

Protecting the Sundarbans is our national duty

ANU MUHAMMAD

THE Sundarbans, the last reserve forest in the country and a world heritage site, is again under attack. On March 19, 2016, a cargo vessel carrying 1,300 tonnes of coal sank in Shela River of the Sundarbans. This incident, along with other similar cases of oil and cement-laden cargo sinking since 2014, clearly illustrates the enormity of the threat of carrying coal through the forest and of coal-related pollution in the power generation process of the Rampal coal-fired power plant. Earlier in the oil spillage disaster on December 2014, the government was hopelessly ill-prepared to control the damage. The local population came forward with whatever knowledge they had to clean up the oil from the river, risking their lives and health. We did not see any effective action from the government except a flurry of rhetoric. In the last one year, the government has repeatedly promised to stop the plying of vehicles through this route within the Sundarbans. These words have proved to be hollow and that's why we have seen another disaster in the Sundarbans. We can only conclude from the government's lacklustre attitude that they are not sincere about protecting the mangrove forest.

We have repeatedly urged the government to stop this controversial project. But the government, paying no heed to these demands, allowed plying of big vessels through the nearby river route, construction of large coal-fired power plant and encroachment of forest lands by land grabbers and business groups. The cabinet has already allocated funds for another coal-fired power plant at Rampal. This power plant project at the vicinity of the Sundarbans lacks transparency. Most worryingly, the project would destroy the Sundarbans that plays the role of a natural shield to protect the people and nature of Bangladesh and maintain the ecological balance nurturing the invaluable biodiversity. Millions of people will lose their livelihood due to destruction of the forest. The whole population of the coastal area will be affected. The PM has said that her government would not embark on any development project that affects the environment. Contrarily, we see the government is impatient about carrying out this project. The people of our country as well as the



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relevant international bodies are quite aware of the importance of the Sundarbans. Ramsar and Unesco have sent several letters to the government urging them to stop constructing the power plant near the forest. They have even threatened to strike the Sundarbans off the list of world heritage sites unless the stop the construction. The Norwegian government has withdrawn their investment of Global Pension Fund from the Indian company NTPC for its involvement in this catastrophic project. Many international banks have refused to fund this project. After conducting a field level survey at the project site, South Asian Human Rights body has urged the government to stop it. Initially, various branches of the government had also showed their reservation about this project. These concerns and warnings have fallen on deaf ears of the government.

The government is pursuing this questionable project in the name of solving power and energy crisis. There is no doubt that we have to solve these problems. But the

way the government is approaching this issue, it seems that they are more eager to protect the interests of some local and international companies than solving the crisis. We can give more such examples of destructive development projects, such as open pit mining at Phulbari-Barapukuria, leasing out gas blocks in the Bay of Bengal to foreign companies, maintaining high price of oil amid global slump in oil price, undertaking questionable projects at Cox's Bazar, constructing foreign company-dependent Ruppur Nuclear power plant and so on.

Since the oil and gas of the Bay of Bengal are the main resources for our future, it is only expected that our plans on using these resources are judicious. Otherwise, the country will be totally deprived of the huge potentials it possesses. Sadly, one would be astonished to know the attempts that are being made to destroy these natural resources. Without floating any tender and based on "mutual understanding," the government has decided to lease out the oil

and gas blocks of our sea. In order to do so, the government has resorted to the Speedy Supply of Power and Energy Special Act for 2010, which is essentially an 'indemnity law'. As per this law, no one can seek the court's assistance in matters of the energy ministry.

The Act not only applies to the energy sector, but it also exempts the directors and officials of nuclear power companies from all possible damages and expense. In this regard, on September 8, 2015, "Nuclear Power Plant Bill 2015" was passed in the parliament. In its 28th clause, under the title 'Protecting the activities done with innocence,' it has been said: "No civil or criminal case can be filed or any other legal steps can be taken against the government, chairman, managing directors, project directors, other directors, advisers, consultants, officials or employees for their innocent activities done for building and running nuclear power plants before or after the issuance of this ordinance." So, in essence, no one will take responsibility for the harm that will be caused. Only our

people will suffer.

On February 15, 2016, Finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhit admitted that 'Sundarbans will be harmed because of the Rampal power plant.' But then added that "the location cannot be changed." Why must the government implement this project despite the fact that it will devastate the resources and shelters of the country which is incomparable to anything? Are their hands really tied, and if so, to whom?

No government should have the right to play an 'our-hands-are-tied' role and threaten our natural resources. There is definitely a proper solution to the energy crisis. We have highlighted these -- hundred percent national ownership in national properties and using all properties for the development of the country; cancelling the indemnity law which enables corruption and instead enacting a law "Banning Export of Mineral Resources"; cancelling the PSC process and enabling the national institutions to explore fresh gas blocks in the sea and land areas by providing them with the necessary fund, power and facilities; repairing and renewing the national power plants; banning of open-pit mining and full implementation of Phulbari Agreement; developing the national capacity; adopting a national energy policy by making the best and mixed use of renewable and non-renewable energy; and putting emphasis on long-term renewable energy. These are the ways to achieve a long-term, sustainable, cheap, safe and pro-people development.

However, the government is going the other way: They are going for expensive, risky, donor-dependent projects which are destructive for forests, water, people and the environment. Although some local and foreign coteries are reaping the benefits of such projects, these activities are pushing our present and future generations towards severe uncertainty, danger and destruction. No matter how the government tries to sell these as development, these projects, like the weapons of mass destruction, are destructive for the environment and the people. We would not allow such arrangements to jeopardise our country and the people. Sundarbans protects Bangladesh, so it is our national duty to save the Sundarbans.

The writer is member secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Sanders's silence on Israel

DOV WAXMAN

NO foreign country features as prominently in American presidential election campaigns as Israel, and those aspiring to occupy the world's most powerful political office, whether Republican or Democrat, routinely proclaim their support for that tiny and distant country. Yet, in the current crop of candidates, one has refrained from making any such proclamations: Bernie Sanders. With the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) having just invited all of the presidential candidates to address its annual policy conference next week in Washington, DC, this may be about to change.

The fact that Sanders has barely

address domestic economic inequality and social injustice. Sanders has stuck to his populist economic message with great discipline, and this has inevitably meant that many other issues get little, if any, attention.

But, when it comes to Israel, Sanders's silence also reflects a political calculation. Many of his most enthusiastic supporters are political progressives – the most liberal part of the Democratic base – and young people, groups that tend to be more critical of Israel's actions and more sympathetic toward the Palestinians.

Indeed, a March 2015 Pew Research poll showed that both Democrats and especially Republicans were more sympathetic toward Israel than Palestine. Yet among liberal

delicate position. In fact, Sanders, who spent time on a kibbutz in the early 1960s, has expressed some understanding of Israel's security concerns. In a November 2014 interview, he said that, if he were president, he would "support the security of Israel, help Israel fight terrorist attacks... and maintain its independence."

Lest this seem clearly pro-Israel, however, Sanders promised in the same interview to maintain "an even-handed approach to that area." Moreover, he has publicly criticised Israel's treatment of the Palestinians – a rarity among US politicians. And he has acknowledged that he is no "fan" of Israel's right-wing prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu; indeed, Sanders was among the legislators who boycotted

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In any case, it is not as if avoiding talk about Israel is a departure for Sanders. Despite having commented on the matter where necessary, he has generally not been outspoken on issues relating to the country. He has certainly never embraced Israel as a political cause, as many other American Jewish politicians have. Nor does Israel appear to figure much in his own Jewish identity, which is more connected to the memory of the Holocaust than anything else.

In this respect, Sanders is no different than many other American Jews. In a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center, 73 percent of American Jews said that "remembering the Holocaust" was essential to what being Jewish meant to them, compared with 43 percent for whom "caring about Israel" was essential. "Working for justice and equality" was also ranked significantly higher than caring about Israel. In his staunch commitment to advancing social justice, Sanders also clearly embraces this strand of American Jewish identity.

Sanders's relative silence on Israel, therefore, serves as a reminder that Israel is not all that important to many, if not most, American Jews. Why should American Jewish politicians be any different?

The writer is a professor of political science, international affairs, and Israel studies at Northeastern University and Co-Director of its Middle East Center. His latest book, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel*, will be published by Princeton University Press next month. Copyright: Project Syndicate (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

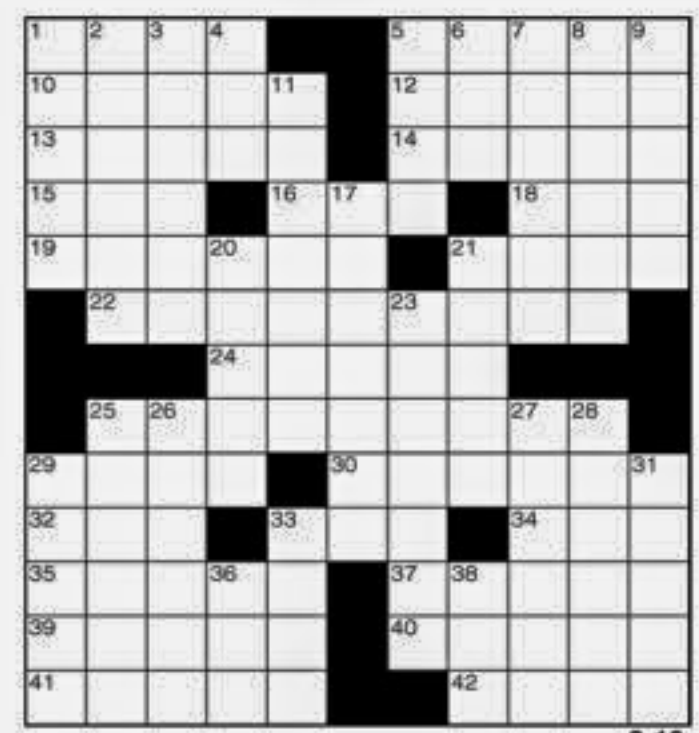
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Field workers
- 5 No-frills
- 10 Accepted truth
- 12 Sports spot
- 13 In a way, informally
- 14 Nice guys
- 15 Yale rooter
- 16 CD forerunners
- 18 Casual top
- 19 Gets underway
- 21 Tie up
- 22 Hindrance
- 24 Colorful flower
- 25 Wash day need
- 29 Sumptuousness
- 30 Maestro Toscanini
- 32 Bat wood
- 33 Color
- 34 Atlas page
- 35 Theater part
- 37 Martin of movies
- 39 Colorful flower
- 40 Alarm sound
- 41 Wasn't thrifty

DOWN

- 1 Libertines
- 2 Driven out
- 3 Limited
- 4 Lawn starter
- 5 Luggage
- 6 Live and breathe
- 7 Submitted
- 8 Focused
- 9 Ready for shipping
- 11 Blue-gray cat
- 17 Depict
- 20 Map division
- 21 Chic topper
- 23 Backslide
- 25 Quarrel
- 26 Sigh, say
- 27 Uno, for one
- 28 See the world
- 29 Endures
- 31 Some tournaments
- 33 Office div.
- 36 Collins base
- 38 Pointer



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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said anything about Israel on the campaign trail is certainly unusual for a presidential contender nowadays. But what makes it even more remarkable is the fact that he is the only Jewish candidate in the race. So why has Sanders been relatively silent on Israel?

To some extent, Sanders's silence can be explained by his broader aversion to discussing foreign-policy issues. He knows that Hillary Clinton, his rival for the Democratic nomination, is far more experienced in this area, and that support for his campaign is based largely on his pledge to

democrats, there was actually more sympathy for the Palestinians, with 68 percent saying that they sympathised more with the Palestinians, compared with 44 percent of moderate Democrats and just 33 percent of Republicans. Moreover, in a Gallup survey taken during Israel's 2014 Gaza War, the majority of 18- to 29-year-olds thought that Israel's actions were unjustified, while the majority of those 50 and older regarded them as justified.

This places Sanders, who depends on the support of liberal democrats and young people, in a

Netanyahu's controversial address to Congress last March.

Against this background, AIPAC's invitation puts Sanders in an awkward position. If he turns down the invitation – as some pro-Palestinian activists are urging him to do – he will surely face harsh accusations from America's large pro-Israel camp. If he accepts it, he will have to think carefully about what he says.

Sanders knows that even if he does speak out on Israel, at the AIPAC convention or elsewhere, he would not win over the country's more hawkish supporters, including

among Democrats. He would, however, run the risk of alienating his liberal base, making discussion of Israel a lose-lose proposition.

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