

Averting a global climate chaos

Political leadership is the number one priority

THE just-released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report should serve as a clear warning to world leaders that time is fast running out in the fight against global warming. The report paints a grim picture as according to the IPCC, efforts to tackle climate change will have to be more aggressive than ever if we are to cap global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius. The average surface temperature has already increased by 1 degree Celsius and could go up further by two or three degrees—which greatly heightens the risk of extreme weather around the globe. The stakes are especially high for low-lying countries like Bangladesh where sea levels are already on the rise.

The report lays out four pathways for us to avert the ensuing global crisis. The primary and the most achievable option calls for a swift decline in CO2 emissions to avoid an “overshoot” of the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold. The international body of climate change researchers has made an urgent call for fossil fuels to be phased out. The importance of energy efficiency in transportation, land use, industries, etc., cannot be overstated. The bottom line is that there needs to be a radical reduction in energy consumption in the global economy which requires a major transformation in societies around the world.

Governments must realise that the responsibility to avert an environmental breakdown in the near future is a collective one. And political will is the number one priority. All countries, including Bangladesh, must not only enforce existing environmental laws but do much more to be energy-efficient in all sectors. Furthermore, countries like Bangladesh that are vulnerable to the myriad effects of global warming should keep up diplomatic pressure to ensure that the high carbon-emitting nations contribute their fair share to funds to protect populations at risk.

Six months for release order to reach jail?

Decrepit state of bureaucratic efficiency

WE really do not know what to say about the manner in which an innocent man, who passed 13 long years in Khulna jail on death row, died without seeing his family. The High Court declared Obaid innocent six months ago, by which time he was fighting a losing battle against colon cancer. Due to the excruciatingly slow pace with which our bureaucracy works, the paperwork for his release order only reached Khulna jail after six months, ironically, on the same day that Obaid died!

Obaid's case is a shoddy, horrendous example of the bureaucratic red-tape culture that has engulfed every facet of government. All he wanted was to spend his dying days in the company of his family, which he had been deprived of for 13 long years for a crime he did not commit. But then, Obaid is just another nameless ordinary citizen of this country for whom nothing but injustice was in store.

We wonder how many more such Obaid's are languishing in the prison system, and like Obaid, their release orders may come too late. We hope that an inquiry into this sordid affair is launched to hold those responsible to account, because until we can establish accountability there will be no end to this state of affairs. The poor man was not able to die in peace surrounded by family. What could be more pathetic than that?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Regulating Facebook-based online stores

With the upsurge in the number of internet and smartphone users, Facebook has become an essential part of the lives of many in Bangladesh. The social media website has numerous features including one that allows users to sell their products to others. A recent report estimates that over 15,000 so-called Facebook stores are active in Bangladesh. While it's a good thing that Facebook provides a platform to entrepreneurs and people can conveniently buy products while on the go, there are concerns that these shops deliver low-quality products. Since people cannot check their products physically before making the payment, there's a risk that they may be deceived in some cases.

Since these “shops” are not registered with the government, the Consumer Rights Law doesn't cover them. The government has rules and regulations for formal e-commerce businesses, too. But they cover online shops founded by the owners themselves.

In this case, however, since Facebook isn't involved in the business itself and acts merely as a platform between sellers and customers, it's impractical, and even impossible, to implicate the social media company.

The government should form a mechanism so that consumers can make complaints if they believe they are being deceived and defrauded. If these Facebook-based shops are not regulated properly, the very reputation of e-commerce will wane in the near future.

M Meraj Hossain, East West University, Dhaka

In July this year, the 17th amendment to the Constitution was approved in parliament with a provision to extend the tenure of the 50 reserved seats for women for 25 more years. What's your view on this?

This is a very unfortunate development in our politics. We have been advocating for holding direct elections for the reserved seats for women for many years. Increasing the number of reserved seats and restructuring the constituencies are also among our demands. But to our astonishment, the draft bill was approved by the cabinet, on January 29, 2018, with a provision to extend the tenure of the 50 reserved seats for 25 more years. This was done without any discussion on the issue in parliament or any other platforms. And later, on July 8, the bill was passed in parliament. The manner in which this has been passed, without any regard for the legitimate demands for reforms in the bill, is really surprising.

This bill has come at a time when we are celebrating women's achievement in all spheres of society. There are many success stories: our women have scaled the Everest, our girls' cricket team have won international cricket matches and brought honour for the country, and for the first time in the country, a woman has been appointed to the rank of a major general. Women have been joining the most challenging professions such as journalism, law enforcement agencies, peace keeping forces, etc.—breaking the social taboos.

Against this backdrop, the passing of the 17th amendment to the Constitution came as a shock to us as this is contradictory to the ideals of women's political empowerment. It also contradicts the promises made by the government as well as the National Women Development Policy and the CEDAW convention. Instead of empowering women, this law will further weaken the process of women's political empowerment. Women in the reserved seats will become further marginalised as they will not have any specific roles and responsibilities. They won't be able to build up their own constituencies without participating in direct elections.

Although there is no legal barrier for women to participate in the national elections from the 300 general seats, given the patriarchal character of our political parties, it is quite difficult for women



Ayesha Khanam

nations largely depend on money and muscle power, women candidates hardly have any chance.

Some of the women MPs have shared with us how badly they are treated while performing their official duties. Often, even a DC refuses to meet an MP from a reserved seat. Thus, it is clear that without being elected through a direct election, a woman MP cannot earn respect from others, let alone work for the people.

Can you please elaborate further on the recommendations made by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad?

At present, there are 50 reserved seats for women in parliament which are allotted to the parties based on their proportional representation in parliament. We have proposed that reserved seats should be increased by one-third (of the general seats), taking the total number of seats to 450. In other words, 150 seats should be reserved for women, who will have to contest in direct elections. We have also suggested restructuring of the existing constituencies. Each constituency for a reserved seat should be created by combining two contiguous constituencies from the general seats. We had prepared a draft bill regarding this and submitted it to the government, but it was overlooked.

In 2008, the Awami League in its election manifesto promised that if voted to power, the reserved seats for women

seats. Then in 2009, the prime minister said that the reserved seats for women would be increased from 45 (there were 45 seats then) to 100 and they would be elected through direct elections. The same was also mentioned in the National Women Development Policy 2011.

Introducing direct elections in the reserved seats of the local government has been touted as a big achievement for the government. How would you evaluate the current situation?

Of course, it was a big achievement. But the Local Government Act itself is problematic. The power of local government has been squeezed and there is no autonomy. Whereas the development of a specific area should be done by the local government, in reality the local government bodies have no power to do so. And when it comes to the women members of the local government institutions, many of them are not even aware of their roles and responsibilities. Women members do not get the same facilities as their male counterparts do. They are not getting proper honorarium and transport facilities. They are given fewer responsibilities than their male counterparts. We have intensively worked at the grassroots level in 10/12 districts. I think what they need is education, training and resources. Of course, there are many women leaders who are quite aware of their roles and responsibilities.

ties, especially women politicians in the big cities. But is there an enabling environment for the women to work? Think about the case of Selina Hayat Ivy, the mayor of Narayanganj. Although she won the mayoral election, our patriarchal political system has crippled her political power.

However, there was a time when women members of the local government were not even given letters prior to the meetings. There were instances where meetings were called at night so women members could not attend those. I must admit that the situation has improved a lot from that.

How far do you think our major political parties have progressed in terms of ensuring gender equality in their party structures?

The third amendment to the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 1972 requires political parties to keep at least 33 percent of all committee positions for women including the central committee. In reality, no major political parties could fulfil this obligation. Although our two big political parties always say that they are open to recruit more women members to their parties, what women members of these parties tell us is that they face discrimination. As the basic characteristics of our politics are still patriarchal in nature, the issue of gender equality is not addressed in party meetings and the women members in these parties are largely excluded from the real decision-making processes.

Moreover, it has to be understood that unless we can ensure a safe and harassment-free environment for women, their political empowerment would remain only a dream. But do any of our political parties address the issue of violence against women? Did they address the issue of sexual harassment of women in public transport? Do they not understand that this is a disgrace to the nation? Have you ever heard anything about the issue of violence against women being discussed in parliament? Rape and all forms of violence are tools to subjugate and subordinate women. Why then do the political parties that talk about women's empowerment and equal rights do not address these issues in real life? It is evident from this that our political leaders, irrespective of the party they belong to, still do not give gender issue a priority.

IPCC REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

It's worse than we thought

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE United Nation's scientific body on climate change, namely the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has just released a special report

which is a scientific as well as political report of great significance and could be a game-changer in galvanising enhanced action to tackle climate change.

The report has a controversial history. The consensus on the long-term global temperature goal used to be a rise of 2 degrees Centigrade for many years.

However, this was not acceptable to the most vulnerable developing countries, including Bangladesh, as even a 2-degree temperature rise would put millions of their poorest citizens at risk of severe adverse climate change impacts.

Hence in the run-up to the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) held in Paris in December 2015, the vulnerable countries, including Bangladesh, made a concerted effort to limit the long-term temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Centigrade.

This demand was initially met with strong resistance from not just the developed countries but also developing countries such as China and India, and especially Saudi Arabia. The argument that they made was that keeping global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees, while not impossible, was extremely difficult. Our counter-argument was that as long as it was not impossible it was the right thing to do.

After two weeks of extremely intensive diplomacy and media work, we managed to persuade almost every country to agree to our demand. The one exception was the delegation from Saudi Arabia who wanted to ask the IPCC to prepare a special report on the topic first (which



The IPCC climate change report has made an urgent call to phase out fossil fuels.

PHOTO: AFP

would take several years).

In the end, in the last hour of the last day, after a phone call from then President Hollande of France to the Saudi King, the Saudi delegation withdrew its objection.

Then some months later, at the plenary of the IPCC, it was actually agreed to have them prepare a scientific report on temperature rise up to 1.5 degrees. This report, which involved several hundred scientists from all over the world and went through numerous reviews by experts and governments, was finally approved at the IPCC plenary in Korea on October 8.

Even here the Saudi delegation tried to water down the recommendations of the scientists but fortunately other countries prevailed in keeping the scientists'

language intact.

The first main message is that the global mean temperature has already increased by more than 1 degree Centigrade compared to pre-industrial levels and the impacts of human-induced climate change are already being felt. And at this rate the effects will be much more severe than had been predicted in previous reports. Hence the problem is much more urgent now.

The second main message is that staying below 1.5 degrees will indeed be very difficult but is still possible. Hence efforts by all countries and actors need to be redoubled to tackle climate change. This will require much greater

political will.

The third message relates to what needs to be done and how to achieve the target. This requires phasing out fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum and natural gas as soon as possible. We need to transition the global economy (as well as every national economy) into a hundred percent “renewable energy economy” no later than 2050.

Therefore, it is hoped that this IPCC report will raise the alarm bells for the global emergency that is climate change and galvanise actions by all actors.

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