

Jute mill workers want their dues

Early intervention could have avoided the violence

WE are worried about the escalation of violence during a three-day country-wide work abstention of different state-owned jute mills that left 16 people injured when clashes ensued between workers and police. Most of the demands of the workers seem to be reasonable. They include clearing all arrears, implementing the National Wage Scale-2015, clearing payments related to gratuities and insurance claims of retired and deceased workers and reinstating those workers who lost jobs during previous demonstrations. If the demands are legitimate and it seems they are, why did the workers have to resort to such desperate measures?

While we cannot condone the attacks on police, blocking of roads and train routes, stopping trains from going to their destination, we cannot help but ask why the authorities especially the BJMC (Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation) did not meet with the workers' representatives earlier and resolve the issues amicably. According to news reports the BJMC has invited the protesting workers for a meeting on their demands on Saturday. After reaching a decision the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and non-CBA Oikya Parishad, both of which represent the protesting workers, will meet with CBA leaders of 26 state-owned jute mills. Why couldn't all this have happened before things got out of hand?

It is no secret that the state-owned jute mills are not running very efficiently and little has been done to remove the bottlenecks which have resulted in these mills not paying the workers their dues. But this does not absolve the authorities from addressing the woes of the workers. There is no reason why workers have to take such extreme measures for extracting what is due to them. The filing of around 250 cases against protesting workers will rather aggravate the situation than defusing it. The government must come up with a sustainable solution to avoid further spiralling of this crisis.

We are breathing poison!

The government must wake up to the problem

A new global study has found that indoor and outdoor air pollution led to 1.23 lakh deaths in Bangladesh in 2017. The report also said that the entire population has been exposed to PM 2.5 (widely regarded as the pollutant with the most health impact of all commonly measured air pollutants)—way above the WHO permitted level. Another survey earlier revealed that Bangladesh has the most polluted air in the world and Dhaka is the second most polluted capital city. The findings are alarming and demands the government's immediate attention.

According to the DoE and the World Bank, brick kilns make up 56 percent of the country's air pollution. And at present, the main source of pollution in Dhaka is the never-ending construction works by various government agencies. Although the government had enacted a law in 2018 to make brick kilns environment-friendly, a recent report indicated that 2,123 of the 7,772 brick kilns in the country have not converted to the required modern and environment-friendly technology. And so far, no substantial action has been taken to stop the dust pollution from construction works. As a result, cardiovascular disease, cancer, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, which have direct and indirect links with air pollution, are all on the rise. The situation is particularly dangerous for children since air pollution badly affects children's physical and mental development.

Under such dire circumstances, the government must find some workable solutions to reduce the level of air pollution in the country. The law to make brick kilns environment-friendly must be enforced and a new specific law to stop air pollution should be enacted. People should be made aware of the health hazards of air pollution, and the government must act now and declare air pollution a public health emergency.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Watching Dhaka burn

It is extremely saddening to see one fire after another—destroying property and claiming innocent lives—ravage through Dhaka. The number of such incidents that have occurred over the last months is truly shocking.

But what it does reveal is the horrific state of city management. Starting from approving the construction of buildings that violate every building code that's on the book, to never punishing those responsible for this mess, the authorities have shown an incredible consistency for incompetence. Unfortunately, because such ineptitude seems to stem across all government agencies, it is difficult to imagine any positive changes happening anytime soon.

Sayed Nazrul, By Email

When growth is unsustainable

While the World Bank's revelation that Bangladesh is among the top five fastest growing economies in the world should be a cause for celebration, given the way that development has come about, I would argue that it is not.

Has this development benefitted ordinary people? No. We still have to face terrible traffic congestion every day. Housing cost and prices of essentials keep going up, as our living conditions get more and more difficult.

This shows that the fruits of this growth have mostly gone into the pockets of corrupt politicians and individuals.

Atiqur Rahman, By Email

Raising our children amidst poisonous air

Do we even realise how it will impact our future?



NAZNIN TITHI

"This is no city to raise your children in," a friend was telling me the other day. "Either you leave the country or leave the city and go somewhere where your kids don't have to

breathe poison." Sadly, I found no reason to disagree with her. My friend is totally at a loss as to what to do with her five-year-old son as the kid has been suffering from asthma and chronic respiratory complications which are getting worse as he is growing up. He is now totally dependent on medication and nebulisation when the symptoms get worse. Being a mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old son, I know how it feels.

While previously, at any random gathering of friends, the issues of discussion circled around the challenges of raising our children in a society which is becoming increasingly intolerant and

A number of studies in both the US and Europe have revealed that exposure to particulate matter is associated with the development of autism spectrum disorder.

the safety of our children outside of the home; for the last couple of months, the discussions invariably ended with the health problems of our children. Because we are faced with a more tangible problem—the toxic air of this city which has been taking its toll on our children.

On April 3, US-based organisations Health Effects Institute and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in their report, "The State of Global Air 2019", revealed that indoor and outdoor air pollution led to 1.23 lakh deaths in Bangladesh in 2017. It also said that the life of a South Asian child will be shortened by 30 months on average as they grow up in the current high levels of air pollution. Several such reports were published in recent months which were quite alarming.

Last March, another global survey on



PHOTO: STAR

air quality found that Bangladesh has the most polluted air in the world while Dhaka is the second most polluted capital city. Dhaka has been among the most polluted cities in global indices for many years now. But this time it ranked worse. The amount of PM (particulate matter) 2.5, widely regarded as the pollutant with the most health impact of all commonly measured air pollutants, in Dhaka's air was found to be way above the acceptable limit. "Due to its small size, PM 2.5 is able to penetrate deep into the human respiratory system and from there to the entire body, causing a wide range of short- and long-term health effects." Researchers have also found the level of lead, cadmium, zinc, chromium, nickel, arsenic, manganese and copper to be extremely high in Dhaka's air. Although these pollutants are dangerous for people of all ages, children are particularly vulnerable to these harmful elements.

Recent data released by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that air pollution has a vast and terrible impact on children's health and survival. Globally, 93 percent of all children live in environments with air pollution levels above the WHO guidelines. It says that more than one in every four deaths of children under five years is directly or indirectly related to environmental risks. And although only 10 percent of the world population is under five years old, they bear 40 percent of the burden of environment related diseases.

Children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution because their lungs are not fully developed like adults. According to

the British Lung foundation, most children only have 20 percent of an adult's lung mass at birth. They breathe in more air more quickly than adults do and so breathe in far greater quantities of air pollutants than an adult does. Also, children have lower ability to fight off the effects of air pollution. So, they are more likely to develop respiratory complications related to air pollution.

Air pollution affects children so much that it can even hamper their mental development. A number of studies in both the US and Europe have revealed that exposure to particulate matter is associated with the development of autism spectrum disorder. Researchers have also found evidence to suggest that air pollution can cause poor neurocognitive development and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children.

Last December, I took my son to a paediatrician, a professor of BSMMU, as he was having breathing difficulty along with a bad cough. The doctor told me that it is pretty common for children to get these types of problems during the dry season—from November till February—when the city's air is the most polluted. After prescribing a number of medicines, he suggested that my son should not be exposed to dust inside or outside the home. In the doctor's chamber, there were 15 to 20 kids aged around six months to seven or eight years old. Unsurprisingly, most of them came with respiratory complications.

Now that the dry season is over, I don't see any change in the city's air quality. Last month, the daily *Prothom Alo* reported that the average time of air pollution has been dangerously

increasing in the city. While Dhaka's air remained polluted for an average of 120 to 160 days of the year previously, in 2018 the city's air remained extremely polluted for at least 197 days.

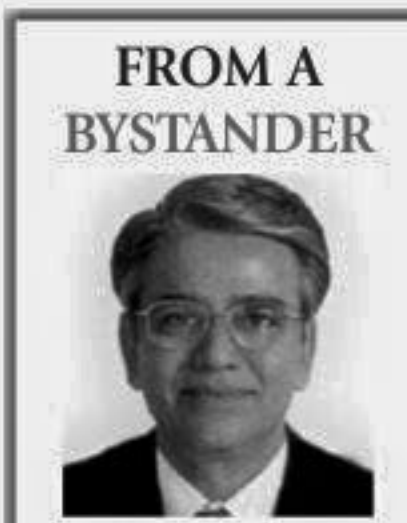
While brick kilns and vehicles running on fossil fuels with higher level of sulphur have been identified as the major sources of air pollution in the country, in Dhaka, it's the chemicals emitted from vehicles as well as dust from construction works that are mostly contributing to air pollution.

Our children are not even safe inside cars. According to the British Lung Foundation, "even when you're in your car, you and your children can breathe in polluted air—from traffic fumes, petrol vapour, tobacco smoke and chemicals. In fact, air pollution can often be higher inside your car than outside."

So the situation is as bad as it can get. What we should do now is go for cleaner sources of energy and better waste management systems to prevent open burning of harmful chemicals, enforce the existing environmental laws, enact a new specific law to address this deadly problem, and of course, make people aware of the health risks associated with air pollution. Since air pollution is a global problem, we should take lessons from other countries who are better handling it. The future of our children will be defined by how we act now: whether we remain silent spectators or we take urgent proactive measures to clean the city's air from these harmful elements.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Algeria's late Arab Spring



MAHMOOD HASAN

ALGERIA'S veteran President Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned on April 2, 2019 after 20 years in power. The resignation came shortly after deputy defense minister and army chief of

staff General Ahmed Gaid Salah demanded that Bouteflika be declared unfit to lead and leave office "immediately". The 82-year-old Bouteflika suffered a severe stroke in 2013 and has since been in poor health and rarely seen in public. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a freedom fighter and veteran of the FLN, has served four five-year terms as president. Trouble for Bouteflika began in mid-February when the ailing president announced that he would seek a fifth term in office. The announcement brought thousands of people, mostly young, to the streets since February 22, demanding that Bouteflika resign and quit the presidency. As demonstrations gained momentum and became weekly Friday protests, Bouteflika on March 11, announced that he was dropping his bid for another term. Massive demonstrations continued as people did not believe Bouteflika's announcement and suspected that the octogenarian will continue in power through other means. Presidential election was scheduled for April 18, 2019 but has since been postponed. New dates are yet to be announced.

Algeria's army has always played a pivotal role in the country's politics. The army was actually backing Bouteflika since 1999, when he was first elected. The role of the army in easing out the wheelchair-bound president has been crucial as the military wanted to maintain stability in the oil-rich North African state of 42 million people. The army chief General Gaid Salah opted to side with the people. After holding a high-level meeting with senior army officers Salah said, "We will support the people until their demands are fully and completely satisfied." Fortunately the six-week long demonstrations were not

violent and there were no street battles with the police and no casualties. Thousands of jubilant flag-waving Algerians celebrated on the streets of Algiers when the news of Bouteflika's resignation came.

There is however some confusion over Bouteflika's departure. After withdrawing his candidature Bouteflika said he would retire at the end of his tenure on April 28, 2019. But his sudden resignation on April 2 has raised some questions. Did he resign voluntarily or was there a coup that forced him to step down? A statement apparently released by the presidential office says that General Gaid Salah has been sacked and would be sent for military interrogation. Though sources inside the presidency said that the document was genuine, the

pro-Salafi Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) almost won the 1991 election defeating the pro-independence National Liberation Front (FLN). The army which supported the FLN staged a coup and took control of the government, cancelled the election and ousted President Chadli Bendjedid. Banned FIS soon turned into an Islamist guerrilla group and began an armed insurgency against the government. The "dirty war" lasted nearly 10 years, cost over 200,000 lives and slowly came to an end in 2002 after Abdelaziz Bouteflika became president in 1999. The fratricidal war left a deep scar in the polity of Algeria.

Oil and gas exports actually drives Algeria's economy. Petroleum accounts for



Algerian protesters gather during a mass demonstration against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algiers on March 29.

PHOTO: AFP

Ministry of Defence issued an immediate denial. The document apparently bore the signature and seal of the president. It is not unlikely that General Salah moved quickly to oust Bouteflika when he came to know that he was being fired. What exactly happened will probably never be known.

A former French colony, Algeria gained independence after a violent and bloody war of independence in 1962. Since then Algeria's contemporary political journey has been turbulent. The most difficult period in the post-independence period began when the

an overwhelming 85 percent of the country's exports and constitutes 20 percent of GDP. But oil revenues started falling since global oil prices started declining from 2014. Several grievances have combined and drove the people to come out to protest against Bouteflika—increasing cost of living, unemployment, inadequate healthcare, distrust of the political process, etc. Protestors on the street want total removal of the previous regime known as "le pouvoir" (the powers that be) representing an opaque clique of

politicians, business tycoons, and military officials who actually ran the government for Bouteflika. People believe that the clique is deeply corrupt.

Agitators say Bouteflika's resignation was the first step towards a new beginning. They want sweeping political reforms of the system of government that has been in place since independence—a fair and transparent presidential election and a new democratic government without any military influence—not the existing "controlled democracy". Currently the government is run by the "pro-government bloc" which comprises parties of Bouteflika's FLN and Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia's National Rally for Democracy (NRD). But political differences between the FLN Secretary General Gamal Ould Abbes and recently retired Prime Minister and Secretary General of NRD Ahmed Ouyahia have already surfaced over who will succeed Bouteflika. And given Algeria's powerful military and the entrenched political clique, succession to Abdelaziz Bouteflika may not be easy. Besides the existence of dormant Salafi groups may also raise their heads to cash in on the turmoil of succession.

There are speculations that General Gaid Salah may take over for a brief period until fresh elections are held. Though Salah is reported to have said that he would not betray his "liberation war brother-in-arms". The constitution actually provides for the Chairman of the Upper House of Parliament Abdelkader Bensalah to take over as caretaker president for three months within which fresh elections have to be held. Who will take over till the elections are held is still not clear.

Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in 2011 and eventually spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria had left Algeria largely untouched. Autocratic regimes across the Middle East fell following violent civil unrest that had cost many lives. One hopes that the late Arab Spring now sweeping Algeria will not degenerate into civil disobedience and violence. The Bouteflika succession issue should be resolved peacefully through fair elections.

Mahmood Hasan is former Ambassador and Secretary.