

DO WE REALLY CARE ABOUT saving our environment?



THE theme of this year's World Environment Day on June 5 was "connecting people to nature". The idea behind the theme was to urge people to get outdoors and into nature. The theme is not surprising, given that people around the world have almost cut off connections with nature.

A balanced, inter-dependent coexistence of plants and animals creates grounds for the survival of human beings. But we have been degrading different components of the environment on various levels.

In Bangladesh, the major areas of environmental degradation include land degradation (soil degradation, forest clearance, etc.), water pollution, loss of wetlands and biodiversity (species, genetic, habitat and ecosystem diversity), and sound and air pollution including change in the climatic variables (temperature, rainfall pattern, wind direction, etc.).

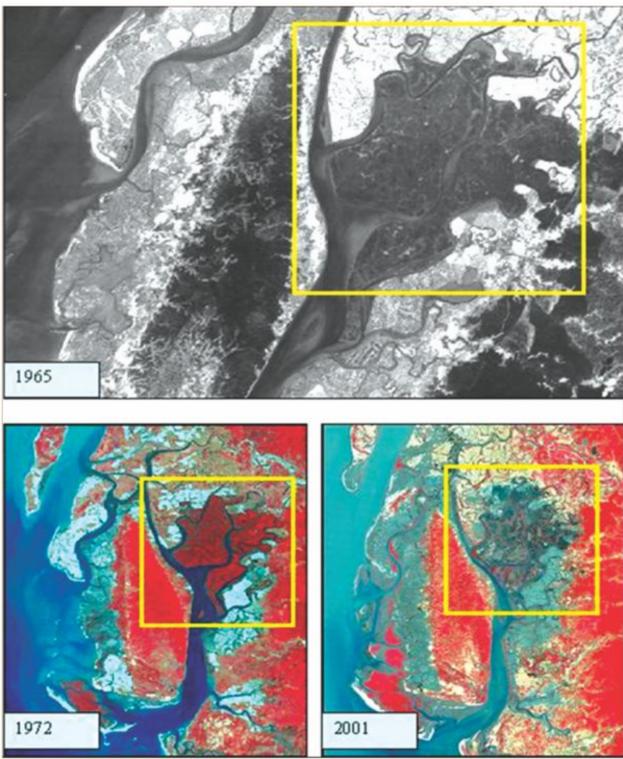
The annual report published by Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) indicated that during 2015-2016, about 2.9 million metric tonnes of chemical fertilisers (1.2 million metric tonnes from domestic production and 1.7 million metric tonnes imported) were distributed among the farmers of Bangladesh. The Environmental Compendium of Bangladesh 2009 suggests that in 2003-2004, the yearly use of chemical fertilisers was 3.3 million metric tonnes. These figures from two periods of time (2003-2004 and 2015-2016) suggest that on average about 3.1 million metric tonnes of chemical fertilisers are applied in the agricultural fields of the country (i.e. 31 million metric tonnes in 10 years). These huge amounts of chemical substances cause soil and

water pollution when chemical fertiliser residues and remnants are discharged into nearby wetlands.

In addition, the country is losing about one percent of arable lands every year due to various reasons. Salinity intrusion in the coastal areas is seriously causing degradation of soil quality. Soil Resources Development Institute (SRDI 2010) estimates suggest that about 2.6 million acres (about 1.056 million ha, 27 percent of total coastal lands) of coastal lands are affected by various degrees of salinity. Forest degradation is also taking place in different parts of forest patches of the country. Current estimates (2012) provided by the Bangladesh Forest Department show that the areas of forests managed by the Department constitute of only 10.54 percent, of which 51.5 percent have no tree cover at all (see National Forest and Tree Resource Assessment [2005-2007] carried out by Bangladesh Forest Department with support of FAO) and another 20 percent have less than 10 percent of tree canopy cover. Therefore, it could be said that natural forests that have tree cover amount to less than five percent.

Water pollution and loss of wetlands and rivers are also taking place at an accelerating rate due to human-induced reasons. The impacts of these types of environmental degradation can be seen in the breakdown of ecosystem integrity, loss of habitats of different flora and fauna species and erosion in the genetic diversity of plants and animals. The Fifth National Report (2015) of the government submitted to Convention of Biological Diversity of the United Nations indicates that the total number of threatened species in Bangladesh is 486 (out of 3,813 which is 12.75 percent) as a result of degradation of ecosystems and habitats.

This brief account on Bangladesh's state of environment given above depicts a depressing picture, although



Deforestation in Chakaria, Sundarbans. COURTESY/SHEIKH TAWHIDUL ISLAM

some measures have been taken by state agencies like the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Department of Environment to curb further degradation of the environment. Thus it may lead one to ask why improvements in environment protection and management remain poor in Bangladesh when regulatory, institutional and budgetary frameworks and provisions are much stronger than before, media campaigns are more robust, and environmental education and awareness are more compelling. Understanding these challenges

and overcoming them are crucial in making progress. The challenges can be divided into three categories. Firstly, the operational systems of environmental conservation and management aspects in Bangladesh are old-fashioned and ineffective. Secondly, inappropriate planning processes are causing serious environmental degradation. Lastly, knowledge gaps on environmental issues within the socio-economic and cultural context of Bangladesh are barriers for effective conservation measures.

Here are some of the issues that might be put under the first category:

(i) the colonial and exploitative mindset of institutions and professionals still exists and this creates barriers for proper execution of existing rules and frameworks; (ii) ad-hoc, short-term planning and implementation of fragmented activities in relation to environmental management/conservation bring little success; sometimes they are counter-productive; (iii) political commitment for environmental conservation is poor.

The second category includes: (i) development planning; implementation of physical interventions especially if not properly harmonised with the characteristics of the land, i.e. the floodplain and deltaic plains; (ii) implementation of field level activities by different agencies is non-coordinated.

And finally, the third category includes the following: (i) inadequate research undertakings, weak assessment and monitoring systems which leave a vacuum in knowledge products; (ii) a comprehensive, national level environmental data depository (warehouse), which professionals, planners, community members can access to develop a plan of action, is still absent; (iii) conceptual clarity about the environment-poverty-disaster-climate change continuum is not studied and understood, leaving environmental concerns as a disconnected, stand-alone phenomenon.

Environmental degradation in this region can be traced back as far as the colonial period which saw the expansion of rail networks, establishment of water navigation routes and use of land and forests for extraction of resources by British rulers. World famous Bengali scientist and applied statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis had warned British rulers about the long-term consequences of rail lines by erecting embankments across the flood and delta plains. Historian SC Mitra in

1916 spoke about the waterlogging crisis in upper deltaic regions (in Jessore areas) and showed how irrigation canals and stagnated water caused malaria to spread in the region.

In later times, the water sector Master Plan developed by US-based engineering company IECO (1964) and subsequent establishment of embankments and polders in Bangladesh seriously affected the fluvial and hydrological systems of the floodplains and triggered different types of environmental degradation. Experts and institutions, including World Bank (International Bank of Reconstruction at that time), argued that the IECO report was not based on adequate data to properly understand the deltaic characteristics of the region, and therefore, the plan should not be implemented. The IECO Master Plan was for 20 years (1965 to 1985) but the Master Plan is still considered as the major guiding document for water resource management in Bangladesh. The warnings of the experts appear to be true as implementation of this Master Plan has caused waterlogging crisis, biodiversity loss, and the breakdown of livelihood pattern of millions of people.

Bangladesh inherited many environmental crises from historical periods and in recent times, the situation has only worsened. Given this context, strong commitment and will, an appropriate and informative plan, and proper monitoring of progress will help people and state agencies to improve the state of environment of Bangladesh. Strong environmental conditions are key to attaining the SDG targets, make communities more resilient to shocks and uncertainties and create a solid foundation of development.

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BRITAIN'S ECONOMY

Between a rock and a hard place



MOST economists view Brexit as something seriously negative for the economy of the UK. Although negotiations for leaving the EU are yet to begin, the pound sterling has already plummeted and

inflation has started to slow consumption and growth. But things could get much worse.

Look at the electorate's options in the elections called by Theresa May for June 8, meant to strengthen her hand for the best exit deal from the EU. To the dismay of many she has opted for a 'hard Brexit', outside both the Single Market and the Customs Union. She even declared her government to be ready for 'no deal' rather than a 'bad deal'. Promising a strong and stable government, she expected a landslide victory, based not only on her own strong personal ratings but also on the collapse of the Labour Party under its new, widely scorned left winger, Jeremy Corbyn. Yet suddenly, her initial 20 percent lead in the polls shrank to 5 percent, although she and her Conservative Party are still thought to be ahead. The Conservatives could even now lose, especially if the Liberal Democrats, with 10 percent, were to accept an alliance with Labour in a hung parliament.

Labour's manifesto would put the clock back by re-nationalisations. It would reverse Conservative 'austerity' cuts to social welfare, 'save' the NHS and abolish student loans needed to pay for university education. These

expensive promises, to be paid for by higher taxes on businesses and the rich, seem appealing to many of the same people who deserted Labour to vote for the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP). Then they scorned the established politicians and experts whose warnings against Brexit were dismissed as 'Project Fear'. They now seem equally ready to ignore economists and business leaders.

It remains to be seen whether distrust of Jeremy Corbyn as a potential leader can still swing the election for Theresa May. Corbyn's image has improved during the short campaign, whereas May's reliance on a very narrow circle of advisers, brought with her from the Home Office, is increasingly criticised. Businesses accuse her of 'not listening', and most see 'no deal' as a disaster. Even a narrow election victory would still be a disaster for the Prime Minister, especially ahead of tough negotiations with an increasingly united EU. May's aim is a continuation of tariff free trade with the EU, without customs delays. This would be to the advantage of industry supply chains on both sides and would represent the old UK aspiration of the EU as little more than a free trade area, leaving continental Europe free to develop more integration. But the 27 other EU members fear this would so reward Brexit as to risk the EU's disintegration. They presented an exit bill of some 100 billion Euros as a first item of negotiation.

The prospects for the UK economy look serious, whichever party wins the elections. Its solid, though slow, recovery from the



financial crash of 2008 still leaves both a continued high budget deficit and a current account deficit. Its stability rests on the continued confidence of global investors and lenders. London's role as a world financial centre has solid foundations but a 'hard Brexit' would lead to losses of some financial activities and damage confidence in the wider economy. The UK industrial base is too small to compensate even by increased exports and would be hard hit by loss of easy access to the EU as its largest market

and loss also of the foreign investment based on that access. London subsidises much of the rest of the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Central revenue losses would especially hit these weaker regions. Agriculture fears that high EU subsidies might not be replaced. The NHS, Britain's universities and its strong science base are among those openly worried over the prospect of reduced inward migration and loss of easy cooperation with EU institutions.

Nor would a Labour victory be any better under Jeremy Corbyn. Its manifesto claims that the sweeping expenditure increases would be paid for by taxing rich companies. It resembles President Trump's doomed budget proposals, since they both rest on wild growth assumptions and double counting. It is true that despite the UK's deficits, there is, at the current minimal global interest rates, a case for expanded borrowing for investment in infrastructure and technical training - a Keynesian stimulus. But how long would rates stay low if markets faced the sudden prospect of a left wing Corbyn government? The pound could well fall further and the city would be hit by capital flight.

Both extremes may still be avoided. The exposure of global equity funds has continued to rise in the UK. The FTSE 100 index, which represents large firms, is at a record high, many confident that they can continue to do well despite Brexit, especially now that EU economies seem back to solid growth. Compromises could emerge, some no doubt painful. Some speculate that if years of tough negotiations fail to reach an agreement the 'remainers' might force another referendum for withdrawal of the Brexit bid. The EU may itself change to more flexible forms of membership.

The election of June 8 is the next major step in what is going to be a long and hard drama, for both sides, but especially for the United Kingdom and its economic future.

The writer is a former ambassador.

QUOTABLE Quote

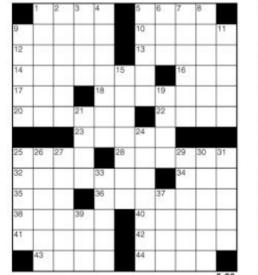
Lock up your libraries if you like, but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.



VIRGINIA WOOLF
English writer; one of the foremost modernists of the 20th century

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Santa --
 - 5 Somewhat
 - 9 From the moon
 - 10 Spiked weapons
 - 12 Alaskan native
 - 13 Dancer Castle
 - 14 Taking its toll?
 - 16 June honoree
 - 17 Assn.
 - 18 Kind of wax
 - 20 Catch
 - 22 Pay to play
 - 23 Calculator key
 - 25 Give a hoot
 - 28 Destroyed
 - 32 Curative
 - 34 Spot to jot
- DOWN**
- 1 Decide, as a motion
 - 2 Short play
 - 3 Writer Bellow
 - 4 Craftsman
 - 5 Friendly seniorita
 - 6 Watering hole
 - 7 Stuck at the
 - 8 Lease singer
 - 9 Slip
 - 11 Marshy grass
 - 15 Triton orbits it
 - 19 Cooking fat
 - 21 Stagger
 - 24 Fencing cry
 - 25 Cowboy wear
 - 26 Virgil hero
 - 27 Crib toy
 - 29 Heroin, e.g.
 - 30 City on the Loire
 - 31 Painter Degas
 - 33 Wastes time
 - 37 Schreiber of "Spotlight"
 - 39 Gardner of film



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

COOP TICS
EMAIL ACHED
LETT MOORE
ELM STENCIL
BEEPERS OFT
TARRYS ELSA
LAS CIA
PERM TANTE
ERA SUNSETS
ARIGATO CHI
LASER ETHAN
STING SWING
ANTE APES

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

