

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Another fire wrecks the lives of innocents

And again, this could have been avoided

DAYS after the death of 26 people in Thursday's Banani inferno, a massive fire swept through the Gulshan-1 DNCC kitchen market on Sunday, burning down over 200 shops. This should serve as another rude awakening for us, and the authorities should realise just how badly they have failed to learn from past disasters, and the lack of corrective measures or follow-up actions that have been taken after them. As was clear during the most recent fire outbreaks, the recommendations of the Fire Services and Civil Defence personnel were totally ignored, which meant that these disasters were just waiting to happen.

The situation we are now in has primarily manifested itself due to the apathetic attitude of those responsible for ensuring that safety measures are in place and are being followed. And such an attitude, in turn, has been allowed to thrive by the total absence of accountability as people are continually allowed to get away with murder. The new mayor has said that he will not accept the current state of things. But we cannot help but remain sceptical given the overall picture of things we have seen from the past, including the lack of urgency and care from nearly all previous city mayors. And that is something that should no longer be tolerated.

We hope that the DSCC mayor's suggestion that the Gulshan fire could be an act of sabotage is not an attempt to shirk responsibility. Instead of chasing phantom conspiracies, the authorities should work to shore up fire safety measures as it should have been done a long time ago. While we call for a thorough investigation into the incident, we also demand that those whose actions or inactions contributed to the huge loss of innocent lives over the week are held accountable and severely punished.

Prevent the Surma going down the Buriganga way

A stitch in time might save it

THAT we as a people have scant regard for the natural resources that we are blessed with is well-proven, and well-proven too is the fact that the authorities respond to a situation only when it is too late. Rivers are our lifeline, but most of them have reached a near-moribund state because of the way we have used, misused and overused them. Dhaka's lifeline, the Buriganga, is all but dead and there is a last-minute scamper to revive it. And now a report in this paper shows that the lifeline of Sylhet, the Surma, is facing the fate of the Buriganga. Not only has it become polluted, it seems the residents of Sylhet town have no other place to dispose their garbage than the banks of the Surma.

The DoE representative in Sylhet takes issue with the common view that the river is polluted beyond human use. The environment department would have us believe that this is not the case, citing his reading of the oxygen content of the water of the river. However, most often the users provide the best reading about the usability of a particular object—and in this case, we believe the local people, who have been using the water of that river for various purposes for generations, should be in a better position to certify to its usability or otherwise.

We suggest the DoE and the local administration wake up to the situation immediately. At least dumping of garbage can be stopped immediately, and a comprehensive plan on one hand, and immediate corrective measures on the other, be taken up forthwith.

Linking inequality to social unrest: Can UN turn the tables?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

IN a speech at the 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) on March 6, 2019 in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet spoke forcefully for combating inequalities in income and wealth.

Inequalities in their various forms, she said, are responsible for the rise in social unrest in many countries. While presenting her annual report to the HRC, Bachelet spoke eloquently about the threats posed by global inequality. As a matter of fact, she went even further and spelled out the linkages between human rights and inequality and urged world leaders to work in reducing inequality with utmost urgency. The annual report on human rights circulated by Bachelet's office, OHCHR, is replete with instances where human rights are under attack. In addition, the report came up with a strong hypothesis: "Inequality drives human rights violations everywhere." She drew a direct connection between the political unrest in France, Sudan, and Haiti and the surging inequality in these countries, and urged for immediate action to redress various forms of inequities. "To achieve the 2030 Agenda, the world's States needed to advance on tackling inequalities—inequalities of resources, income, power, access to justice, and with respect to the basic conditions for human dignity," she said.

For readers who might not be familiar with the international hotspots singled out by the OHCHR chief, here is some brief background information. In France, the public demonstrations in Paris and other regions which began on November 17 last year were triggered by President Macron's proposal to raise fuel tax, and have now morphed into a nationwide agitation against his government. The Yellow Vest movement, now into its fourth month, is a reflection of the opposition to Macron's policies for tax cuts for the rich, reducing support for social programmes, and privatisation. In Sudan, the autocratic rule of

President Bashir, who has been at the helm for more than 20 years, is facing street demonstrations and protests organised by a group of professional unions including doctors, lawyers, teachers and students, and supported by two of the largest opposition parties. Bashir responded by declaring a year-long state of emergency. In Haiti, the trouble for the government began last year with anti-corruption protests over USD 4 billion of funds earmarked for social development which went missing. The latest round of demonstrations, which led to several deaths, is the culmination of years of simmering discontent that has plagued Haiti since

human right. Inequalities affect all. Even in prosperous countries, people feel excluded from the benefits of development and deprived of economic and social rights, leading to alienation, unrest and sometimes violence. In addition, the OHCHR's report endorses the position that reducing the various forms of inequalities is a precondition for the achievement of the SDG Agenda. It may also be mentioned that there is increasing awareness that inequalities are the drivers behind several of the global trends that are of great concern to HRC and other inter-governmental bodies. Involuntary and precarious migration is a case in point. The recent surge in

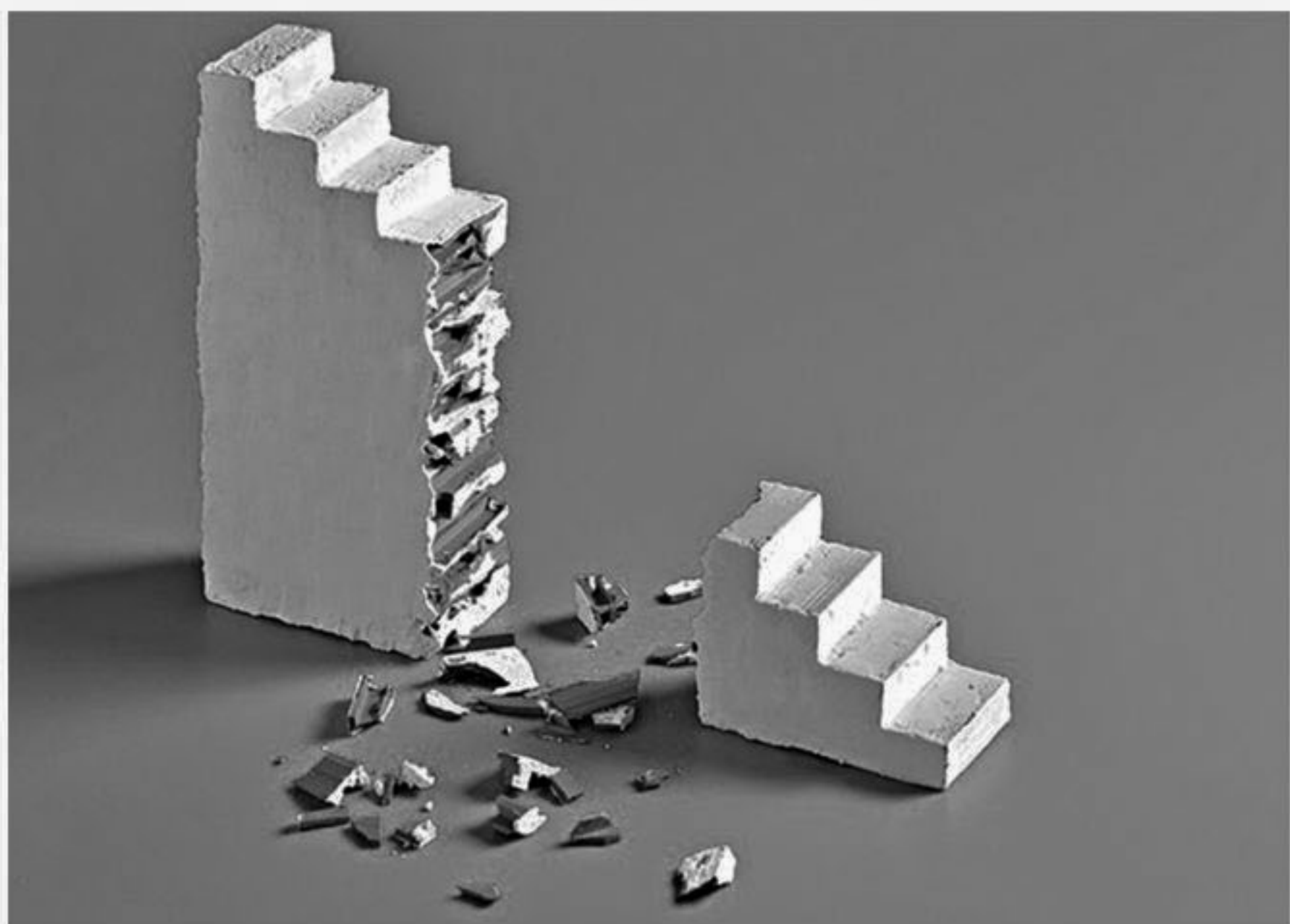
education reform that raised education spending by 2 percent of Chile's GDP. Roughly half of this money went toward improving the quality of subsidised schools that serve more than nine out of 10 Chilean children. Prior to the reform, subsidised private-voucher schools were allowed to charge add-on fees and select students, leading to one of the worst socio-economically stratified schooling systems in the world.

Earlier this year, in a special meeting of HRC in Geneva to review progress on achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, Bachelet sounded the alarm. She indicated that "overall, we are not on track" to meet its ambitious aims. "The 2030 Agenda is a commitment to achieve greater international cooperation for a more equitable international order," she said. "But above all, it is a promise extended to people previously locked out of development: the marginalised, disempowered and excluded communities; the millions of women, racial, religious and caste minorities, indigenous peoples, migrants, persons with disabilities, Roma and the poor."

The threat to SDG posed by rising inequality has been flagged by UNDP too. According to its own calculation, achieving SDG 10 "Reducing Inequalities" is proving to be a formidable challenge. "It is well-documented that income inequality is on the rise, with the richest 10 percent earning up to 40 percent of total global income. The poorest 10 percent earn only between 2 percent and 7 percent of total global income. In developing countries, inequality has increased by 11 percent if we take into account the growth of population," according to a UNDP study.

As for Bangladesh, the trend is very similar to the rest of the world. A columnist of this newspaper wrote that "stark income, consumption and wealth inequalities remain a scar on the economy." (March 12, 2019) Official statistics show that in 2016, the top 5 percent of households possessed 28.9 percent of the national income while the bottom 5 percent possessed only 0.2 percent.

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SOURCE: WWW.TECHNOLOGYREVIEW.COM

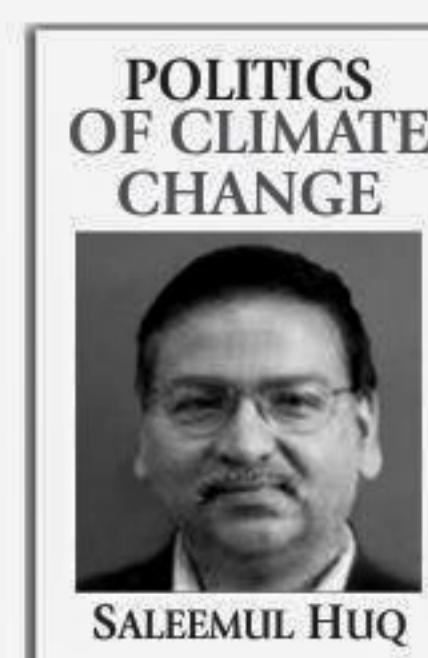
the January 2010 earthquake, which killed 100,000 people.

The message contained in the report and speech is powerful in view of the fact that it originates from a non-partisan watchdog. OHCHR is entrusted with highlighting human rights violations and keeping a vigil on how the powerful around the globe are trampling on human rights by denying a segment, or even a majority, of the population of a country access to basic human needs. Advocates for equality can now count on an important ally in the fight to achieve greater equality. Equality is not purely an economic or a political agenda, it is a

migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to the United States is a consequence of the failure to ensure that development reaches everyone, according to the OHCHR annual report.

Bachelet underlined that inequalities and the failure to give equal weight and respect to all human rights had the power to erode all three pillars of the United Nations: peace and security, development, and human rights. During her tenure as President of Chile (from 2006 to 2010, and 2014 to 2018), reducing inequality had been at the heart of Bachelet's ambitious reform platform. One key component was a push for

Time to enhance global support to the most vulnerable communities



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
SALEEMUL HUQ

THE massive cyclone Idai that devastated Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe last week has destroyed 90 percent of Beira, the second biggest city in Mozambique. This was a cyclone of unprecedented severity for that part of Africa and has been rightly attributed to human-induced climate change by the scientific community.

Hence, we are now unequivocally living in a post-human-induced-climate-change world, and things will only get worse unless the world steps up its efforts to keep the global temperature below 1.5 Degrees, which is still possible but only if the efforts are not just doubled but quadrupled.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, has called a Climate Summit in New York on September 23, where he has only invited leaders of countries, provinces, cities, companies and civil society organisations to come with Action Plans and discuss how to enhance actions. Climate change deniers are definitely not welcome!

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been invited and has accepted the invitation. This is a tremendous opportunity for her to showcase Bangladesh's journey from climate vulnerability to climate resilience.

One specific aspect of this topic, which Bangladesh can claim to have played a leading role in, is on Community Based Adaptation (CBA) which started in Bangladesh almost 15 years ago and has grown into a very substantial global community practice over those years. This community of actors meets every year to share their experiences and brings together several hundred participants from around the world. The next (13th) annual conference will be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in the first week of April and will have a substantial contingent from Bangladesh participating and sharing our experience with other countries.

Another important development that will occur at the Climate Summit in New York in September is the handing over of a major new report on enhancing

support for adaptation from the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA), which is headed by Ban Ki-moon, Bill Gates and Kristalina Georgieva from the World Bank who are preparing a report with a number of Action Tracks that will be further pursued by the GCA through 2020 onwards.

One of these Action Tracks is likely to be on Supporting Local Adaptation including Community Based Adaptation and this could be the track that Bangladesh can be the champion of—both by practicing it in Bangladesh as well as by sharing its knowledge and

at the local level.

Another opportunity is to find a solution to one of the major bottlenecks and barriers to getting global funding for adaptation to the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable developing countries. Global climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) have made laudable board-level decisions to support the most vulnerable communities in the poorest and most vulnerable developing countries, but have failed miserably in actually delivering on that promise. One of the reasons for this failure is that the

Bangladesh as well as other countries where it operates. BRAC has the ability to receive a billion dollars from global funds and deliver it in small amounts to thousands of communities in many LDCs while maintaining both stringent fiduciary monitoring as well as technical assistance.

A third element of South-South capacity building to tackle climate change is the LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC), which is an official initiative of the LDC Group, and is coordinated by the International Centre for Climate



People collect metal sheets from a damaged supermarket to re-build their destroyed houses following the devastation caused by Cyclone Idai in Beira, Mozambique, on March 21, 2019.

PHOTO: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP

experience with other countries, especially the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

One opportunity for doing so would be by the prime minister inviting the heads of the GCA to come to Bangladesh in January 2020 for the annual Gobeshona Conference on Climate Change that has been held for the last five years primarily as a national event, but could be made into an international or even a global event from next year, where we invite the rest of the world to come and learn from Bangladesh's experience in adaptation

traditional agencies like the multilateral banks and UN agencies are geared to fund national governments and find it difficult to reach the grassroots.

So alternative financial delivery mechanisms must be found, and Bangladesh has the biggest NGO in the world, namely BRAC, which now operates in at least 20 LDCs with major programmes delivering funding from global funds to local communities for development purposes. BRAC is now developing its capacity to support Community Based Adaptation in

Change and Development (ICCCAD) based at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

Hence the next twelve months are a great opportunity for Bangladesh to become a global leader in promoting local-level adaptation both in Bangladesh as well as globally, with an emphasis on South-South capacity building for other LDCs.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Public safety should be a top priority

The gruesome fire at Chawkbazar followed by the one at Banani on Thursday, or the myriad road accidents that occur throughout the year, are a clear testament to our sheer indifference towards the safety of the ordinary people. Public safety should take precedence over everything else in a state's policy making, but that doesn't seem to be the case in Bangladesh when we take into account the shocking frequency with which such incidents happen, taking innocent lives.

Despite all these tragedies, measures so far taken by the authorities have been inadequate which shows a business-as-usual approach deeply embedded within the administration. It also shows how corruption and lack of transparency and accountability have pervaded our institutions and nearly every sector. Will those responsible for different sectors wake up to the sufferings of the citizens? Do these tragedies have any effect on them? Or will we continue to see the recurrence of tragedies day after day? The authorities must realise that such a situation cannot go on for long. They must ensure accountability and good governance as part of efforts to improve public safety. And they must pay equal attention to all areas because the Banani tragedy has proved that accidents may happen even in so-called affluent neighbourhoods.

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Ananta Companies