

The vulnerability of ethnic minorities

The state must protect their rights

IT is a story that repeats over and over: An indigenous community living for generations in an area suddenly being told that they will be evicted because some influential has decided to use it for lucrative purposes. Yesterday's paper reports yet another such case—this time 400 families of the Garo and Khasi communities are living in fear of being driven out of their homes in Srimongol. The land has been apparently bought by an influential joint secretary to establish a tea garden in the area.

The person in question may have all the paperwork required to establish the fact that this is a legal transfer of land. But what is really baffling is why the concerned ministry would give such permission, knowing that it would mean destitution of hundreds of families who are already impoverished. Where are these people supposed to go once they have been driven out of their homes?

Similar examples of evictions of minorities from their historical homelands abound—the memory of Santal families in Gaibandha being forced out through intimidation and violence in 2016 still remains fresh. At the same time, there are always promises of compensating and relocating these communities, which never materialise. It goes without saying that many indigenous communities live under vulnerable conditions. Without legal documents of land ownership, the possibility of eviction looms large on their heads. We have seen many instances of such communities being attacked, mainly to intimidate them enough so that they leave their homes and the land can be grabbed.

In these circumstances it is important for the government to play a proactive role in protecting our indigenous communities from being stripped of their land which ultimately also means, their livelihoods. In the Moulvibazar case we are heartened to see that the Member of Parliament has stepped in and sent a letter to the DC asking for the land to be given to the communities concerned. We hope this will happen and this will be a precedent for other cases where similar evictions may happen.

In the spirit of kindness

Lauding the efforts of Christian missionaries

WE applaud the efforts of selfless endeavours of missionaries who have been serving the poor and needy in Bangladesh. On December 25, *The Daily Star* reported on the contributions of a Christian charity where around 100 people of different faith groups, who suffer from a number of problems, are taken care of by the nuns trained as paramedics and nurses.

The report drew attention to 124 hostels and orphanages and 75 hospitals and dispensaries in various remote parts of the country that are run by the Catholic Church and named a number of reputed hospitals run under the Protestant church. According to the secretary of healthcare commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, an estimated 30,000 people receive healthcare in these facilities.

The contributions made by a community, with only about eight lakh Christians, to the country's healthcare, education, socio-economic development and humanitarian activities, have been phenomenal. These institutions are willing and able to offer help regardless of faith, caste and ethnicity. They do this with little or no expectations of recognition and the sole intention of bringing light to communities in distress.

We believe that these are truly remarkable, praiseworthy efforts that must be appropriately recognised. We hope that as a nation, we are able to create an environment of trust and harmony so that such efforts may be continued with as much vigour and optimism as they have been thus far. In doing so, we hope other communities will also be inspired to emulate these efforts. A country like Bangladesh, where such a large portion of the population is disadvantaged, has much need for efforts such as these.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The harmful effects of soft drinks

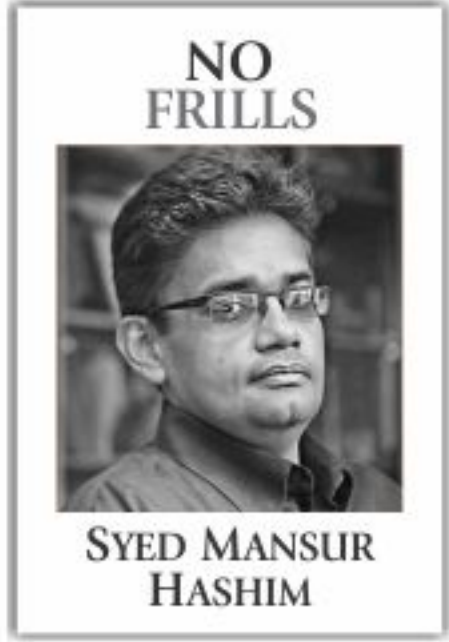
Soft drinks or carbonated beverages consist of a unique chemical blend of sugar or artificial sweetening agents, caffeine, colour, flavour and preservatives in water, injected with carbon-dioxide gas. All of these ingredients are extremely harmful for the human body and may lead to complex diseases like cancer and heart disease, according to multiple studies.

Because of our lack of knowledge, we the consumers have accepted these harmful drinks gladly and, nowadays, these are among the most consumed drinks in our country. We cannot take a stand against the giant beverage companies in any way, but after having learnt the truth, we can at least restrain from slowly poisoning ourselves by not drinking these beverages which do not have any health benefits whatsoever.

M. A. Razzaq, Dhaka



No need for water bodies!



NO FRILLS

THAT was basically the message realtors had given Rajuk in early November in a views-sharing meeting. Realtors believe it is ludicrous for Rajuk to try and reclaim what has already been grabbed. Indeed, that meeting could easily be termed a circus, since it was said that Dhaka would be better off without its wetlands since it was pointed out by a representative that the only purpose of water bodies is to serve the mosquito population. Never mind the experts' opinions and feasibility studies that wetlands are mandatory for the city's natural drainage system. Never mind the fact that the city, which was once defined by its aqua lands, has lost around 2,500 acres of flood flow zones and agricultural lands.

Rajuk remains silent against this relentless drive by the high-and-mighty coterie of wetland grabbers and presently we are witnessing the demise of the Dumni canal on the city's eastern outskirts. The canal is in the final throes of being filled up and going by what has been printed in *The Daily Star* on December 24, a 120-foot-wide canal is now 10-foot-wide. "Half a dozen land claimants—three real estate developers, two private land claimants and a government organisation—have so far either blocked and filled up parts of the canal or narrowed it down to one-twelfth of its official width since 2009," s aid locals.

So this has been going on since 2009. But then, protests have been falling on deaf ears of the authorities. In the midst of all this, we have a chief engineer of Rajuk going on record to state that the building of a culvert which narrows the canal's width to 10 feet is "not a problem, water will flow anyway. Width of a canal is to be reduced if a structure is built over it." This is in contradiction to the 2006 study by British Halcrow Group on flood management that recommended widening and conserving existing canals along with storm water retention ponds

and areas as flood management measures.

When we look at the history of filling up of water bodies, and that includes rivers like the Turag, one finds a pattern that is followed by realtors. They seldom act alone. Countless reports have emerged in media about how adept they are at skirting the legal system and "managing" enough leverage among both the custodians of water bodies and enforcers of the law to effectively kill canals and rivers.

Last year, this paper ran a story on the

unabated without giving two hoots to a 2009 landmark High Court judgment that had delineated detailed measures on how ailing rivers may be recovered on five rivers feeding Dhaka , viz. Buriganga, Balu, Turag, Sitalakkhya and Dhaleshwari.

While the mighty Turag has fallen prey to land grabbers in a big way, we have managed to kill the Sitalakkhya with the dumping of untreated toxic industrial discharge. The water of the Sitalakkhya is as black as that of Buriganga, which until very recently was

with who would bear what portion of cost of the central effluent plant (CETP) were allowed to fester whilst many units went into production. So, while Buriganga may see a revival of sorts somewhere down the years, it appears that the Dhaleshwari is now going downhill.

It does not matter which river or canal we highlight in media, the bottom line is that we have a DAP that is not followed by authorities. We have various agencies which have proven themselves to be utterly inept, toothless



The Dumni canal being choked by land development near the Purbachal 300-foot road in 2012.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Turag River which outlined the systematic destruction of Turag starting from the year 2009. Once a mighty river, touted as one of the key rivers that supplies water to the city, has been witness to relentless encroachment by land grabbers who have filled up major chunks of the river and turned them into theme parks, housing estates, industries, etc.

What we have lost in the process is supply of freshwater for human consumption and agriculture, fish resources, marine ecology and waterfront. Land grabbing has flourished

home to the leather industry at Hazaribagh. Going by recent news, we understand that not all factories have relocated to the new leather estate in Savar and the dumping of toxic material continues there. While a major chunk of tanneries have moved, there are other factories in the vicinity that follow the same custom of discharging untreated chemical waste into the river. Amid much fanfare, the tanneries were moved to the leather estate. There too problems persist. Land had been allocated, but the problems associated

and powerless in the face of land-grabbing companies which are backed by serious political clout. We have seen that public outrage and outcry mean little to anyone in office and that laws are there to adorn the books but not be implemented. We live in a system that is built around powerful vested interests where profit is king and where the environment and people's collective voice do not count.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Preventing the next African famine

STEPHANIE HANSON and WHITNEY MCFERRON

AFTER falling for more than a decade, the number of hungry people in the world is rising once again. This year was marked by the worst global food crisis since World War II, with South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria either experiencing famine or teetering on the brink. More than 20 million people in those four countries alone remain severely food-insecure, and the United Nations estimates that USD 1.8 billion in immediate humanitarian aid is needed.

Political instability and conflict have contributed heavily to this food insecurity, but insufficient food

support many millions more. Countries on the continent that have invested heavily in agricultural development and smallholder farmers have been successful at avoiding famine.

Consider the example of Ethiopia, which experienced one of the worst famines in history in the mid-1980s. An estimated one million people died during that crisis, which was caused by a combination of conflict and drought, and it took many years for the country to recover.

Today, Ethiopia is peaceful, but drought conditions have returned. In 2016, the country suffered its driest growing season in 50 years. And yet Ethiopia did not experience famine last

priority. In 2010, it created the Ethiopian Agricultural Transformation Agency, a public entity dedicated to boosting the productivity of the agriculture sector. As the noted British author and Africa researcher Alex de Waal has noted, "Politics creates famine, and politics can stop it." Ethiopia proves his point. While domestic and international contributions still flow during relief efforts, it is Ethiopia's long-term investments that have increased the country's resilience.

An increase in strategic agricultural investments, from African donors or international sources, could help other countries in the region reap similar rewards. Climate change is making such

Trees are one of the most effective tools we have for fighting climate change, and they also make economic sense for small farmers. A farmer who invests USD 2 in seedlings can make a profit of more than USD 80 in ten years, when some of the full-grown trees can be cut and sold. Trees also benefit the environment while they are growing—by absorbing carbon, improving soil health, and preventing erosion.

Farmers who have an asset base of trees, livestock, or cash generated by selling crop surpluses are better able to withstand weather shocks. And, as our organisation is currently demonstrating in six African countries, farmers can build their asset bases with training and financial support. That is why we believe African governments and bilateral donors should deepen their investments in programmes that provide farmers with the skills to produce long-term crops, especially trees, sustainably. Inexpensive practices—such as planting crops in rows, weeding correctly, and applying fertiliser in micro-doses—are also proven methods to increase crop production dramatically.

With the effects of climate change expected to intensify in coming years, Africa's smallholder farmers must prepare now for a more turbulent future. The United States has historically been the world's largest donor to global food security programmes, but the future of this leadership role under President Donald Trump is uncertain. While global food security initiatives enjoy bipartisan support in the US Congress, the Trump administration's proposed foreign aid budget recommends deep funding cuts to these programmes.

As US support waivers, African and European governments, foundations, institutional donors, and practitioners must be ready to step in to help African farmers build long-term resiliency. Investing in agriculture is the most efficient way to improve food security in Africa, while ensuring that people on the front lines of the fight against climate change can maintain thriving economies and sustainable, healthy environments.

Only through careful planning, and by following the lead of countries like Ethiopia, can Sub-Saharan Africa address the underlying causes of hunger. Although food security is a complex problem to solve, preventing future famines doesn't have to be.



PHOTO: ACTIONAID

In Somaliland, East Africa, Hinda stands with her three children Hamida (seven months), Dekka (four), and Umer (five). Over the past two years most of her family's livestock has died because of drought. "I am now scared for my children," she says.

production has also likely heightened tensions and exacerbated hunger. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where three of the four countries on the verge of famine are located, crop yields have long lagged behind the rest of the world, owing to poor farm inputs, such as low-quality seeds and fertiliser.

Investing in agriculture is one of the most effective ways to end hunger and improve political stability. There are 50 million smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa alone, and they

year. There were hungry people, to be sure, but disaster was avoided. Oxfam attributes this to the fact that the government was better prepared to deliver food and water to millions. The country has also vastly improved its farming infrastructure, and new irrigation and drinking water systems provide rural areas with easy access to clean, safe water sources.

For more than a decade, the Ethiopian government has made agricultural development a top

investments even more urgent, as extreme weather events—both flooding and droughts—are becoming more common throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Even without government support, however, farmers can take modest and cost-effective steps immediately to mitigate climate shocks. By using smart farming techniques such as drought-resistant seeds, intercropping, composting, and crop diversification, farmers can blunt the effects of extreme weather at very low costs.

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