are being levelled for construction of hotels-motels and other industrial and commercial establishments.

Because of comparatively stricter measures in place, hill cutting is seen less in the CHT. But still, because of massive arrival of Bengali settlers in the indigenous area, the region in near future may see similar detrimental impact.

Presently, tree felling in the hills are taking place indiscriminately. The indigenous people, however, know



Hill cutting continues unabated despite ban

how to use the hills for making huts and growing crops.

In Chittagong and CHT, where people live on the hill slopes, hill cutting increases chances of mudslides and threatens lives of dwellers. We've been experiencing numerous losses of lives for the past few years during monsoon triggered by rain.

How do these incidents happen when we have strict laws to protect the hills? It must be carelessness of the environment regulator officials, law enforcing agencies and the public representatives as well as the muscle and money power of the individuals and businessmen, for which the destruction of the environment continues.

The number of penalized people is so small that the violators are not afraid of anyone, and the group of dishonest people is ever expanding.

The frustration mounts when we see the businesses linked to different government agencies cut the hills illegally and enjoy impunity, or face token fines, especially after their destructive activities are published in media.

According to a public statement, the Department of Environment (DoE) between January 2009 and June 2012 fined 20 institutions Tk 3.88 crore while filed 119 cases against people for cutting down hills illegally. But the number of incidents taking place was much higher as reported in media.

Moreover, following negotiations with the regulator, the guilty can manage to pay less than what they were fined, and because of prolonged legal procedure and having scope for acquiring stay orders on the restrictions from the courts, many of them engage in the same

crime again.

It is annoying as the government fails now and then to protect the hills when the High Court has repeatedly been ordering the government to ensure that no hills are razed without prior permission of the environment regulator.

While the government was supposed to raise its voice against illegal hill cutting and create awareness among the people to stand against this, we can see only the green groups and local people have so far spoken up.

Moreover, the court responded several times following the public interest litigations by environmental rights groups. But, execution of the orders by the government is not seen to be occurred.

It means the people linked with the government don't want to go against the businessmen as they,

allegedly, get benefits out of such 'projects'.

But how long this can be allowed at the cost of environment? Very recently, a Bangla daily in an investigative report showed how the authorities of a proposed fertiliser factory were cutting down hills for their mega structure in Sylhet, without acquiring any environmental clearance from the regulator.

Locals and journalists came to know about the move and helped the countrymen know about the disaster through the newspaper. No government agency agreed to shoulder the responsibility even though it's their duty to protect the natural topography.

The project is underway with finance from the governments of Bangladesh and China while a local contractor is conducting and supervising the land development. We've also come to know about the government's constructing of roads and highways by razing hills.

So, how can we be in compliance following the court orders? How can we believe those sky-high claims by the government stalwarts that they are sincere in protecting the environment?

Yet we want to believe, that the government itself will fix the problems within it and then go for a massive plan to seal this trend of unplanned, unauthorised, and suicidal hill cutting forever. If measures are not taken up immediately, the concerns and frustrations will remain, and the nature will be losing its resources and balance, unfortunately, only to the detriment of most of our interest and benefit of a number of reckless profit mongers.

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Designing the new climate regime

In more than 20 years of annual meetings, participants in the Conference of the Parties have failed to resolve their differences. As developing countries take on commitments without dealing with root causes, strong solutions will not be easy to come by.



With emissions yet to be effectively reduced, global warming mitigation not soon to occur globally.

MUKUL SANWAL

THE new climate regime will lead to commitments only for developing countries. The reason for this is that the United States, which did not ratify the legally binding commitments contained in the Kyoto Protocol, continues to insist on a system in which nationally determined goals for reducing emissions will be monitored globally.

Neither in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in 1992, nor in the Kyoto Protocol, in 1997, have countries stated the precise meaning of equity and its related obligations. They have, though, agreed on general principles meant to guide the allocation of obligations among countries. This is primarily to be done by putting countries into categories in accordance with their per capita incomes. The notion of equitable access to sustainable development was introduced in the Cancun Agreements, in 2009, which recognised that developing countries will be given more time to ensure that their emissions of greenhouse gases reach a peak and that their priorities should be on ensuring social and economic development and eradicating poverty.

The Workshop on Equitable Access to Sustainable Development, held in May 2012, and the World Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, also recognised that "eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge," and that social and economic development are the overriding priorities of developing countries.

One dispute is over whether "fairness" should be the guiding principle of the negotiations, rather than "equity". The Kyoto Protocol was based on "fairness", which concerns outcomes. The United States has argued that a fair distribution of effort will not hinder development and, in concert with the EU, has stressed that an independent discussion about equity will not be productive.

Developing countries, though, insist that their commitments should be based on "equity", which refers to "equitable access to sustainable development".

The unanswered question is: Why are developed countries reluctant to accept equity as a guiding principle as they work to determine who has to do what and to what extent?

These conceptual differences arise from

two competing visions that reflect the national interests and circumstances of various countries.

The environmental case, supported by developed countries, takes into consideration the deterioration of global ecosystems. It also concentrates on outcomes, as well as the assertion that limiting increases in global temperatures and determining when emissions of greenhouse gases should hit a peak are the most important global goals. Yet the Climate Change treaty, which was ratified by all countries, including the United States, says that developed countries' emissions were to have peaked in 1990. One of the treaty's articles calls for developed countries' emissions to return to their 1990 levels by the year 2000. Therefore, any agreement now setting a year in which a peak should occur - the EU has suggested 2020 - will apply only to developing countries, which will find themselves under the burden of meeting that target well before their standards of living have approached those of developed countries.

Developing countries' case for sustainable development is based on an analysis of the ways in which the use of resources has led to the atmosphere's high concentration of greenhouse gases. The planet's capacity to cope with emissions is not infinite, and those who tax that capacity should be held accountable for their actions.

The Climate treaty, in its second article, also seeks to stabilise the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases, which is a different goal from the emissions reductions called for by the Kyoto Protocol. And international cooperation will require developed countries to reduce their emissions by much more than the 80 per cent they aim to achieve by 2050.

The way in which the global goal is defined will affect countries in various ways. In more than 20 years of annual meetings, participants in the Conference of the Parties have failed to resolve their differences. As developing countries take on commitments without dealing with root causes, strong solutions will not be easy to come by.

Therefore, the goal of limiting increases in global temperatures by a specified date should apply only to developed countries. For developing countries, the goal should come with the proviso, resting on a global consensus, that eradicating poverty remains their chief priority.

The writer has served in various policy positions in the Indian government and represented India as a principal negotiator at the UnCED, Agenda 21, Rio Declaration and the Climate Change Treaty.

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Access to water Discrimination and challenges

To achieve MDG target of water supply and sanitation by 2015, Bangladesh needs to spend USD 12.59/capita which is only USD 2.4/capita now.

A H M NOUMAN

THE International Water Week has just been observed (Aug 24-30) at the Swedish capital Stockholm and by concerned organisations elsewhere with a call for "More Food in Each Drop of Water" and a slogan seeking more "Water in Urbanised World". More than two thousand water specialists/activists from about two hundred countries attended the Stockholm meet representatives from Bangladesh including a researcher of DORP also participated. It may be mentioned that DORP (Development Organisation of the Rural Poor), an NGO, has been working on water for many years, specially with Bangladesh WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Alliance. WASH programme presently covers six sub-districts namely, Barguna sadar, Fakirhat, Ramganj, Kuliarchar, Bhuapur and Sirajganj sadar, funded by a Dutch NGO, Simavi.

DORP presented a case study titled 'Budget tracking: A civil society initiative in Bangladesh'. It was to draw the attention of the resource rich countries to the plight and struggle of resource discriminated developing countries in coping with and facing the challenge of the problem, in this case water.

The focus is on water, sanitation and hygiene for the most impoverished section of people living in some selected remote localities of rural Bangladesh who, and much more many others like them are less focused in budget allocation. Budget advocacy for them would ultimately matter in improving condition of the poorest of the poor in society.

The objective is poverty reduction through community empowerment increasing access to safe water and sanitation services as well as habituating women in the community and the marginalised to improved hygiene practices. On the other hand involving communities in budget monitoring is educating them on budget allocation and its use. Often service providers at upazila level are not fully oriented towards implementing the budget of Sectoral Development Plan (SDP). The monitoring would lead to the



Scarcity of and demand for potable water increasing by the day.

necessary implementation.

To achieve MDG target of water supply and sanitation by 2015, Bangladesh needs to spend USD 12.59/capita which is only USD 2.4/capita now. Out of many survey findings only a few are enough to reveal that gap between water luxury and water constrained countries. In the former 20 gallons of water is used to make a glass of beer and 32 gallons for a glass of wine. 100-176 gallons of water is used by an American a day. On the contrary, in the latter, women toil for hours fetching a pitcher of drinking water from far away places. Often it is drought, often it is salinity forcing them to toil away so many man hours without much profit. More than three million die due to water scarcity in a year and only two-and-a-half gallon of water is used by an African a day.

These disparities and constraints were among the issues raised at the weeklong water meet and sought solution to. Besides, there were some horrible findings by an earlier survey titled 'Water-rich Country versus Water-poor Country' conducted by the organiser International Water Institute of Stockholm partnering with Water Platform of FAO. Selected five water-rich countries are America, Canada, Uruguay, Japan and Cyprus and the five water-poor are Chad, Niger, Madagascar, Ethiopia and Sierra-Leone. We only wish there does not arise any serious conflict on water use and the constraint is consolated with cooperation.

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