

More girls are going to school

Stipends have worked wonders

We are delighted to know from a report in this paper that, according to government data, female secondary students outnumber their male counterparts in 63 of the 64 districts. Here we must commend the government for successfully implementing its stipend programme targeting girl students. Donor-funded stipends have also helped in boosting enrolment of girls into primary and secondary schools. The recipients of stipends, moreover, do not have to pay tuition fees, which is a great incentive for parents to send their girls to school.

In fact these scholarships as well as vigorous campaigns by government and non-government organisations to promote girls' education has to a large extent, made parents see the value in getting their daughters educated. We give kudos to the girls too, for continuing their studies despite many economic and social constraints.

One of the challenges in this movement is of course making sure these girls do not drop out towards the end of their secondary school education. For this, experts have pointed out the need to create a safe environment for girls so that they are not harassed or stalked while going to and from school. This is one of the causes of the high incidence of child marriage in the country forcing many girls to drop out of school. The longer girls stay in school, the higher the chance for them to reach their full potential. It will allow them to get better paying jobs which will in turn, contribute to the country's development.

The government study has also found that enrolment of girls in secondary schools is lower in urban areas like Dhaka and Chattogram where stipends are not given. We hope that the government's plan to introduce the benefit in urban areas will be started soon so that girls from these areas are not deprived of education.

It is wonderful that a successful model to encourage girls' education has been found and is being replicated. The government must now make sure that the success continues and that the dropout rate for both girls and boys is significantly curtailed through further expanding stipends and other benefits. For a nation, there is no better asset than having an educated young population.

Bagerhat land record office

An accident waiting to happen

THE Bagerhat sub-registrar and land record office with its 150 employees have been working out of a British-era building that was declared risky by authorities back in 2012. Strangely, the Public Works Department has not found a suitable alternative piece of land to construct new offices despite the fact that the money for relocation has been approved. The building in question used to be a district judge court; that moved out back in 1990 to new premises. The land record office was moved here in 1997 and today, we see that different parts of the building are in various stages of decay. Indeed, people who work here complain about more than the leaky roof that turns porous during the rainy season.

It is quite preposterous that things have been moving at such a snail's pace in relocating the land record office to a new location in a more modern building. It is not only the people who are in jeopardy should this ancient building collapse; with land deeds still preserved in written form, a collapse would spell disaster for the authorities as thousands of precious documents would be lost. One wonders how seven years can elapse and still the wheels of the bureaucracy fail to procure land and construct new premises for this very important district office for land registration and record keeping. Such a lackadaisical attitude towards people's safety is what has allowed thousands of buildings, both government and commercial, to operate decade after decade until an accident occurs. We hope immediate action is taken before such a disaster.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Don't let abductions become normalised

There have been many cases of abduction in the past years and incidents of abduction has even led to a number of deaths. People are now well aware of how common it has become and are fearful of the moral degradation that has led to its rise.

Abducting someone takes a lot of audacity on part of the perpetrators. And the fact that there are groups out there who repeatedly abduct people for ransom or for other reasons is not a good sign.

Such audacity has gradually been allowed to establish itself as rarely have we seen the culprits get brought to book. Until and unless these miscreants are apprehended and punished exemplarily, abductions will continue unabated.

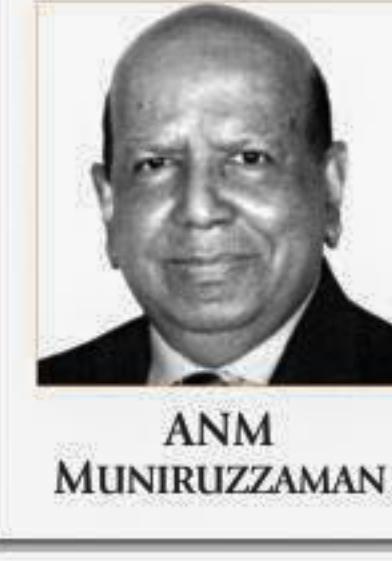
Another even more horrific practice we have seen lately is the increasing number of cases where women and girls are being abducted and raped. Our law enforcing agencies as well as the government and society as a whole must take this seriously. Those who commit such heinous crimes must not be allowed to get away with them, no matter who they are.

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Rising sea levels, rising threats

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ALMOST all states now agree on the emerging threats to security from climate change, especially risks from sea-level rise to global peace and security.

Bangladesh is no exception. In fact, Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries from the threats of sea-level rise.

Sea-level rise (SLR) is a climate-induced and human-driven phenomenon. Growing population, increasing demand for natural resources, and rapid urbanisation are the major factors pushing sea-level rise to a risky extreme. Thermal expansion of water due to global warming remains one of the two main causes of SLR while the other is massive melting of ice sheets and glaciers. Scientists predict that even though the sea-level is estimated to rise 11 inches to 38 inches by 2100, a major breakup of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets can easily raise it up to 23 feet, creating a doomsday scenario.

Low-lying regions around the world will suffer the most. For example, Bangladesh will lose a significant part of its territory to the rising sea, causing mass displacement of people. In the extreme case, island states like the Maldives and Papua New Guinea will disappear. Among all the regions, East Asia, Middle East, and North Africa bear the greatest relative impacts. Coastal areas will be severely affected. The most alarming news is that eight of the 10 megacities and many financial centres (i.e. New York, London, and Mumbai) in the world are situated in coastal areas which may be partially or completely lost due to SLR. This could cause global trade and the international financial system to face significant shocks. Supply chain management will also be adversely affected due to rising water levels in port cities like Rotterdam and Shanghai.

Many small island developing states will face an existential threat due to the rise in sea-levels. Loss of wetlands will result in massive territorial shrinkage. Even before being submerged, the viability of these states will already be threatened, as often sea-level rise makes islands uninhabitable long in advance. Disputes over maritime boundary are very likely to take place as baselines and shorelines will move from its present longitudes and latitudes. With even the slightest change in lines, the current regime of maritime boundaries based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) will be obliterated. Confusion over coastlines and borderlines will also create disagreement over EEZs and territorial seas and access to ocean resources. These might threaten inter-state relations and make peace more difficult.

Expansion of sea areas in habitat areas will displace hundreds of millions of people around the globe. Since 40-45 percent of the global population lives by the coast, the human loss and displacement is going to be enormous. Intra and inter-state migration will occur on a massive scale, which will eventually create an unhealthy distribution of populations. Lack of resources can further cause tension between host communities and migrants, which in extreme cases can even lead to the collapse of states.

Regions already facing socio-economic tensions are likely to suffer more due to migration. Along with the loss of habitat, livelihoods will suffer too. Production of

water security will similarly be threatened due to hyper-salination of water. Due to melting of ice, water will submerge coastal areas. Different sources of water will be contaminated by salt water. Sweet water will be contaminated by the infusion of salt water.

Energy infrastructures are highly vulnerable to sea-level rise. Nuclear reactors need uninterrupted water supply for cooling down the system which is why they are built near coastlines. Increased water levels will flood nuclear power plants which will affect the functionality of the reactors. The Fukushima power plant is a prime example, which in 2011's Tsunami was partly washed away in

the tourism sector due to SLR will be devastating. Caribbean nations alone will see 149 multi-million-dollar resorts lost to rising sea-level. Price of available high-end beach properties will skyrocket. Huge disparity over the supply and demand of property will resurface allowing only a small portion of the population access to shelter. All these effects could easily add up to civil unrest and conflict. Multidimensional insecurity of people can make them vulnerable and prone to crimes and violence. Price hikes in the Middle East caused by a drought in Russia had sparked riots in Tunisia, which eventually contributed to the events of the Arab Spring. Impacts of sea-



Members of the International Atomic Energy Agency inspect the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant during their review mission on the plant's decommissioning process. Rising sea levels increases the threat of Fukushima-like disasters.

different sorts of crops will be halted and their quality can deteriorate due to salinised water. Hundreds of species of fish will be lost due to higher ocean temperatures, altered depth of water and associated changes in the chemistry of water. Similarly, many aquatic animal species will also be lost as the change in sea-level will affect their metabolism, functionality, ecosystem, growth rate, etc.

Food security will be hampered to a great extent as we lose agricultural land to rising sea-level. Quality of the remaining agricultural land will also worsen with saline water intrusion. Salt water contamination will make irrigation difficult. Expected production of crops will go down drastically. Rice production is predicted to be reduced significantly due to delta areas such as those of the Mekong and Red River being submerged. This food insecurity among people will gradually build up to an unstable security situation within and beyond states.

water and electricity supply was shut down, which prevented its regular functioning, causing radiation into the water and air. Destruction of coastal infrastructures will occur due to SLR. Port facilities, rail and road links, transmission facilities etc. will be heavily impacted. Capacity of coastal cities and states will decline severely as providing basic services to the population will become more difficult. Lack of services often aggravates the fragility of states.

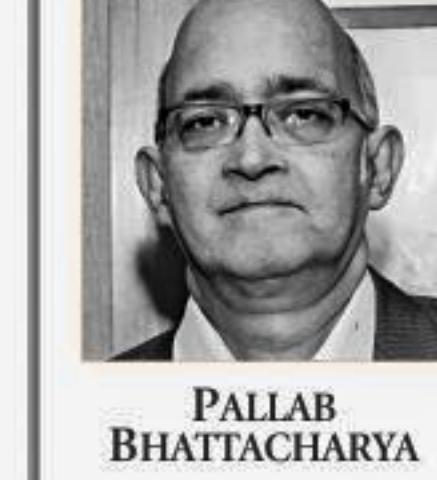
Higher sea-levels have the potential to flood terrestrial habitat. Greater tidal intrusion will change the salinity regime of coastal freshwater. Due to increased depth of the sea, marine life will be exposed to various threats like lack of sunlight, wave energy, and oxygen, which will adversely impact the marine ecosystem and will become an existential threat. Alteration in chemistry of soil caused by saltwater will also impact the coastal plant life. Economic impact on

level rise can therefore have long range, non-linear, multi-directional implications. Especially, lack of access to sweet water can give rise to new conflict scenarios. Conflicts among nuclear-armed states will make the situation worse as seen in the case of India and Pakistan over the Indus water treaty. Weak governance, a common feature among the climate change-vulnerable countries, will aggravate the internal anarchy.

Reversing completely the process of sea-level rise is not achievable. Some of the impacts of rising water level are inevitable. Hence, rather than focusing on reversing the process, the practical and attainable course of actions will be to mitigate it with the objective of preventing further aggravation.

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Has democracy returned to the Maldives?

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THE last seven months have seen two watershed events in the political history of the Maldives, the strategically-located Indian Ocean

archipelago that has since long been a theatre of intense rivalry between Asian giants India and China for influence. It all began with the victory of Maldivian Democratic Party leader Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the presidential elections in September last year that brought an end to five years of authoritarian rule of Abdulla Yameen. Then the second week of April this year saw an emphatic win for the MDP in the parliamentary polls. The party's securing of two-thirds majority in the Majlis thus completed its stranglehold on the power structure of the Maldives marking a remarkable transformation in the country's politics.

The two events, which have brought democracy in the Maldives back on rail, are momentous when one looks back at the five-year rule of Yameen since 2013 as he systematically undermined the Maldives' fledgling democracy and all key institutions by putting political opponents and Supreme Court judges in prison, clamping down on civil liberties, muzzling the media and patronising Islamic radicals as is common under any authoritarian rule.

With Solih as President and MDP leader Mohamed Nasheed, the former president, tipped to be the next prime minister, the party is best placed now to introduce political and economic reforms to insulate the Maldives from possibilities of return of despotic rule in future. On his return home from exile

coinciding with the parliamentary election victory, Nasheed did promise the sweeping reforms. High on his wish-list is a shift from the existing presidential form of government to parliamentary system so that there are checks and balances between the executive power and legislative oversight. The kind of majority MDP has in Majlis will no doubt help it push through the constitution amendments for this, but



Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, right, and Mohamed Nasheed.

PHOTO: AFP

analysts suggest it should not be done too fast and pressed too far. On the economic front, MDP's 19-point agenda includes anti-corruption measures including asset disclosure and introduction of income tax, minimum wage and unemployment benefits in a bid to loosen the elites' sway over the economy and diversify the economy. Then there is also the issue of reforming the judiciary.

The developments in the Maldives are

to be up to three billion dollars, a huge sum for a small country like the island nation with little sources of earning other than tourism, the backbone of its economy.

India lost no time in reaching out to the new political dispensation in the Maldives seeking to stage a return to the strategic picture in that country. Apart from the customary phone call congratulating Solih on his victory in presidential poll, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to the Maldives to attend Solih's inauguration as President

in November last year in what was the former's first visit to that island nation in five years. Before that, Modi had visited all South Asian countries except the Maldives. Modi's trip set the stage for more exchange of high-level visits: Solih came to India in December last and Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had travelled to Male in March this year. During Solih's visit, India came out with a USD 1.4 billion financial package for the Maldives. Soon after the parliamentary poll results were out in the Maldives, Modi also made it a point to call up both Solih and Nasheed on April 8 reiterating India's "deep commitment, in keeping with its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, to work closely with the Maldives...and assist the Maldives as per the latter's requirement in its socio-economic development."

However, it would be naïve to assume or expect that the Maldives' new government will overnight change its regional orientations. There are no easy way-outs of its serious economic challenges. Any vigorous attempt by the Solih government to move away from China could see it dealing with the charge of being "pro-India", a convenient political ploy used by some parties in South Asia to counter their rivals. Sri Lanka is an example of how a change of government there has not resulted in a decrease of China's importance because of its inability to repay the large Chinese loan for the Hambantota sea port. True, China's financial muscle has seen it expanding its footprints in South Asia, including the Maldives, neutralising to some extent India's proximity to its neighbours. India will be keenly watching how the Maldives under a new political executive deals with China in the time to come.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.