

Recognising the role of mothers

Support them at all levels

ON Mother's Day, which was observed yesterday, it is important to remember that we must reinforce our commitment to all women, especially those who are mothers, in our society. Mothers always have a defining role in our lives and what we become is largely because of their contribution in terms of the love and care they have bestowed on us and the values they have tried to inculcate.

Keeping in mind the challenging conditions that prevail in our country, we would also like to recognise the varied and overall contributions of women across the board despite every obstacle. A front-page story on the occasion of Mother's Day has highlighted the plight of abandoned mothers, many of whom are homeless or treated with utter neglect. This is utterly shameful for any society, more so for one like ours that has traditionally always regarded mothers with respect and gratitude. If we are to progress as a people, we must acknowledge the sacrifices of our mothers and their contributions to society. This we can do by caring for them, providing for their comfort and giving them the recognition they deserve.

Besides taking care of the household, many mothers work tremendously hard at their respective workplaces and it is essential that we strive to make all workplaces safer for them and for all women in general. What is also important to take note of is the fact that in the last two years, we, as a nation, have failed to bring the maternal mortality rate in our country down despite much scientific and medical progress and breakthroughs. This indicates a lack of care more than anything else. Thus, there is a clear need for greater effort on the part of the state and society for providing all mothers with better maternal healthcare.

Together, let us try to repay all mothers for the incredible sacrifices that they have made for us and support them as they have continually supported us.

Save the trees

Development not at the cost of environment

WE are astonished that the ministry of environment and forest has itself initiated a proposal to cut down more than 3,000 trees in two reserve forests of the country. The purpose is to build a stadium in Chandpur union of Gazipur and a Petroleum Corporation project in Maheshkhali of Cox's Bazar district.

As it is, there has been gradual depletion of forest land in the country, and whereas ideally we should have 25 percent of land under forest cover we have less than 10 percent at the moment. And that too is being denuded by population pressure and the stress of urbanisation.

Admittedly, in a land-strapped country like Bangladesh, there will be a constant pressure of development on land, but one must weigh the long-term costs and benefits of a project on the environment and the people. There are certain natural endowments that cannot be regained or recreated in a short time—trees and forests being a few such precious things. It is little comfort that such projects are allowed on condition that the users shall plant double the number of trees they fell. Growing trees is not building a house. And the project, being located where it is inside a reserve forest, may cause long-term damage to the area and other associated harms that may not have been foreseen. This the administration should not lose sight of.

The yearly revenue and one-time compensation levied on the users are no recompense for the unmitigated harm the projects will inflict. Given the existing cabinet decision that bars felling of trees in reserve and natural forests, we would hope that alternative sites would be selected for the two projects.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Bailing out Farmers Bank

The government is all set to bail out the scam-hit Farmers Bank. In my opinion, such a move will set a dangerous precedence and will have negative consequences in the future. Despite doubling the interest rates on deposits, the bank has failed to attract new customers. Also, it could not regain its clients' confidence after restructuring the board twice. Under these circumstances, if the government injects fresh capital into the bank, it will drain out too.

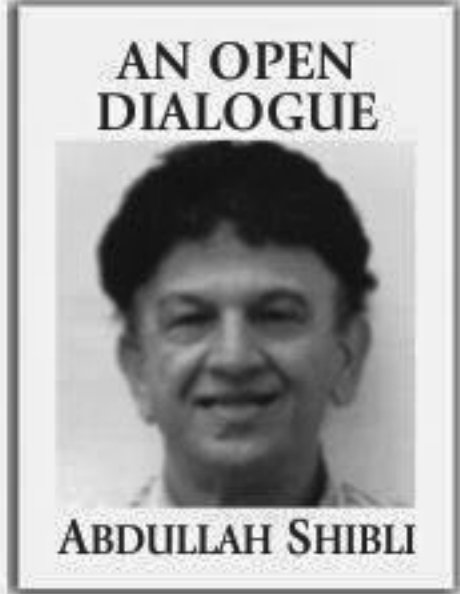
When experts warn that bailing out the bank will encourage others to follow suit, it's simply not justified for the government to go ahead with its plan. The government should care more about protecting the interest of common depositors than that of a few powerful bankers. Instead of funnelling new funds, the government should pressurise the bank to recover the lost money.

Mohammad Zonaed Emran, By e-mail

Publish quota gazette soon

We are dismayed at the cabinet secretary's recent remark that there was no progress in issuing the gazette notification scrapping the present quota system in public service jobs. This is a violation of the prime minister's directive. It seems to us that the government is not serious enough to settle the issue in a peaceful manner. We urge the government to live up to its promise by scrapping the quota system officially.

Juel Rana, University of Dhaka



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

A N array of recent accidents in the country, as well as another one outside, point to the need for improved regulations and stricter enforcement and oversight in transportation, energy, and aviation sectors. The plane crash in Kathmandu, a train derailment near Tongi, and the sinking of a coal-carrying barge in Khulna were all preventable. Fortunately, there were no human casualties in the latest accident, in which MV Bilash carrying 775 tonnes of coal capsized on April 14 in the Harbaria Channel near the Mongla River Port.

However, environmentalists have voiced their concern regarding the possibility of damage to the ecosystem that might result from this catastrophe. An initial assessment indicates that the spillover effect from the submerged coal would be negligible based on the assurance from the captain who claimed that the cargo was "covered". Sahara Enterprise, the owner of the vessel, claimed that, "The coal was still inside the vessel so there was no concern about any environmental disaster." However, according to Mahmudul Hasan, divisional forest officer of Sundarbans East Zone, the accident spot was very close to the Sundarbans and the coal-mixed water was spreading to different parts of the mangrove forest.

Investigations into the three accidents are incomplete as this column goes to press, but from all accounts it is almost certain that human errors played a major role in each. The onus lies squarely on us for errors of omission and commission and the chances of recurrence can be, and need to be, minimised. This string of accidents in air, land, and water makes the job of any government tough, since regardless of the findings of the accident reports, the ultimate responsibility lies with the administration to undertake efforts to prevent these disasters, and lessen their consequences.

Accidents have major lessons or "takeaways", and after the initial experience of loss, anger, and grief we move forward. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989,

and the Bhopal gas leak in 1984 all led to major changes in their respective industries. Bangladesh has recently witnessed several instances of coal-carrying barges going down in our waterways. Mishaps such as these have economic, environmental, and health impacts. While the latest incident on the Possur River did not cause any loss of life, there are other fallouts.

Bangladesh's development strategy to achieve middle-income status is based on economic growth, infrastructural development, and expansion of the power sector. Therefore, one can sum up the dilemma we face as follows: (i) Energy use is the driving force behind growth, (ii) Our energy consumption is low, but also very expensive, and (iii) We need to lower the cost to increase use.

Coal-powered plants can generate electricity at a low cost as reported in the latest Power Sector Master Plan (PSMP) but can harm the environment. "Coal will be the cheapest primary energy now and in future and coal-powered stations will increase in Bangladesh." With demand for electricity growing by 7-10 percent a year, it will need to more than triple production, to over 30,000 megawatts by 2030. Chinese news agency Xinhua claimed last December that the coal-powered plant at Payra "is a part of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina government's plan to set up a series of coal-fired power projects to generate 40,000 MW electricity by 2030." If we are going to use coal for power generation, brick kilns, tea stalls, re-rolling steel mills and road construction among others, our policy regarding extraction, import, and transportation, in addition to emission standards, must be clearly articulated. Bangladesh seems to be caught in a bind, and how we negotiate this conflict will have long-term consequences.

There are many reasons why the MV Bilash accident should serve as a wake-up alarm for different stakeholders in coal transportation business, such as operators, law enforcement agencies, designers, users and others concerned, in order to come up with a coordinated action plan for the future.

First, it is expected that riverine traffic in this area will increase considerably in future. If the government's plan to boost electricity generation by coal-powered plants goes through, we will witness growth in import of coal and transshipment by river.

Can we minimise the risk of riverine accidents?

Second, the government has approved over 200 industries to be set up within 10km of the Sundarbans. Once these factories start operation in the coming years, commerce and passenger traffic will receive a boost.

Third, ecotourism in the Sundarbans area has picked up significantly in the last decade. Unless there is stricter enforcement of vessels plying the rivers and waterways in the southwestern region of the country, and certification and training of crews are brought up to par with international standards, accidents are bound to happen and a single major accident can unleash a chain reaction and threaten the ecosystem.

The import, transportation, and consumption of coal have increased in recent years. According to PSMP forecasts, our import of coal will top 60 million tonnes by 2041, and global evidence shows that there are occupational and public health and safety risks from the principal methods of coal transportation: railroads, barges, conveyor belts, and trucks. The environmental impacts of coal transportation include air pollution, water pollution, solid wastes, noise levels, safety and traffic hazards.

Returning to the case of MV Bilash, it has been reported that this accident is the sixth in the last three and a half years. A total of eight commercial ships—one oil tanker, six vessels carrying coal and fertiliser, and a launch—sank in rivers running through the Sundarbans in the last five years from March 14, 2013 to April 14, 2018. Typically, the owners of these boats are given the opportunity to refloat them and everything then goes back to business as usual. In 2016, the Sea Horse, a large bulk cargo vessel carrying 1,245 tonnes of coal, sank in the Shela River in 2016 and the owners went scot-free. The Sea Horse accident resulted in spillage of coal, hundreds of gallons of fuel oil and other toxic contaminants inside the Sundarbans World Heritage site.

So, how do we lessen the chances of accidents and prepare for the expected uptick in coal use? First of all, damages to ecosystem must be prosecuted. Willful negligence by operators results in lawsuits in many countries (including India) which impose fines and seek damages for such misdeeds. Study models show that the more the contractors spend on accident prevention, the more the benefits of accident prevention they derive.

Secondly, surveys reveal various ways to minimise the chances of accidents in our waterways. According to data published in "Riverine Accidents in Bangladesh: Ways Out," a study conducted by Captain Mahmud Hossain of Bangladesh Coast Guard, factors contributing to such accidents are unfit vessels, disregard for and ignorance of rules, and lack of enforcement. Another study pointed the finger at a lack of delineation between the different agencies working under the Ministry of Shipping, including Department of Shipping, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation, and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, lack of enforcement and monitoring, jurisdictional confusion, shortage of experienced crew and skilled masters, and absence of exemplary trial and punishment.

Finally, currently Bangladesh does not have the advanced technology and trained manpower necessary to carry out river surveys regularly. As a result, the river routes remain uncharted for a long time. Reduction of the depth of rivers by siltation and presence of underwater wreckage remain hidden dangers, and hazard warnings are often ignored by the operators. The government's own reports indicate that the port authorities do not clearly specify the required draft for shifting vessel from high seas to the inlet channels, for example, from Kutubdia to Chittagong outer anchorage.

To sum it all up, recent "episodes of ships capsizing have created a cumulative impact that endangers the rare aquatic ecology of the Sundarbans," warned Donna Lisenby, energy campaign manager for Waterkeeper Alliance. "If the Rampal and Orion coal-fired power plants are built, the resultant dramatic increase in ship traffic will further imperil the Sundarbans." Needless to point out that tightening of regulations, better enforcement, and investment in technology and training will not only facilitate our transition to middle-income status, but also have spillover beneficial effects in all modern sectors, including manufacturing, transportation, and energy. As they say, "prevention is better than cure."

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist, and Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA. His new book *Economic Crosscurrents* will be published later this year.

A crucial stocktaking

Review of human rights situation in Bangladesh under Universal Periodic Review



TODAY, Bangladesh's human rights situation will be reviewed at the United Nations' Human Rights Council in Geneva, under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism. The UN Human Rights Council carries out UPR review every four and a half years and this is the third-cycle review for Bangladesh.

Along with the state report, various UN organisations, national and international human rights organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), and the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh submitted their reports under this review process. During a three-hour interactive session, representatives of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) will present the initiatives and measures undertaken by the government to improve the country's existing human rights situation as well as the progress of implementation of various recommendations made by the government during the second-cycle UPR in 2013.

On the basis of this, other member states of the UN may ask questions and make recommendations. The GoB can accept those recommendations or may reject them giving justifications for rejections, if any. The GoB may also make some voluntary pledges to improve the human rights situation in the country.

The Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB), since its inception, has been actively involved in this process. In fact, the Forum emerged as a result of an initiative by some leading human rights organisations of Bangladesh which joined hands to work together in the UPR process in 2007. The Forum subsequently expanded its work beyond reporting to the Geneva process, and has been undertaking stakeholder engagement and advocacy initiatives to defend and advance human rights in the country. At present, 20 organisations are members of this Forum, with ASK working as its secretariat.

Like the previous two UPR sessions, the Forum has submitted a comprehensive shadow report parallel with the government report. This report has been produced based on data and information gathered from the Forum's own and other sources and has made some precise recommendations for the GoB. This is also intended to draw the attention of other UN member states so they may take it into consideration while making recommendations to the GoB to promote and protect human rights in Bangladesh. In this cycle of UPR, 29 stakeholder reports from various national and international human rights organisations have been submitted.

On April 12, 2018, a Geneva-based non-governmental organisation called UPR-Info organised a pre-session discussion with member states and civil society members from Bangladesh including Forum representatives who attended the discussion and made verbal statements. They covered a wide range of human rights issues based on the submitted report. In their statement, Forum representatives recommended to make time-bound commitments to reform relevant laws to address enforced disappearances; establish an independent commission to ensure transparent and accountable investigation of all alleged human rights



Activists protest the Digital Security Act in Dhaka in February.

PHOTO: AFP

violations by state agencies and to ensure enforcement of the Torture and Custodial Death (Deterrent) Act, 2013 and refrain from any regressive amendment to the Act; and also enforce the Supreme Court Guidelines. They also demanded the repeal of all regressive and restrictive provisions of the laws and to refrain from adopting any laws which are detrimental to citizens' freedom of expression and association and assembly.

To attend the actual review session to be held today, a delegation from Human Rights Forum Bangladesh is currently visiting Geneva headed by Forum convener for further lobbying with the member states to raise human rights issues. It is evident from their discussions with various stakeholders, experts, diplomats and representatives from international organisations that issues like freedom of expression, freedom of press, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, right to protest and assembly, independence of judiciary, strengthening the National Human Rights Commission, the Rohingya issue, repealing special provision of Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, review of the Draft Digital Security Act 2018, enacting the Anti-Discriminatory Act, and rights of indigenous communities and other minorities will be prioritised.

In addition, implementation status of the recommendations from the second cycle will be assessed extensively. After the review session today, the final report will be prepared and adopted at the UN Human Rights Council on May 17, 2018. The third cycle of the UPR session is thus very important for various reasons.

Firstly, the current GoB has been in power for two consecutive terms and has had enough time to improve the human rights situation, especially to implement commitments made in Geneva during the second cycle. As per usual practice, the member states would like to review what progress has been made.

Secondly, Bangladesh is currently on track to be ranked as a developing country and the government is also committed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Human rights

and justice for all, leaving no one behind, are among the basic elements in the set of pledges made under the SDGs, goal 16 in particular. Therefore, it would be of member states' interest to learn how the Bangladesh government is going to mainstream issues of human rights, justice and equity in the development agenda for the period leading up to 2030.

Thirdly, there is a possibility that the government will highlight its priorities such as economic development, countering threats of terrorism, and managing the challenges arising from the massive influx of Rohingyas, which are most likely to draw solidarity of the international community. It remains to be seen if such matters overshadow equally genuine concerns for human rights, justice and equity, without which neither development nor the capacity to cope with terrorism and Rohingya-related challenges can be sustainable.

Fourthly, there will be a national parliamentary election this year. It would not be surprising if the participating member states' interest in civil and political rights, especially those related to inclusive election and ensuring people's right to vote, is accompanied by expectations of a more specific and time-bound action plan to implement commitments made on the basis of recommendations from the earlier cycle of UPR.

The uniqueness of the UPR process is that while each of the other UN human rights treaty bodies focuses on one particular topic based on the specific treaty, the UPR process covers comprehensive human rights issues. Thus a state's efforts in improving its overall human rights conditions are assessed against its commitments made under the UN human rights mechanism as well as against the obligations laid out by the Constitution and the national laws of the country.

Sheepa Hafiza is the convener of Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB), a coalition of 20 human rights and development organisations