



Back to basics

NEAL WALKER

BANGLADESH'S flag has flown proudly at the United Nations Headquarters in New York since September 1974, when Bangladesh officially became a member state of the UN -- recognised as free, independent, and sovereign.

The principles of equality, tolerance, freedom, peace and non-violence, the principles that characterised the United Nations, are enshrined in the country's Constitution. The country's commitment to these principles is exemplified in Bangladesh's involvement in many aspects of UN work globally and locally. Since the first Bangladeshi troops served in UNIMOG in 1988 they have participated in 37 UN Peacekeeping missions and over 113 thousand peacekeepers have been deployed, including the first ever all women's police force in Haiti.

Peacekeepers are not only ambassadors of Bangladesh and the UN System: they embody the values and spirit on which both the UN and Bangladesh were founded. Bangladesh has a long history of being engaged in the policy and thematic work of the UN. Most importantly, Bangladesh has been, and continues to be, a key actor in shaping the global debate on the international development agenda. Bangladesh's voice has been influential because it has fulfilled its development potential.

Bangladesh's impressive development efforts have been internationally recognised. Along with Cambodia, it ranks today as the top LDC performer in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Of particular note are the goals in poverty reduction (MDG 1), under 5 mortality (MDG 4) and maternal mortality (MDG 5). Bangladesh's performance against the MDGs is a clear indication of a strong commitment and partnership between the government, the United Nations, development partners, and the will of the people working in the local non-government and development community.

When reflecting on the gains Bangladesh has made in the last twenty years, it is only fitting that we evaluate where the country has come from, and to critically and pragmatically plan for the future. In less than two years the MDGs expire. Since last year the international community has begun to debate and define the World We Want post-2015 with an unprecedented global consultation initiated by UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon.

Bangladesh was one of the countries chosen for UN support to undertake national-based consultations, and it has taken the opportunity to be a leader among the LDCs in contributing to this dialogue. The outcomes of these consultations surfaced ideas, thoughts, dreams and ambitions of participants, which reflected a broad cross-section of the Bangladesh population that included, among others, youth, women, indigenous people, urban communities, and civil society.

Goals around climate change, gender, democratic governance, human rights, and inclusive social and economic development, were clearly emphasised as priorities for the country transitioning into the post-2015 period.

However, in articulating the post-2015 agenda in the country once it has been finalised, and in the ambitious pursuit of attaining middle income status by 2021 (as set out by the government's Vision 2021), the key question that must be taken into consideration is how to make this journey economically, socially, ecologically, and politically equitable and sustainable. Currently, more than half of the Bangladesh population is under the age of 25. This brings challenges but more importantly opportunities, which is the reason this year the United Nations in Bangladesh has decided to focus on the theme of 'Youth for Development' for UN Day 2013.

Over the next few days, different Agencies within the UN will be publishing an op-ed on what youth and development means within the contexts of each of their mandates; identifying from a UN perspective what these key challenges and opportunities are for the country. It is how the UN views the role of youth as not only passive recipients of development assistance, but as active in their development as individuals and citizens of the country. Investing in youth in Bangladesh is not only limited to service provision, but a long-term framework for understanding how to harness the potential of youth in this country to strengthen economy, society and democracy.

When referring back to the foundation of Bangladesh as based on principles of freedom, equality, and social justice, and looking to the future the UN in Bangladesh is confident that the country will move forward in respect to the best of its traditions.

The writer is the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Bangladesh. This op-ed has been written to mark UN Day on October 24, 2013, which this year is focusing on Youth for Development.

Saving the Sundarbans, rethinking economic growth

ADNAN MORSHEH

WE need growth, energy, and, of course, power plants. But at what environmental cost? This question cannot be answered by the empiricism of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). When growth takes precedence over the environment, the results, as history teaches us, are often disastrous.

Consider China. An official Chinese report released in March 2013 stated that China incurred a loss of approximately \$230 billion due to environmental degradation in 2010 alone. Nearly 3.5% of the country's GDP, this mammoth loss was calculated based on costs arising from pollution and disruptive interventions in the ecosystem in the name of development. The gravitas of the ongoing problem was such that it compelled even the Chinese political leadership to consider the environmental consequences of the expedited development programmes in the country.

An intense debate has been going on between the supporters and opponents of the Rampal project. The supporters of the power plant mostly rely on the government-initiated EIA to build their case. The EIA suggests that there would be no adverse effects on the Sundarbans, if state-of-the-art technology is used and environmental safety compliances are enforced at the power plant. This is a prime example of technological utopianism; that is, technology could solve all problems and bring about an ideal condition. Such linear thinking has long been discredited in industrialised nations. Why create a problem and then import an expensive technology to solve it?

Despite its scientific methodology, the EIA has inherent limitations to model environmental impacts accurately because there are so many uncertain variables in the assessment process. Environments are a dynamic system, constantly changing. Biophysical environments are affected by solar energy, weather, climate, airflow, temperature rise, soil conditions, etc. Add to this list the human aspects of environments—cultural attitudes toward nature, problematic histories of deforestation in the name of progress, and the developmentalist idea that environment is an unlimited resource for economic growth.

Thus, while there is no doubt that the EIA is a useful tool for gauging a project's environmental feasibility, it by no means ensures

anything. In fact, given our history of politicising the environment, the EIA could very well become a convenient tool for achieving political goals. As conflicted scientific views on global warming reveal, environmental data could be manipulated and selectively produced to bring home ideological objectives. There are certain types of projects for which the EIA is neither adequate nor appropriate.

The proposed power plant at Rampal is one of them. The project's impact will transcend regional environments. The 14-kilometer-away argument to suggest that the project would have very little effects on the Sundarbans is myopic. Environmentally conscious countries are increasingly pursuing alternatives to coal as a source of energy. But, in Bangladesh, not only are we embracing a

economic growth often ignoring its environmental consequences. They changed course only in the second half of the 20th century. Today there is a contentious debate about what is being touted as "Green GDP."

The public's environmental activism made a difference in the USA. Consider the American ecologist Rachel Carson. In her seminal book, *Silent Spring* (1962), Carson mounted a vociferous attack against the agricultural industry's rampant use of synthetic pesticides or DDT. She showed how enhanced agricultural productivity as a result of pesticide usage came with an unseen "war with nature" and its catastrophic aftermath: slow poisoning of ecology, death of wildlife, and rise in the number of cancer patients.

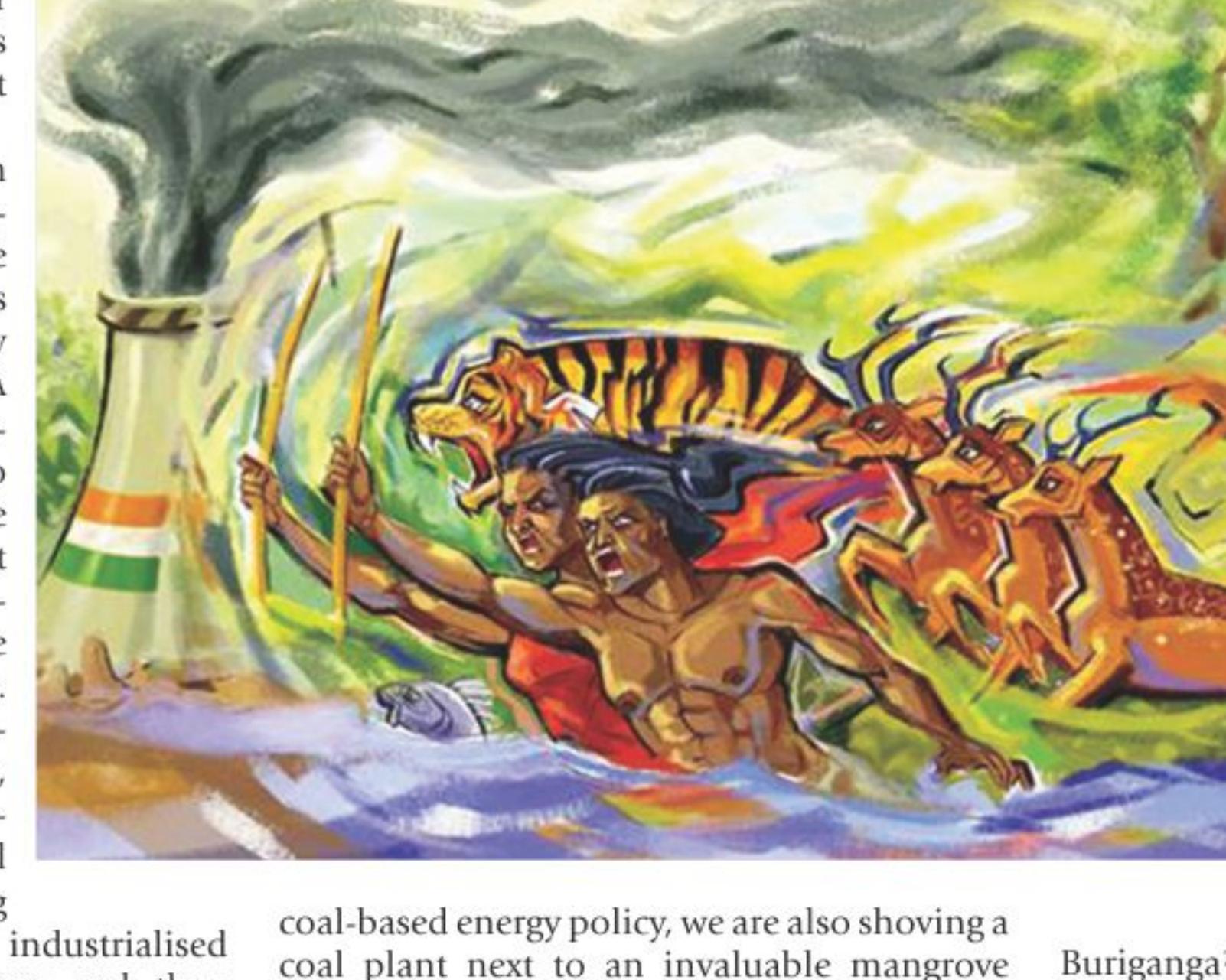
In our own backyard, during the British era, extractive colonial environmental policies led to much deforestation in the subcontinent because the British considered Indian teak the most durable of shipbuilding timbers. Thus, as the Royal Navy's maritime muscle bulged, Indian forests thinned. Sadly, once the British left India's shores, the decolonised natives embraced the same environmentally insensitive ethos of industrial economy, harming their own ecological foundation.

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh's political establishment uncritically embraced the tenets of market economy that creates an insatiable demand for natural resources. Tannery factories at Hazaribag surely bolstered the country's GDP, but what happened to Buriganga? We all know the environmental consequences of the ship breaking industry along the Chittagong seashore, but who would dare regulate this belligerent industry?

We need development. But given the country's geographic fragility, there must be a strategic balance of economic growth and environmental protection. Bangladesh does not have India's or China's land mass. The country cannot afford to experiment with the environment.

It would be prudent to consider alternative sources of energy. Any vision for the country's sustainable economic future must be driven by an ethical empathy toward the environment.

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coal-based energy policy, we are also shoving a coal plant next to an invaluable mangrove forest that has a worldwide appeal.

The power plant's projected annual discharge of 52,000 tons of sulfur dioxide will "ungreen" the Sundarbans, pry open the fragile southern frontier, and affect coastal marine life. Even when these cataclysmic effects cannot be approximated with any certainty, why take a chance, especially when Bangladesh faces great geographic challenges due to global climate change. Every square inch of the country warrants thoughtful and depoliticised environmental planning.

The question of environmental well-being receives only feel-good lip service within the industrial-economy orientation that we inherited from the West via colonialism and globalisation. Since the Industrial Revolution, Western industrial countries pursued a path of

and I can be picked up and locked away if we publish anything in the electronic form that a police officer may deem to "cause deterioration of law and order, or prejudices the image of the State or person or causes to hurt religious belief." This black law may be abused by successive governments to silence criticism; unfortunately those endorsing this law fail to appreciate that this same law can be used against them when another party controls the police force.

As for the inevitable shift in power, any election may result in another government being formed by a political party with a super-majority of seats in parliament. The current ordeal of Bangladesh may well look like a pleasant picture in our rearview mirror as we speed towards a country ruled without discernible opposition in Parliament, by those who have been counting down the days to when they wield power. I request that we do not make the same mistakes once again and return those who are undeserving—be it in the last 5 years or the 5 years before—back to power (or if/when we return them back to power, not to do so with a super-majority in Parliament). Let those who are independent, who have not purchased nominations from the large political parties, who want to enter government from their communities, who aspire to serve their people and not just themselves, let those individuals have a chance of earning your votes (and hopefully providing a real opposition to the next majority political party in government).

Our world's and country's problems do not lie with any one ideology, political party or

government, but with a system that values private accumulation over public good, and is thus being ripped apart as resources are becoming ever more finite whilst individual demands of those with wealth are ever-increasing, a system desperately in need of repairs. Unfortunately, these repairs are likely to take decades, of us correcting our own behaviour so that we use fewer resources, to demand less, of us slowly putting our community, our people before ourselves.

Yes, the rot is overpowering; however, my internal optimist is slowly shaking off the beating it received over the last few weeks, for the quote at the beginning of the piece was a reminder that although we may be at a tipping point in our generation, I believe that we will eventually tip towards good, a good that is lying dormant, ready to be kissed awake by all our individual acts towards its service.

As my friend Zaki O. wrote to me recently (in sensing my despondency at current events) that we choose our side in the battle between good and evil; in this battle where good is being battered, for us to stand tall in the face of consequences of our actions, to focus on the journey and do what we can to do the right thing, not take short-cuts to wealth or any advantage and, through our singular acts, to repair the system one rusted bolt at a time. I, for one, will listen to my friend and this column's advice and focus in the coming days and months on my own and others' positive acts to stem the public rot.

The writer is a corporate legal adviser.

Optimist's last stand

MASUD KHAN

"FOR I have seen the truth; I have seen and I know that people can be beautiful and happy without losing the power of living on earth. I will not and cannot believe that evil is the normal condition of mankind."

From *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* by Dostoyevsky

I am an optimist; some may even say that I am the almost delusional kind, the type that sees a three-quarter empty glass of water as a glass not only quarter-full, but one that feeds off overnight dew drops, rises up to its full potential and gets to the half-way point. Recent events far and near, however, have punched my internal optimist in the gut and seemingly overpowered it. As it lies prostrate in the dark alleys of current events, the stench of rot gurgles underneath.

This rot, it is fetid; it is that open drainage, the darkest, most gruesome; thousands of souls dropping their daily miseries into the communal open air toilet, rot. Its foul vapours block off any view of a brighter sunrise.

The rot seeps out from near and far. Away from Bangladesh and smearing the front pages of international news, bombings and killings of innocents and the not-so-slow destruction of the future continues unabated; accelerated by ever more disingenuous and oft-repeated

justifications for such cruelty spewed in the name of commerce, religion, ideology and, the most scathing double speak of the post-World War II period, the public relations coup by the sole superpower of camouflaging the most flagrant of such cruel acts in the name of Democracy and Justice. Yes, paraphrasing the Grateful Dead, we are going to Hell in a bucket; unfortunately, we are not enjoying the ride.

In the US, the American president, who has forever corrupted the slogan "we can," cannot seem to preside over a second-term. This second term, so joyously celebrated by progressives, is now being derailed by the ideological battle within the Republican Party which has stopped the federal government from functioning at its fullest. Closer to home-shores, the Salafists, far from being silenced by the executions of senior al-Qaeda leaders over the past few years, continue to mock Islam's practice of peace by killing in the name of Allah, from shooting up a mall in Africa to blowing up religious sites in Pakistan and the Middle East. In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the majority Buddhists mock Buddha's teachings by killing and persecuting the Muslim minority. In India, its Border Security Forces (BSF) continue to undo India's legacy as a friend of Bangladesh and shame her with the killing of Bangladeshi at the border—India's border killings shall forever be captured in our minds with the sight of Felani, the little girl whose bullet-ridden and

dangling body draped the barbed wire which slashes across Bangladesh's border with India. We can only hope that the Indian Supreme Court will bring justice to Felani's family, as any justice was denied by the BSF in trying the constable who shot Felani—fortunately, there are many sane voices in India which speak out against this barbarity.

While at home, the Bangladesh deputy high commission in Kolkata refused visas to Indian activists who are attempting to get justice for Felani in the Indian Supreme Court.

Sycophancy ran amok last week and jammed up Dhaka's traffic to a halt, as officials and opportunity-seekers VIPed their way to the airport to greet our prime minister (in an irony lost on those participating in the circus, the ridiculous traffic jam occurred the night before the government sent out an SMS reminding us that it was National Productive Day). Truth telling today finds itself at the mercy of the newly enacted and draconian Section 57 of the ICT (Amendment) Act-2013, which empowers the police to arrest any person without a warrant and possibly imprison the person (non-bailable) for a maximum of 14 years (from prior version's punishment of 7 years).

This amendment may be abused by the powers that be, for the non-bailable offenses are intentionally ill-defined, leaving it up to the police and those who control them to decide what is punishable under this amended act. You

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