

Master plans for rivers

Ensure sustainability of the plans

THE government presented to us, on July 21, two decade-long master plans to protect five rivers in Dhaka (Buriganga, Turag, Balu, Dhaleswari and Pungli) and two in Chittagong (Karnaphuli and Halda) and their tributaries. Government officials belonging to different ministries and departments were involved in making these plans. While the government must be congratulated for formulating a plan to regain the rivers to be implemented over several phases, our experience of implementation of masterplans is rather bad. The first and foremost question is that the authorities have not shared with any stakeholder precisely how they have gone about making the master plans, or without taking any inputs from them.

We have, over the decades, witnessed the lack of commitment of the authorities to master plans. They have been openly flouted, regardless of court rulings and campaigns by activists and the media. Hence, the latest plans ought to be taken with a pinch of salt because all the rhetoric that has been made at policy level over the last two decades about protection and preservation of rivers have resulted in exactly the opposite, i.e. more encroachment, more pollution and nothing of substance about following what is written in master plans.

This brings us back to the question of implementation of the plan in toto. What we do not need are futile and hollow promises. Unlike other master plans, such as the Dhaka DAP, we hope that it will not be scuttled by vested interest groups. We feel that by following landmark court rulings that have been made over the last decade to free the rivers from the juggernaut of vested interests, a new exercise of formulating a plan might not have been necessary at all.

Dormitories at the cost of trees!

The controversial master plan should be revised

IT is outrageous that the Jahangirnagar University authorities have decided to cut down over 1,100 trees to construct six dormitories—three for male and three for female students. The university authorities have already started felling the age-old trees despite protests from the teachers and students. Reportedly, a new master plan has been made for the university, and the trees have been cut down according to that plan, of which the teachers, students and the university community are not aware.

Since many of the teachers have alleged that the university authorities have kept them in the dark over the matter, we would suggest that the authorities make the master plan public. And then, after holding discussions with all the stakeholders of the university, revise the plan if needed. Also, we would like to know what happened to the university's original master plan according to which all its previous infrastructure was built.

Of course, there should be no doubt that the JU, being the only residential university of the country, needs to have more dormitories so that more students can enrol there. But that does not necessarily mean that new infrastructure should be built at the cost of the trees. Already, a major share of the university's land has been ruined due to unplanned development in the campus. Therefore, the university authorities should move away from any decision that will harm the university's environment and make the green campus look like a concrete jungle. And if trees have to be cut at all, it must be to the bare minimum. And whatever the number of trees is cut, double that should be replanted.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

When did we turn this barbaric?

It seems like some people in this country have been gripped by pure lunacy. The incidents of mob lynching that have been occurring all over the country have again reminded us of the incompetence of our law enforcers. Is there any sense of humanity and rationality left in us at all?

It is hard to imagine how a group of people could be driven into a murderous frenzy triggered by just a rumour or a verbal instigation. But that is our reality now. Innocents are falling victims to mob lynching and that too in broad daylight.

The vile individuals involved in this heinous crime should be identified and brought to justice as soon as possible to set an example. The concerned authorities should make this a high-priority issue and take strict steps to prevent the spread of rumours that are causing innocents to be beaten to death in cold blood.

It is high time we stepped outside our bubble and admitted the fact that we as a nation are failing. The government, law enforcers along with the human rights organisations should immediately come forward to put an end to these killings. It is absolutely ridiculous that all it takes is a little push to cause people to reveal such extreme cruelty.

Md Shamiul Islam, By email



How black money can and cannot be reduced



THE OVERTON WINDOW
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

MOVING against the current of expert opinion, the government, in the budget for FY2019-20, opened up a five-year scheme to convert black money into white. The plan will allow people with undisclosed income to invest the money in special economic zones and high-tech parks by paying a flat rate of 10 percent tax without having to answer any questions, and permit them to purchase land, flats and apartments by paying tax of Tk 500 to Tk 15,000 per square metre.

It's a controversial decision, primarily in light of the fact that the lowest tax slab in Bangladesh is 10 percent and the highest is 25 percent. Meaning that black-money-holders will be able to whiten their money paying the lowest tax rate, and honest businessmen who pay higher rates of tax will lose out to them

What this plan does is give people who have amassed their wealth in illegitimate ways—through crimes and corruption—the chance to get rid of the financial trail of their wrongdoings and avoid questioning while they are at it.

for not being corrupt.

While the government is financially incentivising dishonesty in that way, it is arguing that the move is necessary to bring undisclosed income back into the formal economy, to increase its tax net and boost the country's stagnant private sector investment. But if we look at the data, we see that between 1972 and 2017, Tk 18,372 crore was whitened in Bangladesh with the NBR receiving Tk 1,528.74 crore in taxes only. And of the Tk 18,372 crore collected during this entire period, Tk 9,682 crore has been whitened during the tenure of the last



caretaker government, while under both AL and BNP governments, the amount of money that has been whitened each year under such schemes is negligible—which leaves no reason to believe that it will be different now under the AL government.

What this plan does, however, is give people who have amassed their wealth in illegitimate ways—through crimes and corruption—the chance to get rid of the financial trail of their wrongdoings and avoid questioning while they are at it, should they need to do so. This essentially leaves them with a “get out of jail free” card to use in times of trouble. Meanwhile, there is another problem—that of the actual black money and the underground economy, which the current government scheme cannot solve.

According to a 2015 IMF report, the size of the black economy in Bangladesh stood at around Tk 4,532.71 billion. And a 2012 finance ministry report prepared on the underground economy estimated that black money amounted to around 45 percent to 85 percent of Bangladesh's GDP. Despite the difference in estimates, what both reports suggest is that huge sums of money are lurking in our underground economy which are not only being generated as a result of crime and corruption, but are also being used to commit more corruption and crime.

This produces an invisible cycle that is difficult to translate into monetary terms, but is devastating nonetheless in terms of

the social costs that it imposes. Similarly, because of its nature, finding the real monetary value of the black economy is difficult too, and such estimates often end up undervaluing the true size of the underground economy. And so there is no question that the government does have a big problem on its hands.

Although black money is most often associated with illegitimate activities, in Bangladesh, black money is considered as money earned both legally on which no tax has been paid, as well as money earned illegally and also untaxed. This means that black money can be reduced by strengthening the tax system.

Years ago, the NBR chairman had disclosed that the number of persons paying more than Tk 100,000 as personal income tax in 2011-2012 had not even surpassed one thousand, despite there being 23,212 multi-millionaires in the country. We have seen the latter figure go up year after year. But the former has not increased in accordance with that. This shows one of the most significant weaknesses of our tax system—its failure to bring the rich's share of the wealth under the tax net which, to some extent, is actually a political problem.

According to Dr Muinul Islam, professor, Department of Economics, University of Chittagong, “Black money revolves around the concept of illegally obtained money through political and/or bureaucratic corruption, bribery at

all levels of the government,” among others. Naturally then, the problem of political and bureaucratic nepotism and favouritism is deeply entrenched in the entire issue of black money. Since it is usually very difficult to separate the two, in order to reduce the share and influence of black money in society, countries must have strong institutions to fight corruption. And that is what we lack most severely. It is this lacking that has given rise to black money growing in Bangladesh in the first place.

This is why the government, instead of trying to cure the symptom of this illness, by launching initiatives to allow the whitening of black money, should look to address the cause, which are the activities that generate black money. This includes strengthening regulatory and monitoring institutions, and granting greater independence to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), whose actions over the years have been anything but bold. However, a great part of why that is, is because of political interference from government high-ups, preventing the ACC and other regulators from pursuing cases against those who are somehow connected to the ruling party of the day or other influential quarters. That, too, must change if the problem of black money is to be addressed effectively.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is @EreshOmarJamal

Privacy violations, the rise of Big Data and Orwell's premonition



IQRA L QAMARI

IN George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984, the fictional omniscient entity “Big Brother” seemed like an absurd possibility even a decade back. For an all-knowing being to exist in a society that had access to a constant flow of information was not common in everyday narratives of the time. Fast track to 2019 and what we have is an emergence of Big Data that is slowly helping us spiral towards an eerily similar reality. There is no shock factor to this phenomenon. The biggest source of this gigantic accumulation of data is the people themselves.

Facebook, despite its privacy-breaching scandals is exponentially growing, with 2.32 billion monthly users as of December 31 last year. While it managed to land itself in user security controversy and outrage, its revenues have only increased. Never has any enterprise before managed to constantly accumulate data of over two billion people. It did so by fostering a culture of sharing among the digital nomads—when we experience something new, we tend to capture or record it, when we record it, we upload it and finally we share it with our own selection of audience. But is it shared only within our selected circle? The latest events that have occurred suggest otherwise.

Last month, in a courtroom debate in San Francisco, lawyers defending Facebook in a litigation issuing from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, declared, rather too matter-of-factly, what we have been feeling apprehensive about—users should have no rational expectation of privacy from social media. Further arguments ensued to and fro where it was, revealed that the tech giant treats privacy as something binary, rather than nuanced. The moment users choose to share their posts with others, their privacy gets compromised. If that is the case, the option of being able to tweak one's desired selection of audience should be announced as redundant. This new turn of events definitely added more fuel to the controversy that originated since the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Just a year

back, Mark Zuckerberg sat in front of members of both houses of Congress, uttering the word privacy numerous times and each time, emphasising on how the company policy advocates for the privacy of its users. This year, he had penned down a 3,000-word monologue—the foundations of which is based on personal privacy—where he promised to reconstruct the image of his company. But with that still fresh in memory, his lawyers are delivering contradicting statements. Both these scenarios emerge from the same company at stake but both cannot be the truth.



PHOTO: REUTERS/DADO RUVIC/ILLUSTRATION

Facebook is growing exponentially despite its frequent privacy violation scandals.

According to a Ted Talk by Yuval Noah Harari, best-selling author of Sapiens and Homo Deus, liberalism is currently under threat given the direction of information collection and dissemination is being steered towards by these “Silicon Valley Prophets”. Liberalism, in theory, is based on the capacity of people's free will. The intricacies of our society play out in a way that prioritises the freedom of willpower and decision-making over everything else—customers are always right and

firm that was involved with Trump's presidential campaign. Since then, legal and ethical questions have arisen while the firm was held culpable for influencing the democratic agenda.

This event highlighted the loopholes in social media privacy policies, the terms of which we agree to without the slightest hesitation. Providing a mere review on a restaurant or liking a page on social media would trigger an algorithmic pattern exclusive to each individual. Users

fail to realise that every click is leaving behind a digital footprint that contributes to an inconspicuous process of data curation that is not just utilised to suggest advertisements but is being exploited for profit maximisation of power-hungry corporations and/or to further the agenda of other political entities. It is almost as if people are being made to become comfortable with the idea of social experimentation despite transparency and accountability being largely absent.

The Silicon Valley giants have furthered the use of these patterns to permeate all online activities of users. One might simply ask, “Why is my personal data so important?” But these tech companies do not really care about individualistic personal data or the mundane details of one's life. What they are interested in is the metadata from which physiological portfolios can be drawn and used to manipulate behaviour. The Federal Trade Commission has recently decided to impose a fine of five billion dollars on Facebook due to the earlier privacy violations—a penalty that falls flat against the repercussions it has instigated while the amount is being compared to a mere “parking ticket” for a corporation of this magnitude.

Data collection and its merger with complimentary technology have provided human beings with countless noteworthy privileges and contributions. Although, the term Big Data, has a negative connotation to it, we cannot deny how our modern state of affairs have thrived in this digital ecosystem. Yet, there are no benefits without costs. Social media platforms are now like an unregulated marketplace that needs intervention from all stakeholders—be it the political commanders, the pioneers of the tech companies and, most importantly, the users themselves. The whole business model would collapse if enough number of users withdraw or unsubscribe from such domains. Likewise, the human race today is also heavily reliant on these platforms. It appears that both parties involved here are at stake, and will have to meet at a common ground. The recent endemic of privacy violations must not be treated as just a threat anymore but also as a wakeup call for this era.

Iqra L Qamari is a student of economics at North South University and is an intern at The Daily Star.