

Declare a 'climate emergency' to protect children

BCL at it again

No space for critical views

DUCSU Vice President Nurul Haque Nur and at least 27 of his supporters were once again attacked by members of Bangladesh Chhatra League and the so-called Muktijuddho Moncho (mostly comprised of BCL men). This is not the first time they have attacked the Ducusu VP. Only on December 17, a faction of the Moncho also attacked and injured at least 15 people, including Nur. On December 4, another of its factions padlocked Nur's office and demanded his resignation. And even before that, Nur and his supporters were attacked by BCL men on numerous occasions, without any serious pushback from its parent party, the ruling Awami League.

The attacks were always based on flimsy excuses. And this time it is no different. The allegation against Nur was that he had brought "outsiders" into the Dhaka University campus. But is it BCL's remit to address any breach of DU rules? There is the proctor who can take action in such a case. Who authorised the BCL to address any breach of regulation, that too by breaking the law and brutally attacking students?

The attack on Nur's supporters was so brutal that several of the victims had to be hospitalised, with one of them currently languishing in the Intensive Care Unit, fighting for his life. BCL cadres appear to be impervious to all admonition and even pressure. Despite the brutal murder of Abrar Fahad and the nationwide protests against BCL activities afterwards, it seems they have learned nothing from it. Their dislike for dissent has crossed all boundaries. And Nur is facing so much of BCL's wrath as he happens to be the lone dissenter.

The prime minister has reportedly given instruction to take organisational and administrative actions against the attackers. And we hope this time those responsible for such reprehensible action are indeed held to account for their criminal behaviour.

At the end of the day, it is the image of the ruling party that gets tarnished due to the recurrence of such events, not its ancillaries. It is quite clear that Nur has had a target on his back from the very beginning, and it's about time this targeting stopped.

The high costs of the SEZ in Chandpur tea estate

Lost livelihoods and environmental degradation

THE government's decision to set up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Chandpur tea estate in Chunarughat, Habiganj, will have negative repercussions on several counts. It will deprive 6,000 tea workers of a major part of their livelihood as they will lose their farmlands. It will replace precious agricultural land where paddy is being grown. And lastly, it threatens to cause major environmental damage in terms of loss of wildlife and pollution of rivers. We are therefore baffled at why the government should persist with locating the SEZ at such a high cost.

The tea estate land, the lease of which was cancelled by the government in 2015 with Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (Beza) acquiring it, was the land where tea workers of Chandpur have been farming since 1890. Thus, it is easy to see why this move would be devastating to so many families who are heavily dependent on farming in order to survive. Tea workers are marginalised people and are grossly underpaid for their hard labour. To take away their only means to somehow make ends meet would be inhuman and goes against the ILO convention that Bangladesh has ratified—which asks governments to recognise the right of ownership of land traditionally occupied by underprivileged tribal groups.

It has, moreover, been established through investigation that the land in question is not "barren" as falsely established by the local government. The prime minister has categorically said that she will not allow industries to be established on arable land. Thus, the move to set up an SEC in this land is in direct contravention of the PM's directive.

The environmental impact of an SEZ in this land is also convincing enough to deem this decision unwise. The forest department has confirmed that the area is only four kilometres from a national forest and only 19 kilometres from a wildlife sanctuary. Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) has warned that the increase in traffic to connect the SEZ through the Satchhari National Forest may lead to its death which will impact the streams and rivers downstream.

It is shocking that the Beza, as reported in this paper, has not done any Environmental Impact assessment (EIA) in the area before deciding to make it an economic zone, something that would be considered a prerequisite when acquiring any government land. All these factors point out to one thing: the government must revise this decision and find an alternative site for this economic zone. While we understand the need for SEZs for our economic development, there is no logic in establishing an SEZ at the cost of such large-scale human suffering and environmental degradation.



MANZOOR AHMED

"NERO fiddles, while Rome burns" is an apt metaphor for the 25th world climate summit, called the Conference of Parties (COP25), which just ended in Madrid. Government representatives from 200 countries ended their meeting, copping out from agreeing on a pathway to implementing the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit

global warming, carbon emission targets and other related measures. Climate change specialist Saleemul Huq wrote that a big issue at COP25 was the role of children and civil society who urge that it is time to consider the climate change issue as a "climate emergency" ("COP25: Long but barely fruitful," *The Daily Star*, December 18).

Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish girl, named as the Time magazine's Person of the Year for her leading role in a worldwide youth mobilisation for climate action, spoke at the COP at its President's invitation. The negotiators listened politely but then went back to their endless arguments, ignoring her message of urgency to "make 2020 a year of action," because the coming decade will "define our future."

Environmental hazards for children

A conference on early childhood development attended by development organisations, experts and government representatives from the Asia Pacific Region in Hanoi, Vietnam, on December 4-6, was hosted by the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC). The conference raised an alert about climate change threats for young children and urged early action.

Fazilatunnesa Indira, MP, State Minister for Women and Children's Affairs, attended and addressed the meeting from Bangladesh. Besides describing the progress and initiatives about early childhood development in Bangladesh, she noted the climate-related dangers faced by the children and urged consideration of a climate alert for them.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has termed pollution of air as the silent killer which causes over eight million deaths of children per year worldwide. Children are more vulnerable than adults because children breathe more air, consume more food, and drink more water than adults in proportion to their weight.

Children's central nervous, immune, reproductive, and digestive systems are still developing. At this stage, exposure to environmental toxicants can lead to irreversible damage. The risk of autism spectrum disorder and neurodevelopmental disorder of children is increased by a pregnant mother's exposure to air pollution and toxic chemicals.

WHO estimates that environmental risks account for 25 percent of the disease burden in children under five. They are exposed to risk factors where they live, work, play and learn, unless preventive and protective measures are taken. ("Environment and Child Health," WHO, 2018)

Urban air pollution

Air pollution has become a major health threat in the larger cities of South Asia including Dhaka and it is getting worse. In a recent day (December 14 at 8:30 in the morning), Dhaka's air quality was the worst in the world, according to Air Visual, a US-based organisation that tracks air pollution. With a PM2.5 score of 237, it was by rank order above Ulan Bator in Mongolia, Kabul, Lahore and Chengdu in China, according to a report by a local newspaper on December 15.

PM2.5 score indicates the level of microscopic floating particles per cubic metre of air. A safe level is an average of 35 in 24 hours. Dhaka's air had almost 7.5 times more than the acceptable level of floating particulates in the air at least at one point in the day.

High levels of PM2.5 reduce visibility and cause the air to appear hazy. More dangerously, the tiny particles travel deep into the respiratory tract and the lungs and cause short-term eye, nose, throat and lung irritation; coughing, sneezing, runny nose; and shortness of breath. A prolonged exposure affects lung function and worsens medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease. It is associated with high rates of chronic bronchitis, reduced lung function and increased mortality from lung cancer and heart disease. Children and the elderly are particularly sensitive to PM2.5.

The sources of the fine particles primarily are exhausts from vehicles burning fossil fuels; other operations requiring burning of wood, coal and heating oil; construction activities; and natural sources such as forest

organisations and the private sector can examine and plan actions of their own. So should the educational institutions, health service providers and other social service agencies that serve children and families.

Thirdly, as part of the national and sub-national action plans, the enforcement of environmental safety rules and regulations and meeting all legal requirements by all concerned have to be ensured. The culture of inefficiency, neglect, absence of accountability and impunity for violations have to end. Shutting down illegal brick kilns which defy environmental regulations, enforcing dust, waste and noise control in construction sites, and taking off the street unfit vehicles spewing toxic fumes, among other initiatives, would make a significant difference in and around Dhaka.

Fourthly, monitoring mechanisms have to be established with the technical capacity to establish safety and protection benchmarks for major harmful sources and measure and monitor these. Remedial actions have to follow from the monitoring results. Setting up an



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

and grass fires. Urban residents of Bangladesh are well familiar with these sources of air pollution, except the last one.

What can we do about it?

Much can be, and must be, done to halt the potential carnage and reverse the course. That a crisis is upon us has to be recognised and the obligation of the state and society has to be accepted to protect and nurture children. To do this, we need not depend on or wait for the global actors to put their acts together.

First, the Environment Ministry and the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs need to work together to assess the depth and dimensions of the problem, and a framework for action has to be prepared containing strategies, plans and targets—immediate, short-term and longer-term for 5 to 10 years. Actually, the Comprehensive Policy for Early Childhood Care and Development adopted by the government in 2013 requires such cooperation and coordination.

Secondly, based on the framework for action, the concerned government ministries and agencies, government structures at city, municipality and local government levels, NGOs as well as community

independent environmental protection agency with the necessary technical capacity and mandate would be an appropriate step.

Fifthly, along with urgent actions under a climate alert to protect children, longer-term strategies, goals and plans also need to be guided by a sense of urgency. Adaptation and mitigation actions that we, as a state and society, need to take must be taken. Moving away from fossil fuel and coal as energy sources and fast-tracking into renewable sources, conserving the Sundarbans as a human heritage, making transportation and the built environment carbon-efficient, and generally actions for transition to sustainable production, consumption and lifestyle need not be at the mercy of decisions at COP summits.

Finally, citizens and civil society, academic and research institutions and the private sector need to recognise their social and moral obligation and stand up to do what need to be done for the future generations. As Greta Thunberg said, the adults are not taking their responsibilities, so children have to come out on the street. We should not let this happen.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

How to Revive the WTO

SHANG-JIN WEI and XINDING YU

DECEMBER 11, 2019 is the 18th anniversary of China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). It also marks the start of an era in which the WTO no longer has a functioning appellate body to adjudicate trade disputes among member countries. Why is the WTO imploding, and can it be resuscitated before it's too late?

Before China joined the WTO in 2001, many feared that its membership could doom the organisation in one of three ways. First, Chinese rule-breaking might be so common, sceptics claimed, that it would trigger an explosion of cases against the country that would overwhelm the appellate body of seven judges. Second, China might express its grievances by bringing countless potentially frivolous cases against other countries, which would also exceed the organisation's capacity constraint. And, finally, China might ignore any WTO ruling against it, undermining the system's credibility and usefulness.

None of that happened. Of the 349 trade disputes brought to the WTO for adjudication since the end of 2001, China has been a defendant in 44, or 12.6 percent of the total—in line with the country's 12.8 percent share of global exports in 2018. Interestingly, this number is fewer than the 99 brought against the United States and the 52 brought against the European Union during the same period. Part of the reason is that China has continued to reduce tariff and non-tariff trade barriers, and ease investment restrictions, in accordance with—and sometimes going beyond—the terms of its WTO accession agreement. In fact, few countries have reduced such barriers more than China has during this period.

Likewise, China has not turned out to be an overly aggressive complainant. Since December 2001, China has lodged 21 cases at the WTO, or 6 percent of the total—lower than its 10.8 percent share of global imports in 2018. Strikingly, this number also is substantially lower than the 55 cases lodged by the US, and the 46 filed by the EU.

Large countries tend not to have a perfect record of complying with WTO rulings. But of the 44 cases against China since 2001, other countries have had to return to the WTO to secure better compliance only twice, compared to 15 times in the 99 cases against the US over the same period.

The WTO allows individual member countries to have their own national systems for enforcing trade rules, particularly regarding subsidies and dumping (selling below cost). This may be interpreted broadly as part of the

costs rise, or some combination of the two.

Given this international pattern, we can check whether other countries have considered China to be a special problem. We do so by superimposing on the same graph the total number of anti-dumping and anti-subsidy cases lodged against Chinese exporters by all other WTO members from 1995 to 2017, relative to China's export volume. Since China's accession in 2001, the number of such cases relative to exports has declined as China's income has increased, much

judges have completed their four-year terms, the US has systematically rejected any proposed successor nominated by other countries, apparently with the aim of rendering the system inoperative until other countries agree to alter the rules to America's liking.

Any WTO dispute-settlement panel is required to have at least three judges. So, with two of the appellate body's three remaining judges having completed their terms on December 10, the organisation's "highest court" is now functionally dead.

Since the WTO was established in 1995, global GDP has grown by about 250 percent on a cumulative basis, while global trade has increased by about 270 percent. A professional disinterested process for adjudicating trade disputes between countries has been key to this success. Because larger countries always have greater bargaining power than smaller ones in bilateral or regional trade negotiations, this process has helped to level the playing field in favour of the WTO's vast majority of small- and medium-size members.

Resuscitating the WTO will require changing its rules. Perhaps appellate body judges should be appointed by a majority or supermajority vote, so that no single country can block a nominee. In addition, the body could be expanded to 15 judges, in line with growth in trade volumes, and appointees' terms could be lengthened. Or the terms of the last three judges could be extended temporarily.

But none of these measures will be enough. The US, China, and other countries also have an interest in modernising WTO rules regarding state-owned firms, government procurement, anti-dumping cases, and digital trade. Whatever reforms these countries wish to see, killing the organisation's dispute-settlement system is not the solution.



The World Trade Organization (WTO) logo is seen at the entrance of the WTO headquarters in Geneva, on April 9, 2013. PHOTO: REUTERS/RUBEN SPRICH

rules-based global trade framework. Using data for 2017, we find that the number of anti-dumping and countervailing (anti-subsidy) cases lodged by all WTO member countries against exporting countries tends to decline as the income level of the exporter increases.

The data pattern is fairly clear: as a country becomes richer, there are fewer anti-subsidy or anti-dumping cases against it. This could be because richer countries observe rules better, are less likely to attract complaints as their labour

as the average international experience would have predicted. In other words, cross-country comparative data suggest nothing especially problematic about China. (Of course, China's size means that the absolute number of cases against China is large.)

Until recently, no one would have thought that the US, a key architect of the rules governing the WTO, would choose to kill the organisation's appellate body. But that is what appears to be happening now. Since 2017, as the body's current

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A People's Champion

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed was a great human being. He was the founder and Chairman Emeritus of Brac, the world's largest non-governmental organisation. His goal was simply to serve humanity. From the Liberation War up until recently, he had been present in every sphere of our society. He worked relentlessly since the beginning to rid our country of poverty. He was an institution unto himself, one who dedicated himself to improving the lives of ordinary people, especially the poor and women. The world mourns the loss of this great soul today. In many ways, Fazle Hasan Abed facilitated the development of Bangladesh, as well as other developing countries around the globe. I hope our country will keep his legacy alive.

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