

File cases against those involved in hill cutting

Only imposing fine is not enough

IT is most unfortunate that despite being fined several times by the Department of Environment (DoE) in the last three years for illegally cutting the hills of Chattogram's Mirsarai and Sitakunda upazilas, certain companies, including some renowned ones, have not stopped the illegal practice. On a recent visit to Mirsarai and Sitakunda, our correspondent found many companies cutting the hills of the areas without any interference. Although most of the companies in the area have made commitments to the DoE that they won't cut hills, they have not kept their promises and have been razing the hills secretly.

One thing is clear from this, only fining is not enough to make these big companies abide by the law. In order to make them comply with the relevant environmental laws, the DoE must come up with some strict measures, including filing cases against them, if needed. In addition, they should conduct mobile court drives regularly, not occasionally, against the companies.

It is good to know that the DoE has already made a list of companies who have been razing the hills, putting the environment at risk. Now what they should do is file cases against those accused. If a relevant case goes to court, the perpetrators could face 10 years in jail provided the DoE can prove the allegation. But sadly, the DoE has not succeeded in proving any of the allegation in court so far. This brings to the fore the question of their efficiency and the amount of pressure they face from the big companies who wield power over not only the DoE but also other government agencies concerned. The fact that the big companies always get away with only paying fines, make them more emboldened to go on with their despicable acts. We have also seen this in the case of river polluters. This culture of impunity must be broken.

Our hills, rivers and forests must be saved at all cost, for the sake of our own well-being. We would like to see strong commitment on part of the government to save our environment.

Demand for skilled expatriate workers falling

Education system failing to equip aspirants

SO ADLY, only about 44 percent or an estimated 2.5 lakh Bangladeshi workers who went abroad were deemed to be "skilled" out of some 6 lakh migrant workers who found work in overseas labour markets. Unfortunately, we have been cutting corners in categorising when it comes to producing skilled workers. These and other shortcomings were highlighted in a report titled "Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2019: Achievements and Challenges" by RMMRU, published on December 29. It is not surprising to find that many countries have stopped recruiting doctors and engineers from Bangladesh, which puts a huge dent in our remittance because a skilled expatriate worker earns many times more than an unskilled one and the fact that this year, the number of migrant workers is about 10 percent less than the number of people who found jobs abroad is a very worrying sign.

The declining trend is highlighted by the largescale returnees of Bangladeshi workers from countries like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia and should be serious cause for worry as inward remittance is of vital importance to the economy. The 30-day training programme introduced by the government to transform unskilled workers into skilled ones destined for Middle Eastern labour markets is obviously falling short of the expectations of overseas employers. It is time we took cognisance of the failings and did something to improve the situation.

Migration researchers believe that efforts need to be expedited in language training so that skilled workers are made language-proficient, because we have to take into account that we are not the only country in this part of Asia vying for a piece of the overseas labour markets. Again, the country's higher education curriculum needs to be improved so that graduates from our nursing schools, medical colleges and engineering universities are perceived to be at par with expatriate workers from other countries in terms of knowledge and skills.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ushering a new beginning

Tomorrow will mark the start of the first year of the next decade. Like always, everyone will hope that the year will be filled with peace, prosperity and harmony across the world. However, the year 2019 was not a happy one, especially with so many unfortunate events that unfolded, much to our dismay.

From natural calamities to political unrest, we have witnessed many tragedies including accidents, outbreak of diseases and acts of terrorism among numerous others, resulting in many deaths.

Several eminent personalities have left us too—with Sir Fazle Hasan Abed being the most recent one—as we struggle to make the world a better place. I earnestly hope and pray that the future will not be as dismal as 2019, as we continue to be optimistic and work towards a brighter tomorrow.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram



IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

THE year 2019 was essentially business as usual in terms of corruption in Bangladesh, as it continued to be a challenge of ever-increasing concern except for two notable features that drew public attention. On the one hand, corruption exposed itself in some unprecedented manner as booties of this illegality in casinos, public procurement and other instances of abuse of politically linked power shocked and awed many observers.

On the other hand, for the first time in the country, a high-profile anti-corruption drive was launched by a political party-led government at the initiative of the prime minister and leader of the ruling party targeting a few individuals within her party, which raised many expectations. What to expect of this bold stance remains a big question.

The first corruption-related story of the year that drew intense public attention was that Bangladesh went two steps down in both score and ranking in terms of the CPI—the Corruption Perception Index. In international comparison, we continued to be among countries perceived to be worst affected by corruption, while also remaining the second lowest in South Asia after Afghanistan in terms of prevalence of the menace.

This measure of grand corruption added to the already deepening concern that in terms of petty corruption, as experienced by 89 percent of victims of bribery, paying bribe is a *sin qua non* for receiving public services as the national household survey released by Transparency International Bangladesh in 2018 found. It has been widely reported throughout 2019 that the depth and breadth of bribery in public services have only intensified in spite of the recent significant increase of salaries and benefits for public officials.

At higher levels, reports of syndicated corruption in development projects using foreign grants, loans and investment funds as well as taxpayers' money appeared frequently in the media. Among the top rankers were public hospitals, educational institutions, Biman, Chattogram Port authority and custom house. Abuse of power by law enforcement agencies which have always ranked among the worst corruption-affected segments continued unabated. A police officer was even found to have corruptly colluded with a senior official of the Anti-Corruption Commission, which



NAZRUL ISLAM

entity," having rights similar to a living person. The High Court appointed the National River Protection Commission as the guardian of rivers and assigned it the responsibility of upholding the rights granted to rivers. In delivering this judgement, the High Court was following precedents of granting similar rights to nature as a whole (by countries like Ecuador and Bolivia) and to particular rivers (such as by New Zealand). Even a court in India granted personhood to the Ganges and Jamuna rivers in 2017.

The second good development regarding rivers in 2019 is the new energy that the government displayed in freeing rivers from encroachment. Many structures have been demolished from the banks of the Buriganga and Turag rivers. There has been some progress in this respect in some districts too. For example, the Habiganj district administration displayed notable enthusiasm for recovering the Old Khoai River by demolishing the encroaching structures.

The third good development regarding rivers in 2019 has been another initiative by the High Court—this time against pollution. The HC observed on December 3 that there are 68 underground drains and sewerage lines under control by Dhaka Wasa, dumping untreated sewage into the Buriganga River. On December 9, it ordered Dhaka Wasa to shut all sewerage lines connected with the Buriganga River within the next six months. In addition, the court asked the Department of Environment to shut down, within the next one month, all industries built on the banks of the Buriganga River without clearance and industries polluting the river by dumping waste. In general, the court ordered the authorities to stop dumping all types of waste to keep the water pollution-free.

These positive developments are of course encouraging. However, there were many disappointing developments regarding rivers in 2019 too. The first set of these developments concerns implementation of

also acknowledges its own challenge of dealing with corrupt and unethical practices.

The police authority has reportedly taken departmental disciplinary measures against hundreds of officials and staff though in most cases, no genuinely deterrent action is known to have been taken except "punishment transfer", which in reality means only passing the burden of corruption from one place to another. Jailors, and other senior prison officials were unabashedly involved in corruption related to auction, procurement and supplies for prison canteen, commoditisation of prisoners, bail, accommodation and visits.

Corruption in public procurement symbolised by the "pillow scandal" in the Rooppur nuclear power project quickly became a new normal in other publicly funded projects involving collusively manipulated cost estimates at unbelievably high rates applied to products or services for development projects. On the other hand, public works has been one of the most lucrative targets of politically linked corruption in procurement, also through



Police raid the Arambagh Krira Sangha in the Motijheel area of Dhaka on September 22, 2019.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

easily formed collusions with a section of relevant officials.

2019 also witnessed corruption allegations sparking off spontaneous public rallies. One was in the wake of a Transparency International Bangladesh report that exposed corruption in Wasa causing poor quality of water and other services. The other was against illegal transactions in connection with development projects of Jahangirnagar University allegedly involving the vice chancellor and her family.

Institutions usually outside the antenna of corruption reporting like Islamic Foundation made news around corruption in recruitment. So did the Election Commission, a section of leadership and senior officials of

which found attendance and lectures in trainings a convenient means of illicit money making. The EC further shocked observers when its staff got involved in the corrupt business of issuing NIDs to a sizable number of Myanmar nationals of Rohingya identity. Then came the unusual story of a triangular internal feud between CEC, commissioners and the secretariat around an unprecedented competition for advantage, by violating the due process in recruitment, which was widely exposed by the media.

The most ominous trend has been the accumulated crisis in the banking and financial sector bedevilled by institutionalised abuse of politico-financial power like loan default, through collusion, protected and promoted by Bangladesh Bank under pressure of the government. The trend continued throughout the year more blatantly than ever.

The problem of money laundering across borders has been in the news prominently—according to internationally credible data released in 2019, Bangladesh was ranked 26th globally and second in South Asia after



A man rows a boat in the Buriganga river which has been badly polluted due to unabated dumping of garbage and used engine oil from vessels.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

only India. Counted mainly on the basis of trade-related misinvoicing, at least USD 9 billion is laundered from Bangladesh in a year. Efficient cross-checking of the data may determine what portion of the defaulted loans are finding its way out of the country.

On the other hand, as recently estimated by TIB, at least USD 2 billion is lost annually to six top destination countries for Bangladeshi expatriate workers in the form of illegal payment for work permits which is supposed to be free of cost. By another estimate, at least USD 3.5 billion is annually laundered by illegally employed foreign nationals in Bangladesh, mostly in the private sector.

The list is much longer. Corruption and impunity have not only been

institutionalised to a level of state capture, but also allowed to grow like a monstrous multi-headed Lernean Hydra which also needs multi-dimensional strategic measures to control. The problem has acquired such dimensions by a long-nourished feature of political culture in the country by which access to power by direct, indirect or even manipulated political links is taken as an unrestricted mandate to abuse that power for private gain and personal enrichment. In exercising this mandate, a collusion is conveniently built with partners and agents from business, administration, law enforcement and indeed the whole set of state institutions.

Against this backdrop of despair, the high-profile drive targeting a few ruling party affiliated student and youth leaders, some procurement lords and kingpins of casinos, raised public expectations. Three important points made by the head of the government and leader of the ruling party encouraged people to expect that things may change. She declared the government will exercise a policy of zero-tolerance against corruption; promised that nobody will be spared; and made the unprecedented pledge to cleanse her own house first.

The main challenge, however, is about enforcing these in word and spirit, which depends on the capacity and commitment of those who are entrusted and authorised to do so. Unfortunately, many of those in key roles are considered to be among the beneficiaries, promoters and protectors of the institutional structure of corruption.

Take the instance of casinos that flourished in Dhaka right before the eyes of the law enforcement agencies, administration and other relevant government departments, political leaders and public representatives of various levels. The same is true of the network of corruption in public procurement, which has been exposed as the source of filthy enrichment of some of those who are under investigation, but facilitated by a win-win game involving collusion and protection by the proverbial big fish.

In this context, effective delivery of anti-corruption demands a retransformation of values, norms and practices in political parties, which is the most difficult part. Equally difficult is the task of depoliticising the relevant state institutions, rendered almost dysfunctional mainly by partisan influence. In the absence of any real progress in that direction, there is no magic bullet to control the monstrous hydra of corruption.

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How our rivers fared in 2019

THE year 2019 saw both good and bad developments for our rivers. On the good side, the first thing to be mentioned is the High Court's judgement of February 3, declaring rivers as a "legal

entity," having rights similar to a living person. The High Court appointed the National River Protection Commission as the guardian of rivers and assigned it the responsibility of upholding the rights granted to rivers. In delivering this judgement, the High Court was following precedents of granting similar rights to nature as a whole (by countries like Ecuador and Bolivia) and to particular rivers (such as by New Zealand). Even a court in India granted personhood to the Ganges and Jamuna rivers in 2017.

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policies and directives. As the saying goes, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." Improper implementation can nullify the intention of good policies and directives and produce opposite results. It may be recalled that, in 2009, the HC, alarmed by encroachment and responding to the demand by river activists, had directed the district administrations to demarcate, by installing pillars, the boundaries of rivers that surround Dhaka city. Unfortunately, the district administrations implemented this directive by setting up the pillars in the middle of the rivers, thus aggravating the problem of encroachment. A writ petition was filed in 2015 asking for remedy, and the



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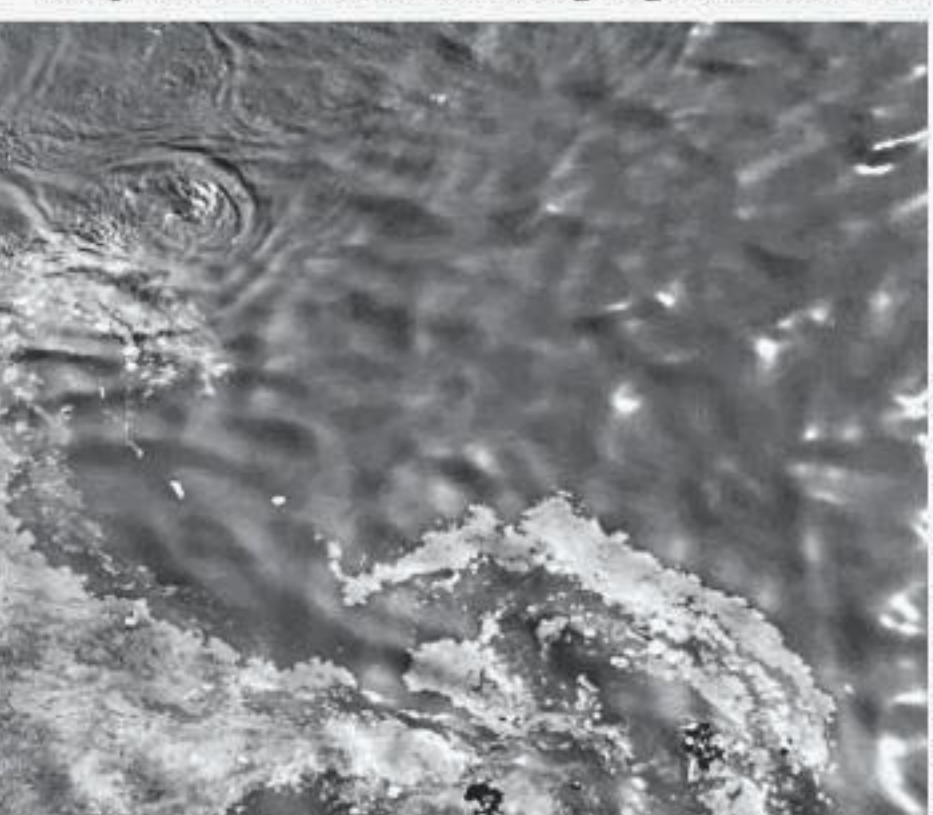
HC ruling of 2019 was a response to that petition.

River activists have pointed out that the authorities, even in their current demolition drive, are not following properly the HC directives regarding steps to be followed in demarcating river boundaries. Instead, they seem more interested in clearing the space needed to implement the walkway construction project. As a result, many encroaching structures are getting legitimised.

Furthermore, alongside the demolition drive, a process is going on to convert the old channel of the Buriganga River (called Adi Buriganga) into a lake, modelled after the Hatirjheel project. Needless to say, this project amounts to killing the river, violating the HC's order to treat rivers as a living entity. This ill-advised project will also disconnect the Buriganga River from the Turag River. Likewise, for one good example of Old Khoai recovery, there are hundreds of examples in various districts of converting rivers into a

series of small ponds, in contravention of the High Court judgment.

Similarly, it remains to be seen how effective the High Court's directives to stop polluting the Buriganga River will be on various government agencies. Previous government initiatives at controlling river pollution have not been that successful. For example, an effort was made to remove the thick layer of plastic debris that has accumulated on the Buriganga River bed. However, the effort appeared to have been abandoned half-way. Similarly, the shifting of tanneries from Hazaribagh to Savar, according to press reports, has largely shifted the pollution from the Buriganga River to the



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Bangshi River. In general, the government has not been that successful in making the industrial enterprises build and run effluent treatment facilities properly. Thus, the situation regarding implementation of policies regarding encroachment and pollution continued to be disappointing in 2019.

The second area of discouraging developments in 2019 concern transboundary river issues. The upper riparian countries, in particular, India, continues to divert water away from Bangladesh's rivers. This has created a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, these diversions are causing the average river flow to diminish. In the dry season, the flows often fall below the minimum required to keep the rivers alive. This diminution of flow leads to increased sedimentation, formation of sand bars (chars), encouraging encroachment. The depth and carrying capacity of rivers decreases. When India

opens all the barrage gates in the rainy season, the shallow rivers can't carry all the water discharged. The result is widening of rivers and serious bank erosion. Bank erosion in 2019 was particularly tragic in Naria Upazila of Shariatpur district. Thus, diversion by India is aggravating both encroachment and bank erosion.

Cross-boundary river pollution is also getting more serious with time. One reason why the Indian court granted the Ganges and Jamuna rivers personhood is the horrendous pollution that these rivers are suffering from, despite being considered holy. This pollution is entering Bangladesh. Due to upstream denouement, the rivers in Bangladesh now carry more sand and coarse materials than fine silt. As an additional problem, rivers flowing from Meghalaya into the Sylhet division are carrying more chemical pollutants, including heavy metals, due to mining activities conducted there.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh so far has been unable to protect adequately its rights as a lower riparian country. The Ganges Treaty of 1996 has not been able to increase the Padma flow and to ensure the minimum environmental flow in the dry season, due to the absence of any minimum guarantee clause. Any talk about the Teesta River sharing has lost its worth because further upstream diversions have systematically reduced the flow reaching the Gajoldoba Barrage.

Bangladesh's reticence in fighting for its rights on the shared rivers is puzzling in view of the approach it took to resolving the maritime border dispute with India. In October 2009, Bangladesh turned to the United Nations Convention on Law of Sea (UNCLOS) for settlement of this dispute, and in 2014 the Permanent Court of Arbitration provided the verdict largely in favour of Bangladesh. When it comes to rivers, Bangladesh has so far refrained from signing the 1997 UN Convention on Non-navigational Use of International Watercourses, despite the fact that this convention upholds many rights of lower riparian countries. Instead, Bangladesh clings to the bilateral framework, which has done very little for it.

The lesson for 2019 is, therefore, that Bangladesh has to be more energetic both domestically and in its negotiations with India to protect its river system.

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