

SAVING THE SUNDARBANS

The foreign aid conundrum

NAZNEEN AHMED

IN the wake of the Paris Conference of Parties (COP) 21, as countries are designing their post-climate action plans, needless to say, aid for developing countries for climate change adaptation and mitigation needs remains on the negotiating table.

However, the Paris deal was not only about aid. The question to both donor and aid recipients is not about the amounts they are committing or receiving as aid, but rather how much they are translating aid into policy and practices to meet climate change's main challenge: cutting emissions by shifting to clean energy and conserving forests as carbon reservoirs.

In retrospect, Bangladesh's efforts to shift to low-carbon growth are evidenced by the formation of the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) and also in the formulation of a number of plans and policies. For example, Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2009, Energy Efficiency and Conservation Master Plan 2030, and the Renewable Energy Policy 2008 that targets 10 percent of total electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020.

Exactly how Bangladesh intends to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through forest conservation becomes unclear particularly in the face of the Rampal power plant issue. This is because the potential threat Bangladesh poses to the Sundarbans by allowing the construction of the Rampal power plant contradicts its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) statement to the UNFCCC, in which it recognised ecosystem conservation as a mitigation action - subject to the availability of external resources - to reduce GHG emission. In its INDC, Bangladesh estimated the costs of ecosystem-based adaptation and coastal and wetlands conservation measures for the period 2015-2030 to be USD 3.5 billion - a figure which the country is probably expecting to meet with foreign aid. If natural ecosystems like the Sundarbans, which constitutes around 50 percent of the country's reserved forests, are lost as a result of short-sighted and expedient policies like the Rampal, what would Bangladesh's stance be in the global aid discourse?

On June 19, a high level stakeholder consultation - a praiseworthy initiative by the government - was held with eminent civil society citizens and environmental groups to reach a consensus on the power plant. A point needs to be clarified here - the construction of the power plant itself is not much of an issue

for Bangladesh, considering its low electricity consumption per capita. Understandably, it is the location that is an issue.

The Rampal power plant cannot be viewed as an isolated case and neither is it the only threat to the Sundarbans. A number of private companies having acquired land around the forest indicates that the risk of further commercial activity and human encroachment is very high. Therefore, the power plant raises serious issues of unsustainable land-use, unregulated industrial and shipping activities that are mushrooming near and threatening

National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2006, to name but a few, Bangladesh is yet to achieve the MDG target of 20 percent forest cover of the country's total land area.

On the positive side, Bangladesh is one of the top 10 mangrove-dominating countries in the world. In the context of climate change, the Sundarbans is a significant carbon sink because, according to a paper (2009) published by IUCN, the carbon storage capacity per square kilometre of coastal marine habitats, including mangroves, is 50 times higher than a tropical forest, thereby allowing

few decades.

Over the years, several policy interventions were made to bring the coastal mangroves under a management framework, some examples of which include the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan 2000 and the draft Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Management of Mangroves (2003) initiated by the World Bank. How much of these documents got translated into action remains a question.

In fact, the Chokoria mangrove in Cox's Bazar should serve as a lesson learnt for

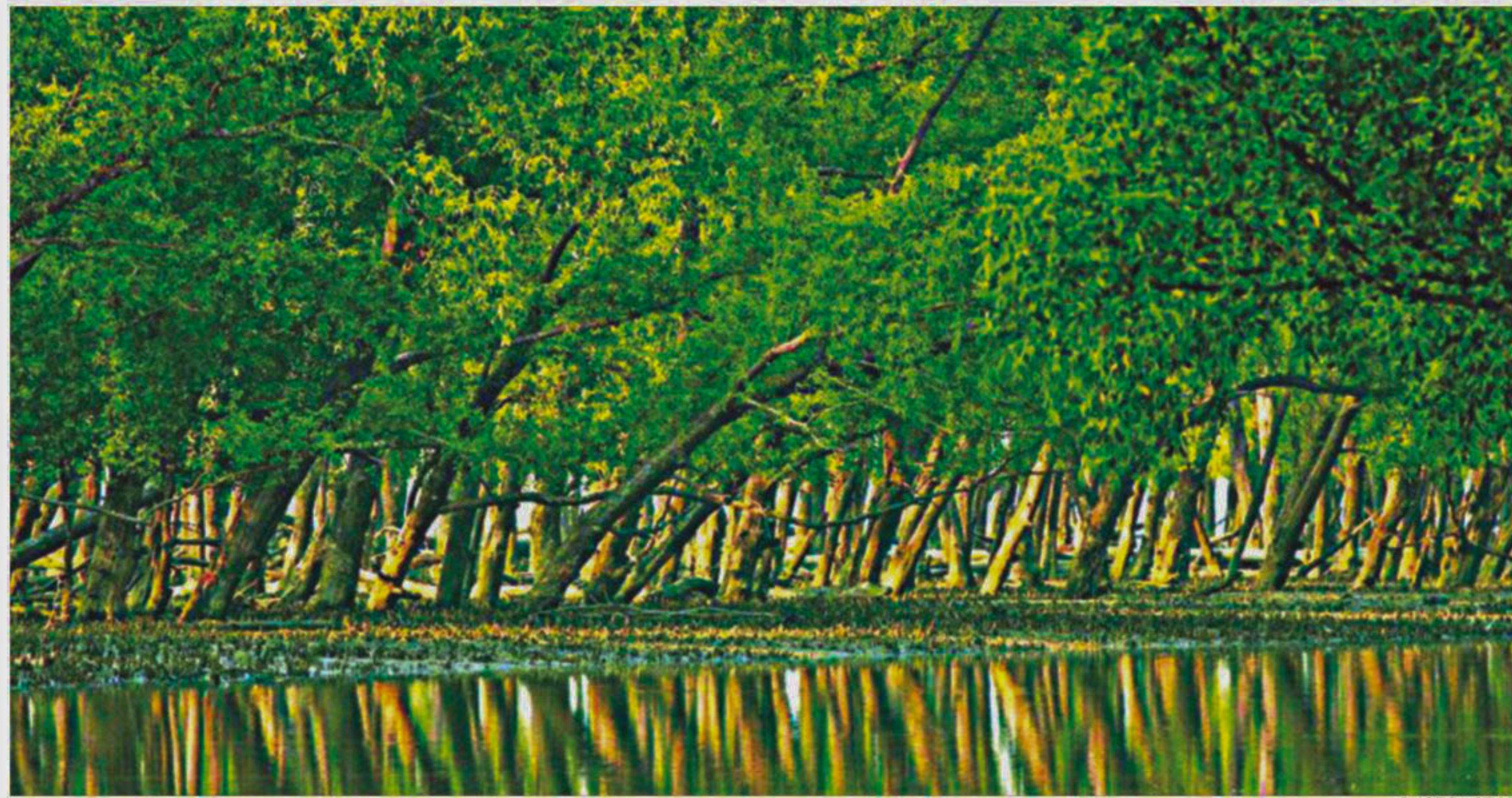


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the survival of the country's most valuable mangrove ecosystem. If commercial projects are selected without taking into account their negative effects on the natural assets of the country, it is highly likely to destroy Bangladesh's irreplaceable natural defences against climate-change calamities in the long run.

Looking back, in spite of such institutional arrangement such as the high-powered National Environment Council and a highly supportive policy environment for environmental conservation that includes, for example, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the National Forest Policy 1994, the National Environment Management Action Plan 1995, Forestry Master Plan (1995-2015),

it to store larger amounts of carbon in soil. However, Bangladesh's INDC has not adequately captured the role of carbon sinks, unlike that of India, which explicitly mentioned quantifiable targets for creating additional carbon sinks by increasing forest cover. Nevertheless, by avoiding mangrove degradation and deforestation, Bangladesh can effectively contribute to national and global climate change mitigation strategies.

Despite their ecological benefits, the United Nations Environment Programme (2014) warned that mangroves are being destroyed at a three to five times faster rate than terrestrial forests, and are one of the most threatened ecosystems on earth. Bangladesh has also lost its mangrove areas by 45 percent in the past

Bangladesh, where a similar lack of farsightedness in policymaking resulted in unsustainable growth of the shrimp industry and led to the complete annihilation of the 21,000 hectare of mangrove forest. This is a sad commentary on the issue of sustainable mangrove management, particularly given the fact that deforestation itself is the second largest driver of climate change and is responsible for around 20 percent of carbon emissions the world experiences today. Are we to lose the Sundarbans in the same way?

A question which looms large is: if Bangladesh continues down the line of forest loss and degradation, could external aid claim to serve Bangladesh's mitigation objective? Ironically, Bangladesh has been receiving

considerable overseas aid for conserving mangrove wetlands and biodiversity. Is it consistent to threaten the Sundarbans with unplanned industrial activities on one hand, and receive foreign aid for its conservation on the other hand? Between 2011 and 2015 - the planning period of the power plant - the Sundarbans continued to be an aid intervention site of the European Union, Germany, the US, and the World Bank. In this connection, what has been the role of donors?

Given donors' influence in the forestry sector, it was reasonable to expect that our development partners, as major sponsors of Sundarbans conservation initiatives, would be vocal in demanding a review of the power plant's decision.

Therefore, amid all the aid influx and disbursement for conservation of the Sundarbans, what also remains subtly missing is the commitment to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action of 2008 which aim to make aid accountable and effective.

This paves the way for critically assessing how exactly foreign aid views the Sundarbans - as a natural asset to be preserved for the country's long lasting development or as a quantitative indicator to demonstrate project interventions? Are Bangladesh's decisions related to environmental conservation being driven by a genuine commitment to sustainability?

While the world is complacently celebrating the Paris "deal," the Sundarbans stands as a symbol of lack of accountability, questioning donors and aid recipients alike on the effectiveness of aid. It is a reminder to all countries, regardless of their rankings in GHG emissions, to measure how cohesive their national energy and environmental policies are with foreign aid aimed at mitigating climate change through environmental conservation.

Indeed the need for coherent policymaking and mutually supportive roles of all actors to keep the earth's climate from 2 degrees Celsius rise was best reflected in the speech of Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute, Columbia University, as he said during the Paris Conference: "The diplomats have done their job: the Paris Agreement points the world in the right direction, and with sophistication and clarity. It does not, however, ensure implementation, which necessarily remains the domain of politicians, businessmen, scientists, engineers, and civil society."

The writer is a staff member of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC University. The views expressed in this article are those of the writer alone and do not represent those of the institution she serves.

Rule of law or the will of some?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

FOR the sake of argument, let's just say that the information published in newspapers is correct, that police officer Babul Akhter was behind the gruesome murder of his wife Mitu. If so, by law he should be arrested without delay, charged with murder and brought to book. The court will determine his punishment for the crime, if he has committed it.

And the police have an important role to play in this process. The police are supposed to investigate the murder case to unearth the motive behind the killing, as well as those who were involved with it. Then they will submit a charge sheet to the court against the accused, paving the way for justice. Babul Akhter must be allowed to defend himself before the court, as he, like all citizens, enjoys the constitutional right to do so. And this is the rule of law.

But, what has been happening centering Babul Akhter is a contradiction to the rule of law. Babul has been asked to resign from the police force to protect himself. And if he does not do so, he will find himself in jail on a murder charge, according to media reports based on sources

inside the police administration. This hints at a negotiation between Babul and some senior police officials. If Babul resigns, will he be spared from the charge, even if he has actually masterminded the murder of his wife? If this is so, the police will be accused of protecting the

guilty and convicted, he will automatically be unfit to hold his job in the police force.

If there is any action the police can take before the conclusion of the trial, once Babul is accused of the crime, it can suspend him through a departmental action on the condition that he would

Babul should face departmental action for breaching the discipline.

Until yesterday, Babul was not made accused in the case filed in connection with the murder of his wife. He was picked up and taken to the DB office on Friday night, where he was kept for 15 hours for "interrogation". He was sent back to the home of his father-in-law in Dhaka, where he has been staying after the murder of his wife on June 5 in Chittagong.

Initially, the home minister said Babul was taken to the DB Office for interrogation and later he said he was taken there to identify suspected killers of his wife. The way he was picked and interrogated at the DD office has triggered many questions. In the last one week or so, newspapers and social media have been flooded by reports and discussions on this. None of the reports and discussions has served to brighten the image of the police.

Chittagong's Police Commissioner last Saturday spoke at a press conference, focusing on the statements of two suspected killers, who were said to have been paid to murder Mitu. But the Police Commissioner did not say who hired them. The police headquarters maintain their mysterious silence, despite the

inundation of media reports and discussions.

Babul has also remained silent, as his close relatives claim that he has been asked by the police not to speak. The question has also been raised that whether Babul, who is known as a brave officer for his role against militants, is being made a victim of internal politics within the police administration.

Police play an important role to uphold the spirit of the law by enforcing it effectively. For its significant role, the force is called a 'law enforcement agency' of the government. Yet, the mysterious developments surrounding this murder

case is in no way healthy for the rule of law or the agency responsible for enforcing the law.

If Babul Akhter has any link to the murder of his wife, he must be brought to book and there should not be any negotiations with him. If he is innocent, no one in the police force should be allowed to make him a victim of personal conflicts within the force, and the police headquarters must stand by Babul. In this scenario, the police chief should formally explain what is really going on without giving space to further damage the image of his force.

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Even if the police establish Babul's involvement in the murder, they cannot force him to resign using it as a bargaining weapon. The police do not have such jurisdiction and any such action is unlawful. Babul's fate must be decided by the court. If found guilty and convicted, he will automatically be unfit to hold his job in the police force.

mastermind of a murder in a planned and deliberate way.

Even if the police establish Babul's involvement in the murder, they cannot force him to resign using it as a bargaining weapon. The police do not have such jurisdiction and any such action is unlawful. Babul's fate must be decided by the court. If found

remain suspended until he is cleared from the charges.

But by putting pressure on him to quit the job, some police officers have taken the law in their hands. They made the law subject to their will. This is completely against the spirit of the rule of law. Police officers who have unlawfully pressurised

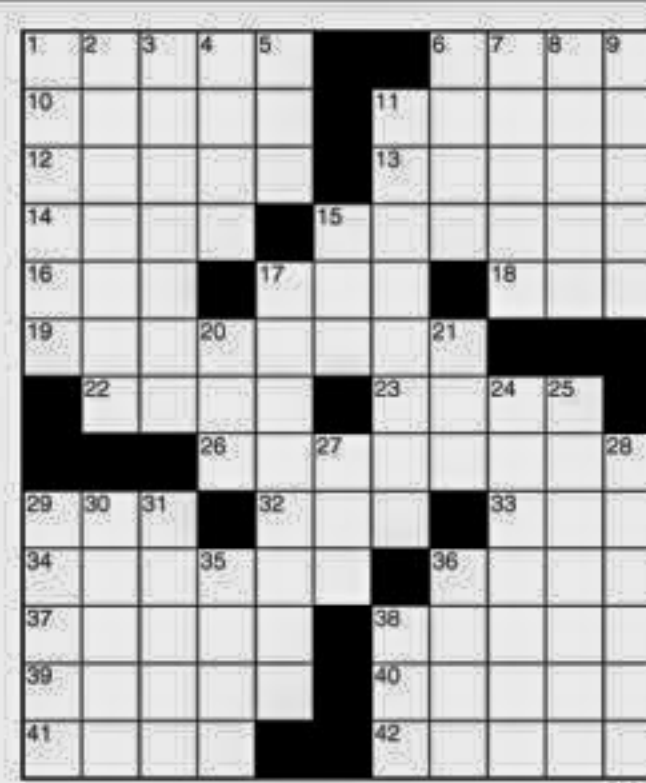
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ACROSS 42 Leather strips

- 1 Point count
- 6 Concord
- 10 Music's Mariah
- 11 Supermarket section
- 12 Come up
- 13 Labor group
- 14 Barn area
- 15 Fold
- 16 Yale rooter
- 17 Language suffix
- 18 Tennis court divider
- 19 Resolute
- 22 Monthly bill
- 23 Norway's capital
- 26 Mocking
- 29 Youngster
- 32 Corn unit
- 33 Singer Ritter
- 34 Freeway entrance
- 36 Zeus' wife
- 37 Play setting
- 38 Fable finish
- 39 Like some messages
- 40 Make law
- 41 Some primates

DOWN

- 1 Climbed
- 2 Yule singer
- 3 Mouth
- 4 Take it easy
- 5 Pupil's place
- 6 Needle source
- 7 Korean or Thai
- 8 Nearby
- 9 Principle
- 11 French farewell
- 15 Vegas-set series
- 17 Respected
- 20 Neither Dem. nor Rep.
- 21 Twisty turn
- 24 Not figurative
- 25 Ham it up
- 27 Kanyes music
- 28 Glorifies
- 29 Puccini opera
- 30 Victorious
- 31 Commerce
- 35 Matures
- 36 Sharpen
- 38 Kitten cry



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ERASE ALIST
PICKET FENCE
USE DOE BAR
PERSSEUS APE
ART CLEO
DOCKS DOLES
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AMIT RED RAN
TICKET TAGENT
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