

How long the injurious emissions?

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WE are so constrained a people, situationally and conditionally, that we tend to ignore many implied ills for a single apparent gain. Such an issue is the ever-expanding "brick-making industry", given the fact that brick appears to be an essential item in this era of urbanisation and industrialisation. But, unfortunately, many consequential problems have arisen for not having any effective precautionary measure to contain establishment of illegal brick kilns and use of firewood as fuel, check loss of cropland and top soil, and stop hill cutting.

The present government in the last four years has been able to show that they have a level of concern for degraded environment, especially air and water pollution, and wish to fight the adverse impact of climate change.

But the reality gives us a discouraging picture of the government machinery and the businessmen involved. Even though the related law came into force in 1989 and was later amended in 2001 -- under which the government issues clearance to the businessmen the regulator, Department of Environment (DoE), is yet to ascertain the total number of brickfields operating in the country. The association of the brickfield owners claim the number to be around 8,000 but environmentalists say it would be no less than 15,000 -- given the fact that over half of those are unauthorised and thus illegal. The number is, however, estimated to be over 500 in the western side of Dhaka -- stretching from Basila to Ashulia via Aminbazar.

Moreover, in Dhaka, where the government has its head offices of different regulatory bodies, the number of functional brickfields is also unknown. Anyone from a high-rise in the capital's western front will easily be able to witness the 'bravery' of the unscrupulous brick kiln owners: They have installed their plants in gross violation of the related laws and also ignore or bypass the enforcement order of the DoE officials since most of them perhaps have connection with political leaders and may have allegedly greased officials in different bodies including the district administration which issues the licences after scrutinising DoE clearance and other prerequisites.

A senior official of the DoE has recently written an article in a national newspaper on the sprawling brickfields. He, however, held the district administration responsible for the "menace", and apparently, urged the officials to work sincerely and go tough against the violators to prevent further illegal expansion. The article clearly states the non-coordination trend in the government departments which is obviously frustrating for the people directly affected by the adverse impacts of the carbon-spewing brickfields.

Concern is there for any locality near the brickfields, but the situation in Dhaka is the worst due to high density of population. The capital, however, was supposed to be in the best shape because of having all departmental headquarters, including that of the law enforcers.

Instead these highly black smoke-emitting conventional brick kilns are polluting the air of Dhaka and the surrounding areas. A World

Bank study says the conventional Fixed Chimney Kilns (FCK) contribute for up to 20 percent of the total premature mortality caused by urban air pollution in Dhaka (all causes combined). The Bangladesh Country Environmental Analysis reports that poor air quality in Dhaka contributed to an estimated 3,500 premature deaths in 2002 (World Bank 2006). Emissions of particulate matters from this kiln cluster are responsible for 750 premature deaths annually.

According to a recent global survey, Bangladesh ranked 131st among 132 countries in controlling air pollution with regard to its effect on human health. India holds the very last position.

And, now in this dry season, the brick makers are operating the kilns uninterrupted and releasing excess smoke and dust in the air. It is aggravating the pollution further.

Apart from the capital's western fringe, such illegal brick kilns are also present beside different highways, rivers and canals and even on croplands. The law stipulates that licences would be issued for brickfields being set up three kilometres away from human habitats, city corporation, municipalities, forests and orchards, reserved areas, eco-parks, and the state's important establishments.

The brickfields near Dhaka have been operating for years despite being within 50 feet of the highway and rivers Buriganga and Turag. And whatever the laws say, they are doing fine and the number is ever increasing. Only a few owners are using coal instead of wood and rubber tyres and lesser number of them emission-efficient chimneys.

According to the existing law



Brick kilns in cropland along waterbody

regarding burning bricks, the unauthorised kilns must be removed, while licences of kilns burning wood to be cancelled. Moreover, the violators can be jailed for one year or fined Tk 50,000 or both. The officials concerned can also fine those kilns which are not emission-efficient.

Comparatively, the DoE has now been more active than in past years. But the irony is that the number of brickfields using conventional methods has been increasing, and obviously, those are being set up illegally.

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The low-profile DoE's monitoring and enforcement teams are still insufficient to cover 64 districts. It is shocking to see these days that brick kilns are being set up in croplands in the rural areas by putt-

ing at risk people's health, damaging top soil, at places cutting hills, felling trees and creating noise. But because of the shortage in manpower and logistics, the drives against the profit-mongers are yet to be satisfactory.

The most frustrating thing in the brick-making industry is the indecision over selecting and promoting an appropriate method to cut pollution. The government now advocates mainly for Improved Zigzag Kiln (IZigzag), while the other widely accepted methods are Improved Fixed Chimney Kiln (IFCK), Vertical Shaft Brick Kiln (VSBK) and Hybrid Hoffman Kiln (HHK). These technologies are substantially cleaner, consuming less energy and emitting lower levels of pollutants and greenhouse gases, the WB study says. In most of the methods, other than in HHK, coal is used as fuel to burn bricks.

For replacement of the old and traditional FCK brick kilns with new

versions, the DoE had stopped renewal of licences for new brickfields in October 2010 for two years and ordered that the existing brick kilns be replaced by the time.

But because of poor campaign, reluctance of the officials concerned and high cost of switching to new technology, owners of conventional brickfields expressed their unwillingness. Well, they have recently been given again an extension of six months to convert to the new methods.

According to the finance minister's budget speech, only 500 brick kilns were converted to efficient methods until June 2012.

The government must see the fresh extension does not frustrate us in matter of ensuring clean environment; it is "better late than never". However, the plans centring the brick-making industry must be rational and futuristic.

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GLOBAL WARMING : AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

The deafening silence on climate change

If current emission trends continue, global temperatures will increase by six degrees Celsius by 2100, warns the International Energy Agency (IEA). "Even schoolchildren know this will have catastrophic implications," said Fatih Birol, the IEA's chief economist.

MARK HERTSGAARD

GLOBAL warming has seldom been mentioned this year on the campaign trail, despite Obama's promise to the contrary

The Economist, no radical rag, wrote in 2011 that, looking back 100 years from now, the only important question about our current historical moment will be "whether or not we did anything to arrest climate change".

But you would not know it from the prevailing political discourse in the US. Climate change remains the great unmentionable on Capitol Hill and the campaign trail, and the mainstream media is doing precious little to call politicians out over their shameful silence.

In his acceptance speech at the Republican party's National Convention in August, Mitt Romney mocked the very idea of caring about climate change. "Four years ago, President Obama promised to begin slowing the rise of the oceans," Romney said, as the party faithful chortled. "And heal the planet," he added to further laughter.

"My promise is to help you and your family." Romney's words, and the crowd's delight, demonstrated again how extreme today's Republican party has become. Even former president George W Bush, for all his resistance to tackling climate change, never made fun of it.

Romney's mockery did have one positive effect: It led Obama to utter the "C-word" himself, something he has rarely done recently.

Environmentalists were delighted when Obama said in his acceptance speech at the Democratic Party's National Convention: "Yes, my [energy] plan will continue to

reduce the carbon pollution that is heating our planet, because climate change is not a hoax. More droughts and floods and wildfires are not a joke. They are a threat to our children's future."

But was Obama merely punching back at Romney and telling the Democratic base what they wanted to hear? After all, as in most of his campaign appearances this year, Obama's acceptance speech mainly addressed his energy strategy, which calls for exploiting all available energy sources, including oil, gas and what he (inaccurately) calls "clean coal".

Spell of extreme weather

In an interview in April, Obama told Rolling Stone magazine that he expected climate change to be an issue in the presidential campaign, and he promised to "be very clear in voicing my belief that we're going to have to take further steps to deal with climate change in a serious way". Except he didn't.

It was not for lack of opportunity.

Over the last six months, the US has suffered one of the hottest summers and worst droughts in its history, sparking wildfires, stunting crops and costing the American economy billions of dollars.

Meanwhile, the Arctic ice cap has melted to its lowest level on record. The loss of Arctic ice is the "equivalent of about 20 years of additional carbon dioxide being added by man", Peter Wadhams, a professor of ocean physics at the University of Cambridge, told the BBC.

Throughout this spell of extreme weather, Obama remained silent, shunning the "C-word". Even as his own government's scientists affirmed climate change's connec-

tion to the extreme weather events of 2012, Obama declined to use his bully pulpit to make the link clear to the public, much less attempt to rally Americans to action.

Of course, with the sluggish economy and high unemployment, Obama has had a lot on his plate. But nothing else will matter if the planet becomes uninhabitable, and it is not hyperbole to say that this is the course humanity is on.

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Nations threatened by climate change

Already, nearly 1,000 children a day are dying because of climate change, according to a newly published study. The annual death toll stands at 400,000 people worldwide.

Climate change is also costing the world economy \$1.2tn a year, the equivalent of 1.6 per cent of economic output, reports the Climate Vulnerability Monitor, a study commissioned by 20 nations most threatened by climate change.

The report was released on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in September. Most of the 400,000 deaths are "due to hunger and communicable diseases that affect above all children in developing countries", concluded the study, which was authored by 50 scientists and policy experts from around the world.

The good news is that the political terrain surrounding climate change may at last be shifting in the US. The conventional wisdom,



Polar ice melting due to global warming

apparently shared by Obama and his advisers, has assumed that talking about climate change turns voters off, because it is too dark, too controversial, too complicated.

But a growing body of evidence challenges this view. Speaking out about climate change, and above all about how to fight it, can be a political winner, this argument goes, in part because the hellish summer of 2012 led many more Americans to think climate change is real and dangerous after all.

"I think we have achieved a real tipping point with the public, in that they finally see for themselves what the reality of climate change means," said Joe Romm, the editor of the nation's leading climate science blog, Climate Progress.

In his new book, Language Intelligence, he uses a baseball metaphor: "You can't say one individual home run was due to steroids, but when somebody gets 70 in one season, then you understand what it means for them to be juiced. Our climate has been juiced by the steroids of greenhouse gases, which make almost every major extreme weather event more extreme."

Pro-climate actions

"Three out of four Americans now acknowledge climate disruption is real, and more than two out of three believe we should be doing something about it," declares Climate Solutions For A Stronger America, a new report intended to help activists, public officials and other advocates build public support for climate action (Disclosure: The report's sponsor and writer, Betsy Taylor, the head of the consulting firm Breakthrough Strategies and Solutions, is a friend of the writer). Climate Solutions For A Stronger America draws on numerous opinion polls, notably a new nationwide poll of 1,204 likely voters conducted specifically for the report.

Commissioned by Harstad Strategic Research, Inc, the polling group also carried out work for Obama when he was a senator and still does contract work for him as president. Among the polls' other findings was that "a pro-climate action position wins votes among Democrats and independents, and has little negative impact on Republican voters".

The narrative advocates can use

to mobilise such voters, the report suggests, is the classic quest story: Heroes set off to vanquish villains in service of the common good. "Americans don't run away from big challenges," goes the script. "We turn them into big opportunities. We have a responsibility to our kids."

"But Big Oil and the Koch Brothers are standing in the way: Corrupting our political process and blocking American clean energy innovation. It's time to take our future back, and clean energy's a great way to do it."

In 2008, it looked as though Obama would be the hero to lead such a quest. But if four years of Obama's presidency demonstrate anything, it is the folly of waiting for any president to storm the barricades of entrenched power. If the US is to vanquish the climate villains and help win the quest for planetary survival, the people of America will have to be their own heroes.

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