

Tackling the environmental challenges in Cox's Bazar

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



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HAVING just returned from a scoping mission to Cox's Bazar to see the environmental situation both inside and outside the Rohingya camps, I am going to share some thoughts on the immediate and long-term needs from an environmental perspective.

Before doing so, I would like to pay tribute to the people and government of Bangladesh as well as the international agencies and NGOs who have managed to handle the immediate humanitarian crisis extremely well under the circumstances.

If one were to look at a satellite image of the Cox's Bazar region from early last year, one would see forests in which wild elephants roamed. The same picture today will show a city of over 700,000 people where there was once a forest. This has happened almost within a blink of an eye!

However, while the immediate need was to find shelter, provide food and medicine as well as water and sanitation to the incoming Rohingya, the time has come to move from the immediate crisis management stage to a slightly longer-term vision. This needs to be done both within as well as outside the camps.

I will describe the major environmental issues and suggest some actions for each one.

Upcoming monsoon rains

This is by far the biggest danger looming in the next few months, with the makeshift shelters perched on sloping hills that are most vulnerable to landslide. This is a problem that is quite predictable, and hence needs a priority action plan to be implemented urgently.

The elements of such a plan can include relocation of the most vulnerable, improving



Rohingya refugees cut hill to make their makeshift shelter near Balukhali in Cox's Bazar, September 4, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

their housing and drainage conditions, and most importantly, building human resilience to enable the people themselves to be better prepared when the problem inevitably occurs.

This is also true for possible cyclones as there are hardly enough cyclone shelters for the local population, let alone for the lakhs of newcomers. Hence, an urgent cyclone and flood preparedness programme needs to be undertaken, drawing on the significant capacity that already exists among the government,

its development partners and NGOs.

Deforestation

This is the second major problem and consists of the denudation of several thousand hectares of forestland to house the Rohingya in camps as well as the ongoing cutting of trees for firewood for cooking.

While the allocation of forestland for the camps could be justified, the ongoing deforestation needs to be addressed, as it is spreading the seeds of environmental degradation

well outside the camps also.

The immediate need is to identify and supply an alternative fuel source. While more environment-friendly sources should be explored moving forward, the best immediate option may be LPG (as required).

One associated problem has been the human settlement on wild elephant trails which has already resulted in a number of deaths by trampling. This needs to be addressed through a more careful allocation of

camp areas and fencing to divert the elephants.

Water and sanitation in the camps

This is the third most important issue both for supply of drinking water through tube-wells and toilets for defecation. The main challenge is human faecal waste management, which needs to be done more scientifically in "closed treatment" rather than "open treatment."

I saw a couple of excellent closed faecal waste management systems in Kutupalong camp done by Practical Action. Many more of these are needed urgently to replace the existing open systems that are there now.

Regional and longer-term approach

The final issue is the need to move from an ad hoc crisis management mode of reactive interventions to a more systematic and planned approach. In this regard, I would like to propose setting up of a National Environmental Expert Group with local and international experts who can develop an environmental management plan, and more importantly, monitor it and report to the higher authorities on a regular basis.

This can easily be done through platforms like Gobeshona which has already brought together over 50 public and private universities, research institutes and NGOs from Bangladesh and abroad. Such a group should have a mandate to monitor the environment both inside as well as outside the camps.

To sum up, while the massive influx of the Rohingya refugees into Cox's Bazar region was unexpected, the resulting environmental problems are quite predictable, and hence we need to urgently address this issue in a much more systematic and coordinated way. The Bangladeshi scientific community stands ready to do its bit.

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Debate on simultaneous polls in India

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ARE simultaneous elections to national parliament (Lok Sabha) and assemblies in states in India, with its huge size and geographical and cultural diversity, feasible? Will fresh national elections in India be brought forward from its due time in the first half of next year to the end of this year to facilitate simultaneous elections?

These questions are being discussed in political circles and corridors of power in Delhi after the idea of simultaneous holding of elections to the Lok Sabha, the lower House of parliament directly elected by the people, and legislative assemblies in states received a firm push from the highest quarters of the country—President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi—at two separate forums on January 29.

While Kovind, in his first address to the joint (the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, the upper House) sitting of bicameral parliament, made a strong push for simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly polls, Modi flagged the issue while interacting with lawmakers belonging to his Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies in the ruling National Democratic Alliance. Both the events took place on the same day. Kovind argued that frequent polls hurt the Indian economy by imposing a huge burden on human resources while the "model code of conduct" clamped by the Election Commission for conduct of the elections "impeded" development activities.

The speculations about simultaneous polls and advancing the next national elections were sparked by the President's speech in parliament and mounted later on January 29 afternoon at a meeting of NDA leaders where Modi reiterated the

need for simultaneous national and state elections, saying the leaders could start debating the matter and create a positive atmosphere for the idea. The PM once again drove home the point that a continuous cycle of elections in states at different times "hurt" development and was a huge financial burden on the state exchequer.

The remarks by Kovind and Modi appear to be a carefully thought-out move although it needs to be pointed out that the President's speech in the joint sitting of parliament is a document written by the government and reflects the latter's views and priorities.

The proposal for simultaneous national and state polls—or what has come to be known as "one nation one poll"—was put forward for the first time by India's Law Commission way back in May 1999, when India was going through years of unstable coalition politics and fractured mandates particularly in parliamentary elections which triggered frequent polls. Then there were two stable Congress-led governments for ten years from 2004 before Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party won power with emphatic majority in 2014 elections.

In 2015, a parliamentary standing committee in its report had raised the issue of the cost of conducting the elections (it had estimated the cost of Lok Sabha and state assembly elections at Rs 4,500 crore) and the impact of a series of elections on governance, and suggested that simultaneous national and state polls can undermine policy control. In his address to the joint session of both Houses of parliament in 2017, former President Pranab Mukherjee had also expressed concerns over frequent polls, saying "they put on hold development programmes...and burden human resources with

prolonged periods of election duty." He also called for a debate on the matter.

In his speech, Kovind talked about how the "model code of conduct" clamped by the Election Commission for conduct of the elections "impeded" development activities. The code of conduct, aimed at ensuring level playing field for ruling and opposition parties in electoral battles, bars a government of the day at the

Centre or a state from announcing fresh initiatives or sops and taking decisions which would woo voters and give an unfair advantage to the ruling dispensation.

In states across India, the elections to their legislative assemblies are held keeping an eye on the five-year tenure of the assemblies, and these timelines are different from either one state to another or a group of states to another. In a huge country like India, the poll process—whether it is for parliamentary or state assembly election—is usually

lengthy, lasting nearly a month on an average.

This is mainly to facilitate the movement of federal law and order personnel and poll officials. For this, a government cannot take any major decision relating to governance for fear of violating the code of conduct. Votaries of simultaneous polls claim this often results in policy and administrative paralysis. For instance, even the process for the coming

elections to three small north-eastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland will take almost a month. Secondly, election booths are set up in schools and colleges where studies and often exam schedules have to be readjusted keeping in mind the elections. Thirdly, teachers and federal and state government officials are engaged in conducting the elections who are then diverted from their main areas of activities—class rooms and administration respectively.

It was also suggested by Bibek

Debroy and Kishore Desai of India's Policy Commission that the framing of the Indian election cycle should be done in a manner that polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies are "synchronised together." But holding simultaneous polls is easier said than done. India's new Chief Election Commissioner OP Rawat had recently said that creating a legal framework for simultaneous national and state polls would take time because it would need an amendment to the constitution, Representation of People Act and other related laws. Then, deployment of security men and women, poll officials and electronic voting machines in seven lakh polling booths across the country, in varied types of topography and climatic conditions, has to be elaborately planned. To address all these issues, it is possible that even simultaneous elections have to be conducted over multiple phases involving a lengthy timeframe and raising the same issues which are now being faced in elections held at different times and over a number of phases.

The opposition led by Congress has been wary of simultaneous polls, suspecting that this might be a ploy to overcome anti-incumbency of BJP governments in major states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where fresh state polls are due this year-end. BJP, on the other hand, has favoured simultaneous elections, and this was contained in the party's manifesto in the previous parliamentary polls in 2014. Mainstream opposition parties like Congress, Trinamool Congress, CPI, Nationalist Congress Party, and CPI(M) have termed simultaneous polls as "impractical" and "unworkable."

But the question is: are

simultaneous polls feasible given the different terms in the offices of various state governments? Secondly, will BJP advance the parliamentary polls to coincide with polls in the Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh? Also, elections to Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha states are due next year. Will the ruling parties of those three states agree to simultaneous polls with the Lok Sabha elections as that would necessitate curtailing their governments' tenure there by a few months? Will political parties reconcile their penchant for real politics on the ground with the idea of simultaneous national and state elections?

Besides, there is no guarantee that advancing the parliamentary elections will ensure advantage for BJP as such a move had backfired in 2004, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. The next parliamentary poll is going to be a referendum on the Modi government and it is unlikely that clubbing state polls with the national election will help state-specific issues to be supplanted by national issues on which the Modi government can claim achievements. A regional party like Biju Janata Dal ruling the eastern state of Odisha, has succeeded in retaining power trumping Congress party and BJP in successive state elections. So has Trinamool Congress, led by Mamata Banerjee, in West Bengal in 2016.

Simultaneous polls could be a political gamble for BJP but the stakes could be fraught with risks. But then Modi is a leader who is not averse to taking risks as demonetisation (scrapping of high-value currency notes) in late 2016 has proved. Will he take the plunge once again?

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Indian voters hold up their voter ID cards at a polling station in northern India.

PHOTO: AFP

QUOTABLE Quote

ANATOLE FRANCE
French poet, journalist, and novelist(1844-1924)

It is human nature to think wisely and act foolishly.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Fissure

5 Anne Rice character

11 Lake near Buffalo

12 Run out

13 "A Doll's House" heroine

14 For each

15 Unequal, as a game

17 That lass

18 Allude

22 Bridge utterance

24 Jiffy

25 Goose egg

26 Piston connector

27 Viola's cousin

30 Church replies

32 Hot crime

DOWN

1 Gambling city

2 Golfer's choice

3 Places for some engines

4 Makes fun of

5 Heavy metal

6 Pro

7 Charlotte, for one

8 Bind up

ACROSS

9 Bow's shape

10 Kickoff aid

16 Taxing org.

19 Computer safe-guards

20 Bus. sch. course

21 Cincinnati team

22 Cuzco capital

23 Berth place

28 Defeats

29 One way to shop

30 Concert aid

31 Snake-haired Gorgon

35 Leaf carriers

36 Salon sound

37 Bad actors

38 Auction buy

39 Bonanza stuff

40 Gimlet base

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	J	A	R	B	O	S	S	E
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S	C	H	W	A	T	H	E	R
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P	E	R		E	Q	U	A	L
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N	I	N	E	T		A	S	K

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT