

# THE DEVIL IN DEVELOPMENT



THE SOUND & THE FURY  
SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

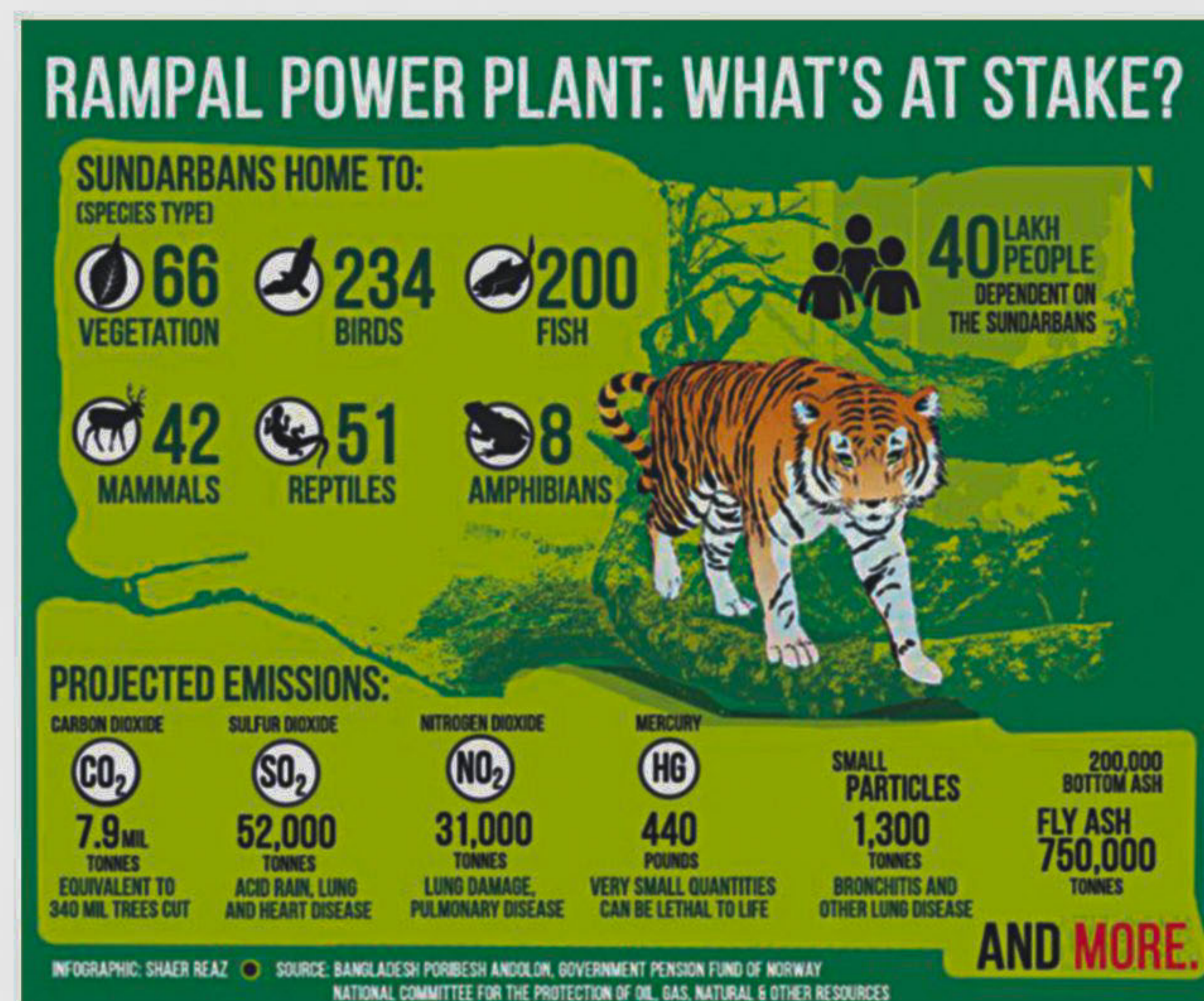
**T**HE word "development" - eliciting as it does grandiloquent notions of progress - has become, at least in Bangladesh, something of a red herring. It is used as a catch-all phrase to justify just about anything - from eviction of slum-dwellers to make way for high-rise housing projects to forceful grabbing of ancestral lands to build eco-parks and tourism spots, from rampant deforestation of our woodlands to unapologetic pollution of our rivers, from undemocratic and top-down imposition of anti-people projects to suppression of dissent through violence both sponsored or otherwise. It matters little that such so-called development only exacerbates the extreme vulnerabilities of people already on the margins, destroys scarce natural resources and intensifies the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots; that it does precisely the opposite of what "development" - real, pro-people development - ought to do. If one protests these actions as unjust, undemocratic or inequitable, one can be easily dismissed as being "anti-development", and by extension, "unpatriotic", making it ever more difficult to have any sort of constructive conversation about Bangladesh's development priorities (or the lack thereof).

And, thus, in the name of "development", we are now witnessing an unprecedented attack on one of our most valuable natural resources, the Sundarbans. (I say unprecedented not because other regimes have not tried to sell off our natural resources to multinational corporations at a fraction of the real cost to the country, but because no prior case has involved as ecologically sensitive an area as the Sundarbans.) If development was the real goal of the construction of the Rampal power plant, if people were the focus of this intervention, why would the government displace thousands of people from their homesteads without so much as following the proper rehabilitation procedures? Why would they

jeopardise, in one broad stroke, an entire ecosystem of the world's largest mangrove forest, and the source of livelihood of around 40 lakh people? Why would they discount the grave ecological danger of the construction of this coal power plant, when national and international environmental experts, including Unesco and Ramsar ("Protecting the Sundarbans is our national duty", TDS, March 22, 2016), have made it abundantly clear that this would be nothing less than a suicidal move for Bangladesh? Why would they risk our national heritage without even conducting a fair, independent and scientific Environmental Impact Assessment (for a more comprehensive criticism of the current EIA, please refer to "Sundarbans under Threat," TDS July 25, 2016)?

What gives a government the power to be so reckless when they are not the owners, but rather the guardians, on behalf of the people, of Bangladesh's natural resources?

For those who consider "environment" to be a "soft" issue that has no place in the more "grave" and "grown-up" discussions on development, let's talk economics. Let's talk about the fact that three French banks and two Norwegian pension funds pulled out their investment last year from the Rampal power plant because the "failure to comply with minimum social and environmental standards and the corresponding financial risks made the project a clear 'no-go' for financial institutions." Let's talk about the economic reality that Bangladesh will be financially responsible for 85 percent of the project, even though Bangladesh and India are supposed to be 50:50 partners. Let's talk about fact that, as per a comprehensive report by the US-based Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), which conducts research and analyses on financial and economic issues related to energy and the environment, the plant will actually lead to higher electricity rates in Bangladesh. Published in June 2016, the report says: "The revenue requirements of the Rampal plant would require tariff levels that are 32



percent higher than the current average cost of electricity production in Bangladesh and will therefore increase electricity rates in Bangladesh. Without subsidies, the plant's generation costs are 62 percent higher than the current average cost of electricity production in Bangladesh." The true cost of the plant, it adds, is being hidden by three subsidies worth more than US \$3 billion.

That the Indian government would want to pursue this case, at only a fraction of the cost and risk associated with Bangladesh, is obvious enough. IEEFA suspects "that the project is being promoted as a means to sell Indian coal to Bangladesh and as a way to skirt Indian policy against building a coal plant so near the Sundarbans, a protected forest and World Heritage

Site." But we are at a complete loss to understand what possible economic benefit there could be to Bangladesh pursuing a project that has been deemed financially unviable by major international financial and research institutes. We respectfully ask the government to explain to its people the cost-benefit analysis on the basis of which it is so eagerly risking the world's largest mangrove forest, home of the Bengal Tigers, and a forest that saves us from natural disasters by providing a barrier to storms.

While we understand the need to generate power, and applaud the government for its crucial role in mitigating Bangladesh's energy crisis, we cannot comprehend why the government is remaining oblivious to what has now become a slogan for the anti-Rampal

movement: "There are many alternatives to generating electricity, but no alternative to the Sundarbans". The National Committee to Protect Oil-Gas-Mineral Resources, Port and Power (NCPBP), which consists of engineers, energy experts, activists and environmentalists, have proposed alternative strategies for generating electricity without jeopardising the environment and people's lives and livelihoods. Rather than engage with such groups and explore sustainable solutions for a greener Bangladesh, the government has thus far not only chosen to ignore their repeated pleas to relocate the plant, but actually responded to opposition to the Rampal project with barricades, batons, tear shells and arbitrary arrests.

Are we to deduce, from its reaction to the mass demonstration on July

28, 2016, that violence is the only language the state understands best, or at any rate, the only language it is willing to deploy to suppress its critics? The space for democratic expression has shrunk so much so that it seems naïve to decry the violation of our constitutional rights. The arbitrary arrests of unarmed protesters, and indiscriminate beating and use of tear gas, resulting in injuries to at least 50 demonstrators, is just another "day-in-the-life-of" example in a woefully long list of attempts to suppress people's voices against harmful development projects through force, rather than productive dialogue.

It angers me, frustrates me, but mostly, scares me that the government feels that it has the power to do anything it wants - no matter the facts, no matter the consequences - and that it considers itself above and beyond all accountability to the people. As we remain distracted with our daily lives, horrific news of terror attacks and new fads on the internet, the government acts and plans in the shadows of neoliberalism, knowing fully well that the masses, at the end of the day, are too apathetic to take to the streets to demand a greener, more sustainable future, to claim from the government what is their right.

We must, for our sake, prove the 'power' wrong. We must shake off our cocoon of complicity, and ask ourselves why we cannot fight to protect our environment, the livelihood of lakhs of people and the Tigers of the Sundarbans with the same passion as we take to the streets to celebrate the Tigers' win in a cricket match; why we remain unmoved to act, content to play the part of a fool chasing after a Pokemon as the cries of the dolphins and deer of the Sundarbans fall on our deaf ears (there are headphones to block off the reality, after all). We must act, and we must act NOW, if we are to have any chance of preserving the Bangladesh that we recognise and love. The only power we need, after all, is power to the people to decide its development priorities.

The writer is a rights activist and freelance journalist.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Broken promises for Syria's children



KEVIN WATKINS

**I**F you ever lose faith in the power of hope, not to mention the importance of never giving up, remind yourself of the story of Mohammed Kosha. A 16-year-old Syrian refugee living in Lebanon, Mohammed has overcome obstacles that most of us cannot even imagine, in order to excel in his education. World leaders should take note.

Four years ago, Mohammed and his family fled their home in the town of Darya, a suburb of Damascus, to escape relentless bombardment by Syrian armed forces. Having already lost a year of primary education in his hometown, where it was simply too dangerous to attend school, he then spent another year out of the classroom when the family arrived in Lebanon, where they now reside.

Mohammed's life changed when Lebanon's government opened the country's public schools to refugees. Classes were not only crowded; they were also conducted in English, meaning that he would have to learn a new language. But Mohammed seized the opportunity to learn, and threw himself into his studies. Last month, against all odds, he scored the second-highest marks in Lebanon's Brevet secondary-school exam. And he is not done yet.

Mohammed knows that education is the key to building a better future. In his words, "Learning gives us hope." If only world leaders had even a fraction of his wisdom.

There have been some encouraging signals. At a meeting in London in February, international donors recognised the importance of education for refugees, promising to get all of Syria's refugee children into school by the end of 2017. They even pledged \$1.4 billion to achieve that goal.

It was an ambitious promise to a group of highly vulnerable children. Today, about one million Syrian refugee children aged 5-17 - roughly half the total - are out of school. And most of those who are in school will drop out before starting their secondary education. In the space of a single primary-school generation, Syria has suffered what may be the greatest education reversal in history. Enrollment rates for the country's children are now well below the regional average for sub-Saharan Africa.

But now, just six months later, the promise of education for all refugees is about to be broken, dashing the hopes of millions of Syrians. Just 39 percent of the \$662 million in urgent education aid sought by United Nations humanitarian agencies this year has been funded. And as documented in a Theirworld report published today, only a fraction of the \$1.4 billion pledged in London has been delivered.

As the international community shirks its responsibilities, Syria's neighbours have continued to make extraordinary efforts to address the crisis. Lebanon, Jordan, and (to a lesser extent) Turkey have opened up their public schools to Syrian refugees.

But these countries' education systems, which were strained even before the crisis,

cannot handle the burden that they are being forced to shoulder. Syrian refugees now comprise one-third of all Lebanese public-school students. This is like the American primary-school system, suddenly having to absorb all of Mexico's children. There are simply not enough teachers, classrooms, or

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textbooks to deliver decent education to the refugee children.

The February conference was supposed to produce solutions that would ease the burden on Syria's neighbours. Host-country governments did their part, preparing in

advance their plans for delivering universal education to refugee children. They then worked with donors to develop comprehensive strategies for reaching all out-of-school children and raising the quality of education.

Yet, with the international community having failed to hold up its end of the bargain, progress has not just stalled; it could be reversed. More than 80,000 Syrian refugees now in school in Lebanon are at risk of losing their places.

The human consequences of the education crisis among Syrian refugees are impossible to miss. They are apparent in the growing army of child labourers picking vegetables in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley or working at garment factories in Turkey, where a half-million refugees are out of school. They are also reflected in the continuing flow of refugee families making the perilous journey to Europe, driven by the hope that their children will have educational opportunities there. Yet, many European governments continue to invest in razor wire and detention centres, rather than in schools and teachers.

There is an alternative - but the clock is ticking. Next month, the UN and the United States will host another round of refugee summits. This time, governments can leave their recycled promises and heady rhetoric at home; instead, they should carry with them concrete plans to deliver the \$1.4 billion they have already pledged.

The international community must also rethink how aid is delivered. The Syrian crisis will not end any time soon. Instead of

delivering aid through unreliable, underfunded annual humanitarian appeals, donors need to provide predictable multi-year funding, as the United Kingdom has done. More generally, the European Union and the World Bank should expand and intensify their support for education.

Of course, more donor finance for education is only part of the equation. There is more that host-country governments, however overstretched, can and should be doing. For starters, they should be working to remove the language barriers facing Syrian children. They could also address chronic teacher shortages through expedient recruitment of Syrian refugee teachers. Above all, host governments could help refugees become more secure and self-reliant, notably by upgrading their legal status and expanding the right to work.

Ultimately, though, a credible response to the refugee education crisis must involve a fairer approach to burden-sharing. Before heading for the UN summit treadmill next month, governments should review the promises they made at the London conference. And they should recall Nelson Mandela's dictum: "Promises to children should never be broken."

The writer, Executive Director of the Overseas Development Institute, is the author of a new report by the children's charity Theirworld, *No Last Generation: Holding to the promise of education for all Syrian refugees*.

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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- Bangor's state
  - Formal agreement
  - Singer Paula
  - Honolulu hello
  - Carrying out
  - Store events
  - Commonion
  - Scoundrel
  - Whole bunch
  - It's measured in degrees
  - "That's gross!"
  - German river
  - Baby grand, for one
  - Flower parts
  - Beige
  - Have debts
  - Disposition
  - Pub pint
  - Cotillion girl
  - Singer Reed
  - Veranda
  - Start
  - Check for odors
  - Make blank
  - Melodies
  - Emmy-winner Tyne
  - Challenges
- DOWN**
- Angry with
  - Dwelling
  - Figure of speech
  - Convent resident
  - Painter of Toledo
  - Lasagna or linguine
  - In the style of
  - Conspire
  - Math statement
  - Fall flowers
  - Bible boat
  - Locker poster
  - Tribe symbol
  - Flower parts
  - Reykjavik's nation
  - Yerevan's nation
  - Mopped
  - Mine rock
  - Enlighten
  - 3 2 \* P o m p a n d Circumstance' composer
  - Racket
  - Flowers
  - CIO's partner
  - Memorable time

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

B	A	L	E	T	S	O	B	A	B
T	A	L	O	N	O	D	A	R	S
A	R	E	N	A	R	O	Y	C	E
C	O	V	E	R	M	E	T	A	U
O	N	E	L	E	S	S	O	N	S
S	Y	N	T	A	X	E	Y	E	S
U	T	I	C	A					
S	C	A	N	C	A	L	I	C	O
C	A	R	A	V	A	N	N	E	V
A	R	A	E	N	D	G	A	M	E
R	O	B	I	N	L	A	S	E	R
F	L	O	I	N	T	E	V	E	N
S	A	K	S	S	E	C	T		

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