

A timely undertaking Secondary education programme would bring in much-needed reform

WE applaud the government for undertaking the "Secondary Education Development Programme"—the country's largest-ever education-related project—under the budget of next fiscal year. A mammoth sum of Tk 137,666 crore is to be allocated for the project and its core objective is to enhance quality of secondary education and boost skills development of students to arm them with the skill sets needed for the job market.

The programme is timely which, if implemented properly in the coming years, could do wonders for the quality of secondary education and career and educational opportunities for students. However, it should also be noted that with such mega projects comes the attendant risk of mega-failures.

The project is unique for another reason: it is a test case for a unified budget where development and non-development budget are merged. This is intended to increase efficiency in terms of use of resources and implementation.

We hope that the programme has taken into account the need to equip students with the IT skills and technical expertise needed for a modern workforce. Already, the proposed programme is slated to bring in much-needed reform in critical areas such as monthly pay order for teachers of non-government schools and school curriculum and exams—the lack of incentivisation of teachers and the menace of HSC and SSC question paper leaks are some of many problems plaguing the secondary education sector.

At the end of the day, it comes down to the capacity of the education ministry to properly implement the five-year programme. The ministry is set to come up with schemes regarding implementation and it is crucial that along with the operational details, mechanisms of accountability and transparency be put in place because it is taxpayers' money that is at stake.

The polythene menace

Promote jute as an alternative

POLYTHENE is not biodegradable and is largely to blame for the filling up of canals and drainage systems in the city. Although Bangladesh banned its use nearly a decade ago, its widespread use continues in the absence of both recycling and a viable alternative to polythene as packing material. We generate around 1,700 tonnes of plastic waste daily and the import of plastic raw materials costs us Tk 2,000 crore annually.

The sad reality is that no government agency has been able to control the production, distribution, usage and dumping of polybags, and the use of polythene shopping bags is widespread. We need a nationwide campaign to raise people's awareness of what polythene is doing to our environment and to clamp down on factories producing polythene.

We believe the government should vigorously promote synthesised polymer from jute fibre that was discovered by a scientist at Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation back in 2012. Jute-based packaging bag should be introduced on a wide scale because it is biodegradable while being water- and air-resistant. Jute polymer, as it is known, can carry about one and a half times the load of a traditional polythene bag while being environmentally friendly. The very fact that it is perishable in nature could be the answer to our environmental problems, and canals, waterways and drainage systems could be freed from the dreaded polythene and plastic products.

Large-scale production of jute polymer would go a long way in reviving our jute industry, save farmers involved in jute production, ensure that there is a market for jute round the year, and mitigate environmental concerns.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Humiliating defeat for Bangladesh

Bangladesh endured a humiliating defeat against Afghanistan in the first T20 cricket match in their three-match series. Many have questioned some of the decisions made by captain Shakib Al Hasan.

For example, why did Shakib opt to bowl first when the pitch seemed good for batting? Why did he continue using fast bowlers even though they were expensive and the pitch seemed better suited for spinners? Why did he not use Mahmudullah or Mosaddek more?

Bangladesh is a mature test-playing nation and such a defeat against Afghanistan indicates the need for serious reflection.

Aminur Rahim, Mohakhali

Incomplete construction work

Questions were raised in parliament in regard to the development of a 2.1km-Mehdipur-Abdul Nabi Road in Daganbhuiyan upazilla, Feni. Only half the road has been completed while the rest has remained untouched for a long time. The local member of parliament (Feni-2) has repeatedly sent demi-official letters to the chief engineer of the local government and engineering department (LGED), yet no action has been taken to complete the road construction.

We urgently request the LGED officials to take necessary steps to finish the job by the end of this year.

Prof M Sadeq Sonar, By mail



ALI RIAZ

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

SINCE the government launched the so-called "anti-drug drive" in early May, akin to the Philippines' "war on drugs", more than one hundred people have been subjected to extrajudicial killings. Although the number and pace of these killings, described by the government as "gunfight", have been staggering, extrajudicial killing is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. It has become a familiar tool of government for more than a decade. The number of people killed in 2016 stood at 156; in the year before, at least 178 people lost their lives at the hands of law enforcing agencies. All along, the members of the ruling party and law enforcing agencies rejected these allegations. This time around, an audio recording of an AL leader's last-minute conversations with his family over telephone before being killed by the Rapid Action Battalion has engendered emotional reactions across the country and emerged as unambiguous evidence of what was already known to many for years—that most of these crossfires/encounters/gunfights,

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whether against the militants, opposition activists or petty criminals, were staged.

It is in this context that the Secretary General of the ruling party, Obaidul Quader, made the comment that "one or two 'mistakes' may happen during such drives". This comment, however callous it may sound, is regrettably too familiar. This government and its predecessors, since 2004, never acknowledged these incidents as extrajudicial killings, let alone take responsibility.

There is no dearth of reminding the incumbent of what it said prior to coming to power. In March 2005, a

become the defining feature of the current system. The rhetoric and actions of the ruling party have emboldened those who are blatantly disregarding the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution and engaged in wanton killings. The government not only describes these victims as "drug dealers" but implicitly argues that as a menace to society, these citizens are not worthy of due process. Their words and attitudes have, essentially, acted as an indemnification of these acts.

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order. At least 57 people died in custody and hundreds were injured by torture during the operation, while the government claimed that only 12 died of "heart attack" in hospitals after being handed over to police.

The High Court, in its full verdict released in January 2017, said: "Even a hardcore criminal has the right to be tried in the competent Court of law for his alleged perpetration of crimes. He cannot be physically annihilated or killed by the members of the joint forces for his alleged crimes." The verdict also maintained that the law-enforcing agencies or the joint forces cannot take the law into their own hands and by doing so, they have infringed the relevant provisions of the Constitution. The court not only pointed to the criminal liabilities of the individuals but stated unequivocally that "the State cannot shy away from its responsibility for the illegal and unconstitutional actions of the public functionaries" (*Dhaka Tribune*, January 3, 2017). Understandably, the ruling party leaders cheered the verdict.

The disregard for fundamental rights, the constitution and the court by the government is deeply disturbing, but in the absence of an accountable political environment, limited democratic space and a heightened role of law enforcement agencies, it appears to have become the "new normal". What is frightening is the normalisation of extrajudicial killings and rationalisation of these unlawful acts by supporters of the government. The highly polarised political environment, fear of being ostracised, of being labelled as unpatriotic and of being vilified have precluded members of the civil society to speak out against extrajudicial killings for long, particularly when political activists of the opposition parties became victims or when it was adopted as a strategy to quash militancy.

The passionate reactions to the killings of the AL leader, a welcome development, appear to be mostly about the "incident" rather than questioning the strategy of extrajudicial killings. The silence, which has increasingly turned into a social paralysis, is enabling the continuation of the phenomenon. It is time to break the silence and confront the phenomenon, rather than reacting to one incident at a time.

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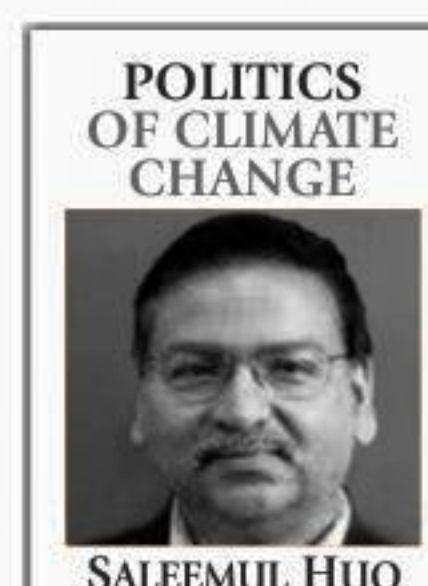


newsletter of then-opposition Awami League, in the context of the establishment of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) by its arch-rival the BNP and the operations of the RAB, read, "These forces have been given so much power and authority that they have blatantly disregarded constitutional provisions, human rights laws as well as court law. Almost every day they are catching people on different false charges, and are brutally murdering them, covering it by calling it 'crossfire deaths'. The victims are not tried or given any opportunity for self-defence." Additionally, many have pointed to the promise made in the 2008 election manifesto: "Extrajudicial killings will be stopped." But none of this has deterred the ruling party from legitimising these extrajudicial killings over the years.

The culture of impunity has continued as the ruling party has increasingly become more reliant on the force as the principal mode of governance and authoritarianism has

disregarded the court of the land. We may recall that the High Court, in a verdict in September 2016 regarding indemnification of the members of the law enforcing agencies, reminded us the very foundation of the rule of law: "no one is above law, and everybody is subject to law." The observation was made while delivering the verdict on the writ petition regarding the "Joint Drive Indemnity Act, 2003." The Indemnity Act was passed by the parliament after engaging members of the army and law enforcement agencies in a security operation called "Operation Clean Heart", an operation akin to the current anti-drug drive. The operation was conducted under the BNP-led government from October 16, 2002 to January 9, 2003. On February 24, 2003, the government enacted the "Joint Drive Indemnity Act, 2003" providing indemnity to all joint forces' actions. The then government claimed that the operation was necessary for recovering illegal weapons and restoring law and

A year after Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement



SALEEMUL HUQ

renewing on a commitment made by its president in Paris. This had several consequences, including the halting of the US pledge to provide funding for the Green Climate Fund (GCF) as part of the commitment of developed countries to provide USD 100 billion each year from 2020 onwards.

It also meant that the US federal government would not try to fulfil the commitments that it had made under President Obama to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases.

However, the worst news is by far for the citizens of the US rather than for the rest of the world. This is the denial of the science and reality of human induced climate change by Trump and the head of the Environment Protection Agency (EPA). This has already had the effect of depriving US citizens of the protection from its own federal government to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change. The more than 4,000 deaths of US citizens in Puerto Rico attributable to Hurricane Maria

are just one example.

In contrast, the good news is that many people in the US are not following or even supporting their president. There is a growing movement of Americans who say they are still in the Paris Agreement and will do their best to fulfil the US commitments made under President Obama.

For example, around 20 governors of states, led by Governor Jerry Brown of California, have declared their intentions to fulfil their obligations under the Paris Agreement. In fact, California (which by itself is the 7th largest economy in the world) will be hosting a global summit on climate change in September this year.

At the same time, Mayor De Blasio of New York is leading many dozens of mayors of cities who are committed to fulfilling their obligations as well. In fact, he has re-constituted President Obama's Climate Change Experts Advisory Committee which Trump had dismissed as soon as he moved into the White House. This committee is now based at Columbia University in New York and is being funded by both the city of New York and the Governor of the State of New York.

Another even more important change for the better is the market driven shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy across the US even in states under Republican governors. This, despite efforts by Trump to subsidise the coal industry. No one wants to invest in coal any more.

At the international level the major reaction to the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was to rally everyone else to redouble their commitment. Thus, for example, President Macron of France offered to make up the financial

contribution of the US in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) while other developed countries have promised to make up the US deficit of USD 100 billion per year from 2020 onwards.

Another important indicator of US' isolation on this issue is the fact that not a single country joined the US in withdrawing from the Paris Agreement (unlike when they withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol with Australia by their side).

Perhaps the biggest shift that has taken place, which is not necessarily directly attributable to Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, is the inexorable global shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy driven by a combination of technological advances in wind and

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Americans protest President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change outside the White House in June 2017.

PHOTO: ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP

solar energy efficiency, along with improved electricity storage capacity (which allows the intermittency problem to be solved).

Countries like China and India are in the forefront of this revolution in energy systems and are likely to be the winners in the 21st-century race to a post-fossil fuel world leaving the US behind and 20th-century technologies.

Finally, while it is important to acknowledge that the decision of Trump to officially withdraw from the Paris Agreement is not a good development for the world, nevertheless, the fact that the rest of the world, and indeed even the people in the US, don't agree with him is the ultimate good news.

One of the most important, but under-appreciated elements of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change is that while it required the leaders of all countries to come to an agreement first, the implementation of the agreement does not necessarily need those leaders anymore. Anyone and everyone can do his or her own part to implement the agreement without permission from political leaders.

In less than a year of President Trump's withdrawal, this fact has become abundantly clear.

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