

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY DECEMBER 9, 2019, AGRAHAYAN 2, 1425 BS

Now Meghna is being grabbed!

Why are the custodians of rivers inactive?

We are shocked to learn from a *Daily Star* report that a part of the Meghna River in Munshiganj is being filled up to set up a petroleum company. While visiting the river recently, our correspondent found about half a dozen dredgers dumping sand into the river in broad daylight to reclaim land from river foreshores and floodplains. Reportedly, the encroachment has been going on with the assistance of the Munshiganj district administration and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

In 2009, the HC gave detailed directives to the government agencies concerned to save the country's rivers. And in July this year, the HC said that the state must act as the people's trustee to save our rivers, hills, sea beaches, forests, canals, *beels* and wetlands. Apparently, all the directives of the HC have been ignored by the custodians of the rivers—BIWTA, the upazila administration, police, district administration, water development board and DoE—when it came to stopping the grabbing of Meghna.

Although the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) has made a list of 13 companies, including power plants, cement factories, ship builders, etc., who have been grabbing the Meghna in October this year and asked the BITWA to evict them, no substantial steps have been taken by them. Moreover, the BIWTA has not been following the Port Act and Port Rules which requires a BIWTA river port officer to be responsible for keeping a navigable channel and river foreshore free of obstructions and workable for port activities.

Under the circumstances, the government should take immediate steps to stop the onslaught on Meghna by influential grabbers. It should hold the BIWTA as well as other government agencies concerned accountable for not following the HC directives and the basic rules to save our rivers.

Delayed autopsy report hampers murder investigation

Concerned individuals should be held accountable

A REPORT published by this daily on December 7, which suggested that a homicide case was filed as an unnatural death (due to suicide) by the police due to the delay in receiving autopsy report, sheds light on the loopholes in our crime investigation process.

The victim, a 33-year-old, was strangled in July 2017 and his body was hanged from the ceiling by the criminals to make it look like a suicide. Despite the victim's mother's protestations that her son could not have committed suicide, the police filed it as such, without even waiting for the autopsy report to arrive—which did turn up, but after more than two years. And in these two years evidence may have been damaged or gone missing.

While it remains a question, why the police filed the death as a suicide without reviewing the autopsy report, the bigger question that needs to be answered is: how can an autopsy report take two years to reach the police from DMCH? And this despite a High Court ruling earlier this year which directed investigation officers to submit autopsy reports to the magistrates concerned within 10 days of any murder.

The doctor concerned had signed the report on August 1, 2017, but it reached the police only on September 15 this year. When asked about the delay, the doctor's response that the report could have been buried under stacks of files is not only irresponsible but unacceptable. Even the staff working in the report dispatch section could not answer why it took such a long time for the report to be delivered to the police.

And according to DMP data, investigation of 257 unnatural death cases filed more than six months ago have been stalled due to unavailability of autopsy report from DMCH, which employs three forensic experts and two morgue assistants, and on average conducts eight to 10 autopsies a day. However, lack of manpower cannot be used as justification for hampering criminal investigation into a murder case.

The authorities concerned should take a serious look into this issue and immediately address the causes of the problem. Delayed justice due to negligence of forensic doctors is not acceptable and cannot be allowed to happen.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Solving Dhaka's overpopulation problem

Dhaka is under intense population pressure as more and more people flock to the city, many argue, to pursue a better life. According to a recent study, however, about 57 percent of Dhaka dwellers would have gone to villages had there been employment opportunities and basic civic facilities like good education and healthcare.

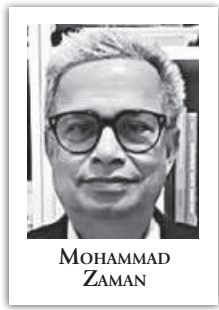
According to the study, the top five problems identified by city dwellers are traffic jam, air pollution, lack of safe drinking water, bad road condition and waterlogging.

When a city is as densely populated as Dhaka, these problems are bound to arise, particularly because of the intense pressure that overpopulation exerts on the city's infrastructure and other facilities. The authorities should recognise this.

Despite the fact that the infrastructure that has been developed in Dhaka in recent times is inadequate, no amount of infrastructure building can support a population this big. Which is why, other regions of our country should be developed more in order to not only discourage further migration to Dhaka, but to also encourage many people who have come to Dhaka, to move elsewhere.

Imtiaz Ali, Dhanmondi

NRC and the larger crisis brewing in Assam



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

CENT developments surrounding the controversial National Registry of Citizens (NRC) in Assam have made many extremely worried across borders in Bangladesh and India regarding the future of Bengali Muslim settlers and Hindus alike. At risk are nearly 20 million people, including an estimated 12 million Hindus, who have been wrongfully left out of the NRC list announced in August 2019, setting off a huge political outcry in Assam, West Bengal and the rest of India. The Assamese nationalists, who advocated the updating of the NRC, expressed their indignity with the outcome and accused the state government of failing to provide indigenous Assamese people a "foreigner-free NRC."

The NRC exercise was conducted under the instruction of the Supreme Court of India in view of the demands by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and as per the Citizenship Act (1955) to identify and weed out illegal "foreigners" living in Assam. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which won the state election in Assam in 2016, was strongly behind the NRC with forthright use of their party slogan—*jati, mati, bheti* (home, hearth and identity)—urging people to protect the land from "illegal" Muslim migrants from Bangladesh. The final citizens' list, which excluded many indigenous and Hindu communities, suddenly made millions stateless in their own country. As a result, the BJP in Assam was put on the spot for creating a nightmarish mess with potential for deportation of a large number of native people. At the same time, the list disenfranchised the Bengali Muslim settlers—who lived in Assam for generations with rights to property, and other social, economic and democratic rights—as "infiltrators" and "illegal migrants", throwing their lives into disarray, along with migrants from Myanmar which borders four northeastern states of India.

The NRC outcome plunged Assam into chaos and did not satisfy anyone either in Assam or India. It targeted the minorities living in poverty—mostly Bengali speaking Hindus and Muslims in Assam, who are easily stereotyped as "Bangladeshis." To understand the complexity behind this crisis, it is vitally important to look back into the history and the social formation of the larger Assamese society and culture. The Indian Censuses (1911 to 1931) confirm steady migration of Bengali Muslim settlers from East Bengal to Assam, reportedly encouraged by the British to expand the agricultural frontier of this otherwise thinly populated state for more revenue generation. According to the

census reports, the poor peasants from Mymensingh, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri gradually settled down in various parts of the state, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bengali settlers, therefore, have been part of the Assamese polity and culture for over 150 years as a legacy of past migration. Even today, the mobility of people for livelihood and other opportunities, including displacement by disasters, are constant within the region. As a result, it is not surprising to find today climate migrants moving across borders between Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. Attempts to control borders and boundaries are a relatively recent phenomena caused by political and security considerations.

The first organised campaign against the Bengali settlers in undivided Assam—the *Bangal Khedao* movement—dates

first." The long turmoil named the Assam Movement (1979-1985) eventually led to the Assam Accord (1985), followed by the Supreme Court instruction for the NRC exercise.

As the NRC was in progress, many human rights experts raised concern over the drive against the "illegal" Bengali Muslim settlers for whom Assam remains their only home. This is echoed very eloquently in the writings of a group of Muslim poets of Bengali origin, pejoratively called "Miyah"—a term they have reclaimed now. The Miyah poetry began in 2016 at the height of the NRC controversy opposing the use of the word Miyah as a slang for Assamese Muslims of Bengali origin. The Miyah poetry essentially highlights links between language, identity and politics. The poems describe the humiliation and

Cabinet last week approved a Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) to be tabled soon in parliament; the CAB seeks to provide citizenship to persecuted religious groups such as Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Christians, Buddhists and other minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but not to Muslims. BJP hopes to use the CAB to counter the perception of fear about any future Pan-India NRC. In the process, BJP wants to make the Muslims second class citizens in India.

The impacts of the NRC and the CAB are already being felt at the Bangladesh borders. The domestic "political intrigues" of BJP and the possibility of a Pan-India NRC in the future may likely lead to a Rohingya-type migration to Bangladesh. Indeed, according to some reports, it has already started.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Indian security personnel patrol on a bridge at Kachari Para village, in Hojai district, northeastern state of Assam, India.

back to 1940s in the Brahmaputra Valley and continued through 1960s, which ultimately led to the expulsion of 50,000 Bengali Hindus who took shelter in West Bengal. No comparable figures are available for Bengali Muslims who moved to East Bengal at that time. The "Assam for Assamese" movement in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed discrimination, killings and attacks on Bengali settlements, more particularly the migrant Bengali Muslims. In 1980, a Bengali legislator was killed and Bengali settlers' localities repeatedly came under systematic attacks. In 1983, more than 2,000 Muslims of Bengali origin were killed in just six hours during the infamous Nellie Massacre. In sum, the settlers became a common target of hate for the Assamese rioters: "if you see a snake and a Bengali, kill the Bengali

discrimination and capture a lifetime of oppression and abuse experienced by the settlers and their descendants in Assam. In July 2019, Assamese police booked 10 Miyah poets and activists under the India Panel Code for their writings on the NRC, which the Miyah poets condemned as baseless and wilful misreading of the poems. The anger against the Miyah poetry must be seen against the backdrop of Assamese politics for the last four to five decades—who is "native" to the state and who is an "outsider."

The citizens list has already made millions stateless, created huge uncertainty for those affected—who fear for their jobs, lands, access to healthcare, education for their children—and above all, the risk of deportation. To deal with the domino effects, the BJP

While Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, criticised the anti-Bengali NRC outcomes in Assam and also sharply reacted to any future Pan-India NRC, the Bangladesh government passed these as "internal" matters of India and publicly asserted that the NRC will have no impact as assured by the Indian government. Given the developments in Assam, it is extremely risky to take a position like this—and rest "assured" by a friendly neighbour, rendering the country even more dependent on Indian patronage. It is important to stand up and speak out for the rights of people undergoing such tragedies in Assam.

Mohammad Zaman is an international development/resettlement specialist and advisory professor at the National Research Centre for Resettlement (NRCR), Hohai University, Nanjing, China. Email: mqzaman.bc@gmail.com

Johnson-Corbyn debate revisits Brexit division

KAMAL AHMED

FRIDAY night's election debate has once again exposed how divided the British nation is. The Sky poll conducted by YouGov shows 52-48 difference between the two main contenders vying for No 10 Downing Street—incumbent Boris Johnson and challenger Jeremy Corbyn. It is the same margin that set the course of the messiest divorce from the European Union, the Brexit referendum. The winner in the debate, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, stuck to his campaign theme, "Get Brexit Done". His rival, Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn's policy of taking a neutral position and giving people another chance to decide between a new deal or remaining in the EU seems to represent the opponents of Brexit.

PM Johnson, amidst huge criticism for trying to evade media scrutiny, fared well in the debate by sticking to his well-rehearsed strategy with a portrayal of lingering chaos and uncertainty if his opponent gets into Downing Street. His emphasis was on three areas : there is an agreed deal which in his words is "oven-ready", all 630 candidates of his party have signed up to his deal and the whole Brexit process will be over by the end of 2020 which will then allow him to focus on other pressing domestic agenda.

Jeremy Corbyn on the other hand tried to prove that the "oven-ready Brexit deal" was not at all what it claimed and in fact would result in a no-deal divorce. He brought up a leaked document of the EU deal that Johnson had signed up to, which showed that goods moving between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom would require customs check and documentation. It implies an assumed border on the Irish Sea. Mr Johnson denied any such requirement of customs procedure, but did not dispute the authenticity of the leaked document. Rather he went on attacking Corbyn, asking since when did he start caring about the union of the Kingdom as he had sympathised with the

Irish Republican Army (IRA). This tactic perhaps exposes a real possibility now of Northern Ireland's isolation from the United Kingdom and pushing it to reunite with the Irish Republic.

In the last parliament, the Conservatives had to rely on the Unionist MPs of Northern Ireland who have already expressed their inability to do the same again if the Brexit deal contains provisions of customs procedure or treats them differently from the rest of the UK. It explains why Johnson has

ups or blunders which happened so many times over his pledges on building hospitals, recruiting new nurses and police officers, funding more schools and ending austerity. Those blunders reduced his trustworthiness in the eyes of the people. Despite emerging marginally ahead in the last debate, the same Sky/YouGov poll found Corbyn is trusted by more than 55 percent of the people, compared to Johnson's 29 percent.

Many analysts suggested that the BBC debate, the last of the two leaders'



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson and opposition Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn face each other in a head-to-head debate on the BBC in London, December 6, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

been pleading the people to give him a majority which every other opponent and some of his former associates want to deny him. In an unprecedented move a few hours before the final debate, a former Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, came out and urged the nation to deny a majority to Johnson and vote tactically. He has called for electing those few rebel Conservatives who were kicked out from the Johnson's party.

Johnson's team, however, would be pleased that he did not have any slip-

face-to-face interaction, was the last chance for Corbyn to recover the lost ground in opinion polls, in which he has been trailing since the beginning of the campaign—sometimes by 12 points and more recently by 7 points on average. Though Corbyn performed much better than the first debate on ITV, there was nothing too spectacular. His focus largely was on ending austerity and making this election more than Brexit. On Brexit, his strategy was to emphasise the need to bring the country back together from the

division created by the Brexit debate—by maintaining his neutrality and giving people the final say.

Going by the opinion poll, it seems his message on ending austerity, bringing public services under the government's control and protecting the National Health Service created by his party, has succeeded in bringing back those wavering Labour voters who have been torn apart on the question of indecisiveness on Brexit and pains accrued from a decade-long austerity programme imposed by the Conservatives.

In this election, Corbyn has been attacked from all sides. The right-wing forces and the press portray him as a danger to the economy and security. In Labour's heartland, those who supported Brexit criticise him for not taking a firm position on supporting and implementing the divorce deal. The Brexit Party, led by the most ardent Brexiteer Nigel Farage, has targeted Labour singularly as the main detractor of the Brexit project. He has withdrawn all his party nominees where Conservatives have the advantage, but has kept his candidates in all those seats where it can harm Labour. On the other hand, those who want to remain in the EU, popularly known as the Remainers, are divided in two camps—those who want to revoke Brexit altogether and those who prefer a second referendum. Corbyn's neutrality to some extent does not satisfy many of those Remainers and the ardent ones among them are the Liberal Democrats.

The Brexit Party's support to the Conservative Party somehow facilitated by president Trump has consolidated Johnson's position and there is not much room for him to improve. But Corbyn still has some time to win over the Remainers. His advantage is that denying majority to Johnson might open up 10 Downing Street's door for him, and the Scottish National Party and the Greens are ready to help.

Kamal Ahmed is a freelance journalist based in London.