

Promises galore in election manifestos

But are they doable?

BOTH the major political parties have come out with their manifestos containing a plethora of promises. Some are restatements of commitments of the past unfulfilled, some new ones. One would have rather wished that these were revealed much earlier than only ten days before the election. There is little time for the voters to internalise these and question the candidates on their promises during the campaign. This only shows how serious the parties are about manifestos and how seriously they take the voters. However, we will take this opportunity to posit a few questions. The list being long, we shall deal only with a few that we consider of extreme importance.

The Awami League (AL) plans to increase GDP growth rate to 10 percent (from current 7.8 percent) within the next five years—where the hundreds of billions of dollars needed to boost growth by more than two points will come from remains a mystery. We have been promised that 1.28 crore jobs will be created over next five years—how this will be done is not clear either because, according to BBS, the industrial sector which is a major employer could only create employment for only 300,000 people in the seven years till FY2016-17. We have also been promised that order will be brought to Dhaka's chaotic transport sector by introducing a mass transport system, etc., work on which only started in earnest this year, having being in the anvil for the last eight years. All in all, a whole lot of commitments but not much detail about how to achieve them.

The BNP has its own manifesto with lofty promises too. If elected to power, economic growth is to be raised to 11 percent but there is no timeframe mentioned. Like AL, BNP promises one crore new jobs but fails to say how they'll be created. There is also a promise to raise minimum wage in the RMG sector to Tk 12,000 within two years. At the end of the day, we are left with starkly similar manifestos in that both parties promise a lot without little explanation as to how these major goals are going to be attained.

Indiscriminate hill cutting must stop

Why are the laws not enforced?

THIS daily had reported yesterday that some influential people have been destroying the small and medium sized hills in three upazilas of Tangail to fill up some low-lying areas and wetlands, without any consideration for the environment or the ecosystem of the area. And not only in Tangail, illegal hill cutting has been going on in all the hilly districts of the country including Chattogram, Sylhet and Bandarban, as this daily had reported earlier.

Hills are being razed in the name of development—for building housing projects or other commercial purposes—which is prohibited by the law. For example, Bangladesh Environment Preservation Act 1995 (amended in 2000) prohibits cutting of hills without an approval from the authorities concerned. Also, the Building Construction Act, 1952 puts restriction on hill cutting without permission. But as these laws are hardly enforced, hill cutting has been going on unabated.

In this particular case, people who are behind destroying the hills are saying that these hills are on private land and so there is no barrier to raze them. But the fact is that cutting hillocks on private land is also a punishable offence. Therefore, the government must ensure that laws are strictly enforced against such illegal acts. Also, the local administration as well as the DoE must come forward to stop such crimes. Indiscriminate hill cutting, which has a negative impact on a particular area's ecosystem and poses a great risk of landslide, must stop once and for all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The CEC in denial

The Chief Election Commissioner says he fails to see how there isn't a "level playing field". On the other hand, Mahbub Talukder, a dissenting commissioner, indicated that a "level playing field" is still elusive. Who is telling the truth?

The media has reported and from what we already know, candidates belonging to the opposition camp aren't being given a fair and equal chance to campaign. Their rallies are often attacked. Even the motorcades of Kamal Hossain, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Moudud Ahmad weren't spared. Candidates like Barrister Mahbub Uddin Khokon were shot at using rubber bullets by the police.

I live in the Farmgate area of Dhaka and haven't yet noticed a single poster of the opposition candidate. The person nominated by BNP for this constituency is on the run as there are cases filed against him.

Is this not indicative of what the actual situation is?

More interestingly, heavyweight AL candidate and minister, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, alleged that CEC personally called him to ensure that his BNP opponent can also carry out campaigning. If this is true, the CEC himself privately recognised where the field is not even. So why is he denying it in public? **Ragib Hasan, By e-mail**

Saving our girls from stalkers

It's our collective fight

NAZNIN TITHI

HAVING barely survived an attack by a group of stalkers on December 10, Lucky Ghosh fights for her life at a hospital in Manikganj, while her stalker Ashikuzzaman, who led the attack on the 15-year-old girl with sharp weapons, has been roaming free. Although Lucky's father has filed a case with the local police station accusing five people including Ashikuzzaman as the main accused, as of writing this article, the police could not arrest him.

The story is pretty much the same in the majority of cases. We only come to know about incidents of stalking when the stalkers go as far as attacking their victims physically, or in the worst cases, rape or murder them.

What is surprising is that sometimes people, who we expect to fight against stalking or sexual harassment, turn out to be stalkers themselves. We came across one such news report in October this year when there were allegations against a 45-year-old teacher of stalking his female students in Tangail. What's more, when the students complained to the headmaster of the school, instead of taking any action against the teacher, he threatened the students with expulsion from the school. The teacher was later arrested and sentenced to one year of imprisonment by a mobile court. There was even a report of policemen stalking a schoolgirl in Khulna earlier this year.

According to Ain o Salish Kendra, from January till November this year, a total of 49 children were sexually harassed by their stalkers. Although there are several laws with provisions to deal with cases of stalking, victims can hardly seek any legal redress under these laws mostly because of a lack of awareness about these laws and also because of the "socially accepting attitude" towards this crime. Moreover, the existing laws are inadequate to deal with the wide range and forms of stalking incidents. So those who work with women and children's rights believe that a specific law is needed to fight this crime. The absence of a specific law is, in fact, giving rise to these incidents. Nina Goswami, Senior Deputy Director, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) observes that the 2011 HC directive does not cover the stalking incidents that happen in public places

such as markets, public transports, etc.

Among the existing laws, section 75 of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance, 1976 provides for imprisonment for three months or fine or both if someone uses indecent language or behaves indecently in public places or streets. Also, the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, 2000 (amended in 2003,) has a provision for imprisonment for a period of five to ten years for provoking a woman or girl to commit suicide.

In 2009, an HC bench came up with some specific guidelines, directives and ruling in its verdict upon a writ petition filed as public interest litigation by Salma Ali, the-then executive director of Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers



Association (BNWLA). It issued a set of guidelines defining sexual misdemeanours to prevent any kind of physical, mental or sexual harassment of women, girls and children at their workplaces, educational institutions and other public places including roads across the country. According to the directive, disturbing women and children through letters, e-mails, SMS, posters, writings on walls, benches, chairs, tables, and notice boards, and threatening or pressing them for sexual relations constitute sexual harassment and torture. It also criminalised "teasing" women and children through e-mail or telephone. The HC also directed the government at that time to make a law on the basis of the guidelines.

Then in 2011, the High Court declared

stalking illegal and directed the government to consider the offence as sexual harassment. The court also added that incidents of stalking at any place in the country have to be brought under trial in accordance with the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act. It defines sexual misdemeanour as "any kind of provocation through phone calls or e-mail, lewd gestures, showing of pornography, lurid stares, physical contact or molestation, stalking, vulgar sounds or any display of a derogatory nature". The court directed the police to set up separate cells in the police stations to deal with stalking cases. It also empowered mobile courts to deal with cases of stalking until the government enacts a fresh law or amends the relevant

law for stopping the crime.

The High Court's directives were very well thought-out and if enforced, could have made a big difference. But there has hardly been any enforcement of these directives.

Although the police are entrusted with a lot of responsibilities, they have failed to perform their duties. Currently, if a victim of stalking files a GD with the local police station against her stalker, the police usually do not take the issue seriously, as has been seen in many cases. They do not even bother to investigate. There were instances where victims of stalking filed a GD with the police station but the police did not take any action and a few days later, the women were physically attacked, or raped or even murdered.

In March last year, a garment worker in Dhaka lodged a GD with the Banani police against four youths who had harassed her. She requested assistance of the police for five hours late at night but was denied a police escort. The next day, she was raped by the same men who had harassed her earlier. (The Daily Star, May 20, 2017)

Moreover, our police stations are still very unfriendly towards the victims. When victims of sexual harassment or stalking go to the police for help, police ask them questions that further harass the victims. Also, the fact that there are very few women police officers at the thana level makes it very difficult for victims to lodge complaints. And setting up separate cells in police stations have not been done in all these years.

Salma Ali, also a human rights lawyer and petitioner of the guidelines prevention and protection from on sexual harassment, observes that the lack of enforcement of the laws is one of the main problems here. According to her, after the High Court's directive to form a sexual harassment complaint committee at every workplace and institution in 2009, only a few institutions have complied. This explains why stalking and other forms of sexual harassments are on the rise.

So our society as a whole needs to be a lot more sensitised towards this crime. A lot needs to be done in making people aware that stalking is a punishable offence. Usually, incidents of stalking are not taken seriously. For instance, when a woman is stalked by someone on a public bus and she protests, sometimes other passengers suggest that she should not use public transport, a common response from the public. Such attitudes only serve to encourage stalkers.

Moreover, in order to change the mindset of people and the future potential stalkers, awareness should be raised against stalking from the school level. Topics of awareness against sexual harassment including stalking should be incorporated in the school curriculum. The government should create a massive social movement against stalking, ensure strict implementation of the existing laws as well as enact a new law, and speed up the trial process to stop this crime.

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COP24: A quick post-mortem

MIZAN KHAN

THE Conference of the Parties 24 (COP24) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has ended on December 15, with the usual extension of more than a day to complete the deliberations. Almost 25,000 delegates from the government, non-government, private sector and faith community attended the meeting, which was mandated to adopt the Rulebook for implementation of the Paris Agreement (PA). Analysis of the event is forthcoming yet, but based on my experience as a member of the Bangladesh delegation, I regard the ultimate outcome as not satisfactory, almost frustrating, but way better than the "Brokenhagen" of 2009.

The most rancorous elements that appeared at the meeting are: recognition of the science of climate change as presented by the IPCC 1.5C Special Report;

language, at the need for more ambitious emission reduction pledges before 2020, which frustrates the most vulnerable countries, UN organisations and NGO activists. With tensions mounting, the UN Secretary-General Guterres had to visit the meeting several times to plead for progress. Despite settling on some parts of the Paris Rulebook, countries failed to agree on substantive issues, such as defining the ex-ante and ex-post provision of information on CF.

Actually, CF continues to be one of the most rancorous issues in all COPs, since 2015 when developed countries pledged to deliver USD 100 billion a year from 2020. Even before COP24, the rules governing CF reporting under Article 9 of the PA were expected to be direly contentious. The rules cover Article 9.5 of the PA (reporting on the projected availability of CF in future), and Article 9.7 (reporting

is its extreme fragmentation in delivery, with channels both public and private ranging from 99 to over 500 including over 22 multilateral CF funds. There are too many overlaps involving huge transaction costs, generating frustrations both at delivery and receiving ends. This warrants a "thinning out" of weedy tendrils of CF bureaucracies, which often clog the money to reach the target communities. So, one good decision at COP24 was the organising of a workshop next year on "effectiveness" of CF to measure its impacts at the ground. The Bangladesh delegation strongly pushed for this.

Just weeks before the meeting in Katowice, the OECD published a report on CF, which shows that in 2017 their members have provided USD 56.7 billion as CF to developing countries, but it did not specify the methodologies of reaching this number. We may recall the episode of 2015 in Paris when an OECD representative in a session on long-term finance mentioned that in 2014 they provided USD 62 billion as CF, the Indian delegate, based on their analysis, responded that only USD 2.2 billion could be regarded as credible CF. This Himalayan gulf in numbers of claimed CF delivery and actual receipt shows no sign of bridging yet.

Another interesting facet is that though grants account for over a third of bilateral CF, it is a measly 10 percent of multilateral funding. But the most vulnerable countries' persistent demand has been to have grants as CF mainly to enhance their adaptive capacity. Also the adaptation finance remains at one-fifth of total CF, though the pledge has been to maintain a balance in support between mitigation and adaptation. What is more frustrating is that the long-agreed principles of CF under the UNFCCC, such as "new and additional" CF has been totally diluted, with no signs of resuscitation.

However, amidst the clouds shrouding the canvas of CF, there is some money flowing in to the Adaptation Fund, to the tune of USD 129 million, and some new pledges of replenishment to the Green Climate Fund, where Germany pledged an amount of USD 1.5 billion, followed by countries like France, Japan, Norway, Sweden, UK and others. It is expected that the EU will lead to fill the gap left by the US-declared withdrawal from the PA.

Finally, the Bangladesh delegation, I must say, fared well in the negotiations in the streams of Adaptation, Mitigation, CF, and Loss and Damage. In the future, it has the potential of doing a lot better, given that more rigorous homework is done before the meetings. This warrants analytical deliberations well before each meeting to generate novel ideas for consensus-building among like-minded alliances. As climate negotiations now stand as the number one global public diplomacy issue involving all countries and thousands of diverse stakeholders, our government is expected to put greater efforts in capacity building of the negotiators, particularly young ones, to carry our flag aloft in the most visible and most widely-publicised diplomatic forum.

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The 12th plenary meeting of the COP upon conclusion of the joint statements plenary.

PHOTO: COP24

urgency of ramping up the mitigation ambition to match the call of science; fixing the share/levy of emissions trading transferable to a yet-to-be structured mechanism, replacing the Clean Development Mechanism under the soon-to-die Kyoto Protocol; the issues of climate finance (CF); and the agenda of Loss & Damage (L&D). Some elements have been agreed upon: that all countries will have to report their emissions and show progress in cutting every two years from 2024, after the global stock-taking at COP29 in 2023.

The contestations cantered particularly on two issues: how to recognise the latest IPCC Report, which entails how clearly countries should signal the need for greater mitigation to stay below the temperature limit of 1.5 degrees, the aspirational goal set under the PA. The agreed text just hints, instead of using strong

on money already delivered). The agreed text now says developed countries "shall" and developing countries "should" report on any CF they provide, but the sought-after criteria-based common reporting format could not be agreed.

But in absence of an agreed understanding of what CF is, countries have wiggle room for creative accounting. This was starkly evident again at COP24. The decision language under both parts of Article 9 is relatively permissive, which allows countries to report the full value of loans, rather than the "grant equivalent" share as CF. Another persistent issue is the "double/triple" counting of the same money, provided through all the Rio conventions or different delivery channels. The fixing of accounting methodologies subjectively by finance providers does not allow any comparability among them. An additional prick in CF