

## Deteriorating air quality in Bangladesh

Take immediate corrective measures

THE air the residents breathe in three of the most industrially developed cities of the country, namely, Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur, has been described as one of the most polluted in the world by the Department of Environment. What's more, Bangladesh was ranked fourth among 91 countries with worst urban air quality, according to a report published by the agency.

Experts are quick to identify the main factors behind such a high level of air pollution—industrial smog, smoke from vehicles and brick kilns, and dust from construction sites. But a lack of vision and unbridled industrialisation, perhaps the real reason for this sorry state of air, often is not spelled out. It is sad that to look out at any city or a small town is to be greeted by a bleak sprawl of factories shoddily constructed amid residential areas, shrouded in a mantle of thick, black smoke spewed out by battered buses. It is ugliness that is on the march with no underlying design save for an even more urgent need to facilitate 'development'. What good is a growth rate of six percent if the air is unbreathable and puts people at high risks of respiratory diseases and other health problems?

Industrialisation is necessary and unavoidable. But it has to be well planned, abiding by environmental rules and regulations. Consumption and production patterns must be sustainable as recommended in one of the SDGs. The government has, so far, not taken up any major step to check pollution, according to an expert. It should, therefore, call for greater awareness of health risks caused by air pollution, implement effective air pollution mitigation policies and regularly monitor pollution levels in these cities.

## Labour recruitment in Malaysia

Host country should not have monopoly

IT is a matter of grave concern that the Malaysian government has appointed a sole entity, Synerflux Sdn Bhd, a private Malaysian company, to oversee the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers including workers' registration, eligibility and delivery of visas.

Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) has raised concerns of Synerflux being part of a powerful, transnational syndicate, a claim that is not unfounded given the dubious records of another company that ran a similar system and was owned by the same individuals who founded Synerflux. We also agree with many of the criticisms of the new recruitment mechanism voiced by migrant rights organisations which argue that such a move could monopolise labour recruitment and exacerbate labour relations between the two countries.

With Synerflux having monopoly, the Bangladesh government will have no scope for the verification of workers' jobs, salaries, working conditions, etc, which is problematic. It seems rather odd that Bangladesh will have to take all liabilities for the lapses of the selected recruiting agencies without having any say in the recruitment process. We have every reason to believe that under the new recruitment system our workers are likely to become more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse.

In this regard, organisations like Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and Baira ought to have much more of a stake in the recruitment process of Bangladeshi workers. It is, therefore, imperative that the Bangladesh government engages in meaningful discussion with Malaysia to ensure a level playing field so that our workers' rights are protected.

## COMMENTS

**"Jatiya Party will be able to play the role of a true opposition party if our three ministers quit the cabinet and if I quit the post of prime minister's special envoy."**

--JP CHAIRMAN HM Ershad

Soyem Shahjahan

As if we don't know that! Tell us something new, Mr. Ershad.

Mohammed Hasan Tanvir

You quit first and then others will follow you.

Firdaus Sohel

JP is now like a parasite that feeds on AL.

**"PM stresses taking measures to end beggary" (January 3, 2016)**

Md Abdullah Noman

That's a good move.

Muhammad Elias

There are thousands of professional beggars just inside Dhaka city. But the number of unemployed educated people is far bigger.

# An execution's dangerous ripple effect

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

THE execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia, along with 46 other men accused of being involved in terror attacks and Al Qaida, has taken most observers by surprise. It may be interpreted as a deliberate show of Sunni power in the intensifying sectarian crisis in the Middle East. The resulting violence that led to protesters setting fire to the Saudi Embassy and the ultimate severance of diplomatic ties between the Sunni dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, is likely to escalate the volatility of the region and will be a major cause of worry for the world in general. With the two countries already involved in proxy wars from Syria to Yemen this execution may well be the catalyst for making the war on terror an even more complicated affair than it already is.

Human Rights Watch and other organisations have condemned the execution saying that the country's justice system was 'flawed with the absence of an appeal code' and that the terrorism law in Saudi Arabia is too broad and vague allowing for anyone to be accused of being a terrorist. In Nimr's case, he was accused of "inciting protest and ... discord". His arrest in 2012 was hardly surprising in a country where dissent can be punished with death. He was a Shiite leader who led many anti-government demonstrations and had openly criticised the royal family for what he

termed as discrimination against the Shiite community in Saudi Arabia. He was sentenced to death in 2014. HRW has alleged that there was no lawyer present during Nimr's interrogation and trial which no doubt, makes his execution even more unacceptable to the European Union and also embarrassing for long time ally, the US, which has already lost some of its charm after a nuclear deal with Iran.

But what has enraged Shiites around the world especially Iranians is that Nimr was lumped with AL Qaida

timing however, raises questions regarding what exactly Saudi Arabia's role will be in the complex crises brewing in the region. In December, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman declared the formation of a 34 nation coalition to fight terrorism militarily, with Bangladesh joining on a false impression, Pakistan not even knowing it had been included and Indonesia – a Sunni Muslim dominated country rejecting it. Although the Saudi coalition against terrorism seems to have

was just a reaction to Iran and Iraq's growing involvement in the war against ISIL or for other reasons is not clear. Now with the execution of Nimr and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declaring that Saudi rulers will face "the divine hand of revenge" for their actions, the Shia-Sunni divide is bound to grow wider and more belligerent from both sides.

It is clear that the Muslim world especially, has to remain united in trying to combat terror groups like Al Qaida and ISIL. And individually most Muslim dominated countries, including Bangladesh, are quite aware of the crucial need to step up their efforts in terms of counterterrorism. Saudi Arabia, in the wake of innumerable terrorist attacks since 2003, has had a programme for the 'rehabilitation for convicted fighters' – young, radicalised Saudis who have been found guilty of terrorist activities who are 're-educated' to shun their extremist views and come back to normal. The programme is claimed by officials to be 100 percent successful. But its decision to execute a Shiite religious leader, who apparently only used the war of words not weapons, and its official severance of ties with Iran has created the danger of further tensions between Shias and Sunnis within Saudi Arabia and in other countries like Syria, Iraq and Pakistan, already afflicted with the disease. It will thus mean more sectarian violence and a perfect environment for ISIS and Al Qaida to radicalise young people, recruit them and carry out more attacks. Either way it spells disaster for both the western and eastern hemispheres.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

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operatives who had been found guilty of carrying out terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia. In the Shiite world therefore, Nimr is a martyred hero who had to give his life for protesting the violation of rights of his religious community. Saudi Arabia's stance is that Nimr was trying to instigate secession and he had been punished according to the law of the land (Sharia Law) and due process was maintained, the carrying out of the sentence along with 46 others being merely coincidental. The

faded away from public discourse, Bangladesh must unequivocally, disengage from it. It must also stay clear of the sectarian conflict as it reaches a new dimension provoked by the execution.

The presumptuous declaration and the fact that none of the Shia dominated countries such as Iran and Iraq were invited to join, indicated an attempt to create a purely Sunni fraternity that would be ready to use military power in the region according to the briefing by the Saudi Deputy Prince. Whether this

## PREDICTING 2016

# Why economists differ so widely

OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

PROJECTING an economic outlook in early January is a New Year tradition. While political forecasts are not too divergent, economists differ remarkably to portray the future in a new year, resulting in common curiosity. Economists can be divided into four groups of forecasters: ambitious, moderate, conservative, and pessimistic – as we saw in the predictions of Bangladesh's economy in 2016.

The economy has gained noticeable stability in major macro-variables such as growth, inflation, and the exchange rate. We do not expect wide deviations in these variables. Growth is on an upward trend, while inflation is on the downward and the exchange rate is almost static. Interest rates are likely to fall but slowly. Investments are likely to pick up after a period of correction to take advantage of the existing macro stability. If perceptible improvements in energy, gas and infrastructure can be ensured, private credit will speed up for sure. People expect better administration of the existing infrastructure. Better traffic discipline in two megacities and in the 4-lane highways can ensure at least an additional 1 to 2 percentage points in growth rate for the nation, sending our economic growth to 8 percent.

These assertions give a moderately prospective picture for Bangladesh when the whole Europe is likely to languish in recession and so is part of Latin America. The US predicts its growth to be slightly over 2 percent. Bangladesh is trailing behind India in investment and growth, but doing much better than Pakistan in most major economic indicators. However, many economists do not consider Bangladesh's relatively better performance from that judgment. They raise different negative aspects, giving them more weight. Then again, some economists are politically motivated and their predictions lack dispassionate judgment, econometric exercises, sound theory, and modern analytical tools. Some economists predict euphorically, like radical politicians, when predicting the country's economic future in this year. Both the polar-case opinions can be brushed aside or should be taken with a grain of salt.

There is a saying that six economists will come up with seven opinions. People quote it jocularly but many of us fail to see that numerous opinions are natural to economics due to various observations, assumptions, and models. This write-up hopes to explain the reasons behind the differences observed in economic predictions.

Let us take Bangladesh as a test-case to predict its growth over 2016. Economic growth is a complex variable that comes up after adding consumption, investment, government spending, exports and imports  $[Y = C + I + G + X - M]$ . Say, one economist observes stagnancy in investment. He may find 2016 to be a bleak year with slow growth. Another econo-

mist sees the same state of dullness in investment, but he may not necessarily project slow growth if he senses a boost in consumption which represents more than 70 percent of GDP – much higher than investment's 29 percent share in GDP. An open economy may hugely benefit from increased exports even if both consumption and investment show lukewarm performances. Sometimes, higher government spending, as suggested in Keynesian economics, may alone pull an economy that is supposed to languish otherwise.

The main point of this argument is to show that viewing the same economy from different angles is only natural in economics – a social science that includes interaction of human peculiarities in the material world. People may not take the right course of action desired for the economy. During the great recession of 2007-2009, when the US government failed to stimulate investment, President Obama called on the citizens to not stash away money in their mattresses. He wanted his people to consume more and thus save less, believing in the Keynesian suggestion that saving is a vice during recession  $[Saving = income - consumption]$ .

Who, however, listens to the president? A saving rate of 2.5 percent that prevailed in the pre-crisis period rather jumped up to 7.5 percent during the recession, justifying our mindset of austerity and saving insurance when uncertainty looms large. Economist Paul Krugman also preached Keynesian economics to save

less by consuming more over depressive episodes. Economic agents often play up some strategies opposite to the government's wishes. Saving rates in the US always climbed up during the recessions of mid-1970s, early 1980s, and late 2000s. Since economic agents may interact in an unpredictable way, without following the timely rationale for the country's economy, little wonder that their prognoses for the year are likely to follow different trajectories.

Theoretically, Bangladesh should attract more foreign investments than India, because Bangladesh's stability in growth, inflation, and exchange rate is higher than that of India. That did not happen. Bangladesh's growth path displayed lower volatility since liberalisation, though openness is likely to trigger higher volatility in more complex periods of uncertainty. Theoretically, Bangladesh should attract more



capital inflows due to higher interest rates. That did not happen either. Instead, the US-lowered interest rates fell drastically and the country still drew more capital inflow – a situation economist Ben Bernanke labeled as a "saving glut."

Given these anomalies, and the interaction of human peculiarities, expectations-driven actions and mismatch between theory and practice, predicting the economy in a new year becomes a difficult job. And even then, these predictions are likely to differ widely. No surprise there!

The writer is chief economist of Bangladesh Bank.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### JU doesn't attract migratory birds anymore

Not too long ago, we saw lots of migratory birds in the lakes of Jahangirnagar University. Winter in JU meant a winter with the migratory birds. But it is a matter of great sorrow that in the last few years, the number of migratory birds arriving at JU has dropped significantly. Previously, 25 to 30 species of birds used to arrive by mid-December, but now only 4 to 5 species of birds have come.

For the last few years, JU lakes have been leased out for fish farming and adjoining lands for cultivation. The farmers use chemicals in the lakes and chop down trees, the natural habitat of birds. It is our duty to provide the migratory birds with a safe haven and create a convenient environment for them.

Ashraf Alam Khan  
On e-mail



PHOTO: KHAN SHAHEB

### New door for space travel

This refers to the report, "SpaceX rocket landing opens 'new door' for space travel" (Dec. 22). It is exciting news because no one has ever brought an orbital class booster back intact. We hope that it will be a major milestone in the drive to cut costs and waste by making rockets as reusable as airplanes.

Deendayal M. Lulla  
On e-mail