

Environment in Cox's Bazar in peril

Only a quick Rohingya repatriation can mitigate those

THE UNDP report has only reconfirmed the worst fears we have had about the extremely harmful consequences on the local environment, its flora and fauna and wildlife, which the very large Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar would cause. This was only but a natural outcome of a sudden deluge of people from across the border that caught the local administration off guard.

Nearly 1500 hectares of land containing invaluable forest resources have been affected already, and there is the potential for more areas suffering the brunt until there is a complete stop to the uncontrolled use of forest woods as cooking fuel. But that is not all; the ground water level is depleting very fast, again due to unplanned drilling of shallow tube wells to supply water to the refugees. Therefore as an immediate measure, the administration should arrange alternative cooking fuel for the refugee camps, and take measures to protect the forest lands that are vulnerable to human coercion.

And these also bring to the fore the need to put into effect the agreement in principle to the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. All the more so when refugees from northern Rakhine are still entering Bangladesh. Not only should the preparatory work be completed quickly, the rate of repatriation per diem must be enhanced so that that the repatriation can be completed sooner than the two years that the agreement stipulates. Thus there is need for continued pressure on Myanmar so that the repatriation can be sustainable.

Consumers getting cheated on LPG

No price regime set by government

IT'S probably only possible in Bangladesh. Three years have passed since LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) was introduced. The pricing for these LPG tanks being sold to consumers have no set price regime. So, while there has been much talk about setting a fixed price for the standard 12.5kg LPG tank, there has been no effective measure taken by authorities to enforce it. And in the absence of any regulatory measure, supplier companies have taken advantage to set their own prices. The situation is quite ludicrous because a government panel found that these cylinders should be retailing at no more than Tk 703, whereas the various market players are charging customers anywhere between Tk1,100 – Tk1,300 per cylinder.

Stupendous profits are being reaped at the cost of the customer. Why do we not have MRP (Maximum retail price) stamped on LPG bottles, as we do for other commodities on the market? City residents have been forced to opt for LPG cylinders to cook food because there's simply not enough gas pressure or availability in many parts of the city. Also, new apartment blocks coming up have not been getting piped gas as per policy.

This does not mean we let the market forces play it out amongst themselves to fix any price they want. Big business will always resist any regulatory measure to curtail their abnormal profits, but it is the duty of authorities to stop business entities from fleecing customers at will. The government, as the regulator, has a duty to look after consumers' interests and we are sorry to state that it has not done so in the case of LPG.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Prevent childhood disability

Childhood disability caused by cerebral palsy (CP) is a public health issue in Bangladesh. CP, the most common type of motor disability in childhood, may be caused by an injury to the developing brain, which occurs before, during or soon after birth. It is a lifelong disability that affects movement and is often accompanied by speech, cognitive, vision and hearing impairments.

In Bangladesh, there are about 260,000 children with cerebral palsy, according to CSF Global. A major portion of CP cases can be prevented by simple public health interventions such as institutionalised deliveries, training local health care workers on neonatal resuscitation, and preventing childhood infections. I hope the government will take this issue more seriously and take appropriate steps to combat CP.

M.S. Islam, Dhaka

Disciplining the autorickshaw drivers

Auto rickshaws have become a vital transport in the rural areas. However, unregulated use of these vehicles is often responsible for road accidents. Some autorickshaw drivers are teenagers, and almost none of them have a driving license. They do not have any idea about the traffic rules. At times, they engage in a race with fellow drivers to overtake each other.

I think the roads and transport authorities should take steps to regulate these vehicles under the Motor Vehicle Act for the safety of the passengers.

Md. Mashiur Rahman, Rangpur

Regenerating the Tree of Life



“whatsapping”. While I appreciate the benefits of internet connectivity, I seem to be out of the groove with the ongoing tech revolution. The limits of my social media expertise extend to a Facebook account. Fortunately, it serves my purpose quite adequately: I can stay in close touch with my immediate family and close friends.

The past 17 years of the new millennium have meant a sea of change for those who grew up communicating face-to-face. Many like me are going through a period of adjustment trying hard to keep up with the internet era where feelings and opinions are shared on the phone or computer screen. Even FaceTime comes across as a second-best option. How can anything replace a close physical encounter where facial expressions, body language and eye contact express what a thousand words cannot?

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One would have thought that with multiple opinions and ideas available in the public forum we would have gained additional wisdom. But I feel I am becoming increasingly inept at coping emotionally because there seems to be no certainty about anything anymore. And this is not on account of the widespread existence of fake news, “alternative facts” or the onset of a “post truth” era. Today, the weight of an opinion seems to be preponderantly determined by its popularity on social media: often two views are vying for the winning position based on the number of twitter or Facebook followers rather than the intrinsic value of the issues. There was a time when we watched a



movie and read its reviews. While we allowed critics to guide us, we articulated our opinions quite openly. But now there are multiple views expressed by twitter and ultimately everyone falls in-line with the most popular one—not because they agree but because they are scared of backlash. Who wants to be contradicted in public and be accused of being a “Philistine”? In today's internet savvy age, education is not about reading and then analysing and processing the information to form well thought out opinions, but being part of the “web crowd”.

The spirit of referendum through the internet seems to have permeated into all aspects of our lives. We are increasingly making decisions about social and political issues guided by polls and twitter—even the media is swayed by these opinions. It's no longer kosher to say “I agree with both views in some ways”—we must be either for or against something. In this context, I am reminded of a pertinent observation by the American novelist F Scott Fitzgerald, who noted that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

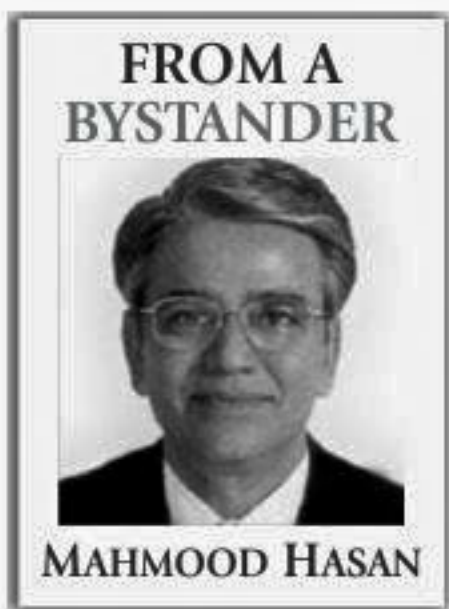
Even while planning vacations we seldom indulge in those “tea and samosa” sessions with friends who have visited a location and can give us interesting views on what to see and what to avoid. The travel guidebooks containing valuable information about planning trips have also gone out of vogue. Instead, we make choices and decisions by switching on our computers or smart-phones and checking out customer reviews on restaurants, hotels and even monuments that have been standing there for centuries. As if the pyramids need reaffirmation from twitter or instagram followers about their appeal!

I'm aware that I should be grateful that I am alert and agile enough to keep up with the times—at least partially. For, there are friends who are in physical discomfort or describe their days as “unending” and “hard to fill.” Truth be told, I have also started to experience senior moments—I forget a friend's birthday or, worst, cannot put a name to a face. Some have suggested that I practice the neurological exercises available on internet sites: Google “brain exercises” and you will be given several options, even a quick fix of “10 best exercises that boost memory”! But the spontaneity of an afternoon coffee with a close friend or a challenging bridge game with neighbours can do more to invigorate my neurons than a thousand brain exercises recommended by Google. What can be more exhilarating than my annual visit to Dhaka, reconnecting with childhood friends, spending the entire evening extending into the wee hours listening to heavenly classical music and simply watching the setting sun in the city's hazy horizon! Despite all the technological advances that are supposed to help you discover the world, there is nothing like a warm voice or a consoling hug to tell you that living is all about real life relationships and not “virtual” communications.

I realise that my mental resistance to the technological revolution will not add even one day to my life or change the pace and direction of the world. But I believe it will allow me to step off the conveyor belt and recapture some of the passion and adventure of my youth, even if for a few fleeting moments. It will help me feel that I am “alive” rather than passively observe my life pass by on a phone or computer screen!

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Merkel still searching for a government



parliament Acting Chancellor Angela Merkel has not been able to form a government for almost four months. Merkel has been in marathon talks with other parties to build a coalition government and retain her position.

All governments in Germany since 1949 were coalition administrations, as no single party commanded the numbers in the Bundestag. After the election in

democrat) led by Martin Schulz managed only 153 seats.

The AfD phenomenon, which was thought to be an aberration in German politics, was written off by some psephologist. But its rise since 2013 on an anti-immigrant plank has already altered the political discourse in Germany. This ultra-right-wing group led by Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland made significant gains by crossing the five percent threshold of votes in 2017. It garnered 12.6 percent votes and entered the parliament for the first time with 94 seats. As the third largest party it is set to play a crucial role in the parliament, particularly on immigration.

FDP (classical liberalism) of Christian Linder came out fourth with 80 seats. The Left (leftists, democratic socialism) led by Sahra Wagenknecht came out fifth with 69 seats. And the Greens

parliament. SPD feared that continuing with the grand coalition under Angela Merkel's shadow would further erode its political influence with the polity.

Merkel began negotiations in earnest to build a three-way coalition with liberal FDP and the environmentalist Greens soon after the election results were announced. That was supposed to be the “Jamaica coalition”—the colours of the three parties representing the colours of the Jamaican flag. But after more than six weeks of parleys the deal collapsed on November 20, 2017, when FDP pulled out because of differing views with CDU. That made Merkel's political future uncertain and thrust Germany into a critical situation with the possibility of fresh election.

The most important sticking point was related to asylum, immigration and family reunification of one million

SPD— giving more seats to AfD and the Greens.

Merkel's failure to stitch a coalition is ominous for the European Project. Germany is the pivotal member of EU and delays in forming a stable government may jeopardise issues such as Eurozone reforms, immigration, defence of Europe, Brexit negotiations etc. EU needs a stable German administration to push the European Project.

Worried at the political stalemate, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (former Foreign Minister from SPD) urged parties involved in negotiations to form the government. He said Germany was facing the worst governing crisis in the 68-year history of its post-World War II democracy and pressed all parties in the parliament “to serve our country”.

Developments as of January 12 suggest that Merkel has been able to strike a preliminary deal with the SPD. Martin Schulz agreed to speak to Merkel after the tri-lateral talks collapsed. The return of the grand coalition would give Merkel a comfortable score of 399 seats in the Bundestag. But some SPD party men are wary saying that the deal did not make sufficient concession for the centre-left party. The 28-page coalition document apart from agreeing on give-and-take between the two parties, pledges closer cooperation with France and not to sell arms to countries involved in the Yemen war. For the coalition to take off the document has to be approved by SPD party conference on January 21. Martin Schulz said that the deal would preserve and strengthen welfare in Germany with tax cuts, additional investments in education, home-building and research.

Speaking to newsmen after the preliminary deal Merkel said, “We have realised that the world isn't waiting for us...we are convinced that Europe needs a fresh start and have developed the right ideas to go with it.” Martin Schulz added, “I believe we have reached outstanding results.”

In the past three governments, Merkel's style was based on building consensus among all political parties. One wonders whether that practice is coming to an end. One thing that is not yet clear is whether Angela Merkel (63) will continue as Chancellor for the next four years or there will be change in Chancellorship before 2021.

Mahmood Hasan is former Ambassador and Secretary.



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September 2005 it took 64 days before Angela Merkel succeeded in forming the grand coalition government. But this time around the coalition deal has eluded Merkel so far.

This situation has arisen primarily because of the arithmetic of seats in the Bundestag (parliament). In the 709-seat current Bundestag, 355 is needed for majority. Among the six parties that now represent the Bundestag, none succeeded in getting a majority individually.

Angela Merkel's CDU (pro-European centre-right conservative) got 246 seats together along with CSU (conservative) of Bavaria. SPD (centre-left, social

(environmentalists) led by Katrin Göring-Eckardt was last with 67 seats.

With a high voter turnout of 76.2 percent, the election results have shown a swing away from the CDU and SPD when compared to their performance in 2013. CDU and SPD, which were partners in the last government, lost 65 seats and 40 seats respectively in 2017. Most of their lost seats went to the populist ultra-right nationalist AfD.

The SPD, which was part of the outgoing government, believed that it will do better than CDU in 2017. But after being badly mauled, Martin Schulz decided to lead the opposition parties in

refugees that Merkel allowed in 2015, much to the opposition of AfD. The other major contentious issues were climate protection, EU and Eurozone policy, and tax cuts and social development.

At that point Merkel said that she would not lead a minority government with the Greens, rather face fresh elections. The trouble is fresh election may not resolve the problem of numbers in the parliament. According to some opinion polls a fresh call for vote would lead to a fragmented parliament again. Predictions said the vote percentage may go down even further for the CDU and