

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA SATURDAY OCTOBER 21, 2017, KARTIK 6, 1424 BS

Corruption, not rats broke down the dams

Irregularities in building and maintenance must stop

WE are surprised that even after three months since the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed a case against 61 people for mismanagement and corruption in the construction of dams in the haor areas, the water and resources minister, at a recent dialogue, would remark that an onslaught of rats caused the damage. Though he did admit that there could have been corruption he said that this was part of the 'total system where corruption exists'.

This is hardly any consolation for the 46.7 lakh people of the haor regions who have been severely affected by the flash floods this year. Crops have been lost, houses, roads, culverts and embankment destroyed. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has found in its study that a number of embankments had been destroyed due to poor maintenance. Certainly this study and the ACC's findings point to negligence and irregularities of the officials involved in the building and maintenance of the embankments. In the wake of such compelling evidence, what is the purpose of diluting the enormity of such irregularity that has caused immense hardship and misery as well as nullify development efforts of the government?

Instead of theorising that rodents had a part to play in the damage of embankments it is crucial that the focus is zeroed in on human negligence and unethical practices of certain officials. As one of the discussants at the dialogue pointed out – the government should do a study to find out why a particular road is damaged every year.

Monitoring the maintenance of embankments and other infrastructure, is the government's job, in particular the ministry concerned.

Now that the ACC has charged the individuals responsible for the damaged embankments we hope necessary action will be taken against them. The government must remain vigilant of future irregularities during the rebuilding process in these devastated areas.

Centuries-old mosque at risk

Urgent need for preserving our architectural heritage sites

A report published by this newspaper on Wednesday highlighted quite clearly our lack of a sense of history when it comes to appreciating our heritage. Architectural structures of historic importance in our country are often neglected and end up in states of disrepair because of our failure in preserving them. From buildings in Old Dhaka crumbling or being forcefully occupied by the powerful to the numerous historic sites scattered throughout the country, when it comes to protecting these physical structures, we are woefully negligent.

Our report highlighted how the 500-year old Chhoto Sona Masjid in Shibanj upazila of Chapainawabganj, a remnant from the time when Gaur was the capital of Bengal, is at risk due to the hundreds of cargo trucks plying the adjacent road daily. The constant vibration from the trucks is doing irreparable damage to the mosque's foundation, and if unchecked, could mean the loss of integrity of a centuries old building that has survived this long. Thankfully there are people who have brought the matter to the limelight, and the suggestion of constructing a bypass road to divert the traffic away from the mosque has been floated. But, the lack of initiative and urgency is worrying. The district's Roads and Highways Executive Engineer has talked about a bypass road to be constructed eventually, but when that would materialise is anyone's guess.

The importance of preserving the rich and diverse history of this land, where art and architecture took on so many forms, where the influence of the land and of its conquerors meshed to create novelties, should not be lost on anyone. On the practical side of things too, these sites can be capitalised on for promoting tourism. If we do not act now, then the Chhoto Sona Masjid might soon be confined to the pages of history books. A national initiative to act seriously towards preserving sites like this is crucial, now more than ever.

Good men should not be quiet spectators

Is shared outcry bringing an end to the cruel privilege of impunity?



PHUMZILE MLAMBO-NGCUKA

THE pain and anger of more than a million people who tweeted #MeToo in the last week have crowded social media with personal stories of sexual harassment or assault. This virtual march of solidarity marks both the urgency of finding a shared voice and the hidden scale of assault that did not previously have a register. When women are almost invisible, when they are not really seen, it seems that people do not have to care what happens to them.

This online outcry is important because it is giving voice to acts that are public, but that are silenced and neutralised by convention. It is a cruel privilege to be able to harass a girl or a woman with impunity, but in so many cases this is the norm. What we are seeing currently, as women build and reinforce each other's accounts, and as men join in to acknowledge their role, is a validation of the rightness of speaking

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out. We are seeing also the strength in numbers that comes from accumulated individual experiences that are characteristically undeclared.

As the crowd builds of those telling



The online wave joins the other mass movements collectively expressing women's activism.

PHOTO: AFP

their story, we see a picture of real life begin to emerge. A critical mass is growing that proves how much goes wrong when people can act with impunity in a culture of silence.

The online wave joins the other mass movements collectively expressing women's activism: the Latin American 'ni una menos' marches to protest violence against women and particularly against the least privileged; the women's marches that took place across the world earlier this year in support of women's rights and other freedoms; and the marches in Poland and Ireland against abortion bans.

The blanket of silence has also shielded perpetrators of assaults on LGBTI communities and others who are more vulnerable for reasons of ethnicity, poverty, or age. These women are the ones most affected, least visible and have the most to gain from the collective strength of voices building peer

pressure and culture change. After all, it was Tarana Burke, a New York community organiser serving young women of colour who originated 'me too', and her friend Alyssa Milano who picked it up and became the catalyst for the billions who have now been reached by its message.

The full and free participation of women in society, in politics, and in the workplace is essential for women's voices to be heard and for their rights to be respected. The more women there are who take on senior representation roles across public and private sectors, the more opportunities there are for change in the culture of invisibility and impunity, where more powerful men are able to prey on women. Sexual and all other forms of harassment at work, home and outside the home are not acceptable and must not be ignored.

Casual indifference and people saying "it's nothing" have to stop.

The number of men who have joined this campaign is promising but far from being enough (30 per cent in one report). It has already been too long that permissive blindness is the norm. This is about both women and men changing their response to acts of sexual aggression and acting in solidarity to make it visible and unacceptable. Good men should not be quiet spectators.

We need to have all women empowered to speak, their rights and bodies respected, and behaviours established and entrenched as normal that let no one off the hook. No more impunity.

We salute the thousands of women who have been fighting against all violations of women's and girls' rights and call for renewed investment in the fight to end all violence against women.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women.

US withdrawal from UNESCO

Abandonment of principles



ANURADHA MITTAL

selling products made by Palestinian women in my shop. The sewage water has gone into the electric wires, so I have no electricity. Everything in the shop is destroyed. The metal door

Occupied Palestinian Territory apart from Jerusalem, with illegal settlements inside the city. As the sewage water in the market rises, Palestinian shopkeepers and residents point out the holes in the gate to allow for water to go through. However, cement blocks and sand placed by the settlers have closed the water drainage.

I am reminded of my time in Hebron, with last week's announcement of US withdrawal from UNESCO, the Paris-based cultural, scientific, and educational organisation of the United Nations,

member state of UNESCO. A law from the 1990s apparently prohibits US funding for any UN agency that recognises Palestine as a state.

The recent US pull out has to do with UNESCO's designation of Hebron's Old City as Palestinian World Heritage site in danger in July 2017. Condemning the decision, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced an annual USD 1 million cut in membership fees to the United Nations, diverting those funds to a Jewish People's Heritage Museum in the KiryatArba settlement in Hebron. Israel's UNESCO ambassador,

in Hebron after an American Jewish settler killed 29 Palestinians in a massacre at the Ibrahimi Mosque, Palestinians in the Old City have been living a collective punishment—life in a cage.

Today, over 100 physical obstacles, including 18 permanently-staffed checkpoints, 14 partial checkpoints, and various permanent blockades, cut the Old City off from the rest of Hebron. The former lively bustle of Shuhada Street, Hebron's once main commercial strip and home to the wholesale, gold, and vegetable markets, has drowned behind the green shutters of the boarded-up shops, abandoned homes, and empty sidewalks.

In 2015, a third of Palestinian homes in the restricted area (1,105 housing units) were abandoned and an estimated 1,600 businesses closed. Several streets, designated for the exclusive use of settlers, restrict Palestinian traffic and, in some streets, even Palestinian pedestrians are banned.

With innumerable security checkpoints, watchtowers, barricades, soldiers with automatic weapons, revolving gates, deserted streets, and welded shut homes and shops, the Old City of Hebron is a city under siege.

Metal wire mesh and white plastic tarps—littered with garbage and used plastic bottles—form a canopy to prevent Israeli settlers, living in the buildings above, from throwing garbage, dirty dish water, and chemicals down onto Palestinians.

This is everyday life in the Old City of Hebron.

When it comes to Palestine, actions of President Obama and Trump based on a law from over two decades ago, are confusing for the residents of the Old City of Hebron. United States withdraws from the organisation it helped establish after World War II to widen access to education and ensure the free flow of ideas, when UNESCO carries out its mandate.

Anuradha Mittal is the lead author of *Palestine: For Land & Life*.

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A view of the Old City of al-Khalil in the southern West Bank.

PHOTO: AFP

[that was] installed to protect the settlers prevents the water from flowing out into the main drain...This means we suffer every time it rains. They [the settlers] want us to move from here. This is why they make our life hard," she cries. The silent rain accompanies wails of those impacted.

This is the Old City of Hebron—the largest city in the West Bank and the only city in the

accusing it of "anti-Israel bias." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu soon followed, tweeting, "I welcome @realDonaldTrump's decision...I have instructed the Foreign Ministry to prepare Israel's withdrawal from Unesco in parallel with the United States."

Under the Obama administration, United States took similar action in 2012 after Palestine was accepted as a

Carmel Shama-Hacohen, response was to disdainfully take out his mobile phone and share with the UN members, "It's my plumber in my apartment in Paris. There is a huge problem in my toilet and it is much more important than the decision you just adopted."

The UNESCO's decision was a verdict against the occupation. Following the 1994 riots that erupted

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take action against food adulterators

I was shocked to read the news report published by the *Prothom Alo*, which shed some light on the dishonest traders injecting silica gel into shrimps to increase their weight. The gel is used in liquid form which becomes solid afterwards. Because of this adulteration, foreign buyers are losing their confidence in Bangladeshi shrimp, which is negatively affecting our shrimp exports abroad.

Food adulteration in our country has been going on unabated. The government must establish a vigorous monitoring mechanism, along with a strict law, to curb this practice by corrupt traders.

Abul Khaer, Tangail

