

The punishing costs of pollution

Unplanned urbanisation is to blame

WE do not need studies to tell us that indiscriminate, unplanned urbanisation, along with encroachment of land and water bodies, have polluted the air and water making our urban areas, unlivable. Yet we still must live in these areas, paying a huge cost in terms of ill health, untimely deaths and loss of productivity. A World Bank study has estimated the economic cost of all this to be one percent of our GDP which comes to around TK 20,000 crore a year.

This is because we are continuously inhaling air that is contaminated with lead, arsenic, cadmium, pesticides and sulphur dioxide – basically poison that seeps into our system causing irreparable damage. Dhaka and other urban areas of the country have seen a spike in the number of people especially children and the elderly with severe respiratory conditions such as asthma and pneumonia. Even young, healthy adults are falling ill because of the air they are forced to breathe.

So where are these poisons coming from? Well, we have allowed brick kilns to operate in the outskirts of the city contributing 38 percent of the micro-pollutants. Then there are the motor vehicles giving us another 19 percent, road dust 18, solid dust and metal smelters another seven percent to add to the lethal cocktail we choke on everyday. There is also lead poisoning caused by scores of battery recycling areas, lead smelting hotspots and industries. Textile industries, meanwhile pour in 200 tonnes of toxic waste into the rivers leading to more health hazards. On top of all that greed has taken away most of our water bodies intensifying water logging and the associated hazards to public health.

There is no alternative except to take emergency measures. This includes recovering our wetlands, adopting cleaner technologies in industries, stopping illegal constructions and investing in modern, efficient and adequate waste management. This is the only way to resuscitate our dying urban areas.

Exploiting vulnerability

Ensure safety for workers in informal labour force

WE find it appalling that there can be such blatant disregard for human life. In a harrowing image published in *The Daily Star* yesterday, the failure to ensure workers' safety was shamefully evident. In the photograph, a worker of a power distribution company was seen to be working without any safety gear, precariously leaning against a bamboo plant against power cables.

This is not an unusual scenario in Dhaka. Standard safety tools such as elevated working platforms, professional grade insulated work boots, gloves and harnesses are barely ever provided. *The Economist's* Safe City Index 2017 ranked Dhaka among the three lowest ranking cities in terms of safety. The Economist Intelligence Unit which uses 49 indicators including infrastructure security and personal security to make the report, found Dhaka to have ranked 58th among the 60 cities, with overall points of 47.37.

Much of the workforce that engages their labour force in hazardous situations is part of the informal labour force. Labour experts say such vulnerability is resultant of the informal nature of jobs where workers are not provided with appointment letters, end-of-service benefits, insurance coverage or safe workplace. In addition, much of the informal labour force is comprised of people from lower socio-economic strata and is outside labour or social protection.

Displaying such blatant disregard for human life is unacceptable. We hope steps are taken to formalise the labour sector so that workers are eligible for at least the provision of basic safety gear at workplaces. The government must ensure that the vulnerability of those who have no option but to risk their lives to earn a living is minimised as much as possible.

How to make it easier for the Rohingyas



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

WINTER is coming, and the now more than 620,000 Rohingyas living temporarily in Bangladesh need to worry about adequate winter clothing, food, and possible firewood to burn to keep them warm for the next few months. Fortunately, the winter months, considering strictly *Poush* and *Magh*, are going to come and go, and hopefully will not leave any lasting damage on the poor and destitute refugees in southern Bangladesh; unlike those who escaped to much colder climates. But that is no reason to scrimp on blankets, jackets or shawls in addition to providing healthcare, medicine, and other essentials they need to tide over the lean months and prepare for their journey back home.

The repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas may begin early next year. The memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by Bangladesh and Myanmar will provide many of the Rohingyas eager to return home a ray of hope. Even though they left everything behind and came to Bangladesh with nothing except the clothes on their backs, the "homeless" Rohingyas are hoping to return to their homeland. The temporary shelter they were given on Bangladeshi soil was a welcome respite for them after facing years of hostility and uncertainty in Myanmar.

A Bangladeshi—American scholar friend of mine just came back from a fact-finding mission to the camps in the Cox's Bazaar area and reported that while living conditions in many of them leave much to be desired, things are getting better, particularly in the ones which are financed by Gulf state charities. However, one also needs to address the anxieties that the displaced Rohingyas have about their long-term prospects given their past experience and the "cycle of exodus and repatriation." Many in the Rohingya community have voiced their worries in not knowing what life will be like for those who decide to return. Estimates vary on the amount needed to resettle the Rohingyas in Rakhine, but conservative guesses run well over Taka one lakh for a family of five. This would cover some of the resources needed to build their destroyed home, arrange for the basic necessities to support their family for a few weeks, and to make the gradual transition to a life that they were familiar with before they

were uprooted. And then the question remains, why would anyone invest in rebuilding a homestead in a region where they have been living in fear of attacks and forced migration for decades?

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh and other eminent leaders, both Bangladeshi and foreign, have voiced their concerns regarding the plight of the Rohingyas and have recently proposed different multi-point plans on the table to provide safety and security to the Rohingyas. Some of these action plans have included measures such as provision of international observers in Myanmar,

welcoming reception they deserve, and eventually inhabit in conditions that are better than what it is in the camps set up after 2012. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), some of these internment camps are akin to "concentration camps" from where people aren't allowed to get out and where the WFP and other agencies were denied access.

The MoU pledges that "Myanmar will take all possible measures to see that the returnees will not be settled in temporary places for a long period of time and their freedom of movement in the Rakhine State will be allowed in conformity with the

interview that many of the necessary documentation that families had preserved were confiscated prior to August 25 or burned in their houses during the ongoing attacks in recent months. "I am not sure whether half of the refugees will be repatriated," he said.

Finally, Bangladesh government will need to be cautious since the 2017 MoU is based on the 1992 repatriation agreement which had many shortcomings. And, much water has flown down the River Naaf since then. The foreign minister, however, was optimistic when he said that in contrast to the 1992



Many in the Rohingya community have voiced their worries in not knowing what life will be like for those who decide to return to Myanmar.

PHOTO: ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

freedom of movement, creation of "safe zones", enhanced human rights and citizenship guarantees, etc. It is not clear at this moment whether the repatriation of the refugees under the MoU would commence before some progress have been made on these various "preconditions" that are essential for a decent living but also for human existence. To quote an article in the prestigious medical journal *Lancet*, the Rohingya people of Myanmar need "health, human rights, and identity."

The rest of the world will watch carefully if the Rohingyas who chose to return will be accorded the

existing laws and regulations." Like many other international observers who are familiar with the situation on the ground in Myanmar under the tenuous power-sharing arrangement between the military and civilians, we have some reservations about the agreement, and the circumstances in Rakhine in light of past experience.

Europe-based Rohingya activist Nay San Lwin told CNN his major concern about the text of the agreement was how long repatriated refugees would be kept in temporary camps. The other issue is the delay in the delivery of identity cards to the returnees. Lwin indicated in the

agreement the current MoU has some "additional characteristics". "A specific bilateral instrument (physical arrangement) for repatriation will be concluded in a speedy manner," he added. One might add that the world community is looking forward to the goodwill gesture of Myanmar's military and civilian leaders, and awaiting to see when they will seriously consider implementing the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, i.e. the Annan Report.

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Two years of the Paris Agreement

Moving from words to action in tackling climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

ON December 12, 2015 at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris, France, under the leadership of the then President Hollande, the historic Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted. It was a historic agreement for a number of important reasons.

Firstly, it was a universal agreement, unlike its predecessor the Kyoto Protocol, through which every country agreed to take actions. Secondly, the agreement included two important goals: to limit the rise of global temperature to 1.5 Degrees, which vulnerable countries had strongly fought for, as well as a global adaptation goal. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it moved the world from just talking about the problem to taking action, and in so doing it passed the ball from the negotiators to the implementers.

To mark that historic occasion, the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron, convened a one day summit in Paris on December 12 to mark the second anniversary of the historic Paris Agreement. The summit is not to negotiate any new words on paper but rather for action pledges from heads of states, governors of provinces, mayors of cities, heads of companies, leaders of NGOs and all others who have been invited to attend.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be attending and is expected to pledge to deliver electricity to every household in the country and to reiterate the pledge taken at COP22 in Marrakech last year as part of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) to strive to make Bangladesh 100 percent dependable on renewable energy by 2050.

One important change that is now beginning to show is the change in thinking amongst leading private sector companies and their investors. There is a growing shift away from investing in fossil fuels such as coal, and into renewable energy like solar and wind. The advances in efficiency for these renewable energy technologies have already brought down the cost to make it cost competitive with many fossil fuels.

In addition, the improvement in energy storage technology also takes care of the intermittency problem that both solar and wind used to suffer from. So, now their energy can be stored and used even when

the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing. As a result the private sector investors and utilities around the world have started to invest in renewable energy rather than the traditional fossil based energy sources.

At the same time a revolution is in the making as electric vehicles are becoming cost competitive with petrol vehicles as well. As a result almost every major vehicle maker is planning to shift to electric vehicles within a decade.

UK based Adam Smith International highlighted the potential of Bangladesh. At a presentation of the report in Dhaka with government and private sector representatives, the pioneering role of the Bangladesh Bank in developing its Green Finance window was rightly lauded. However, at the same time the poor uptake of this green finance by commercial banks was noted with dismay.

The upshot of the discussion is that the private



The overall result is a global shift in investment away from fossil fuels into renewable energy, with the investors seeing better profits in this shift. This is already unlocking billions of dollars worth of investment and can potentially lead to trillions of dollars of such green and clean investments globally.

A recent study of the potential for such green investment in South Asia by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), an affiliate of the World Bank, has identified over three trillion dollars worth of green and clean investment opportunities in the region, which include many billions in Bangladesh.

At the same time a recent study of Green Finance and Green Growth potential in Bangladesh by the

sector in Bangladesh needs to change its old fashioned mindset and embrace the tremendous investment opportunities in green and clean products and services in Bangladesh. Of course, the government needs to also provide the necessary policy environment but the onus is now squarely on the more progressive and green minded members of the private sector to take the lead and encourage others to follow.

Only by making this shift in our mindset can Bangladesh transition into a green and clean future.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Banks are losing public confidence

Bank robbery nowadays does not necessarily require for robbers to physically break into a bank and steal the money from its vault. In recent times, according to numerous media reports, powerful businessmen, bankers and politicians siphoned off large amounts of money from several banks and financial institutions in the form of loans, bringing them to the brink of bankruptcy. Strangely enough, Bangladesh Bank bailed them out by pouring in massive amounts of public money, instead of taking steps to retrieve the stolen money.

In order to reverse this trend, the authorities should bring the culprits to book. Terminating bank officials will not be sufficient.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

