

## Thousands die unnecessarily!

### Counting the toll of air pollution

ACCORDING to the study 'Ambient Air Pollution: A Global Assessment of Exposure and Burden of Disease' by the World Health Organisation (WHO), Bangladesh came in third highest among 11 Asian countries after India and Indonesia with 37,000 deaths annually from diseases related to air pollution. The average age of people dying is 38.

The main pollutants have been identified as those emanating from cars, coal-fired plants and waste burning. We have a major problem with passenger vehicles, where mass modes of transportation like trains and buses are sorely inadequate and most people have been forced to use private transportation to move around. Waste burning is another major issue and is very widespread in both rural (e.g. burning of crop residue) and urban areas. It is interesting to note that we also suffer from household pollution; particularly in rural areas where wood is still the mainstay for cooking, although liquefied petroleum gas is slowly making inroads.

We have not taken constructive steps to check emissions from cars and industries. With hundreds of thousands of cars and public transports on roads and a large number of those vehicles totally unfit to be on the roads, how long must we wait for government action? Industrial emissions from us is not so much coal-fired power plants but thousands of brick kilns that dot the country, which are by far the highest polluters. These are preventable deaths, but would require immediate steps by policymakers to improve the quality of air we breathe in the country by not enacting new laws but enforcing the ones already in place.

## People's right to information

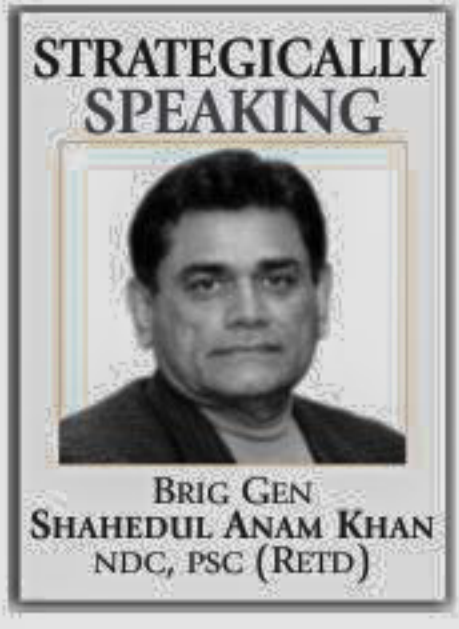
### Nothing should be done to circumvent it

AS we observe International Right to Information Day, it is pleasing to know that 76,043 people have sought information from different organisations since 2010 using the Right to Information Act, 2009. What is also good news is that 96 percent of those who had asked for information were served according to the Chief Information Commissioner. We welcome such positive developments in ensuring transparency and accountability in governance and hope to see the law used in ways that would reduce corruption.

Democracy demands transparency and accountability in governance. Without information, how else can people have the supreme power of governance be vested in them, which is the essence of democracy? It requires the free flow of information, as otherwise, people remain unaware of what is being done right and wrong, and how and what to set right. Thus, the RTI act, which gives citizens access to information in regards to the functioning of various state bodies, should be used as an instrument by people in pursuit of instituting their democratic rights, and exercised as a democratic right, in itself, often and effectively.

In support of people's right to information, the authorities should also assist people in getting informed in every possible way and, to that end, provide them with necessary information, particularly information which concerns the workings of governance, hassle free. In addition, they should refrain from formulating laws and guidelines contradicting the act and what it aims to achieve, such as the national broadcasting policy, article 57, and the proposed digital security act, as suggested by rights groups, experts and civil society.

# Is SAARC coming apart?



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
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**“W**HEN we speak of SAARC, we usually hear two reactions – cynicism and skepticism,” Modi had told the 18th Kathmandu summit, which was to be held in 2012 but postponed to 2014. “Yet, South Asia is slowly coming together” he had added. Given that the latest Summit postponement is the ninth since

SAARC came into being in 1985, one wonders whether the regional grouping is falling apart.

The 19th SAARC Summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad on November 10-11 has gone for a six! It was postponed after Bangladesh and India had communicated their inability to attend, to the SAARC Secretariat. Reportedly, Bhutan and Afghanistan have also communicated their reservations to Nepal, which holds the current chairmanship of the organisation. Since the presence of all the member states is required as per SAARC's rules for the holding of its apex meetings, the postponement was inevitable and we do not know when the Summit might be held, and if at all in Pakistan. However, since India was represented at the recently held anti-corruption meeting in Islamabad by a high level delegation led by the head of its Central Vigilance Commission, India's decision has surprised a few. Nevertheless, many saw this coming after what happened in Uri. And this is perhaps another tactical move by India to fulfill its strategic objective of diplomatic isolation of Pakistan.

India's justification is predictable. Its explanation is that, “increasing cross-border terrorist attacks in the region and growing interference in internal affairs of member states by one country have created an environment that is not conducive to the successful holding of the 19th SAARC summit in Islamabad.” Bangladesh has decided to abstain on the grounds of Pakistan's repeated interference in its internal affairs demonstrated by its uncalled for reactions after the execution of war criminals in Bangladesh.

However, this is not the first time that a SAARC summit has been postponed but only once was it for a force majeure, imposed by the tsunami. Of the rest of the eight including this one, all were due to concerns of security and bilateral tensions involving either one of the two prima donnas of the region, or lack of appropriate level of preparedness. And the last SAARC Summit that Bangladesh hosted was the 13th Summit which had lived up to its numerical unpropitious tag, it being postponed twice before finally taking place in November 2005.

In its very chequered existence, SAARC has had to



encounter many ups and downs and mutual animus and distrust between India and Pakistan has dictated primarily the course it traversed. In fact, rhapsodic though it sounds, 'collective self-reliance' was the motive force behind the formulation of the association. The motivations were internally generated which made the need for its success all the more imperative. But its momentum has been regrettably stalled by developments affecting regional security, exacerbated by alleged complicity and abetment of one country.

Certainly there has been a virtual state of freeze in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations following the latter's position on the trial of war criminals. Ministerial and secretarial level meetings under SAARC auspices were skipped or represented at levels lower than what the meetings called for. Bangladesh's umbrage at Pakistan's interference in its internal affairs is manifest in its absence at the anti-corruption conference now being held in Islamabad.

Bangladesh's attitude was also evident in its downgrading of the level of representations in several very important meetings namely the SAARC energy regulatory conference and the home and finance ministers' conference held in Islamabad recently. In fact Pakistan's gross violation of diplomatic norms had been very evident particularly in relation to the trial and punishment of the war criminals. But recently it

has ratcheted up its anti-Bangladesh stance by exploiting the platform of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group to pass strictures on Bangladesh, which of course it failed to do.

It is a fact that some members of SAARC see Pakistan as the promoter of terrorism in the region. And although Bangladesh has not articulated this in any international forum as yet, it was made abundantly clear by India and Afghanistan in the UNGA recently.

Security experts, including some in India, feel boycotting SAARC Summit is a bad idea in terms of regional cooperation but there is very little to gain from this cooperation when one of its members is engaged in cross border terrorism against two of its neighbours and that the Summit would have witnessed only more acrimonious exchanges. And that is exactly where I differ. The SAARC platform could have been used to confront Pakistan for its acts. Instead of boycotting the Summit it should have been used to expose the country with hard facts. Extremism and terrorism are no longer bilateral issues but affect almost all the regional countries, and regionally must be tackled. Not boycotting but utilising the Summit to address the regional concerns should be the agenda. And what better platform can there be than SAARC. A rethink on the decision to boycott, I feel, is in order.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

## IUCN World Conservation Congress

# My Hawai'i commitment

ENAYETULLAH KHAN

**T**HERE are two schools of thought on the current debate regarding the global conservation of natural resources agenda: one is a pessimistic view of our future which thinks that it is already too late to avoid a catastrophe - and therefore, we must now focus on survival and recovery - which puts people in despair. Others feel that humanity has faced and overcome many challenges in the past and will continue to do so. With these views in mind, over ten thousand conservation leaders from government, civil society, indigenous communities, faith and spiritual traditions, the private sector, and academia from about 200 countries gathered in an historically important IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i, from September 1-10, 2016.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has about 1,300 members and over 1,600 experts who assess the state of the world's natural resources from over 160 different countries. The members decide the global conservation agenda every four years. This year the World Conservation Congress was held in Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA. The UN estimates that today's some 7.3 billion people on earth, under a medium growth scenario, will be more than 8.4 billion by 2030. It is alarming to note that over half the world's population is already living in urban areas,

ecosystem decline and climate change. The congress kept the following in mind: the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Promise of Sydney, Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the Earth Charter, and the Honolulu Challenge on Invasive Alien Species. These gave the global leaders to find ways to alleviate the spirit of partnership and collaboration. Eradicating corruption, we could save the world from ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss and stop eroding traditional bio-cultural relationships.

Healthy and sustainable future is synonymous to healthy ecosystems. To ensure a healthy environment for all and

understand that lawsuits have been filed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Peru, Washington, Philippines, Massachusetts, and Oregon. The Dutch were perhaps the first government to lose a lawsuit against climate change litigators.

Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change and we may think of this.

Hawai'i Congress tells us to engage and empower youth to nurture a new generation across all sectors of society to connect with nature and take action to support conservation. The Congress is committed to address the challenge of sustaining the global food supply and conserving nature. Traditional farming practices are under pressure and

of three, was headed by me, its chairman. WildTeam, through its poster presentation (<http://iucncongress.ipostersessions.com/default.aspx?s=1B-C4-0B-0C-D7-86-3E-96-97-60-4F-37-BE-A8-ED-33&guestview=true>) and knowledge café, informed the audience how it has been working closely with the Bangladesh Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment and Forests to protect the tigers in the Sundarbans. WildTeam is now implementing USAID's Bengal Tiger Activity under the guidance of the Forest Department and with technical assistance from the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, and Bangladesh Centre for Advancement of

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increasingly disconnected from the complex systems of nature and the biodiversity that keep us all alive. So this year's theme was rightly chosen as Planet at the Crossroads.

Discussions focused on how to reverse environmental decline and secure a healthy, livable planet for our future generations. The meeting came to the conclusion that we have an opportunity to move to sustainability and harness nature-based solutions for conservation. As global citizens, we all need to address the major threats to species loss,

to eradicate poverty, Bangladesh needs to establish an environment court to address ecological, political, economic and legal issues related to environment and biodiversity conservation.

The Hawai'i Commitments highlight nature-based solutions to climate change. The document also gives emphasis on the role of indigenous people, and women from local communities, as critical to successfully implementing the Paris Agreement. This Congress for the first time voted to create a new category of membership for indigenous people's organisations. This would not only strengthen the presence and role of indigenous organisations in the IUCN but would also help achieve equitable and sustainable use of natural resources. We should begin to relearn the wisdom of indigenous traditions, how to live in communion with, rather than in dominance over, the natural world.

The Hawai'i Congress also emphasised that the environmental rule of law is essential and needs to be cultivated and strengthened. The establishment of environment courts in more than 50 nations is an encouraging and necessary development in today's world. Today there is a growing trend to sue for climate change damages. I

associated knowledge is being lost. It is committed to face the challenge of preserving the health of the world's oceans. The world's oceans, and the communities that depend on them, are under immense and unprecedented human pressures. Sea level rise not only affects livelihoods but threatens human security. It's very encouraging to note that President Obama designated the first marine national monument in the Atlantic Ocean, protecting fragile deep-sea ecosystems off the coast of New England as the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument on September 15 this year.

In his speech, Obama says: "Over the past several decades, the nation has made great strides in its stewardship of the ocean, but the ocean faces new threats from varied uses, climate change, and related impacts. Through exploration, we continue to make new discoveries and improve our understanding of ocean ecosystems. In these waters, the Atlantic Ocean meets the continental shelf in a region of great abundance and diversity as well as stark geological relief. The waters are home to many species of deep-sea corals, fish, whales and other marine mammals." The WildTeam delegation, composed

Science. We had the opportunity to interact with many participants who showed great interest in tiger conservation in Bangladesh. One gentleman said: "Bangladeshi cricketers are known as tigers, why don't they then raise their voices and say NO to tiger and deer poachers, and come forward to save tigers?"

The world community feels that Bangladesh should turn the tiger from an 'umbrella species' to a 'flagship species', as this is the national animal of Bangladesh. In our knowledge café, we discussed how to raise funds for tiger conservation. We need the support from business people and the civil society. All conservation efforts need good investment. One speaker at a business session asserts: "Conservation measures would cost \$100-200 billion year, or about one percent of all new and reinvested capital. This sum is beyond the capabilities of governments, and therefore businesses are the solution to protecting species." WildTeam urges upon all to join us to save our national pride: the Bengal Tiger. I reassure my commitment to give all out support for this good cause.

The writer is Editor-in-Chief, UNB and Dhaka Courier.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Faulty performance of real estate developments

The outcrop of luxurious buildings in Dhaka is making real estate developers more and more popular each day. The service quality of the agents, however, is not up to the mark. With earthquakes becoming more frequent, many buildings are seen to be crannied, leading to loss of lives. The main reason behind these accidents is the use of admixture material by the real estate developers. Many companies also violate the rules and regulations provided by RAJUK. A lot of loss can be minimised if the government takes strict action against these illegal activities.

Mashrura Iffat  
Khilgaon, Dhaka

### How we can save the Sundarbans

After reading the report, "Disaster written in the wall," of The Daily Star. I am deeply concerned about the severely detrimental impact to the Sundarbans, to our nation and to our delicate planet if NTCP is successful in setting up the Rampal power plant.

My humble suggestion would be to address the root cause of the problem:

Firstly, we request or put massive pressure on the Indian government, Indian Environmental Agencies, and/or the Indian Prime Minister to prevent NTPC continuing with the power plant project, even at the expense of Bangladesh addressing any associated sunk costs of NTPC.

Secondly, we request the US government to put pressure on India to discontinue the Rampal project.

Thank you for bringing such a crucial environmental problem under the limelight.  
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## IUCN World Conservation Congress Hawai'i 2016

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