

Saving the rivers is a must

Don't talk the talk only, walk the walk too

APPARENTLY, there is no lack of lofty words from the relevant agencies regarding the need to preserve our rivers; but we see very little substantive action to free the rivers of encroachment and resuscitate them back to their original state.

Despite a 17-point directive by the High Court that set clear guidelines for saving the country's rivers and wetlands, things have not changed for the better. This directive comes in the backdrop of an earlier ruling by the HC in 2009, and yet we see little initiative to implement either of the rulings. Unfortunately, from what has been reported in media, the DCs followed neither the records, nor did they abide by river laws when conducting the survey. The end result is that the four major rivers skirting the capital have actually narrowed after a slipshod demarcation effort, and today we find some 9,500 or so boundary pillars that are situated in the rivers or river foreshore lines. Experts deem the survey to be a flawed one and the chairman of the National River Commission has stated that due to deficiency of knowledge on river and land-related laws, authorities did not have the courage to demarcate the rivers as per law. In other words, their "lack of courage" has not only validated encroachment of the rivers, it has encouraged more of the same.

Restoring rivers to their original state is possible under current laws, according to the river commission. The port act, inland shipping ordinance, wetland conservation act, water act and water development board act all have sections that can be applied to halt this seemingly endless encroachment of rivers by third parties. But before that, we suggest the government takes up a macro view of all the rivers in the country and chalk out a comprehensive plan, without spending energy and wasting money on piecemeal projects.

When highways turn into parking-ways

They become deathtraps

A photo published on the front page of this daily on November 10, 2019, depicting a chaotic picture of three-wheelers being haphazardly parked on the Dhaka-Chattoagram highway, brings to light one of the key problems of our highways: their transformation into veritable parking lots by unruly drivers. In a country that is already grappling with an increasing number of fatal crashes on the highways, such a picture is not only undesirable but also deplorable.

Alarming as the picture might be, this has become a regular practice for the drivers, thanks to the lackadaisical attitude of our traffic law enforcement agencies. Often the drivers, buying impunity with bribes, carelessly park their heavy—and as this specific picture suggests, even small—vehicles on the side of the highways blocking way for other vehicles to pass. Highways are meant for fast-moving vehicles, and in such a situation, illegal and improper parking not only leads to traffic tailbacks, but also unwanted accidents. According to a police headquarters report, 45.57 percent of the total road accidents in 2018 took place on the highways, which also accounted for 54.61 percent of the total deaths in road crashes in the same year.

Under such circumstances, the concerned agencies must take immediate actions against the owners/drivers of illegally parked vehicles on the highways. The government ban on the movement of slow-moving vehicles, including three-wheelers, on highways should be strictly reinforced, while construction of markets, including kitchen markets, on the waysides should also be completely banned. Zero tolerance should be shown to belligerent drivers who put the lives of innocent people at risk by parking their vehicles in undesignated places on the highways. The culpable law enforcement officials who allow such practices to continue should also be brought to book.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sundarbans to the rescue again

Recognised as the largest mangrove forest in the world and home to a diverse wildlife, the Sundarbans holds numerous benefits for our ecosystem. Apart from serving as the "lung" for the nation, it also plays a major role as a guard for us during cyclones. During such times, it is the Sundarbans that shields us from natural disasters, serving as a defence mechanism as it did when Cyclone Bulbul hit Bangladesh on Sunday. But we remain rather careless towards nature.

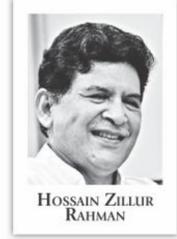
Our actions risk the biodiversity of the Sundarbans, so much so that Unesco has declared the forest as a "World Heritage in Danger" site. Climate change too poses a threat to this great forest, along with the establishment of industrial projects around the Sundarbans. Even its wildlife including tigers, deer, snakes, birds, fish, etc. are at risk due to illegal poaching, oil spills and other factors. We must all appreciate that the Sundarbans provide for us. I hope the government will impose stricter laws to save it. Over the years, our greed has worsened the situation and if we continue to ignore it, soon we will have to face the wrath of nature.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Gandaria, Dhaka



POPULATION POLICY

Women must have the right to choose



HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

FIRST there was Mexico City in 1984. Then there was Cairo in 1994. Now there is Nairobi in November 2019. The global community has dealt with the issue of population in these mega-conclaves. Not all left their mark. The Mexico City event was notable more for the US absence. The Cairo event did mark a watershed, a sort of paradigm shift from bureaucratic notions of population control to empowering notions of choice and enabling conditions. Now twenty-five years later, there is a buzz and new expectations as the curtain is lifted today (November 12) on ICPD25 in the Kenyan capital Nairobi.

How will this summit come to be remembered? A timely reminder on "unfinished business"? An honest soul-searching on "mission confusions" that may have crept in the wake of initial successes? An occasion for "voices" particularly of the youth in search as much for new questions as for new answers? It may indeed be each or all of these and more. It will be patently unfair to pre-judge the outcome of a gathering whose deliberations are just starting today. But with the participation of a large contingent from Bangladesh, it may be useful to marshal thoughts and ideas to be a shaper—rather than only a recipient—of the core global messages likely to emerge from the Nairobi conclave.

As an economist, I have been appreciative of the remarkable decline in fertility—from 6.3 births per woman in 1975 to 2.3 births per woman now—that was an outcome of both demand and supply side drivers. A social campaign approach galvanised the demand. A decline in child mortality due to ORS success against the killer diarrhoea gave the confidence to reproductive-age women to opt for smaller families. An effective and accessible supply chain on contraceptives played its due role.

The fertility decline was not only a signature social achievement but contributed to economic success too. Between 1990 and 2010, a quarter of the incremental per capita income growth can be attributed to the fact that there were lesser people to divide up the economic pie than there would have been if we had continued with the 70s-80s fertility rate.

Nairobi, however, cannot only be about the long view. Equally important is to unpack near-term trends and the implications for future strategies. Early successes appear to have triggered a discourse ambivalence particularly among policy-makers about the urgency of maintaining an unwavering focus on population policy. A dominant perception of being "on track" actually belies the complexities of the "last mile" challenges. The population density within the scarce land mass is rapidly reaching its sustainable limits. On current TFR (total fertility rate), the population of Bangladesh will hit 200 million by 2031. Much of this population growth will be located in the cities and, in particular, the burgeoning urban slums. Coping with unsustainable densities stands to jeopardise the policy attention required for the

planning among the 15-19-year olds. A further twist in this near-term trend is that the rate of unwanted adolescent pregnancies is highest among the urban slums.

The "last mile" challenge pertains not only to the adolescents. Another near-term trend of concern is the spike in post-partum pregnancy of the older married group in their late 20s and 30s, due to an absence of integrated health-FP service in facilities. Nearly 44 percent of post-partum women have an unmet need for family planning. Further unpacking the near-term trends, one sees another hidden statistic of concern—the preponderance of short-term methods that contributes to a high discontinuation rate of nearly 30 percent. The short-term methods are mostly accessed from the private sector while the private sector is the principal

provider of long-acting methods.

Are the near-term trends in population policy highlighted above unique to Bangladesh or are, in fact, reflective of a more general phenomenon across the developing countries? Be that as it may, there are serious implications for how the way-forward strategy in the Nairobi conclave is most meaningfully framed. If the language of "unfinished business" merely energises a bureaucratic drive to increase the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR), this may fall far short of re-igniting the global imagination on the population policy introduced twenty-five years ago in Cairo. Three key constituencies have come into focus around whose needs a holistic re-thinking can come to mark the Nairobi conclave—the adolescents, the urban poor, and the post-partum

women. And for each of these, the underlying unifying agenda is that of women's empowerment. Research is showing that lack of access to family planning is not the major explanation for unwanted pregnancies. Adolescent pregnancies are driven as much by the continuing propensity for child marriage as by the very poor state of exposure to SRHR norms and knowledge. For the urban poor, the reality is as much of policy neglect of a robust and affordable health and reproductive services infrastructure as of endemic exposure to sexual violence and intimidation. For the post-partum women, the issues are as much of lack of knowledge as of sensitive and trusted service facilities.

An issue which appears to have virtually disappeared in the population discourse is that of male contraception. Ultimately, this too pertains to the agenda of women's empowerment because the loss of focus on male contraception essentially indicates an implicit acceptance that the contraceptive burden has to be mainly, if not solely, borne by women. Why should this be so? Why should one readily accept the transparently untenable argument that convincing males of contraceptive use is more difficult? Isn't there a lurking shadow of patriarchy behind such arguments? There will, and should, be many issues discussed at this global summit on population. But summits are remembered for their signature message. For Nairobi, this can be the cross-cutting agenda of women's empowerment. Not just lip service. But substance and teeth. I learned a valuable lesson on this from my young adult daughter Umama Zillur who works on innovative SRHR education at high schools. Such education will go nowhere if seen only as packaged content delivered mechanically. There are many text-books which are not read and "adolescent corners" which are not visited. A meaningful impact can only come from understanding SRHR education as conversations of trust ideally driven by peers. An atmosphere of trust is the ultimate guarantee that needs will be expressed and understood, services sought and delivered, and mutual learnings enhanced to keep the goal in view and progress on track.

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SOURCE: UNFPA

critical agenda of human resource development to reap the demographic dividend of a preponderantly young population. While the annual addition to the workforce is around 2 to 2.3 million, employment creation—both domestic and external—currently can accommodate only half of this number.

At another end, a vicious circle of consequences is in danger of becoming entrenched. Unmet need for family planning is leading to unwanted pregnancies which is leading to unsafe abortions, which in turn is contributing to a slowing in the decline of the critical SDG indicator of maternal mortality rate (MMR). The persistence of child marriage coupled with a very poor state of education on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) is leading to a disproportionate unmet need for family

provider of long-acting methods.

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MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU

AT least a dozen people died and many more were injured due to the impact of the cyclonic storm Bulbul in Bangladesh. Thousands of houses were damaged and trees uprooted during the cyclone. The powerful storm also destroyed crops and damaged embankments in the coastal districts. An initial estimate says that the storm destroyed 47,000 houses, damaged croplands, shrimp enclosures, and uprooted trees in different upazilas of Sathkhira district. Uprooted trees suspended road communications in different areas while power supply has remained snapped in those areas. Most of the low-lying areas in the coastal districts went under water due to torrential downpour triggered by the storm. However, the relevant authorities have yet to get a complete picture in this regard.

Different sources confirmed that, prior to the cyclone, at least one million people living in the coastal belt had been evacuated. The cyclone crossed Khulna coast around 5am on Sunday with a heavy precipitation, flooding low-lying areas in the district.

Before the cyclone hit the coastal belt, a record number of people had been sheltered—in cyclone shelters (designated school buildings), government offices, UP buildings, offices of different NGOs, etc. It's evident that programmes undertaken in this regard in the past have come to bear fruit. Among the factors that also helped in the process are community-level awareness raising programmes, engaging thousands of volunteers including the government-recognised Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) active along the coast, continuous services from community radio, and the role of the mass media. As most of the school buildings in the affected areas were used as shelters, it may take some time before things get back to normalcy. In many areas, the approach roads to the schools were inundated, the ground floors of the shelters were used for the shelter of domestic animals, and this has led to the buildings being unusable for weeks.

However, the overall preparedness ahead of cyclone Bulbul has shown the readiness of the country to deal with natural disasters, particularly cyclones. As a result, the damage was not as bad as it was anticipated to be. Meanwhile, the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, has once again saved the life of the coastal people.

CYCLONE BULBUL

Views from the ground

However, beyond these facts and statistics, the "story" on the ground was not an easy one. Despite all the preparations, there were still many gaps found, and many issues raised, during the response period. The volunteers and staff members deployed ahead of the cyclone by an USAID-funded project called Nobo Jatra have identified a number of areas that need improvement. These include a lack of coordination among the public entities and NGOs, unavailability of shelters, a lack of awareness-raising materials and the capacity of our volunteers. One may also point to the need for an upgradation of the disaster management committees at union and upazila levels and a clear explanation of

significant number of the shelters are not usable due to the lack of proper maintenance. In every shelter along the coast, around 2,000 people were accommodated during disasters even though their capacity is 200 each. This makes it clear that the number of shelters is not sufficient.

During natural disasters, there is a common complaint raised against the coastal people that they refuse to leave their belongings and domestic animals behind when the time comes. This was also true during Bulbul response. It has been empirically shown that robbery increases during disasters, so male family members often choose to stay behind in their homes. This leads to more casualties.



Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) officials urge people to evacuate their homes in preparation for Cyclone Bulbul, in Khulna, on November 9, 2019. PHOTO: AFP

the 10 signals. This has partly brought into question our actual disaster preparedness and the modernisation of the Cyclone Preparedness Program (CPP) considered crucial for cyclone emergency management.

During cyclonic storms, taking shelter at safe, designated buildings is the ultimate measure of preparedness. In the 13 coastal districts of the country, around 4,000 shelters have been constructed over the years while the government plans to build 752 more shelters in the coastal districts and disaster-prone areas to minimise the loss and casualties caused by natural disasters. Unfortunately, a

The best way to minimise this would be to increase the number and size of "killas" (elevated mud-built spaces for keeping the animals safe) that adjoin cyclone shelters. The accuracy of the forecasting system has also become an issue following the last two disasters. During cyclone Fani, for example, signal number 10 was shown although later the storm did not hit the danger level anticipated. This kind of inaccuracy demotivates people to seek shelter when the time comes.

In the last few years, Disaster Risk Reduction Programmes have been undertaken along the coast. Megaphones, first aid kits and search-and-rescue

materials have been provided to the Upazila and Union Disaster Management Committees, schools and some community-level organisations. These materials proved to be very useful but there has not been a sufficient supply of these materials during and after Bulbul. When disasters actually happen, CPP volunteers and the Disaster Management Committees in the districts, upazilas and unions become active, but otherwise these committees do not even hold meetings on a regular basis, and most are no longer properly certified. As a result, there is a lack of coordination during disasters.

Also, the traditional signalling system is still being used despite the development of newer, more effective systems for this purpose. In addition, most people do not know what signal "four" even means. The traditional signalling system (comprised of 10 signals) was developed by the British and we are still using it. What we need is a people-oriented signalling system, which is available today. The reason it is not still used is because enough initiatives were not taken to familiarise the people with the new system. If we jump to signal 10 directly from 4, then what is the point of having all the other numbers in between?

In the past 25 years, a total of 135 million people were affected by different disasters, of whom 16,513 lost their lives. In 2007, cyclone Sidr hit the coastal belt affecting all the 32 districts and around 4,000 people died. The number of deaths dropped to 300 by the time Aila rolled around in 2009. Although cyclone Mahasen damaged a lot of crops, the number of casualties was far fewer than that of the previous disasters. Coming in 2019, Bulbul shows that the total damage from natural disasters in Bangladesh has significantly decreased over the years.

All this happened because of the initiatives undertaken by the state and NGOs. Proper policy formulation and ground-level implementation, along with a rise in overall awareness among the communities, the positive role of media and community-based organisations were all factors improving our preparedness and disaster management capacity. Hopefully, we can continue to build on this success by taking care of areas that still need improvement and continue to improve our disaster management record in the future.

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