

Fighting air pollution needs coordinated efforts

People want action

WHILE only a few days ago, Dhaka's air quality was the third or fourth worst in the world, the city recorded the worst air quality in the world on November 25, according to Air Visual. The revelation is shocking. The smog from brick kilns, smoke from unfit vehicles and dust generated from construction sites, including those of the mega projects taken by the government, are the main sources of air pollution in the capital. Although our scientists and environmentalists have identified the sources of pollution long ago, few measures have been taken to improve the city's air quality. For the last couple of years, the city residents have been suffering from various air-borne diseases such as asthma, lung cancer, cardiovascular and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorders, etc. Several international studies have found that the effects of air pollution are particularly dangerous for children. According to a 2017 Lancet report, the highest number of deaths associated with air pollution took place in Dhaka. Needless to say, the situation is extremely alarming.

Currently, around 2,087 brick kilns are being operated around the capital. And according to the Department of Environment (DoE), 58 percent of the city's total air pollution is caused by the brick kilns during the dry season. Why, then, have no substantive steps been taken by the authorities to stop the operation of illegal brick kilns—the single largest source of air pollution in Dhaka?

The High Court on November 26 ordered the government to shut the illegal brick kilns in five districts (Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Munshiganj and Manikganj) within 15 days. The government should comply with the directive. At the same time, it should take some policy decisions with regard to using eco-friendly green bricks, discontinuing registration of new vehicles and containing pollution in the construction sites.

It is good to learn that the government has installed 16 air quality monitoring stations in Dhaka and other cities. We hope that the reports and forecasts given by these stations would be utilised properly to tackle the situation. We also hope that the recent decisions taken at the inter-ministerial meeting would be implemented without any delay.

Gross irregularities, corruption in pilot recruitment

Compromising passenger safety is an unlawful act

THE Anti-Corruption Commission has filed a corruption case against three high-ups and a former managing director of Biman, in connection with a scam in the recruitment process of pilots. According to the FIR, some 28 out of 32 pilot cadets failed the tests but were recruited anyway, using "grace marks" to inflate their scores, and the scoring system of the exam was a departure from the Operations Manual of Biman. Not only was there a highly irregular examination, but even the age limit was raised to 40, which is a contravention of set rules.

This is a shameful event that has come to light recently, and yet we find that even now the current managing director and other senior officials are making excuses about not taking action against those who passed this flawed examination, and those who allowed rules to be bent to accommodate certain people. The excuses that the appointments have already been approved by the Board, and they are not aware of the 13 recruits (including the nephew of a former managing director) spotted by the ACC investigation, hold no water.

We beg to differ from this point of view because airline pilots are members of an exclusive club and must pass the most stringent of tests because it's the passengers' lives that are at stake here. The fact that financial irregularities, widespread corruption and mismanagement in Biman have already cost the national exchequer Tk 201 crore in 2017-2018 is not lost upon anyone. Repeated scandals involving ticket selling and leasing of aircraft have been unearthed, and now it appears the national carrier has sunk to a new low and is toying with the lives of its passengers. This latest scam is a criminal act and must be treated as such. All those under the ACC radar need to be brought under the legal system and charges need to be pressed against them for criminal complicity, and the examination needs to be retaken, regardless of the cost it entails. Only then can the goodwill of Biman be restored and the safety of passengers ensured.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Will our air quality ever improve?

Why is it that we tend to excel in all things negative? Why isn't it the other way around? Yes, I am talking about our world-class ranking (!) in air pollution. It is quite ironic that we have polluted the very air that keeps us alive to a point that it now makes us sick or worse. Even a few days back, Dhaka ranked as the third or fourth worst city in terms of pollution, but the air quality continued to deteriorate.

I think the government should address this issue urgently. According to a report published in *The Daily Star* on November 26, titled "Dhaka gasping for fresh air", the government has taken a number of initiatives to improve the air quality of the city. But will these bear fruits? I really don't know because much has been promised before but there has been no progress at all. Now in my eighth month of pregnancy, I am extremely fearful for the life I am nurturing in my womb. If the horrendous pollutants and chemicals continue to affect our air, I can't help but wonder what the situation for the newborns will be like. Can they live well despite all these odds?

Sohana Nowrin, Dhaka

The fallen angel dances with the devil

Securing justice for the Rohingya genocide



IN the month, in an application filed before the UN's highest court, the Gambia brought charges of mass murder, rape and destruction of communities in the Arakan state, including against the Rohingya people.

The Gambian submission noted that the Burmese state security forces "systematically shot, killed, forcibly disappeared, raped, gang-raped, sexually assaulted, detained, beat and tortured Rohingya civilians and burned down and destroyed Rohingya homes, mosques, madrasas, shops and Qur'ans." The suit asked the court to order Burma to immediately cease and desist from all acts of genocide, to punish those responsible, including senior government functionaries and military officers, and to give reparations to the victims.

The Gambian move comes at a time when influential members of the international community continue to ignore the gravity of the crimes committed and remain busy with their own geopolitical, economic and strategic interests and thus refrain from taking any effective measure to reverse what the Rohingya genocide scholar Maung Zarni terms as Burma's "genocidal project". So far, says Zarni, they had done little "beyond issuing non-binding resolutions and statements of condemnation calling for symbolic accountability measures and ritual repetition of carefully crafted spin of repatriation littered with substanceless adjectives such as 'voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable'."

The Rohingya genocide has also brought to the fore the hollowness of the UN Security Council in ensuring global peace and security. The failure of the UN system was palpably demonstrated in the business-as-usual approach adopted by its specialised agencies that seemingly stems from their collective denial of the atrocity crimes committed by the Burmese

state against various ethnic groups, including the crime of genocide against the Rohingya.

After having been shunned by the world (in which racism, national chauvinism, corporatism, national security paranoia and Islamophobia reign supreme), the victims of Rohingya genocide are now beginning to feel that the wheels of justice have finally begun to roll, albeit very slowly. In November, along with the Gambian move, two other initiatives appear to have cracked the spell of torpor that had an ominous hold over

the different civilian authorities." It targeted Aung San Suu Kyi for overseeing government policies "tending towards the annihilation of the Rohingya", such as confining them to "ghettos" with severely limited access to healthcare and education. Among others, charges were brought against the Burmese army chief Min Aung Hlaing as well. The complaint sought criminal sanction of the perpetrators and accomplices under the principle of "universal jurisdiction" that upholds that war crimes and crimes against humanity are so horrendous that

the ICC's jurisdiction committed against the Rohingya people. The Chamber also received such requests on behalf of hundreds of thousands of alleged victims. It accepted that there exists a reasonable basis to believe that widespread and/or systematic acts of violence may have been committed that could qualify as the crimes against humanity and/or religion against the Rohingya population.

Suu Kyi's apologists—particularly those in the West and in the UN system, who thus far have been peddling the case that "she has little operational control over the military"—appear to have been caught off guard by the announcement of her personal involvement in the Gambia case. In all likelihood, the ICC Chamber Judge's decision and the Argentinian lawsuit have been upsetting for them. Without a doubt, Suu Kyi's decision to own up and publicly defend the dastardly acts of the Burmese security forces (which the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission noted as "genocidal" constituting "crimes against humanity") only corroborate the fact that despite her differences with the military on the scale and pace of reform in Burma, there has been no discernible distinction in their methods in dealing with the Rohingya.

As of now, neither in words nor in deeds has Suu Kyi given any indication of her displeasure, let alone disapproval, with regard to the genocidal acts of the Burmese military. On the contrary, she had no hesitation in branding the victims of genocide as "terrorists" and blaming those championing the Rohingya cause for generating "icebergs of misinformation". Her administration resolutely rejects repeated calls for independent investigations into the allegations of atrocities against the Rohingya and their access to the Arakan region. It persistently denies requests for visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights on Burma and the Independent Fact-Finding Mission.

Quite like "the emperor's new clothes", the National League for Democracy's excitement about what it perceives to be the State Counsellor's bold decision "to face the lawsuit by herself" lays bare that the fallen angel had all along been in absolute cahoots with the murderous generals of Burma.

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State Counsellor of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi attends a summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on November 4, 2019. PHOTO: REUTERS/CHALINEE THIRASUPA

the international community in the quest for justice for the victims of the Rohingya genocide.

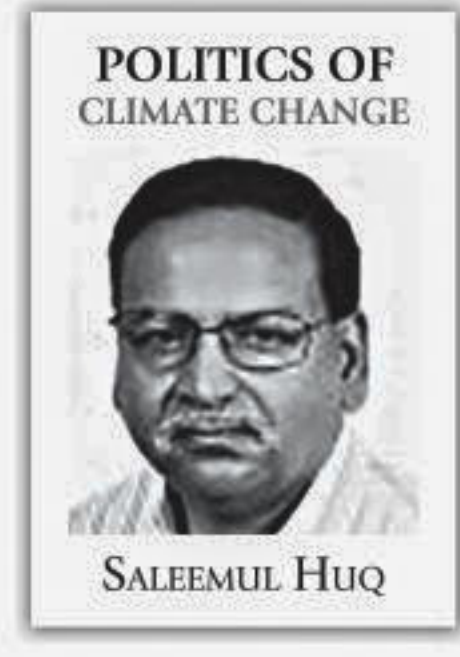
Weeks earlier, in a separate move in Argentina, Rohingya and Latin American human rights groups lodged a lawsuit charging both the military and civilian leaders of Burma. The petition noted that while the military was engaged in murder, gang rape, arson, torture and so on, "the entire genocidal plan... could not have been deployed without the complementation, the coordination, the support or the acquiescence of

those cannot be shielded by the garb of state sovereignty and can be tried anywhere.

On November 14, in yet another development on the legal front, the Pre-Trial Chamber III of the International Criminal Court (ICC) authorised the Prosecutor to launch an investigation into the alleged crimes within the ICC's jurisdiction in Bangladesh, where about a million Rohingya refugees have taken shelter. The authorisation came following a request by the Prosecutor to open an investigation into alleged crimes within

GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE NEGOTIATIONS

Rich countries must pay for climate loss and damage



THE global negotiations on how to tackle climate change take place in December at the annual Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is hosted in a different continent each year. This year it was the turn of South America, and COP25 was supposed to have been held in Santiago, Chile from December 2 to 13. However, due to the ongoing political unrest in Santiago, the government of Chile asked Spain to host it in Madrid.

The annual COP is held over two weeks (with some pre-COP meetings added to make it almost three weeks long), with the first week for officials from different countries who review progress of the actions agreed upon in previous COPs and negotiate what needs to be done next. Then in the second week, the ministers arrive for the final high-level round of political talks which involves intense negotiations amongst the different groups involved.

Except for the United States of America, no country negotiates by itself, but rather all join in sub-groups under the two biggest groups—namely, the rich countries (officially known as the Annex 1 countries as they are listed in Annex 1 of the UNFCCC) and the poorer countries, who call themselves the "Group of 77 and China" (sometimes also called the "Non-Annex 1 countries") which are actually 136 developing countries now.

Bangladesh is a member of one of the sub-groups under the G77 called the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group, which consists of 47 of the poorest developing countries in Africa and Asia and is currently chaired by Bhutan.

Together, with the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and Africa Group and Latin America, these are four of the sub-groups under G77 which are considered the most vulnerable countries.

These four sub-groups of vulnerable countries together number over 100 countries which makes them a majority of the 195 countries in the UNFCCC and a super-majority (over two-thirds) in the G77. However, being small countries, their voices are seldom given much attention even within G77 where the bigger developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa dominate, let alone against the rich

Annex 1 countries.

Nevertheless, whenever these four sub-groups of vulnerable countries are able to unite with a common demand, they can actually get the G77 to support them and then argue with the Annex 1 countries in turn.

This was how the 1.5 Degrees Long Term Temperature Goal was achieved in the historic Paris Agreement which came out of COP21 in 2015, held in Paris, France. This also happened two years earlier, at COP19 in Warsaw, Poland where the four sub-groups were able to force an agreement on setting up the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on Loss and Damage against strong resistance from the Annex 1 countries.

The WIM set up an Executive Committee with a five-year workplan which will come up for review at COP25 and will require a decision on whether to

compensation to the victims of human-induced climate change.

My colleagues at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and I have been advising the LDC Chair and Group on the topic of loss and damage since COP19, and we will be facilitating a one-day pre-COP workshop bringing together the "loss and damage" negotiators from the four sub-groups to develop a common agenda going into COP25.

At issue here is the state of play on this topic which we anticipate will be strongly opposed by the Annex 1 countries, for whom "compensation" has been a taboo word and who only want to talk about insurance as the sole financial mechanism that can be used for loss and damage. While we have no objection to deploying insurance where the companies and countries can pay the premium, we feel

adaptation. It does not seem that this promise will be fulfilled by next year but how much it will fall short will be the issue.

The other perennial topic of discussion is the role of the US government whose president has officially written to the UNFCCC withdrawing the US from the Paris Agreement (although not from the UNFCCC). The interesting feature of this is that the US will not be officially out of the Paris Agreement for another year as there is a delay of a year after a country officially declares its intention to withdraw. Hence, the US will still be part of COP25.

Finally, an even more interesting fact is that the date of the US withdrawal is November 7, 2020 which is the date of the presidential elections in the US. Every Democratic candidate running for president in the US has already declared



The effects of climate change are being increasingly felt in vulnerable countries like Bangladesh. PHOTO: REUTERS

give the WIM a new mandate or not.

The LDC Group has been coordinating with the other three vulnerable sub-groups and we intend to come up with a united strategy going into COP25, where we will argue—and do an advocacy campaign in the media and public domain—for not just giving the WIM a new mandate but also including a mandate to explore raising funding for "loss and damage" that is separate from adaptation funding and also providing

that it does not work for poor countries and communities for whom other financial mechanisms will need to be explored.

Of course, there will also be other issues that will be discussed and negotiated at COP25, including the issue of fulfilling the pledge from the rich countries to provide USD 100 billion a year from 2020 onwards to the developing countries to tackle climate change, through both mitigation and

that the first thing he/she will do, if elected, is to withdraw the US's letter of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement! So, if a Democrat wins the election, the US may be back in the Paris Agreement again and be able to take part in COP26, which will be held in Glasgow, Scotland and hosted by the government of the United Kingdom.

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