

Slum fire inflamed by illegal gas pipes

Authorities should learn from this disaster

THE fire that burned through an entire slum at Mirpur's Chalantika area on Friday was reportedly exacerbated by plastic pipes facilitating illegal gas connections. The plastic pipes melted in the heat, releasing gas from within and making the blaze spread much faster than it would have otherwise. Locals have alleged that syndicates run by some ruling party men in cahoots with employees of Titas Gas stole gas from the main transmission and distribution lines and diverted it to the slum in exchange for money from slum dwellers. Thanks to these illegal gas pipes, it was an accident waiting to happen.

It was a frightening spectacle as the fire rapidly engulfed everything. Fortunately, casualties could be avoided since many people living in the slum were away because of the Eid holidays. Otherwise, the way the fire spread so quickly, the number of deaths could easily have been extremely high. This, however, is a classic example of how the poor, particularly those living in Dhaka's slums, live, surrounded by constant and serious dangers and under conditions where they can easily be exploited by different syndicates—without the authorities ever batting an eyelid. Not only were these people living with such death-traps hanging right over their heads, but many gas cylinders were also found in the slum, some of which exploded during the fire, making things even worse.

With their houses and belongings burned to ashes, thousands of people from the slum are now living on the streets with no relief in sight. They should be given immediate aid and be rehabilitated. Aside from that, the authorities need to come up with a plan to inspect the conditions of different slums and ensure that a repeat of this incident does not occur.

Barisal's medical waste could become a major health hazard

Why is there no separate medical waste disposal system?

WE are appalled to learn that Barisal city does not have any specialised disposal system for its medical waste. Waste from the government hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres, blood banks and upazila health complexes—around five tonnes of it—is collected and dumped with regular garbage into a six-acre landfill. Such waste poses grave risks to both humans and the environment.

The medical waste includes used syringes, bandages, dressings, needles, even amputated parts of human body, stool, urine, blood, expired medicine, etc. When rag-pickers, most of whom are children, come to the landfills, they are exposed to these waste products, becoming vulnerable to contagious diseases such as hepatitis B and hepatitis C, tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS.

It is common knowledge that medical waste must be crushed and burnt in an incinerator before it can be disposed of. So how is it possible that a city as big as Barisal does not have any incinerator? According to the report, a waste disposal plant had been installed in 2004 by a group of NGOs but then it was damaged in 2006, after which the medical waste started being dumped in the landfill. What has Barisal City Corporation been doing for the last 13 years? Officials of the BCC have claimed that they have applied to the relevant ministry for a proper clinical waste disposal plant outside the city. Meanwhile, with the population of the city increasing, clinical waste is also increasing, putting added pressure on the existing landfill. The situation is graver when we take into account that the landfill is located near water bodies, and waste such as infectious blood tossed inside a landfill can contaminate the soil as well as the drinking water supplies.

At this point, the matter must be treated as an emergency and all steps must be taken by the government to ensure that a proper disposal system with an incinerator is installed on an urgent basis and all medical waste is treated in it. Not doing so would put thousands of people at risk.

Digital land administration is the need of the hour



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

BANGLADESH is the most densely packed human domicile in the world among nations having more than 10 million people. With more than 1,100 men, women and children per square kilometre, Bangladesh struggles to provide breathing space to her teeming millions. Without a shred of doubt, "habitable land" is the most scarce and inelastic resource we have to contend with. Dhaka, meanwhile, is the unenviable topper among all capital cities in terms of population density with nearly 20,000 people per square kilometre. Despite being at the lower half of the global per capita GDP rankings, the average price of agricultural land in Bangladesh is higher than that in the UK and is probably the highest in the world. Some commercial properties in the capital command per-square-foot prices higher than that of Las Vegas.

Compared to income levels here, homesteads figure disproportionately in a family's overall material assets. Most people owning homesteads acquire them through inheritance and a large majority of people, who lose homesteads through river erosion, natural calamity or family fragmentation, never own homes again, leading to almost a fifth of the population categorised as ultra-poor and poor who have never known a place they can call their own.

At the time of our independence 47 years ago, Bangladesh's economy was in a shambles and yet encumbered with sustaining 75 million citizens, prompting some world leaders to write it off as a "bottomless basket". That very Bangladesh has now emerged as the second largest apparel exporter and the second biggest source of freelance IT service providers in the world, which is a testament to the grit and perseverance of the very people that many observers once thought would be a burden to the world at large. As this economic juggernaut unfolded and Bangladesh's economy blossomed to over a third of a trillion dollars on the back of sprawling mills and factories

and increasingly mechanised agriculture, one resource has remained stuck in the ground: our landmass, measuring 147,570 sq km. It has remained more or less the same as the population more than doubled to 163 million in the last half century. The burgeoning population and a prospering economy have put a tremendous strain on the fixed landmass, making it the most precious resource at our disposal.

Land administration is a three-headed

is cut and diced into land parcels across the country either as private freehold property, or public leasehold property, or government or state-owned land. This fixed inventory of land can be meticulously recorded in a database with relevant geographic information as well as Global Positioning System tags (Land Database with GIS Extensions and GPS Tags), thereby removing the uncertainties, complexities and confusion surrounding land records. With this simple yet effective

mid-eighties and had commissioned many pilot projects since then, land administration remains largely untouched by any tangible benefits of digitalisation. There have been many laudable piecemeal initiatives but without a holistic digitisation of the land administration ecosystem and continuous upkeep of the digital system, the real benefits of such measures will continue to elude their intended beneficiaries: the citizenry.

The digitalisation of land administration—encompassing records of rights, payment of land development tax, land title transfer or mutation, and digital land survey—requires a slew of information technologies, know-how and expertise that are readily available locally. Most of the land automation pilots have been done by local companies and even the few pilots that were funded by Bangladesh's development partners and contracted to foreign companies were essentially carried out by local sub-contractors.

Digital Bangladesh has touched many facets of public service in the last ten years but not so much the land administration. However, land administration involves the maintenance of the most precious resource of the nation—our fixed landmass—and if any government dispensation deserves the full force of Digital Bangladesh, it is the land administration. Vested interest groups that have been preying on the innocent populace for decades, taking advantage of the opacity and complexity of land administration, will surely oppose any such move but to be in sync with the current government's call to arms to root out corruption and hassles from all citizen services, digital land administration is a crying need of the hour.

A comprehensive digital land administration will not only curtail corrupt and fraudulent practices in land transactions but will also greatly improve Bangladesh's ranking in the "ease of doing business" index. Investments, both local and foreign, are fully contingent on moving up in this ranking. Now all that is needed to make it happen is an unflinching political will.

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Digital Bangladesh has touched many facets of public service in the last ten years but not so much the land administration.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD TAUHEED

hydra that has the whole business of owning, registering and transferring landed properties knotted up in unending anguish and frustration for the general public. The lack of clarity in procedures for obtaining and verifying land ownership information has given rise to the largest clan of thugs and fraudsters that prey on ordinary folks' simplicity and lack of knowledge of the complex web of legal and administrative mumbo-jumbo. Legal experts estimate that four-fifths of all litigations are land-related, and the overflowing cases clogging the judicial system sometimes take several generations over many decades to come to a settlement!

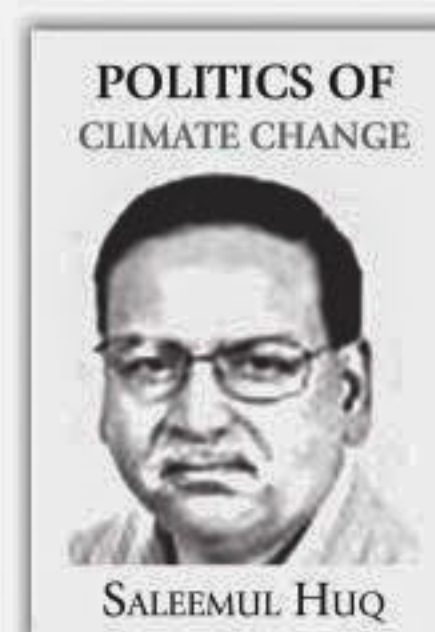
But this does not need to be this way. Landmass is a fixed resource that

step, the nation can rescue the archaic land administration system and at the same time get rid of most of the disputes dogging our judicial system.

The fact that a digitised inventory and upkeep of all land parcels is the panacea for all that ails the land administration, land taxation and land adjudication ecosystem of the country has been known to government policy planners from the early eighties. Any large set of data lends itself to effective and easy maintenance in the form of computer-assisted database, and thus the fact that the millions of land records of the country can benefit from digitalisation was a no-brainer. However, the sad fact is, even though the government had been tinkering with computer-based land records since the

GREEN CLIMATE FUND

Supporting climate adaptation should be a priority



SALEEMUL HUQ

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

THE developed countries of the world had agreed under the Paris Agreement to provide USD 100 billion each year, starting from 2020 onwards, to support mitigation as well as adaptation projects in developing countries. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) was set up with its secretariat in Songdo, Korea to handle a significant part of that amount. The GCF was launched with just over USD 10 billion to start its funding support to developing countries; it is now looking to replenish its fund in a bid to secure a big part of the 100 billion going forward.

Next week, the GCF will hold its big annual event in Songdo to share its plans with hundreds of partners from around the world gathering to review its progress. A delegation from Bangladesh will join the event as well. This is an opportune moment to discuss the progress achieved so far and to work towards improving the effectiveness of the funding for adaptation with a specific focus on the most vulnerable countries and communities.

The GCF Board deserves praise for making an early decision to allocate half of their funds for adaptation and only half for mitigation (since until then, 80 percent of global climate change funds were going to mitigation projects and only 20 percent to adaptation projects). They also decided to prioritise the most vulnerable developing countries in terms of receiving the adaptation funds.

While the GCF Board made this excellent decision early on, the GCF Secretariat and the systems they put in place have failed to deliver it effectively, with funding for adaptation projects reaching only around a third of their allocations (they fudged the figures by claiming that another third were both mitigation and adaptation projects!). Also, the most vulnerable developing countries including Bangladesh and other Least Developed Countries (LDCs) found it extremely onerous to meet all the compliance requirements set by the GCF. For example, it took over two years for Bangladesh to get just two entities accredited to seek funding from the GCF until now.

To be fair to the GCF, they now recognise that they have fallen short on

delivering support for adaptation in the most vulnerable countries, and under the leadership of their new CEO Yannick Glemarec, who had spent several years in the UNDP office in Bangladesh in the nineties, they are looking at ways to enhance their effectiveness going forward.

I think the GCF should treat their mandate to support adaptation differently from their mandate to support mitigation projects. The latter works well for giving loans and also focusing on the bigger developing countries. Indeed, it can be argued that mitigation projects are now quite able to seek loans from the market and may not need to be subsidised by the GCF for much longer.

However, when it comes to adaptation, the clients are not venture capitalists who

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), which found that less than 20 percent of adaptation funding given to developing countries actually reached the most vulnerable communities within those countries. So to be fair to the global institutions providing adaptation funds to national governments, the problem is also a national governance issue where governments need to prioritise the most vulnerable communities in their own countries.

Thus, there has to be a better dialogue by the GCF with national governments about preparing and delivering more targeted funds so that the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries can benefit from that.

a learning-by-doing process, the GCF should consider funding national "learning" institutions and not just the "implementing" institutions, as they are doing now. To help with the learning process, local universities can be engaged with (but should be independently funded) the project implementers for the MEL components.

In the LDCs, such a network of universities called the LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) already exists, and is available to partner with the GCF on a country-by-country basis. A common methodology could also be developed across the countries and with other global funds such as the Adaptation Fund and the LDC Fund under the United Nations Framework



PHOTO: ABM AMINUL ISLAM

Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable countries in terms of exposure to risks associated with climate change.

will take loans and repay them from an income stream selling renewable energy, but rather the most vulnerable people on the planet living in the most vulnerable countries. These communities and countries do not have the capacity to meet all the onerous conditions of the GCF's proposal submission process. Hence, simply sitting in Songdo and waiting for the perfect project proposals to arrive on their desks is not going to work. They are going to have to reach out to these countries more effectively to support their ability to prepare and submit project proposals.

This has been demonstrated by a study of global adaptation funding by the

Another important area where the investments from GCF need to be much improved is in delivering transformational adaptation, as required by their mandate. To be fair, their main tool of funding projects for only a few years is not really a fit-for-purpose investment tool to deliver transformational adaptation over more than a decade on a national scale. Hence, the GCF Secretariat should allocate a small portion of their funds for longer-term engagement at the national level in each of the most vulnerable countries to develop both baselines and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems that go beyond the projects themselves. As adaptation to climate change is inherently

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Finally, it is important for the GCF to both enhance the proportion of its funds for adaptation projects and improve considerably on its ability to reach the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries, who are the main intended beneficiaries of the funds that the taxpayers of rich countries are contributing to the GCF. There is much to be done to improve its performance but it should not be impossible to do with the right attitude and partnerships.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dreams turned to ashes overnight

Last Friday, an inferno destroyed thousands of shanties in Chalantika slum in Mirpur, rendering thousands of people homeless, leaving behind only their charred valuables. Many returned from their hometown after the Eid-ul-Azha holiday to find ashes where their dwelling had once been. These already low-wage earners are now left in destitute conditions and are in desperate need of rehabilitation.

These incidents are prevalent in our country, yet little is done to prevent these tragedies after the initial phase of inquiry. A probe committee has been formed this time as well, which has been asked to conduct a neutral and thorough investigation. The main cause behind the blaze is still unknown, although faulty gas connection pipes had a part to play in catalysing the spread of the blaze, according to experts. Some of the slum dwellers, however, believe this to be an act of arson. But will we ever find out the source of the fire?

The government must ensure that a thorough investigation is carried out by the probe committee to avoid the repetition of such tragedies. If it turns out to be an act of sabotage, then strict actions must be taken against the perpetrators. In the meantime, all these people must be provided with temporary shelter and fundamental supplies till they are rehabilitated.

Shenin Khan, by email