

## Environmental pollution out of control

Policymakers can no longer turn a blind eye

THE report entitled "Enhancing Opportunities for Clean and Resilient Growth in Urban Bangladesh" unveiled by the World Bank is yet another reminder for policymakers and the people of the country of the monumental environmental costs of unplanned urbanisation and the lack of implementation of existing environmental laws. The statistics are shocking: nearly 2.34 lakh deaths in Bangladesh due to environmental pollution and related health risks in 2015, of which 18,000 lives were lost in Dhaka city. Today, Bangladesh is one of the worst affected countries in the world.

Both the economic costs and health implications of unbridled pollution are so severe that letting environmental pollution go unaddressed could lead to the stunting of our economic growth and even a public health crisis. The issues of encroachment upon wetlands, water pollution and air pollution, to name a few, must be seriously addressed.

Furthermore, the general lack of awareness among the populace is a major issue. For instance, how many of us know just how critically high the level of indoor pollution is? According to the WB report, air pollution is the highest in South Asian countries with fine particulate matter measuring at 2.5 micrograms both indoor and outdoor.

We understand that bringing environmental pollution under control is a formidable task. But with the necessary political will, it can be overcome. The WB has made several good recommendations which the government should take into consideration. These include institutional reforms for urban governance, making the environment clearance process more transparent and holding officials accountable. There is no alternative to ensuring accountability and transparency and strict implementation of existing environmental laws. The media is prepared to assist the government in its endeavours and we hope the issue is declared as priority number one by policymakers.

## The mystery of picked-up people returning as corpses

Government must allay the fear

ON Saturday, September 15, JCD President Mashirul Rahman Rony went missing. His family says plainclothes police picked him up from Badda but the police have denied the allegation. On Wednesday, three young men, Shaiful Alam, Monirul Alam and Monirul's friend Abul Hayat, were picked up by allegedly plainclothes police from the airport where they had gone to pick up Shaiful and Monirul's parents who were returning from Hajj. Later they also picked up two more people, one of them a 15-year-old. And again, the police denied having picked them up.

These are just a few examples of young men being picked up allegedly by members of law enforcement, their detention denied by police and then all of a sudden acknowledged with various cases against them. There are also mysterious cases of individuals being abducted and gone missing for days only to be found dead with bullet or other injuries. On Friday, the bullet-ridden bodies of three young traders of garment factory leftovers were found in a culvert in Purbachal. On Sunday, September 16, the bullet-hit bodies of two brothers from Jessore were found in two different upazilas.

These are incidents reported in a span of not even a week. There are reports of such missing people almost every day. It is frightening enough when people are picked up by apparently members of security forces. It is even more so when no security agency will admit they have been arrested or detained.

The fear of loved ones gone missing, ending up as dead bodies, is becoming a common phenomenon and it is these fears that the government is obliged to allay.

The police or any other security force is required to inform the families of anyone they arrest or detain and produce them in front of a magistrate. Denying that they have arrested someone and then admitting it a few days later violates the law of the land. The state must put an end to such arbitrary practice.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Repair lane in front of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro

Earlier, I wrote about the sorry state of the Pantha Kunja park near Karwan Bazar and it is amazing to see that the authorities concerned have already started to remove the waste dumped in the park. The renovation work of the park is in progress now. Hope it's going to be turned into a modern recreation space soon.

Not far from the park, there is a narrow lane in front of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro in Paribagh which remains busy throughout the day. People regularly go to Bishwo Shahitto Kendro to attend various cultural programmes, seminars and courses. And recently, Batighar, a prominent book store, has opened its branch in the area which also remains open all day till 10pm. But the narrow lane leading to these places is in a bad shape since no maintenance work has been done for long.

There are potholes here and there on the road which are getting bigger by the day. Moreover, rainwater has damaged the road further. We, the residents of this locality, urge the authorities to repair the lane as soon as possible.

Zahir Hyder, Paribagh



LUTFEY SIDDIQI

ARE developing countries under-utilising a wealth of diaspora resources? Can more be done with diaspora capital, expertise and connections?

At the World Economic Forum on ASEAN last week, I approached this question from three perspectives. As a contributor to the Commonwealth Secretariat's recent survey of expatriates in London, I drew on its insights. As a former investment banker with a remit across global emerging markets, I recalled the relative differences in approach by different countries. As an engaged member of the Bangladeshi diaspora, I was also able to speak from personal experience.

There are at least two reasons why developing countries can no longer rely on a linear path of economic catch-up. Rapid advances in technology are revolutionising how we organise economic activity and produce output. This is particularly disruptive for those who compete mainly on the basis of inexpensive labour. At the same time, a new backdrop of protectionism and "trade war" means that foreign markets and foreign capital will be harder to tap. What is required is a strategy of experimentation, innovation and leapfrogging.

Diaspora can help on both fronts. Harnessed correctly, their inherent bias towards their homeland can act as amplifying nodes in powerful cross-border networks. They can lend not only their expertise but also their professional reputations—two important factors in platform economies. Harnessed correctly, their savings and investments can also act as foot-soldiers in the flow of capital to developing countries, crowding in investment from other sources. Potential foreign investors often ask, "How much is your diaspora invested in this?"

It is important to distinguish between *involuntary* and *voluntary* involvement of the diaspora. For many years, countries such as the Philippines and Bangladesh have enjoyed a large and growing flow of remittances from overseas workers.

However, the vast majority of this is obliged by poverty. These are involuntary remittances sent for the upkeep of immediate family back home. They are certainly not a proxy for active engagement by the professional and entrepreneur diaspora.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's survey and workshop with expatriate focus groups in London reveals a "market failure" in diaspora engagement. There is ample supply and demand but they fail to meet at significant levels. Three-quarters of respondents said that they send remittances to their countries of origin. Two-thirds said that they would like to invest or park their savings in the home country. However, in practice, less than half of them currently have a bank account in the home

A significant proportion of the diaspora are eager to learn more while some others may have lost interest. It is telling that some embassies were unable to mobilise the one hundred respondents required from each country in the survey. Several of us have been actively hosted and courted by ambassadors of *other* countries such as Malaysia or Singapore. A measurable objective of diplomatic missions has to be the extent to which they contribute to building awareness of economic opportunities and foster relationships with potential investors.

The good news about the fourth industrial revolution is that digital technology can accelerate diaspora engagement in at least four ways:

First, progress in payments technology is already lowering the cost of



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country. Only one in ten owns any business there, either on their own or with a local partner.

What explains the gap between interest and action? What can be done to overcome it?

Successful models can be found in Taiwan, Korea, Israel or India. Some have reached out as part of a proactively designed strategy by the government. Some have fostered interaction without direct government intervention.

However, in all cases, the tone and attitude set by the government ensured that diaspora are seen as an asset, not as a threat or as "traitors" for choosing to live abroad.

Governments, through their embassies, have a marketing role to play.

transferring money. This needs to continue apace with assistance from regulators. Secondly, technology around digital identity and communication should make it more convenient for an expatriate in the UK, for example, to open and operate a bank account in Bangladesh. Especially at a time when hard currency is costly to acquire and deposit interest is low in the west, developing countries should be able to obtain a float of diaspora deposits within its shores.

Thirdly, technology could be easily deployed to enhance the administrative experience of diaspora engagement. I invested in a version of "diaspora bonds" issued by Bangladesh at a time when the country's reserves were a third of what

they are now. In fact, it is precisely at times of external account weakness when diaspora investment is most valuable. Like many others, I value the option of withdrawing my money at any time but, in reality, have not felt the need to do so.

However, the process of acquiring those bonds is onerous and once acquired, claiming coupons requires a nominee in the country (my elderly father!) to obtain signatures from me before submitting those paper bonds physically to the bank every six months. This is certainly not the stuff of digital leapfrog!

Technology should also help ensure accountability and allow the tracking of processes in the way that a courier company tracks the movement of its parcels. In my case, relatively simple queries have taken more than a year to elicit a response—much less a resolution. The Commonwealth survey highlights issues of governance, perceived corruption and a weak financial system. However, the survey also shows that expatriates are positive about the fundamental growth story that non-diaspora investors may undervalue. Most members of the diaspora are familiar and comfortable with the uncertainties inherent in emerging markets. Their request is that government processes do not add to those uncertainties.

Finally, "platform technology" can be used to create communities of diaspora. Similar to Facebook or LinkedIn groups, members can be categorised and matched according to interests and what they can offer. Communities can cut across interests in the same location (for example, multi-sector professionals in London) or they can cut across locations (for example, economists in London and Manila). Over time, these can expand into peer-to-peer investing and mentoring platforms. Like all platforms, professional communities will need to be designed, nurtured, curated and used constructively.

The key to effective diaspora engagement in the fourth industrial revolution is process and governance, powered by digital technology.

Professor Lutfe Siddiqi was a panelist on the session titled "Missed Opportunity: Diaspora Networks" at the World Economic Forum on ASEAN 2018.

## How Idlib reveals danger of a larger bloodbath

## THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

WHILE the US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, warned the Syrian and Russian governments to stand down from attacking Idlib—the last stronghold of the armed Syrian

opposition—as that may lead to a possible "bloodbath", the term itself brought to mind chapter 10 of the book *The WikiLeaks Files: The World According to US Empire*. According to WikiLeaks, the chapter "reveals how the US aggressively pursued regime change in Syria, igniting a bloodbath [emphasis mine]" in the country and, perhaps, even the wider region.

According to leaked cables included in the chapter, the goal of the US government going as far back as December 2006 was to "undermine the Syrian government by any available means, and that what mattered was whether US action would help destabilise the government, not what other impacts the action might have."

This idea that some western governments (and intelligence agencies) were eagerly waiting for the downfall of the Assad government in Syria long before the Syrian crisis actually began was further corroborated by former French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Roland Dumas, who said in an interview with the French TV station La Chaîne

What the US and its allies are doing is a cynical media manoeuvre to delegitimise the Syrian government and its sovereign right to respond to heavily armed groups causing havoc all across Syria.

parlementaire in 2013 that: "I was in England two years before the violence in Syria [began]... I met with top British officials, who confessed to me that they were preparing something in Syria... Britain was organising an invasion of rebels into Syria."

Dumas also said that the operation to destabilise Syria went "way back". And the real reason why it was "prepared, preconceived and planned" was because the Assad government had "a very anti-Israeli stance". This again was substantiated by some of Hillary Clinton's emails that were leaked to and published by WikiLeaks in 2016.

One of those emails, dated July 24, 2012, said that, "The fall of the House of

Idlib was occupied by terrorists who needed to be eradicated for peace to return to Syria, Nikki Haley warned Russia, "Don't test us."

After that, the US military made public a plan to unilaterally launch another attack on Syria, which dangerously included attacking Russian and Iranian military positions, according to the Russian Ministry of Defence. This was clearly done purposefully to send a message to the Iranian and Russian governments. But having invested so much in supporting the Assad government in Syria, it is difficult to see either Russia or Iran back down now in the face of US threats—and already both governments have said as much in their respective responses.

Despite legitimate criticisms against the Assad regime—particularly with the president having broad and unchecked decree authority under a long-standing state of emergency until the early stages of the Syrian crisis—the true extent of outside meddling in Syria, according to these documents, is truly astonishing. Yet, shocking as they may sound, these revelations also expose the double standard of the US as it accuses the Syrian and Russian governments of being



Rebel fighters attend military training in Idlib province, Syria, on October 27, 2016.

Assad could well ignite a sectarian war between the Shiites and the majority Sunnis of the region drawing in Iran, which, in the view of Israeli commanders [sic] would not be a bad thing for Israel and its Western allies." Another dated January 1, 2001 said that the best way to help Israel deal with Iran was "to help the people of Syria overthrow the regime of Bashar Assad."

One email sent by the former close confidante of both Bill and Hillary Clinton, Cheryl Mills, to Ms Clinton on September 24, 2009, went as far as to describe how western governments could achieve this. It said, "When Jared and I went to Syria, it was because we knew

wholly responsible for the violence in Syria, when it knows that the US and its allies are at least partly responsible.

A part of that double standard includes the US pretending as if Idlib is not controlled by terrorists—rather by what the western mainstream media hypocritically calls "moderate rebels"—when the US Department of State itself admitted as recently as last year, in one of its travel warnings, that Idlib is controlled by al-Qaeda. While this game of shadows continues, the US and Russia, the world's two greatest nuclear powers, edge closer to a direct confrontation. Last week, in response to Russia's accusations that

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But what is most tragic is that this could all have been easily avoided if only the western mainstream media would do its job of honestly covering the news, instead of going along with the regime change plans of the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower had warned about. As that would instantly put an end to such Machiavellian games in the face of increased public opposition to the west's interventionism in Syria.

In the absence of honest reporting, what we have instead is an (nuclear) arms race, as evidenced by President Putin's over-the-top show of Russia's nuclear arms capability last year, as well as the largest ever joint military drill (by some margin) held by Russia and China this week.

And, to add to that, we now have a melting pot in Syria just waiting to explode at any moment unless those cheering for intervention recognises where that path eventually leads to.