

Pope's visit to Bangladesh

An opportunity to work towards resolving the Rohingya crisis

We would like to extend a warm welcome to Pope Francis who is in Bangladesh on a three-day visit. This is a historic moment for us and for the Christian community in Bangladesh in particular. The Pope's arrival comes on the heels of his visit to Myanmar—marking the first time that a pontiff visited the Buddhist-majority nation—with the purpose of working for reconciliation and peace. Needless to say, the Pope's visit to the two countries at a time when a massive refugee crisis continues to unfold in our southeastern border is extremely significant.

Although we feel slightly let down that the Pope was compelled to avoid singling out the Rohingya crisis in his speech in Naypyitaw on Tuesday, we believe that given his moral authority he can greatly help to change the fate of one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Thanks to the large body of evidence documenting severe rights abuses of the Rohingya minority of Myanmar, the extent of the atrocities carried out by Myanmar's security forces is known to all. We remain hopeful that given Pope Francis' legacy of standing up for the oppressed, he will speak out against the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya during this very important visit.

In the last three months, the international community has shown its support for the Rohingya people and vehemently condemned the violence that has been unleashed upon them. We believe that the Pope's words will only add to the growing chorus of support for the minority, and given his global stature, will also lend great symbolic significance to the Rohingya cause.

A young man brings hope to the disabled

Testament to the human spirit!

ASADUZZAMAN, who lost his legs to polio as a child, always dreamed of going to school. His enthusiasm was not shared by his family, who, like most families in Bangladesh, view the disabled as a burden. But this young man, now aged 27, decided to drag himself to school one day to Bhangamor Government Primary School and there too faced discrimination because he would sit on the floor on the corridor outside the classroom. He may have been a spectacle to his classmates and teacher, but he went to school every day and was eventually allowed to sit in the classroom. Asaduzzaman went on to win a scholarship when in Class V and finished his Secondary School Certificate from Kharibari High School and graduated in computer science at college. That he supported his own education expenses by tutoring others is worth taking note of.

What is even more impressive is that Asad founded the Disabled Welfare Association in Bhogdanga union in Kurigram Sadar upazila where he is currently the director. This organisation did a survey of the union and found that there were some 600 people with disabilities. We are in awe of his determination that led to the purchase of some land and finally establishment of a school for both the disabled and non-disabled.

Yes, his story is one of inspiration and struggle. It merely goes to show that people who are physically disadvantaged are not necessarily a burden on society. It is our preconceived notion that the disabled are of no use and can play no role in society. Asad's story blows that notion to smithereens and we hail this young man's determination to rise to the challenge posed by people in general. We hope his efforts are given due recognition and the school that now has nearly 200 students receives support from the local administration.

Choking on Dhaka's air

Air pollution in Dhaka city is a serious threat to public health. Unplanned urbanisation coupled with a failure to enforce the existing laws got us to this point.



NAHela Nowshin

IT'S getting harder and harder to breathe—literally. Dhaka's air has become so unbreathable that it is almost impossible to pass the streets without noticing someone wearing a mask, trying to brave the triple whammy of construction dust, smoke from burning garbage and leaves, and vehicular emissions. That is why when in early November the Delhi government declared a public health emergency because of the toxic smog that enveloped the city, the news struck a chord with many Dhakaites. Even though bad air is something we have to deal with all year round, the winter dry season—ironically the period of time Bangladeshis look most forward to—makes it all the more intolerable. Delhites are not alone—we too have on our hands a public health emergency, make no mistake.

Dhaka dwellers don't need official data to tell them just how suffocating and dangerous the air they are breathing in is. But for the sake of curiosity and for outsiders fortunate enough to have never experienced Dhaka's air, let's do some simple math to see where we stand in the context of global standards.

Particulate matter 2.5 (PM2.5) is a primary indicator of air pollution. PM2.5 refers to fine particles that are a complex mixture of solid and liquid, and are so tiny that they can penetrate and lodge deep into the lungs—making it one of the most harmful kinds of air pollutants. Exposure to high levels of PM2.5 has serious health implications and drastically increases the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases such as asthma, bronchitis and lung cancer.

So how does Dhaka fare when its PM2.5 levels are compared with those of the air quality guidelines put forth by the World Health Organization—which provide the basis for global standards?

The recommended target of PM2.5 as per the "WHO Air Quality Guidelines" is an annual mean of 10 micrograms per cubic metre. In a report compiled by *The Guardian* early this year, where WHO data on PM2.5 has been disaggregated region by region, the PM2.5 level in Dhaka was revealed to be an annual mean of 90 micrograms per cubic metre—the second



Dhaka's particulate matter 2.5 level is nine times WHO's recommended target. Dhaka's air quality was recently ranked as the second worst in Asia, only second to New Delhi.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

worst in Asia after Delhi. This is nine times WHO's recommended level of 10 micrograms per cubic metre.

Dhaka residents need to take note. We can no longer ignore the smog hanging over the city thinking it's simply a harmless concomitant of open construction, industrial production, or the dry season. The first thing that one would typically lay the blame on is Dhaka's unplanned urbanisation—and that of course is irrefutable. But that doesn't tell the whole story behind Dhaka's filthy air. The fact is that air pollution in the city has exponentially grown worse because of a complete disregard for existing laws.

A public notice by the Department of Environment (DoE) in December 2016 claimed that the majority of particulate pollutants come from brick kilns—a whopping 58 percent—while dust (18 percent), vehicular emissions (10 percent), and burning of biomass (eight percent) also contributed to deteriorating air quality.

The tale of the brick kiln industry gives a glimpse into the intricate and bleak picture behind Dhaka's air pollution. The brickfield cluster in northern Dhaka produces 2.1 billion bricks annually (around 14 percent of the country's brick production). Pollution caused by brick kilns—the primary source of Dhaka's

dirty air—is not simply a natural byproduct of urbanisation. It is also a result of the failure to implement the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kilns Establishment (Control) Act which was passed in 2013 and came into effect the following year. The Act, in an effort to bring brick establishments under control, gave them two years' time to switch to modern technology and relocate from certain areas such as in ECAs (ecologically critical areas) or within a kilometre from the boundaries of ECAs. The law also has a provision which makes it mandatory for all kilns to manufacture a minimum of 50 percent hollow bricks to discourage the use of fertile soil—the main ingredient for making bricks.

But none of these things are actually enforced. One, the shift from "fixed-chimney," i.e. dirty technology, to cleaner, more efficient methods such as the "zigzag" does not come cheap. Two, brick kilns are typically located in lowlands that tend to flood during monsoons, which is why the dry season is when brick kilns get to work. The shift to modern technologies would require highlands to avoid the risk of flooding—and with the soaring price of land in Dhaka, this is simply not doable for many brick kiln owners. Without government incentives to move to cleaner technology, the hands of the brick-making

industry are tied.

This is just one of numerous cases in the country's history of weak environmental regulation. Similarly, laws related to the fitness of vehicles (as per the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983) which could go a long way in curbing air pollution are flouted openly in a city where the number of vehicles is going up every day.

That pollution is wholly an inevitable consequence of urban development is a myth easy to buy into—urbanisation is only part of the story. This simplistic line of reasoning also absolves public authorities and industries of their responsibility to act in accordance with the law and serves to conceal the impunity with which they are degrading the environment—depriving citizens of their right to a public good such as clean air. So whether one looks at it as an environmental issue or a health crisis in the making, what it's not is a "simple price to pay" for urban development. There is no denying that the main culprit behind Dhaka reaching its boiling point today is unplanned urbanisation; but it is the utter failure to enforce the laws in place that will perhaps expedite our plunge into environmental doom.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

On the margins of ruin: War and displacement



REBECCA HAQUE

NOT history alone, nor literature alone, but my own considerable life experience has convinced me that the world is Manichean, and tragically will forever remain so. Evil has many faces, and man's expulsion from the garden of Eden has tainted the earth with blood spilt in lust and vengeance and vicious hunger for conquest of acres and acres of rich, fertile ground. Cyclically, mighty civilisations have flourished on the banks of mighty rivers and have perished at the hands of marauding tribes and invading armies, and those same great

of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, while my love of history books ignited my imagination to fill the emptiness of the rooms and the courtyards and the granaries and the bathhouses and the adjoining fields with living, breathing men, women, and children. Even my dreams were peopled by sunburnt folk wrapped in white homespun cotton garments. The Indian sub-continent is my geographical space, and I carry my Aryan-Dravidian colour and shape to the Occident and the Orient with pride. Bengal is my birthplace; with my roots firmly attached to the alluvial soil of the Gangetic Plains, I too am the inheritor of a rich culture layered with trajectories of centuries of settlements by Persian and Greek and Arab and Portuguese and Dutch and British voyagers, traders, conquerors. The bloodlines of the Bengali woman meet all cultures and languages,



Life and living on the margins of history has not erased the delicate beauty and resilience of the Rohingya woman.

PHOTO: STAR

rivers have overflowed with human blood and carcass. Cain's act and bequest of brother against brother, his murder of Abel, is the original fable of the curse of evil lurking within each human soul. The mortal frame is a divided box, with opposing, warring desires of the flesh and the spirit, of the mind and the heart, and most unfortunately, yet most powerfully and crucially for the survival of entire civilisations, cultures, and tribes of peoples, the mortal self is itself a complex, convoluted, conflicted unit of light and shadow, of good and evil.

As a child, I have stood many a time on the steps and plinths of the majestic ruins

from the Greco-Roman to the Arabic, from the Hispanic to the Indic, from the Runic to the Hieroglyphic. The profile of the Bengali woman eludes the Cubist frame of Picasso: she is multiethnic, multidimensional. A racial chameleon, made from clay and terra cotta, Gandhara, Harappa, and Mohenjodaro.

The Rohingya is my sister as much as the Nubian and the Sumerian. Life and

living on the margins of history has not

erased the delicate beauty and resilience of the Rohingya woman. Displaced by

colonial power two hundred years ago, by

the same arm of Empire which divided

Bengal not once but twice for its own

mercantile gain, the Rohingya flowered across the flowing river and the fluid border beyond the boundary of my native East Bengal. Now, with evil intent and murder disguised in saffron robes and blood rites, the banks of the Naf are deluged sticky-red with desperate, displaced, ruined shards of humanity. Raped, battered, without her man, embracing the old and the sick and the infant, my sister grabs my shore and begs for help. How can I forsake her, my heart cries, even as it cries at my own inability to actively change her destiny.

In the city of the golden pagodas, the "pure Bamar" sits, complacent and contemptuous of our mixed race and wheatish/brown colour. Long months of placid denial of burning and butchering of Rohingya people by the ruling Burman. Long, arduous months of rescuing and sheltering and feeding the hundreds of thousands of refugees swarming into Cox's Bazaar. We Bangladeshi Bengalis are universally admired for our hospitality; even the poorest landless labourer is a gracious host and will happily share a meal with the starving. The inexorable forces of Nature and the peculiar contours of geography have often made my precious motherland prey to yearly denudation by flood or furious cyclone. Millions have migrated to other lands and are contributing to the economy of their adopted countries. Millions more, men and women, are struggling alone in distant lands to feed their own families back home in cities and towns and villages scattered across this tiny Bangladesh. The spirit of survival, of the continuity of family and lineage, is strong and unyielding in the heart of the Bangladeshi woman.

Education and equal opportunity for employment in all spheres of professional and vocational work have made us confident. Innately intelligent, inheritors of a centuries-old rich, diverse tradition of arts and culture, song and dance, many Bangladeshi women are leaders and role-models in these times of war and displacement. Succeeding generations of highly educated and dynamic Bangladeshi have won global recognition and accolades through individual achievements. Significantly, despite the conservative patriarchal attitude of some menfolk, there has been a fundamental reconfiguration of the ancient system of power and gender-relationship from those dark days when Bangladeshi women were tithed in feudal

bondage and deprived of the written word. While the struggle continues for those still on the margins of economic parity and social security, for those subjugated by violence, for those subjugated by egregious dogma and perverted edict, I admire the efforts of enlightened fathers and brothers and spouses to fight for just rights of the Bangladeshi woman.

Today, as we house and clothe and feed and succour the ruined, forlorn Rohingya, I cannot but feel anxious for our own swiftly depleting resources. The supercilious Bamar has recently, grudgingly, bowed to international pressure for cessation of violence, but expedient political and economic affiliations of superpower nations have in turn forced us into a dubious "repatriation" treaty. Now, at the risk of undermining our own national security, the onus is upon us to bear the brunt of keeping the Rohingya in Bangladesh, in refugee camps, for years, perhaps decades, perhaps permanently. The real danger of Rohingya women disappearing inside the dark labyrinth of human trafficking and prostitution is already happening, as verbal and social media messages have indicated. Soon, verifiable statistics will also be available as women's rights activists begin to monitor the situation. Stateless, without a country or national identity or home or a patch of land to call their own, the Rohingya are mostly seen as expendable by the rest of the world. In contrast, tragically, the Rohingya woman and girl-child, neglected, illiterate, displaced, war-ravaged, but comely of appearance, is apparently seen as profitable commercial commodity by the criminal underworld.

My mind grapples with the horrific proportions of this problem, which has insidiously stretched its tentacles into our public and private spaces. Secret encroachment into our urban and rural spaces and stealing our Bangladeshi identity bring commensurate backlash of anger and rejection directed at the Rohingya. The perplexing moral dimensions of this problem remind me of the desert fable of the nomad, the camel, and the tent. Apropos with regard to the Rohingya-Bangladeshi-Bengali situation, I look at the photogenic face of the bereft, weeping Rohingya woman, and I think to myself, will I one day become unhouse, naked and defenceless, by offering a bit of space in a gesture of goodwill?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Wealth disparity getting out of control

A report titled "World Wealth Report-2017" published by Credit Swiss Research Institute a few days ago, shocked us. The report exposed the growing wealth disparity between the rich and poor. It revealed that half of the world's wealth is in the hands of the top one percent of the world's population.

Only a handful of countries amassed more than 70 percent of the global wealth, while other countries—especially in South Asia and Middle Africa—lag behind.

This increasing wealth disparity can be blamed for many upheavals across the world. The overwhelming wealth disparity needs to be bridged. Otherwise, this growing disparity will only accelerate the rise of extremism, terrorism, unrest and tensions.

Md Saydur Rahman, Jagannath University

Protect groundwater, while building RNPP

Bangladesh is very rich in terms of groundwater storage and aquifer properties and in terms of annual replenishment directly from rainfall and from many rivers and waterbodies. A substantial quantity of groundwater flows to the rivers and seas during the dry season when water levels in these watercourses fall. This creates a hydraulic gradient from groundwater storage areas towards these watercourses.

Bangladesh is very dependent on groundwater. This matter should be taken into account while building the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) so that nuclear waste does not cause contamination mainly due to leakage from overlying aquitard.

Luthfe Ali, By email