

Demand for reviewing road accident compensation

A ploy by transport owners not to pay

A joint meeting of transport owners and workers was held in the city's Mohanagar Natya Mancha on May 2 where transport leaders stated that they would have to rethink their decision to remain in the business in light of recent orders by the High Court to transport companies to pay financial damages to road accident victims. Their opinion is that bus and truck drivers are being touted as enemies of the people and the hefty fines being slapped on them are unjustified.

While these fines may seem too steep for a sector that has operated with impunity for many decades, the thousands of people who fall victim to rash driving by heavy transports have a right to seek compensation for accidents. When we look at the data presented by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, we have some 7,000 people killed and more than 15,000 people injured in over 5,500 road crashes in 2018 alone. That comes to an average of 20 lives every day and the principal causes for such high numbers of casualties is due to reckless driving, risky overtaking, faulty roads, unfit vehicles and unskilled drivers.

Bringing back order to our roads must be a priority issue for the authorities. The fact that transport associations want to take no responsibility for the deaths being caused on our roads shows just how much they care about people's safety. The law has to be respected by all and anarchy cannot be tolerated. We hope authorities will stand firm and not buckle to pressure of the transport association. The time has come for them to take responsibility for the misery caused every year on the country's unruly roads.

UP chairman's highhanded action

Destruction of trees cannot be allowed

WE are alarmed at the news of auctioning off some 240 live trees beside a road in a village in Lalmonirhat. Going by our report, the UP chairman and a UP member of Patgram upazila, with the help of the local administration and upazila forest officer, have auctioned off the trees—mostly mahogany, neem and eucalyptus—classifying those as dead.

Destruction of forests and illegal felling of trees have become a norm in the country. Global Forest Watch (GFW) and World Resources Institute (WRI)—the two international organisations working with forests—in their joint report in 2018 revealed that 3,32,000 acres of forestland were destroyed in Bangladesh in the last seven years. The natural forests of Gazipur, Tangail, Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong Hill Tracts and many other districts have been destroyed for various government and non-government development projects over the years. Only last month, we learned from a *Daily Star* report that 700 acres of protected forest in Cox's Bazar was sought by the public administration ministry to build a civil service academy. Illegal tree felling by unscrupulous traders and influential local leaders for personal financial gains is also very common. Because of such mindless acts, Bangladesh currently has only 13 percent forestland, whereas it should be at least 25 percent.

We must stop destroying our forests and trees if we want to survive. And for that general people must come forward. In this particular case, it was heartening to note that the villagers protested the illegal move and filed a written complaint with the DC of Lalmonirhat. Now we hope the matter will be properly investigated and stern action taken against those responsible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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From Neemtoli to Chawkbazar

As we watched the events of Neemtoli and Chawkbazar unfold in front of our eyes, it seems nothing has changed as we move on with our lives. There are numerous factories and warehouses in almost every building in Old Dhaka.

Nine years ago, the infamous Neemtoli tragedy hit us. Almost 120 people were killed. The origin of the fire was a chemical warehouse. Maybe that incident was not enough to garner our attention.

That is why people in Old Dhaka are still living with chemical factories all around them.

Nine years later, another tragedy knocked on our doors and devoured almost 70 lives. Many were burned. Some are still fighting against death.

We will write, share pictures and blacken our social media profile pictures. But for how long? How long will we remember the lessons from this tragedy? A lesson that cost so many lives.

Today we are working to make a change. But a week later, perhaps no one will remember why.

Time heals everything, but it won't fix the problems we live with. Yes it's the duty of our government to save the lives of its own people, give them a better and safer future. But people must also work to ensure their own safety.

Akbori Khanam, Heed International School

Striking a balance between development and environment

Development without environmental protection cannot be sustainable

"Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realise we cannot eat money." — Cree Indian Prophecy



NAZNIN TITHI

JUST as a country's development cannot be sustainable without a properly functioning democracy, development without environmental protection is also bound to fail. While Bangladesh is advancing with its various development projects at a fast pace, the issue of protecting the environment has taken a back seat in the process. We have already witnessed the negative impacts of unbridled polluting of our environment in the name of urbanisation, industrialisation, and development. Thus the question is, will all the development activities currently going on in the country be sustainable in the long run?

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable economic success in the last few decades. It has been transitioning from being one of the least developed countries to a developing one. According to IMF, Bangladesh is among the three fastest growing economies in the world. As per the IMF report "World Economic Outlook, April 2019: Growth Slowdown, Precarious Recovery," Bangladesh's economy will grow at 7.3 percent this year. And the World Bank has put Bangladesh in the 5th position in the world in terms of economic growth. The World Bank in its report said, "this growth was caused by manufacturing, construction and a bumper crop harvest, coupled with private consumption, remittance and rural income growth." All these are very positive news. But for sustainable economic development, we need to give the issue of environmental protection the attention it deserves.

While praising its different development activities, the government always cites the examples of the two Southeast Asian countries—Malaysia and Singapore. They are our role models for development. Let's put aside the debate on whether the development models of Malaysia or Singapore can be applied here. These two countries are also not the best examples of democracy. But in terms of economic growth and development, they have achieved tremendous success. Thus, if we have to follow the path to

Malaysia's development, we also need to know how the country is doing in terms of protecting its environment.

Malaysia's economy is the third largest in Southeast Asia. The country's position in terms of Gross Domestic Product per capita is the fifth highest trailing behind the four Asian Tigers—South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. According to the Global Competitiveness Report 2018, Malaysia was the 25th most competitive country in the world in the period of 2018-19. Malaysia's economic transition began in the 1970s, when its economy was based on mining and agriculture. Since the 1980s the industrial



A construction site of the Dhaka Metro Rail Project near Rokeya Sharani. The project has been causing serious dust pollution in Dhaka.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

sector has led Malaysia's growth. the country underwent rapid development during the late 20th century. Currently, less than one percent of Malaysian households live in extreme poverty. According to the World Bank, the country is expected to achieve its transition from an upper middle-income economy to a high-income economy by 2024.

Although rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in Malaysia has had its impact on the environment, the country has taken the issue of environmental protection quite seriously. Malaysia still has 62.3 percent forest coverage, according to FAO. It is recognised as one of the top 12 countries for mega-biodiversity and ranked fourth in the world for having the most tree species. The country has formulated several laws for river protection, forest conservation and improvement of air quality.

Compared to Malaysia, what we see in Bangladesh is a complete disregard

for the environment. Unplanned urbanisation and industrialisation have taken its toll on our rivers and water bodies—pollution and grabbing have led to the death of many rivers. The four rivers—Buriganga, Sitalakhaya, Turag and Balu—surrounding our capital have become extremely polluted because of unplanned industrialisation. Industrial wastes have polluted the Buriganga so much that its water is not drinkable even after treatment.

Bangladesh currently has only 13 percent forest coverage, according to FAO estimation. The coverage is supposed to be 25 percent for a proper ecological

balance. Yet, we are constructing the Rampal power plant near the Sundarbans, without considering the devastating impacts it will have on the world's largest mangrove forest. The work for the Rooppur nuclear power plant has also started. Besides, our precious forestland has been used for various government and non-government projects.

A recent global survey on air quality has found that Bangladesh's air is the most polluted in the world. Indoor and outdoor air pollution led to 1.23 lakh deaths in Bangladesh in 2017, according to *The State of Global Air 2019* report. Yet, illegally constructed brick kilns, which are the major polluters of our air, as found by the DoE, are emitting black smoke and big infrastructure projects and other construction works go on without taking any precautions for environmental safety.

What is the point of our economic growth and so-called development, if the

fruits of development do not reach the general people, but rather causes more suffering for them? What is the point of building all the flyovers in Dhaka if they serve only eight percent of the city's people? What is the point of building the Rampal power plant if it jeopardises the environment and people's livelihoods?

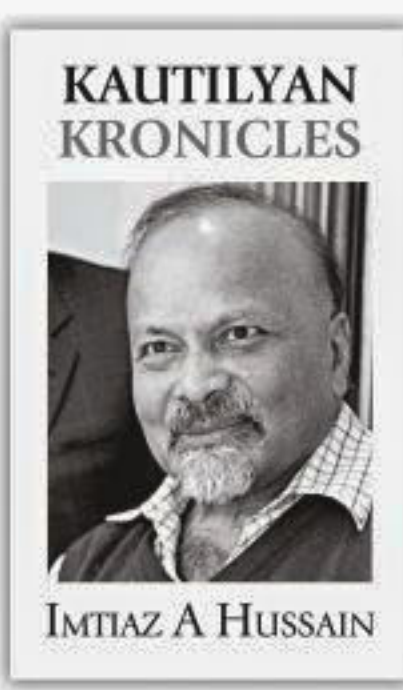
While we want to imitate Malaysia in terms of development, we should also look to how they are handling their environmental issues. Unsurprisingly, Malaysia has also been facing some environmental problems because of rapid industrialisation. According to the *New Strait Times*, between 2009 and October, 2017, there were 149 cases of oil-spills in Malaysian waters (November 9, 2017). Being one of the world's biggest plastic importers, plastic pollution is a big environmental threat to the country. Besides, illegal waste dumping takes place in many parts of Malaysia. In March this year, around 20 to 40 tonnes of chemical waste were illegally dumped into parts of the Sungai Kim Kim river in the Pasir Gudang industrial town in Johor state in southern Malaysia. The disaster has been ranked among the country's worst environmental calamities in living memory, with more than 3,555 people affected and 111 schools in the district remaining closed for several days. But timely intervention by the local authorities brought the situation under control.

In the aftermath of such disasters, the Malaysian government has decided to strengthen its environmental laws. The Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has expressed his thoughts on the importance of preserving the environment. He said, "We need to realise that our efforts to become a developed nation will not be achieved or recognised, if what we can show is only skyscrapers but our rivers are polluted, only barren land is left out of our wilderness and the air we breathe is badly polluted."

Mahathir's words can be a lesson for us too. Because for Bangladesh, coping with the environmental impacts of rapid urbanisation, unplanned industrialisation and indiscriminate development programmes remain a major challenge. We should not allow the destruction of environment in the name of development. We should remember that development is meant to improve our standard of living and it should never be prioritised over the environment.

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There goes the neighbourhood: Sri Lankan spillovers



IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

"TRAGEDY" only mildly describes Sri Lanka's bombing spate. It was heinous, stirring the wrong juices, pitting the wrong spiritual brethren against each other. It was evil, not only fanning flames between

two religious groups, but also imposing this upon the scars of a country already reeling from two prior ethnic conflicts. It was despicable, snatching away the innocence and lives of God-fearing churchgoers, adventure-seeking tourists, and civilians caught flat-footed pursuing their routine tasks.

Its consequences similarly stink. At stake is not just the unravelling of a laboriously-consulted peace from the brutal 1983-2009 conflict, which suppressed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but also spillovers across South Asia. If New Zealand's March 2019 massacre was a bolt out of the blue, Sri Lanka's was the most coordinated since 9/11. Measuring those spillovers could be treacherous: a networked 9/11-type connection stares us in the face.

Two groups claim responsibility: the National Thowtheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The former is too small and too local to coordinate attacks without external support, the latter's claim remains unverified. Both may be fringe Islamic groups, but they are interconnected and independent free-riders of shock.

Understanding plausible battle lines may not be so uphill. If the bombings were in retaliation for the Christchurch massacre, our lack of anticipation and inability to go beyond the "lone wolf" thesis is embarrassingly exposed, leaving the most damning of legacies: other possible reactions will now be encouraged. Since Sri Lanka seemed almost as far from any *jihadi* radar as New Zealand, we must now guard almost all non-descript countries or locations against such actions. A "lone wolf" perspective, which should shift spotlight

to populists of all stripes to identify any "black sheep", must now be combined with a *jihadi* red-herring: how NTJ's Indian links shifted Sri Lanka's wrath against a struggling Muslim minority (constituting barely 8 percent of the population), should open more than eyes.

Plenty of struggling Muslims dot the South Asia landscape. Only last week, Hazaras in Quetta faced an alleged *jihadi* assault; India's election season witnesses extremists hounding Christians

itself capitalising and feeding inter-personal political conflicts: the head of state, Maithripala Sirisena, sacking the chief executive, Ranil Wickremesinghe, until the court reinstated him, a rivalry with Indian connections.

If this vile petty politics taints sympathy for Sri Lanka, it only scratches the surface. At heart is the one-sided battle-victory sounded a decade ago against the Tamils. Whatever the details, it left a divided country even more divided, indeed segregated. Into this



A Sri Lankan soldier stands guard outside St Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, one of the targets of the recent attacks in the island nation.

PHOTO: LAKRUWAN WANNARACHCHI/AFP

and Muslims; and Bangladesh's 1.2 million Rohingyas, though secured from harm, remain exposed to cross-border ideational infiltration. Our intelligence needs to grow as crisscrossing populist-*jihadi* currents come out of the cracks.

Sri Lanka's systemic failure prior to the bombings must be as censured as the *jihadis* punished. Even in Dhaka there were discussions of a US red alert in the second week of April. We were not amused, but fortunately escaped the *jihadi* net this time. Sri Lanka's similar warning at roughly the same time went from certain desks, but not to critical others, exposing an egregious neglect,

seeped the secularly developed Buddhist-Muslim wedge, not just in Sri Lanka, but mostly in Myanmar, and in both stemming from the origin rupture: the Bamiyan destruction in 2001. Other variables infiltrated, but targeting Islam assumed newer contours. When one of the historically most peaceful religions, Buddhism, moves towards a warpath, rival groups beware, specifically Muslims. Pushing that, Bangladesh must beware of Myanmar's Buddhist nationalism, particularly if India, which is not on the same page as us over the Rohingyas, exploits this.

Now if we return to Sri Lanka,

we get a more nuanced picture why Muslims seem riled, how they can be driven out of the mainstream as the Tamils were a decade ago, and what might follow. The only missing blank is the Christian component; and the Christchurch massacre supplied that. In contrast to Sri Lanka's handling of the crisis (including its background), New Zealand may have shown the world through a strong and almost unanimous leadership why another massacre is less likely in New Zealand than elsewhere, like Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's dilly-dallying Wickremesinghe is no Jacinta Ardern, the Rock of New Zealand.

Nor is Aung Sang Suu Kyi. Up for election next year, we might find a chauvinist anti-Rohingya voice becoming more strident, meaning, not all can be well on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. As Bangladesh despairs hosting the Rohingyas and Myanmar neglects them (shielded as it is by a formidable China-India-Russia axis in the United Nations, where the genocide labelling still remains without feet), only vultures show interest.

Meanwhile the ghost of Christchurch could haunt even other locations. Exploiting the Christian-Muslim disjuncture, other groups may settle other scores. Israel automatically comes to mind after populist Benjamin Netanyahu's victory. His Golan Heights goals amid the Syrian imbroglio dittoes his Gaza Strip policy-actions, and how he has dragged an inept populist US leader deeper into an Iranian quagmire. Russia will be out prowling too, with North Korea's Kim Jong-un also stirring the pot. As bedfellows get created out of adversities, the original *jihad*-driven Muslim bait is expected to harden ordinary Muslim lives in many more locations.

Samuel P Huntington wrote about a "clash of civilisation" in 1990. It simmered for quite a while, but instead of "torn" countries sparking it, as he prescribed, lone wolves have taken over. That opens a dangerous 21st-century trail.

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