

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Dip in international oil price

### Not reducing home price defies logic

THE logic being offered by the government for not adjusting the oil price in the country with the international price is that the BPC is making up for the huge 'losses' it has run up over the years. For one thing the BPC losses were made up by government subsidy almost as much as the BPC had accumulated since it began operating in 1997, which it has not yet paid back. And in the last two years since early 2014, when the prices started to fall, the BPC has more than made up the 'losses' by keeping to the previous price. So, why the rigid stance on reducing the oil price?

We want to state that neither the government nor the BPC is a business house nor should they be working with a profit motive. Losses incurred due to fluctuation of prices of an important product can be adjusted but not in the manner that the BPC has done. While it has been prompt in re-fixing prices, upwards, with the rise of oil price in the international market, the benefits of the dip in prices have not been felt by the people in the last two years.

Low oil price has a positive trickle down effect on the economy. It boosts investment and adds to the GDP apart from making consumer goods cheaper. Instead of recovering losses by making the users pay more than three times the cost price of oil, the taxes can be levied on new investments and products. Profiteering by keeping high oil price at home compared to the cost price makes poor economic sense.

## Reckless drivers continue to kill

### How much longer will it go on?

THE death of two budding young students apparently caused by reckless driving within a span of only eight hours, around Shahbagh area, cries out for the re-structuring of the public transportation system and strict punishment of the parties at fault, under law. We offer our deepest condolences to the families of Sabiha Akhter Sonali, 14, and Khadija Sultana Mitu, 12, for the unrecoverable losses.

We feel that such "accidents" occur in a sheer state of lawlessness where buses, many of them unfit to operate, driven by drivers, often without valid licenses, can run someone over and not bother to stop and take responsibility, as was the case in the death of Sonali who wanted to become a doctor.

Policymakers must stop thinking of road safety as a mere transport issue and recognise it as a public health and sustainable development problem as poor families are more likely than those better off to lose the head of household and suffer direct and indirect expenses, such as medical costs, insurance loss, property damage and family income losses. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), road traffic injuries cause a loss of about 2 percent of GDP in Bangladesh.

Umpteen reports and editorials have been written on road accidents in Bangladesh. It is high time we adopted an internationally accepted approach to road safety, taking into consideration vehicles, roads and road users to prevent crashes and strengthening the legal system to deal with the responsible parties which must include owners as well as drivers.

# The environment we live in

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

TWO reports appeared on the same day. Sal forests in Gazipur are heavily degraded. They have reduced by 79 percent within a decade. Encroachment by land grabbers, unrestricted cutting of forests, illegal establishment of factories, and unplanned development projects, houses, and social afforestation have been identified as the reasons. Also illegal capture of forest animals and collection of forest resources transformed a national park such as Gazipur into its current deplorable state. Lack of awareness among common people may also have contributed to this degradation. The continuous process of degradation of this forest land and other forest areas in the country have brought us to a situation where we are struggling to maintain the standard level of forest cover needed for a country.

The other news is about the shifting of the tannery industry to its new designated area. Relocation of tanneries to Hemayetpur of Savar has been pending for 13 years since the government order was issued. Meanwhile, pollution of the Buriganga River from tannery wastes continues to increase the misery of the residents of the area. The unbearable stench, the layers of garbage and the thickness of chemical mixed water can give one a picture of how 'liveable' the area is. But the impoverished community in the area has no other option but to use the water for shower, washing clothes, cleaning utensils and for other necessities. Experts suggest that unless Buriganga is cleaned, not only will the health and livelihood conditions of the local people worsen, but other areas of Dhaka city will also be seriously affected.

These two are among many examples of how the environment is degraded and natural resources are depleted in the country. Water and air pollution, decline in soil fertility, and loss of natural forests, wetland and coastal environment are the result of activities such as land clearing, excessive use of chemical fertilisers, excessive exploitation of natural resources for commercial purpose, deforestation, overfishing and overgrazing. Air pollution from vehicles and industries in Dhaka and Chittagong cities have crossed the threshold level of particulate matter set by the country's Department of Environment. Water from rivers around Dhaka is unsuitable not only for

human consumption, but also for other living creatures. Human intervention on the environment has also led to the loss of biological diversity and ecological balance and to the extinction of several species of the plant and animal world.

Bangladesh depends heavily on its natural resources for employment, revenues and foreign exchange. The majority of its population rely on the primary sector for their main economic activities. This puts a pressure on our limited resources, degrading the environment. When opportunities become limited, the poor migrate to cities for better prospects. Population pressure on urban areas causes land scarcity, increased pollution and social problems in those

natural resources, it is not poverty, but prosperity that takes the lead. The greed for more accumulation prompts grabbing of land, forests, lakes and ponds. The poor use natural resources to meet their basic necessities; the corrupt wealthy group acquires such resources for further enhancement of their wealth. The poor exploit natural resources to survive. The rich exploit natural resources to upgrade their status. And the difference between the extent of exploitation by the rich and the poor is beyond comparison.

On the contrary, environmental damage and depletion of natural resources affect the poorest in the community in the worst way. Thus the poor will tend to

mental degradation will not change. In the absence of clearly defined property rights, opportunities for resource grabbing arise. Over the years, policymakers have taken various measures, including formulating strategies and allocating resources, but the outcome has not been very promising. For example, measures to control air pollution by banning the use of two-stroke engine vehicles, and promoting increased use of compressed natural gas in vehicles and the supply of unleaded petrol are praiseworthy. However, the country is yet to observe any significant improvement. Similarly, without strong measures by the policymakers, the deforestation process will continue. The forest



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

areas. Many of these people have to live in slums without proper facilities such as water, sewage, drainage and garbage removal. This deteriorates the environment and their own health.

However, Bangladesh's case cannot be compared to the traditional models of 'vicious circles' in which population change and poverty seem to exacerbate policy failures and degrade the environment. Thus, the causes of environmental degradation in Bangladesh cannot be linked to only population pressure and poverty. There are many cases when rapid population growth prompted technical change that improved the environment.

When it comes to exploitation of

rely on untreated water sources, whereas the rich may have access to water treated in a treatment plant. The poor will rely on fuelwood and suffer from pollution; the rich will depend on liquid fuels and natural gas.

So while the solution to many environmental problems lies in the reduction of poverty, it is more important to establish property rights and reduce inequality. In an unequal social structure, influential groups with vested interests manipulate policies for their own benefit. The poor, who are the direct and worst victim of degradation, remain outside the decision making process.

Hence, without proactive measures by policymakers, the trend of environ-

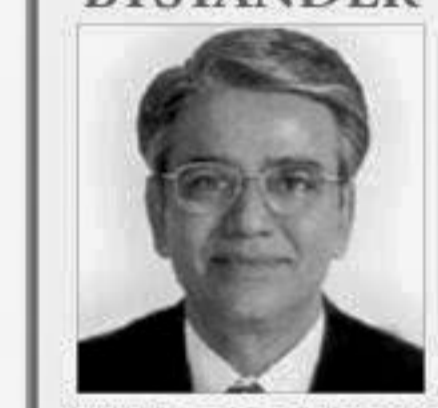
department has neither the efficiency nor the power to oppose encroachment by the powerful.

Environment and natural resources, if not managed properly, will lead to non-sustainability. Depletion of resources constitutes a reduction in the capital base of the economy. If this reduction is not offset by adequate investments in the environment, then the economy is at risk of being unsustainable. Bangladesh's economic and social transformation is spectacular on many accounts. However, similar strides are yet to be observed in case of environmental transformation.

The writer is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

# Saudi-Iran spat incites sectarianism

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

THE Arab Spring had deeply destabilised the Middle East. A new dimension was added to the existing instability on January 4, 2016, when the (Sunni) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) severed diplomatic ties with (Shia) Iran.

The Saudi decision came following the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran on January 3. Iranian demonstrators attacked the Saudi mission following the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr (57) in Saudi Arabia on January 2, 2016. Al-Nimr, a powerful critic of the Saudi Royal family, was in jail for the past three years on charges of terrorism and anti-state activities. He was executed along with 46 Al Qaeda members.

Here two things need to be noted. First, Saudi Arabia is within its rights to execute offenders as it is the internal affair of the country. Second, by not protecting the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, Iran violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. It is a solemn responsibility of a country to protect foreign diplomatic missions.

Riyadh was quite aware of the repercussions and reactions of the Shia population of Iran and the region that would stem from the execution of al-Nimr, and yet they went ahead with it. On the other hand, the Iranian government failed to stop zealots from attacking the Saudi mission. Both are culpable to an extent for their behaviour. The execution fuelled sectarianism and outraged Shia communities across the Middle East.

Actually ever since Iran's revolution in 1979, its relations with Saudi Arabia have been one of antagonism. Both the countries, rich in oil resources, have been vying for predominance over the Middle East. That rivalry has now come to a head.

President Hassan Rouhani, instead of condemning the burning of the embassy, said it was "unjustified". He, however, did not take any retaliatory step. The Iranian police have arrested 40 protestors for the

embassy attack. Tehran, however, formally apologised to the United Nations for the attack on Saudi embassy.

Riyadh has used the burning of its embassy to garner support from the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. Expressing solidarity with Riyadh, Bahrain and Sudan cut off relations with Tehran. Kuwait recalled its ambassador from Tehran, while the UAE downgraded its embassy. Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia issued carefully worded condemnation. Ankara and Algiers took a rather neutral position. However, the Arab world is divided.

There are two factors that weigh on the Saudi Royal family for the way they see regional developments. First, it seems like the House of Saud suffers from a sense of insecurity and is desperate to eliminate dissidents. The internal challenge is probably more serious than external threats. ISIL and Al Qaeda are already operating in KSA and there have been several ISIL-led attacks on Shia targets in the kingdom during 2015, which left several dead. It is estimated that more than 7,000 young Saudis, educated in Sunni Wahabi ideology, have joined ISIL. These trained fighters returning to Saudi Arabia is a source of serious internal threat. Besides, the growing number of restive young people in the kingdom, who are educated but do not have proper employment or any legitimate political outlet for grievances, may eventually be radicalised and pose a serious threat to the royal family.

The other internal threat to Riyadh is the plummeting oil revenue which endangers the kingdom's economy. In 2015, the Saudi budget ran a deficit of \$98 billion and cut the budget by \$86 billion. Budgetary cuts will directly affect welfare spending that could trigger resentment. The war on Yemen and funding anti-Assad forces in Syria are likely to put a strain on the kingdom's finances that the royal family may find difficult to overcome.

Second, there are reports of power struggle within the palace to replace the ageing king. King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (80) ascended the throne in January 2015. He had a stroke and his health is fast deteriorating. He is believed to have delegated powers to his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef (57), the crown prince

and Minister of Interior; and son Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (30), the deputy crown prince (DCP) and defence minister.

These two young Turks are the real force behind the dramatic change in Saudi foreign policy. The inexperienced DCP is believed to be a hardliner, and the stability of the kingdom will depend largely on how he behaves. A German intelligence report last year portrayed the DCP as a political gambler, who is 'destabilising' the Arab world. Saudi Arabia has become "an unpredictable wild card", it said.

Externally, though the DCP has rejected any possibility of war with Iran, the threat perception exists. Iran's nuclear deal with P5+1 has been a major source of Saudi resentment against the US. The arrest of 10 US sailors on January 12, 2016 by Iran in the Persian Gulf and their release the next day speaks of US-Iran rapprochement. Riyadh sees Washington's approach towards Iran with suspicion.

Earlier on December 15, 2015, the DCP had announced the creation of the Islamic Military Alliance of 34 countries to fight terrorism. The DCP said that the alliance, made up of Sunni majority countries, was directed not only against ISIL but also against any other terrorist organisation. The alliance does not include Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Algeria, Oman and Eritrea. Though the alliance has not yet taken any definite shape, one suspects that it is also directed against Iran. The German report says that the DCP is buttressing his domestic power by appealing to Sunni sectarian nationalism.

The Saudi-Iran spat comes with serious concerns. The Vienna talks over Syria, which are scheduled for January 25, may be jeopardised. Saudi-Iran cooperation is crucial for peace in Syria. Proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya will be reinforced by both countries which may destabilise the situation, further sending oil prices skyrocketing.

Neither Saudi Arabia, custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, nor Iran can be the leader of Islamic nations by stoking sectarianism.

The writer is former ambassador and secretary.

## COMMENTS

"1971 War hero JRF Jacob no more"  
(January 14, 2016)

Anjan Baidya

My deepest condolences to JRF Jacob's family. We shall always remember his contribution.

"New way for extortion"  
(January 14, 2016)

Wasif Ahmed

It seems that in this country, everything is out of control.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### A winning start

Bangladesh cricket team has successfully defeated Zimbabwe in their first T20 match. I wholeheartedly congratulate all the players for their outstanding performance. We hope they will continue to make us proud through their winning streak.  
S. A. Murad Sarkar  
Chunarughat, Habiganj



It was the first international match for Bangladesh this year. Hope the win will boost the confidence of our players and help them to become prepared for the upcoming matches.  
Akib Sumon  
BAU

### Fear and hate

In November 2015, a 'Black Lives Matter' protester was kicked and punched by Donald Trump supporters at a Trump rally in Birmingham, Alabama, as Trump yelled, "Get him the hell out of here!" Trump later defended his supporters, telling Fox News, "Maybe he [the protester] should have been roughed up, because it was absolutely disgusting what he was doing."  
George Wallace's daughter, Peggy Wallace

Kennedy, compared her father to Donald Trump, saying, "There is a great deal of similarities as it relates to their style and political strategies. The two of them, they have adopted the notion that fear and hate are the two greatest motivators of voters." The struggle in the US over the last decades has been one between fear and hope, between hate and justice. Donald Trump took on the mantle of hate, grievance and anger.  
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