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Only banning student politics is not the solution

Buet ban should be part of a wider institutional reform

THE ban on the activities of student-led political organisations on Buet campus, announced by the university administration on Friday, should be seen as a first step toward the wider institutional reforms that are needed to make the campus safe for students. The ban, which came in response to demands raised by students protesting at the murder of Abrar Fahad, was not an organic development born of a politico-academic consensus, nor much can be expected of it before the directive is fleshed out to give a more comprehensive guideline. But the novelty of the decision and its far-reaching potential should be acknowledged. Other public universities should take note, and actively try to find a solution of their own.

It's important to note that this ban doesn't include the students' right to freedom of association or to express their political opinion. It targets the particular brand of student politics that has developed in the country in which the student wings of political parties, especially the ruling party, often use their power to terrorise general students. But only a ban on paper will not work without the sincerity of the government and the university administrations which have the responsibility to create a safe, congenial atmosphere for the students. This is what the authorities in Buet, as in other universities, have so far failed to do. For too long they have abdicated their responsibility to ensure that students are protected from the fallout of their dissent and independent thought, and that they don't suffer at the hands of goons masquerading as students. The ruling party is particularly to blame for the deteriorating condition in the universities and for its failure to check abuse of power by the unruly members of its student wing. Without addressing these issues, a ban on partisan student politics will not be effective. Also, it's important that university administrations are rid of political influences and allowed to function properly to ensure the welfare of the students. Public universities have for decades been plagued by the scourge of student politics and too many precious lives have been lost or scarred. The Abrar incident should serve as a lesson that it's time we broke free of this regressive culture and launched initiatives for a wider institutional reform in the universities, whatever it entails.

Jamuna gobbles up homes in Tangail

Victims of erosion need help now

WATER flow of the Jamuna River has been rising steadily and is threatening homes and livelihoods of hundreds in Kalihati and Bhuapur upazilas of Tangail. Over a 48-hour period last week, at least 28 homesteads were lost as the soil eroded in Kalihati. The situation was much worse in Bhuapur, where people lost around 100 homes. The sad part in this whole story is that the affected people have alleged that their complaints to local administration fell on deaf ears. Apparently, the primary reason for this erosion is due to indiscriminate sand lifting from the banks of the river. Despite protestation by the local communities, the authorities did not make a move to stop the activity.

The damage is done. The bigger question here is what will the authorities do now? Hundreds of people, along with their families, are spending days and nights under the open sky subject to the elements. People in Kalihati upazila's Beltia village have been venting their anger at the apparent apathy of the local administration, stating that they have long been demanding a permanent embankment in the area. Again, these demands have not been looked into. The deputy commissioner who recently visited the affected areas have told this paper that the administration is taking steps to construct a permanent embankment in the area during the next dry season. Why couldn't this embankment be constructed last dry season? It is not as if the problem of erosion happened in a day, and had it been in place, perhaps the people of these two upazilas could still have had their homes. It is one thing to promise the sun and the moon after a disaster has occurred. It is quite another to be responsive to people's needs and avert a problem in the first place. We can only hope that whatever decision authorities take now will be implemented expeditiously so that these people can get back to rebuilding their lives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The downside of smartphones

In this digital age, smartphones have become a necessity for most people, regardless of their age. The fact that young people are becoming alarmingly dependent on smartphones needs to be taken more seriously.

The manner in which young students across educational institutions in Bangladesh are becoming "hunchbacks" because of their addiction to smartphones and, in turn, social media, has already unveiled its negative effects on society. I cannot help but ponder what the future holds.

With internet connections readily accessible almost everywhere nowadays, students have started to occasionally misuse it. Many of them spend long hours online, killing valuable time which they could have utilised for their studies instead. Several surveys have shown the alarming rise in the use of social media amongst young students.

Another frightening issue is the addiction towards the easily available adult-content amongst the youth. Surveys have also shown that many young students are falling prey to this mind-altering material, which in turn changes their perception on relationships. The negative effects are countless.

It is high time that parents and school authorities collectively look into the matter and regulate the usage of smartphones, before things get out of hand.

Amdadul H Sarker, Comilla University

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Forewarning can minimise the devastation of river erosion

Dr Maminul Haque Sarker, Deputy Executive Director, Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about how early prediction can help minimise the impacts of river erosion and the importance of developing a national strategy for river erosion.

We have been witnessing increasing incidents of river erosion this year, which has already devoured vast areas of croplands and homesteads of people across the country. Do you think river erosion has been causing more damage this year compared to previous years?

Recently, we came across a lot of news reports in both print and electronic media about river erosion—how it has already affected a large number of people and damaged vast agricultural land and properties of people. But it cannot be said based on these reports that river erosion has particularly increased this year.

When a char or agricultural land erodes, it does not get much attention from the media. But when big structures such as roads, bridges, hospitals, townships are devoured by the rivers, it becomes news. We often do not give much attention to small scale river erosion, but if we look at the erosion and damage done throughout the year, we would find that a lot of the damage remain unaccounted for.

Usually, we take account of the losses and damage at the beginning of each year using dry season satellite images. We publish a prediction report annually which also includes location-wise annual monitoring of erosion and damaged infrastructure. This report is for the use of the national level stakeholders, such as the Planning Commission, BWDB (Bangladesh Water Development Board), LGED (Local Government Engineering Department), Disaster Management Bureau, etc. Analysing the time-series satellite images, we found that the annual river bank erosion along different large rivers, such as the Ganges, Jamuna and Padma, increases with the upsurge of annual peak flood discharge.

Do we currently have any erosion prediction system or early warning mechanism? Also, what about developing a strategy for addressing the causes and consequences of river erosion?

We at the CEGIS have been making yearly predictions for the last 15/16 years with the financial support from different projects of BWDB, WARPO (Water Resources Planning Organisation), UNDP and CEGIS. We are even giving predictions two years in advance since last year. We have seen from experience

that our predictions are 70/80 percent accurate. Brac had worked in some erosion-prone areas based on our predictions and found the predictions to be 90 percent accurate.

Such predictions should be a part of our river management strategy. Because these predictions and early warnings could minimise erosion or reduce the damage to properties. The government can take initiatives for river bank protection and also for the relocation of the local people who are supposed to be affected by river erosion. But it will only be helpful if the government makes a



Dr Maminul Haque Sarker

national strategy for river management and works based on the predictions.

Moreover, river erosion is a natural disaster and the ministry of disaster management should be handling the issue. It is no longer a problem for the developed countries of the world, because they had taken care of the issue long ago. They have managed their rivers in a way that the rivers do not change their course anymore. However, since it is still a major issue in Bangladesh, it needs urgent attention of the authorities concerned.

Could you elaborate on how the river erosion prediction system works? Understanding the morphological behaviour of braided and dynamic rivers is very important. It was found in late 1990s that time-series satellite images are very useful to understand the main rivers of Bangladesh. At the beginning

of this century, CEGIS research team developed a method to predict the river bank erosion of the Jamuna River. CEGIS also developed the prediction method for the Ganges (Godagari, Rajshahi) to Aricha and Padma (Aricha to Chandpur).

An interpretation of satellite images may provide huge information on the location of dry season channels, sandbar and chars (vegetated island). There are different parameters based on which the predictions are made, such as the curvature of meandering river bend, width of the river channel, approach of channel to the riverbank, location of the channel—upstream or downstream, right or left bank, starting and ending point of river bank erosion with respect to the meandering bend, etc. Several hundreds of data are extracted from the time-series satellite images and are analysed statistically.

The extent of river bank erosion largely depends on the characteristics of the bank materials. Before developing the predictive tools, we have to know the properties of bank materials. Erosion also depends on the curvatures, width of channel, terrain slope and shape of upstream sandbar. We relate the extent of erosion with different parameters which provide the rules for erosion prediction.

During the last one and a half decades, the accuracy of our prediction has increased significantly. By this time, we worked in India to develop tools for assessing vulnerability of different structures and river bank erosion along the Kosi River. Water Resources Department (WRD) of Bihar has been successfully using our tools for the last two years.

River erosion has been affecting thousands of people annually in Bangladesh and many of the landless people have no other option but to migrate to the cities in search of a livelihood. Do you think the government's rehabilitation programmes are sustainable?

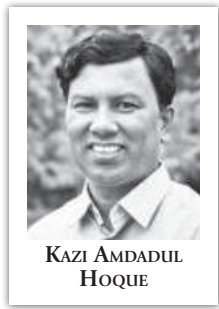
We have a database of how many people have been affected and how much land and resources have been lost to river erosion every year. But sadly, we could not take advantage of this data for lack of a proper plan. Our estimates suggest that currently river erosion affects some

55,000 people annually. Although thousands of people fall victim to river erosion every year, the affected people have little access to institutional support, and the government's measures are restricted to mostly relief distribution to the victims. It would be more effective if the vulnerable people could be taken under the government's Safety Net Programmes. It is important that the government agencies as well as the non-government organisations plan their relief efforts as well as the rehabilitation programmes based on the predictions.

There are NGOs which have been doing a lot of work at the community level. They are building schools and healthcare facilities for the flood and erosion affected people. But often, such facilities are built in erosion-prone areas, meaning that these structures are often washed away by the rivers within a short time. In one instance, we predicted that a certain part of an area was at risk of erosion. But an NGO built a school in that area without taking into consideration the predictions. After a year or two, the school building was devoured by a river. Such incidents can easily be avoided if the early warnings are taken into consideration.

Moreover, protecting the river bank becomes much easier with an early warning mechanism in place. We can take small-scale river bank protection plans or, in some cases, go for big-budget plans. For example, in order to save the banks of the Jamuna near the Jamuna bridge, the government has undertaken some big-budget plans, because the bridge needs to be saved at all costs. However, we can undertake small-budget programmes every year to protect the river banks in the erosion prone areas. The most important thing for the government to do now would be to formulate a national strategy. The government spends a large amount of money every year to rehabilitate the victims of river erosion across the country. By developing a national level prediction system and proper guidelines for addressing the causes and impacts of river erosion, the process could be made much easier and a lot of money could be saved, and most importantly, the sufferings of thousands of victims of river erosion could be reduced.

Reducing the impact of disaster



KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

focuses on one of the seven targets of the "Sendai Seven" campaign: reducing disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services.

The world in 2018 had to face 315 natural disasters with 11,804 deaths, over 68 million people affected and USD 131.7 billion in economic losses. Asia suffered the highest impact and accounted for 45 percent of disaster events, 80 percent of deaths and 76 percent of people affected. Among those disasters, earthquakes were the deadliest (45 percent of deaths), followed by flooding (24 percent) and storms (28 percent).

The "Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019" revealed that the annual economic loss due to disasters cost the region nearly USD 675 billion, about 2.4 percent of its gross domestic product. According to Armida Alisjahbana, the head of UN-ESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), the region's countries cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 if their people are not protected from disasters. Around the transboundary river basins of South and South-East Asia—home to hundreds of millions—poverty, hunger and under-nourishment are coupled with intensifying floods that alternate with prolonged droughts. The fragile environments are converging with critical socioeconomic vulnerabilities with disastrous consequences across the region.

Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world, constantly battling with multiple threats—such as on June 11, when there were lightning, fire, nor'wester, landslide, flash flood, waterlogging, building collapse, boat capsiz, bridge collapse, riverbank erosion and flood.

The "Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2019" (UN-ESCAP) gives a grim picture of how disaster-prone Bangladesh is. Its population are subjected to recurrent annual flooding. Cyclones and associated storm surges and floods have led to almost all of the nearly 520,000 natural disaster-related deaths in the last 40 years,

economic damage notwithstanding. Cyclone Sidr in 2007 cost an estimated USD 1.7 billion in damages and losses. What's more, the country's extreme vulnerability to hydro-meteorological hazards, including storm-induced tidal flooding, is likely to increase due to climate change. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2015), about 13 percent households and 12.64 percent of the population live in disaster-prone areas of the country.

Between 1980 and 2008, Bangladesh experienced 219 natural disasters. The geographical location, land characteristics, multiplicity of rivers, coastal morphology and the monsoon climate render Bangladesh highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Bangladesh suffers from floods, cyclones, storm surges, riverbank erosion, earthquakes, droughts, salinity



PHOTO: GMB AKASH

intrusion, fires and tsunamis. Cyclones in 1970, 1991, 2007, 2009 and 2019 killed 364,000, 136,000, 3,363, 190 and 14 people due to various cyclone induced causes.

However, Bangladesh is also known as one of the most resilient countries. Despite the regular and devastating events, the country manages to attain significant progress in almost all sectors. Now the challenge is mainstreaming the disaster risk reduction into development interventions.

Local governments should consider natural hazards in the respective areas for any rural infrastructure. Each and every village/char should have the bare minimum of a raised plinth with cattle sheds as flood shelters and or cyclone shelters. A monitoring mechanism is needed to ensure that rural housing follows standard guidelines of disaster

management.

Unfortunately, severe inequalities between low-and-high-income countries persist, with the lowest-income countries bearing the greatest relative cost of disasters. Human losses and asset losses relative to gross domestic product tend to be higher in countries with the least capacity to prepare, finance and respond to disasters and climate change. The obligation and opportunities to address inequalities in terms of disaster needs to be incorporated into future diplomatic agendas.

Reducing risks must start with understanding the reality of the people most affected—to take initiative with multi-stakeholder's participation. Disaster risk management, response and climate change adaptation are never stand-alone actions. Many individuals need to be pro-

dialogue and build bridges among countries in the region. One of the most extensive such example is the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin shared by Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India. A vibrant national civil society platform on disaster reduction with NGOs and private sectors can strengthen advocacy to make governments and the international community be more responsive to the felt need. The solution for risk reduction or climate change adaptation can't be an external prescription or imposition but rather spontaneous local initiative—which can be improvised with global expertise and experiences. The government can also explore and support local solutions beyond big projects like embankments.

The Standing Order on Disaster (SOD) in Bangladesh has defined roles at all administrative levels in the country, with spaces to accommodate local innovation and actions. But many stakeholders remain unaware about this "way-forward". However, two significant gaps in addressing the risk reduction remain big challenges. One, the gap between preparedness and emergency response which can be minimised with the help of forecasts. And the other between disaster response-rehabilitation and resilience. "Transition Funding" can be a unique way forward towards resilience—by enhancing economic ability, ensuring social safety net and access to market through poverty mapping.

Forward momentum in disaster reduction by the GO-NGOs at site, the major challenge here is accessing humanitarian funds immediately. The procedures and protocols to get access at the local level remain an obstacle to optimise the use of resources so that they reach people immediately. When forecasting indicates floods, rescue boats and water-sanitation facilities are the immediate priority within a few hours. If local government holds adequate funds and if local NGOs have access to immediate funding, it can reduce crises significantly. The START Fund in Bangladesh has demonstrated how access to humanitarian funds by local organisations within 48 hours can make a big difference. The government and other UN/International agencies can actively think about this idea and to review how "humanitarian funding complexities" can be reduced.

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