

The Daily Star

Murder in Mosques

Guard against purveyors of hatred exploiting the situation

There can be no place for hatred, intolerance and senseless violence anywhere in the world—of the type we witnessed in Christchurch on Friday which has killed at least 49 people so far, including 2 Bangladeshis and injured many more—as of going to print. The senseless killings of devotees in two mosques who had assembled for Friday prayers is the most abhorrent, hateful and appalling act that one has seen in the recent past. While we mourn for those killed and injured, we thank Providence that our national cricket team are safe, having escaped by the skin of their teeth. This act of utter madness and brutality must be condemned by all in the strongest possible term. While we call for the arrest of the killers and their sponsors if any, we feel that our reactions should be modulated by the head and not heart in addressing the matter. We must all make sure that this horrendous situation is not exploited by other religious extremist groups.

Evidently, the killings were well planned and thoroughly coordinated by the perpetrators—there couldn't have been a better time to choose to ensure maximum casualties than a Friday congregation when most of the local Muslims had gathered for this weekly prayer.

Unfortunately, there has been a resurgence of far-right ideology in recent times, coated and garbed under the banner of nationalism. Christchurch killings, sadly is a manifestation of that tribalism espoused and encouraged, regrettably so, in many parts of the world. And one notices with distress the embers of hatred and exclusivity being stoked by some politicians in these countries for political dividends. We suspect that killers have been motivated by this particular ideology and consumed by a pathological hatred for people who believe in a different religious creed than them, betrayed by the manner they went about their killing spree.

While the killings are definitely an act of terror, they do not fit the definition of terrorism—the only intention of the killers was to vent their hatred against a particular minority group, and gain publicity. However, one cannot say with certainty that they do not have other cohorts who share their abhorrence of the “other”. And this is what the government of New Zealand must address seriously. It must make sure that such extremist and fanatical views do not get the space or opportunity to breed and gain currency in a country whose ethnic diversity is second to none.

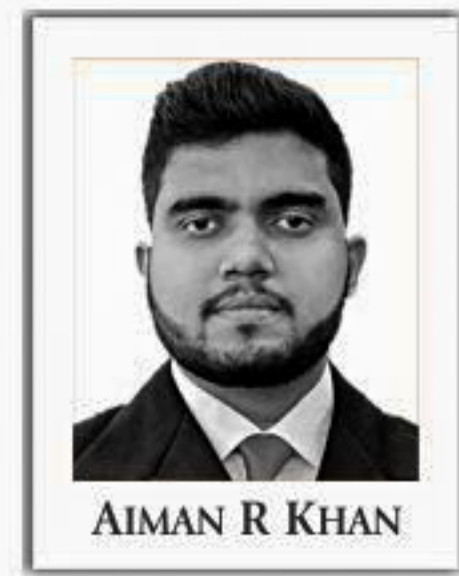
Jashore DPEO's initiative exemplary

Should be emulated by other departments too

While the government primary school teachers have to go through a long arduous process to get their retirement benefits because of corruption and the slow pace of work at the relevant offices, one District Primary Education Officer (DPEO) of Jashore has set an example of efficiency. As this daily reported on March 13, this education officer made sure that the 85 primary school teachers who have gone on retirement and the 42 others who have gone on post retirement leave (PRL) in the last one year in the district get the necessary documents—the PRL order and the pension sanction documents—on time and without any hassle.

With the meagre salary they get, the government primary school teachers struggle to make both ends meet. And the financial and other benefits they are entitled to after their retirement are also not adequate. What is more, even to get those benefits, they have to go to the offices concerned several times and grease the palms of the officials. Recently, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has identified how government officials, including primary school teachers, are harassed and forced to pay bribes at accounts offices for getting salaries and pension benefits. According to the corruption watchdog, accounts offices at divisional, district and upazila levels, operated by the Office of the Controller General of Accounts under the finance ministry, make delays in issuing the necessary documents. This culture must change. The example set by the DPEO in Jashore should be emulated by other government offices. Finally, the government must ensure that the primary school teachers as well as other government employees get their retirement benefits on time and without any trouble.

Legislate Clean Air Act before it's too late!



AIMAN R KHAN

Few months ago, Delhi had been declared as the most polluted city in the world. For most of us who breathed a sigh of relief, the breathing just got heavier. The smog caved in and before we knew it, Dhaka was already creeping up the list of the world's most polluted city.

Dhaka has been consecutively maintaining the highest position among the cities having the lowest air quality in the world. We are all so concerned about landfill, waste-waters, but very few of us actually consider air quality a major issue. Just like the water, the air is prone to be polluted leaving us at risk of contracting irreversible health problems. The US based Air Quality Index (AQI) provides a real time data on the air quality of every city in the world. It gives individual cities air quality scores ranging from 0-300+, associating it with the colour green on 0-50 (the cleanest) and maroon on 300+ (lowest air quality).

As decentralisation of Dhaka is not happening anytime soon, the risk of a major population being exposed to air pollution becomes inevitable. It is indeed sad to say, the city full of life has also been ranked as the second least liveable city in the world by The Global Liveability Index 2018.

The question is, what have we turned our habitat into? Was this what urbanisation had in store for us? Living in Dhaka comes with a hefty price, at the cost of money and a healthy life. There may be more chemicals in the air than all our laboratories combined. The toxicity in the air is slowly poisoning each of us, one day at a time.

Danger levels of the air are measured by using the volume of PM2.5. PM refers to “Particulate Matters” which are microscopic solid or liquid matter suspended in the air. The Department of Environment (DoE) under the

Bangladesh government has found the presence of Sulphate, Nitrates, Ammonia, Sodium Chloride, Black Carbon and minerals in the air which are responsible for chronic respiratory diseases. These are suspended in the air often reaching dangerous levels, totally unfit for human inhalation. The DoE is therefore working to keep such pollution in check by operating Clean Air and Sustainable Environment (CASE). CASE publishes monthly reports and charts on air quality.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

It also encourages people to abide by the rules in order to prevent such pollution to be created. It has undertaken several ambitious projects such as the National Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme, Brick Kilns Emission management and vehicular emission standards. But how much of these have visibly reduced air pollution? Our performance at the AQI is at a constant rate.

Air pollution in Bangladesh is at its peak in the dry seasons of October to March. The primary culprits behind this

are the brick kilns and Dhaka's unbearable traffic congestion. Buses spewing black smoke still rule the roads despite having been banned years ago. Factories are being built around the outskirts of the capital. Altogether these sources contribute to the overall degradation of the air quality of this megacity.

The presence of hazardous substances in the air causes aggravation of asthma, heart and lung diseases. For example, according to M Khalequzzaman, “lead accumulates in body organs (i.e. brain),

which may lead to poisoning or even death. The gastrointestinal tract, kidneys, and central nervous system are also affected by the presence of lead. Children exposed to lead are at risk of impaired development, lower IQ, shortened attention span, hyperactivity, and mental deterioration.” If this goes on, it wouldn't come as much of a surprise to see a future generation full of health issues.

What does the law say?
The Bangladesh Environment Protection Act 1995 puts a restriction on the driving

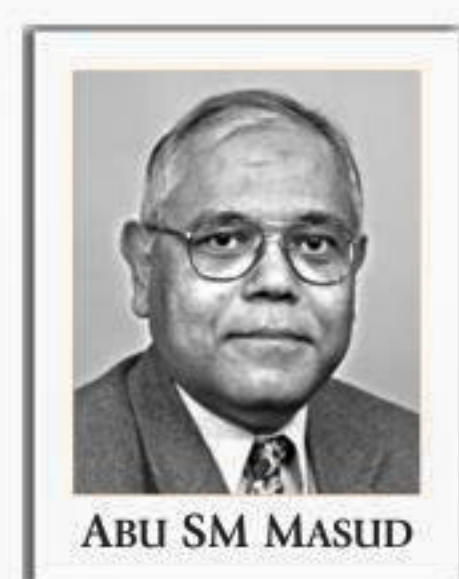
of vehicles producing smoke harmful to the environment. It even imposes a punishment of imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years or with a fine which may extend to Tk 1 lakh, or with both. However, the presence of these black smoke emitting buses still bustling clearly goes to show how well the Act has been implemented. In 2013 the government passed the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kilns Establishment (Control) Act. This ordered Brick Kilns companies to “convert” the kilns into modern technology within two years' time. However, it was not realistically possible to do so in the stipulated time limit. Hence it can be said that there isn't any law at the moment that can control the air pollution in Dhaka.

Although it cannot be totally removed, the focus now should be on air quality management on the existing environmental laws of Bangladesh. The government took the initiative to draft a “Clean Air Act” back in 2018 through a workshop on its formulation. The organisers, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the DoE, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, however, were doubtful whether such an Act can rightfully be implemented. The rule violators would break it just like any other laws. Therefore, imposing a strict liability is the only way to ensure cleaner air. The Act would need further push from the Ministry and DoE in order to be enacted. If that doesn't happen, the previous Acts would need greater amendment.

The air we breathe in is vital to life. The concern would not have been so grave if our bodies did not require oxygen. We have certainly taken our respiratory system for granted since it seems to work fine. We don't realise our mistakes until it is too late. It should be the top priority of the government at the moment to do something about the air pollution. Our lives are at risk and this needs prompt action.

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Aiman R Khan is an Advocate, Dhaka Judge Court.

Why we need general education for an engineering degree



ABU SM MASUD

General Education, or Gen Ed, is that portion of the course of study that lies outside the major or the specialty area, for example, engineering. Merriam-Webster

defines Gen Ed as “a programme of education... intended to develop students as personalities rather than trained specialists and to transmit a common cultural heritage.” Priscilla Hobbs of Southern New Hampshire University has described general education as a “well-rounded learning experience to help develop a well-rounded student.” According to her, the three goals of Gen Ed are: reshaping the student's outlook on learning, learning soft skills desired by employers, and becoming well-versed in a wide variety of disciplines. Thus, in most US universities, the general education component of a curriculum includes

intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programmes.” Also, ABET (the agency that accredits engineering programmes) requires that the professional component of an engineering curriculum must include, “A general education component that complements the technical content of the curriculum and is consistent with the programme and institution objectives.”

Notice the importance of Gen Ed placed in both sets of criteria. They each require Gen Ed but do not specify which courses to include, leaving that for the institutions to decide. Institutions must decide what Gen Ed would constitute of, based on its mission and the needs of its various constituencies. As a result, undergraduate curricula in the US generally consist of two major components: the specialty field (such as mechanical engineering) education and general (studies) education.

I believe that in the current environment of increasing globalisation

Similarly, a 2007 paper in the Journal for Global Engineering Education states, “Global competency is essential for engineers from any country who now compete in an international market for engineering know-how. No longer is cultural sensitivity needed only for product design destined for diverse markets. Increasingly, successful entry into the engineering profession requires significant intercultural skills in order to join efficient and productive collaborations with diverse engineering colleagues. Those colleagues may be encountered ‘virtually’ at a distance, in person at an international site, or next door in the office of a multinational corporation. Outsourcing is increasing, not only for products but also for processes, including highly technical engineering work. Projects are distributed across sites and effective collaboration requires professionals who can work productively with colleagues who are very different from themselves.” I have found that employers of our graduates, particularly those of engineering and business

get educated to be successful in this global, collaborative workplace?

To answer this question, let us review what humanities, social sciences, and language-related courses these students take from Class 9 through the end of a 4-year engineering programme. In Class 9, students are channelled into a “science stream” and only these students have the ability to enter an engineering programme. For example, in classes 9-12, students take four Bangla and four English courses, one course in religious and moral education (which is a course on a chosen religion) and maybe an additional subject course. Thus, in four years a total of eight courses in Bangla and English, and two humanities/social sciences courses. Finally, in a 4-year engineering programme, for example in B.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering at BUET, a total of three humanities courses as electives.

In my opinion, the depth and breadth of courses from class 9 onwards cannot adequately prepare an engineering graduate to become a globally competent professional. So, what needs to be done? One approach would be to consider redesigning the undergraduate engineering curriculum to include the coverage of content materials in (i) communication (writing, understanding, and speaking); (ii) world cultures (including history and geography); and (iii) society (sociology) and religions. The redesign does not necessarily entail extending the programme length but may involve the reduction/realignment/reconfiguration/updating of some existing technical course materials creating space for the addition of general education content. It is not going to be an easy process as some will push hard against reducing “their own course material” for the new “soft” content. It is possible only if the faculty and the administration support the need for change, and there is the sincere interest of employers and other constituencies.

The goal of these curriculum redesign efforts should be for preparing the graduates to be globally competent, who can work effectively in culturally diverse teams, can communicate well, have cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptability, and is a self-learner. Tall order but not impossible.

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courses in humanities, social sciences, languages (including communication), and the arts. A review of the criteria used by US accrediting agencies for both institutional and specialty programmes show that these agencies expect the institution's curricula to include an appropriate Gen Ed component. For example, The Higher Learning Commission (an agency that accredits higher learning institutions) requires in its Criterion 3B that “The institution demonstrates that the exercise of

of national economies and culture, it is important that graduates of Bangladeshi engineering and technical programmes have global competence, and are self-learners and life-long learners. A 2006 report for American Society for Engineering Education states, “engineering colleges... must educate their students to work as part of teams, communicate well, and understand the economic, social, environmental and international context of their professional activities.”

disciplines, and our corporate partners have often stated the need for engineers (read, employees) who can work in global teams, where teams are made up of members from different cultures, speaking different languages, following different religions, and living in different countries. These teams develop, design, produce, deploy, and maintain products and services for their consumers and customers. So, my question is: do the graduates of engineering programmes in Bangladesh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Green marketing

Green, natural, environment friendly—all of these words started as a movement, but have now become gimmicks for marketers to pursue. We have green banking, green HR and green governance. If you want to sell something, all you have to do is just add the word green to it. And that is what is happening.

Companies are adding these words on anything they can, just to sell their products. Green beef is one, for instance. Being one of the largest contributors to climate change, how can beef products be green?

Green, natural and environment friendly—should not just be another marketing gimmick. They represent something much greater than just profits. And there are many companies that understand this and hence are using these words wisely. Like companies making products using ocean plastic for example and others.

Large companies play a big role in how societies function today. They should be more sensible when using such words and in their decision-making.

MD Emon Bhuiyan, East west University