

## Over 1.7 lakh people died from air pollution last year

And how many more before we take serious steps to mitigate this environmental disaster?

ACCORDING to a global report from the US-based Health Effects Institute and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation that was released yesterday, South Asia is the most polluted region in the world in terms of air. The situation is especially dire in Bangladesh, with air pollution leading to 1,73,500 deaths last year, and with the entire population living in areas where the air quality is not considered safe. The report also mentions that air pollution has become the second leading health risk factor after high blood pressure in Bangladesh, and that our life expectancy would have seen the highest expected gain of nearly 1.3 years if the air pollution level met the WHO guidelines.

Why have we allowed air pollution levels to deteriorate to the extent that over 1.7 lakh Bangladeshis have been killed by it—of which 10,500 were only infants? Experts have opined that the country's air is becoming increasingly poisonous, with the major pollutants being household solid fuels, dust from construction sites, coal power plants, brick production, transportation and diesel-powered equipment, among others. Despite this, very few concrete steps have been taken to reduce indoor air pollution through cleaner cooking techniques, and to regulate the sectors responsible for outdoor air pollution and replace them with greener initiatives.

In fact, Bangladesh is only further expanding its coal industry with the help of friendly nations, and despite a government decision to phase out brick kilns by 2025 in all construction work and replace them with concrete blocks instead, these kilns are operating across the country. Many of them are doing so illegally, causing great harm to nearby residential areas. According to experts, putting an end to garbage burning will reduce air pollution by around 30 percent, yet this practice also continues unabated. In February this year, the High Court issued a nine-point directive to control air pollution which, among other things, included covering sites where construction work is underway, seizing vehicles that emit black smoke and ensuring the use of covers on trucks or other vehicles that transport sand or soil. Most of these directives have not been implemented so far.

Air pollution is not just an environmental issue; it is a major public health problem and at this stage, the authorities should treat it as an emergency and take immediate steps including passing the draft Bangladesh Clean Air Act and ensuring its implementation. There are no excuses for apathy and delay when it comes to controlling air pollution in Bangladesh, especially during the pandemic when there is clear evidence of the connection between air pollution and increased heart and lung diseases, and of how people with these diseases are more vulnerable to Covid-19.

## Authorities must reclaim all illegally occupied forestland

Making names of forestland-grabbers public is a good first step

WE welcome the parliamentary standing committee on environment's decision to make public the names of 90,000 individuals and organisations who have illegally grabbed around 2.87 lakh acres of forestland of the forest department across the country. The decision was made after the environment, forest and climate change ministry made these revelations to the Jatiya Sangsad committee.

According to the chief of the parliamentary watchdog, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, the committee has also asked the ministry for a detailed report on the current state of the occupied forestland, to see how many evictions notices had been issued to evict the occupants and what steps had been taken by the authorities concerned to that end. That is also an encouraging step, as this newspaper has previously reported on the lack of initiative shown by the concerned authorities to reclaim occupied forestland.

Unfortunately, influential industrialists and individuals who have forcibly occupied the forestland often abuse the legal process—take stay orders from higher court through filing appeal when the authorities start eviction activities against them—to maintain their occupation, according to the ministry. And law enforcers allegedly do not always cooperate during their eviction drive, which is unacceptable, as the forestland belongs to the state and all its citizens, not to a select coterie of influential people.

We hope this is a first step towards reclaiming all of the forestland that has been grabbed illegally over the years. We also hope that the parliamentary standing committee, after making the names of these organisations and individuals public, will notify the concerned authorities to take urgent measures to do exactly that. At the same time, the fact that so much of forestland have been grabbed over the years must not be repeated again. Whatever legal barriers and bureaucratic mishaps that have led to this must also be identified and dealt with. No doubt this will be a long-drawn-out process but if the authorities are serious about retrieving our lost forestland, this endeavour must be followed through with fairness and integrity. We hope that the work of the parliamentary watchdog is successful.



MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

ROAD fatalities have devastated numerous families in the country through deaths as well as injuries crippling their earning members and loved ones. Being pressurised by

the various road safety campaigns and motions sparked by tragic road crashes, the government has undertaken various initiatives to address the issue. National committees and sub-committees have been formed, numerous seminars, symposiums and discussions have been held, and myriads of recommendations from various task forces have been made. But as the road safety programme hasn't been developed in a systematic manner—by putting the responsibility on the shoulder of a capable public entity, ensuring transparent and sustainable fund flow, and rolling out targeted and effective strategies—little progress has been made in this regard.

It was a natural expectation that Bangladesh would go through a systematic implementation of the road safety programme alongside the speedy infrastructure development programme initiated by the present government. The expectation was further heightened when Bangladesh committed to the global plan for the Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020 at the UN general assembly of 2010. The UN initiative was set to contribute to two SDG targets concerning road safety: Target 3.6 was aimed at reducing global crash-related deaths and injuries to half, while Target 11.2 was aimed at providing access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems as well as improving road safety for all. While the government has met many other SDG targets successfully, unfortunately, the road safety targets remain unmet by a big margin due to lapses in undertaking a professional and systematic road safety programme as well as monitoring the implementation of the same. A systematic approach should, ideally, address the interaction among speed, vehicles, road infrastructure and road user behaviour leading to reductions in road crashes.

An analysis of Bangladesh's crash data involving the above factors, as maintained by the ARI of BUET, reveals that the majority of fatal crashes take place due to over-speeding, errant drivers and vulnerable road user behaviour. A shortage of formally trained drivers, lack of effective speed enforcement measures, poor governance of formal and informal vehicle fleet growth, and absence of a safer environment on the roads are some of the major contributing factors. Although the problems are well-known, the solution is not a straightforward one because of the involvement of numerous stakeholders, many of them politically linked. Also, the transport

sector is bedevilled by a culture of corruption and extortion through the collusion of various union leaders and other stakeholders. On many occasions, this network has been responsible for thwarting much-needed reforms which would have established order and discipline in the sector. Keeping this in mind, any solution needs to be carefully examined and backed by a strong political commitment.

I would like to focus on three specific

To prevent over-speeding, radar-based speed cameras can be installed at every 1-2 km segment of national highways with a network length of about 4,000 km. The cameras will record over-speeding incidents along with the images of vehicles at all times and under all weather conditions. Through a proper and dedicated communication network, the field recording tools can be connected with a central server, i.e. control room. The control room features should be able

to have to understand that not just the megacities like Dhaka and Chittagong, there are at least ten other cities with more than half a million residents that need improved public transport services. Just to provide a quick recipe for this problem, I would like to recommend a fleet of about 5,000 city buses to cover the need for improved bus services in the 12 cities and about 40 quality commuter trains with preferably separate dedicated tracks to serve the need for commuter



Bangladesh is in dire need of an efficient and sustainable road safety programme.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

areas of solutions that can be part of a larger plan for improving road safety. Also, these are aimed at meeting the two SDG targets related to achieving road safety within the shortest possible time and using effective technologies. The three reforms involve: i) speed limit enforcement, incident detection and emergency management system for highways; ii) institutional development of driving instructors, drivers training and testing; and iii) introducing safe, reliable public transportation in cities and sub-urban areas.

On national highways, over-speeding is responsible for 43 percent of accidents as a main cause and its share as a secondary cause is 31 percent (ARI, BUET). Various field studies show that the speed of vehicles, especially buses, often crosses 100 kmph on the highways, irrespective of the straight and curve section situations. This sort of speeding is very common owing to the lack of effective speed limit enforcement measures, often causing dangerous crashes. Also, there is no institutional framework for detecting incidents on the highways and responding to emergency situations. Therefore, a large number of accidents remain unreported and injured victims remain unattended for a long time, thereby increasing the fatality rate.

to develop management decision aids in the form of identifying speed violation, detecting incidents and flow problems, etc. Such installations have been reported to be able to reduce accidents by up to 50 percent in some developed countries.

Again, there are not enough expert drivers compared to the rapid increase in the number of vehicles. Due to the lack of quality driving schools, instructors with appropriate knowledge of road safety, and necessary equipment and proper course structures, the new drivers adding to the existing driver population are not properly trained. To meet the demand for trained drivers and training of existing drivers, an adequate number of driving schools should be established with appropriate equipment, training simulator, educated instructors, etc. Also, a simulator-based driving competency testing system should be established at every circle office of BRTA to improve the driving licensing procedure, taking our driving licensing standard on a par with the globally accepted standards. The trained drivers will contribute significantly to reducing road crashes.

Besides, a formal bus service and surface rail based commuter train service are automatic choices as the low-cost and effective public transportation in urban and peri-urban areas. Our policymakers

train services. The two public transport improvement options—bringing about 4 crore urbanites under a safe public transport network—may need an investment of about Tk 3,500 crore each. Comparing these to a single Dhaka metro line-6 project, costing about Tk 22,000 crore, should surely be a motivation for the policymakers to prioritise projects yielding low hanging fruits. It is not understandable why a government undertaking over two lakh crores of ADP cannot nationalise an urban bus system for 4 crore urbanites at a cost of about 3,500 crores only. A safer and formal urban public transport will reduce urban crash numbers significantly.

Finally, a safe and efficient transportation system is a prerequisite to the present government's visions of 2030 and 2041. The government should carefully plan the implementation of various transport development projects as part of a holistic national plan, and projects should be prioritised on the basis of their safety, economy, efficiency and environmental footprints in order to meet the sustainable development goals, especially the relevant road safety targets discussed at the beginning.

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## We cannot fail the world's children

JUDITH HERBERTSON

THE world is confronting an unprecedented education crisis. At the height of school closures due to the coronavirus pandemic, more than 1.3 billion children were forced out of their classrooms. As many as 16 million children in the world's most vulnerable countries may never return to school, forced to take on work to help their families survive the brutal economic impacts of this deadly disease.

Before the pandemic, the world had already been struggling to provide all children with a quality education. Nine out of ten school children in low-income countries were still unable to read a story by the age of ten. Due to the pandemic and the long period out of school, these children's education has been further disrupted.

In Bangladesh, the drop-out rates in primary schools of around 18 percent and in secondary schools of around 35 percent are likely to double as children and families cope with school closures and loss of income. The most disadvantaged children such as those with disabilities and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are at risk of dropping out permanently. Girls are at greater risk—vulnerable to higher levels of sexual exploitation and child marriage once they drop out of school.

Missing out on education does long-term damage to individuals, communities and nations. As a result of this crisis, a generation of girls who should be among the ranks of future entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, teachers, doctors and world leaders may be left dreaming of what they might otherwise have become.

Education is a human right—part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Generations of well-educated young people are essential to the stability and prosperity of nations, open societies



Education, particularly girls' education, is catalytic and one of the best tools to advance development, strengthen economies, and reduce intergenerational poverty.

PHOTO: DS

and democracies, poverty reduction, greater gender equality, and improved health and nutrition.

Education, particularly girls' education, is catalytic and one of the best tools to advance development, strengthen economies, and reduce intergenerational poverty. By educating girls today we can genuinely change the world of tomorrow. For every additional year a girl stays in secondary school, she can increase her future earnings by up to 20 percent. Access to 12 years of good quality education for girls improves their chances of finding a job, avoiding child marriage, and choosing when and how many children to have.

The UK is a global champion of girls' education and keen to work in partnership with Bangladesh to ensure those 12 years of education are made

available to all, both boys and girls.

Over the last five years, the UK has worked through local partners to provide nearly 1.9 million children, including 1 million girls, with a decent education in Bangladesh. We have also supported 125,000 young children, of whom 50 percent are girls, to receive technical and vocational skills training followed by job placement and self-employment opportunities.

Urgent global action and international investment are now desperately needed to help achieve every girl's right to 12 years of quality education, recover from the impact of the pandemic, and stop a lost generation of children from never returning to school.

This is where the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is so important. The GPE has the vision, the ability and the

strength to get things done. An investment that transforms lives through the power of education. Since 2002, the GPE has contributed to getting 160 million more children in school and doubling girls' enrolment in the countries they work in.

In Bangladesh, the GPE will allocate USD 53.9 million and USD 15 million for the government of Bangladesh to expand access to quality pre-primary and primary education and mitigate the impacts of Covid-19. A further USD 10.78 million will support education for Rohingya refugee and Bangladeshi children in Cox's Bazar.

In 2021, the year of the UK's G7 presidency, the UK and Kenya will co-host a landmark global education summit. The summit will push for concrete action to get children into school and raise vital funding for the GPE. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been clear that girls' education is a top UK priority. We are stepping up our efforts and we need other countries to join us.

Over the next five years, the GPE needs at least USD 5 billion to transform education systems in up to 87 developing countries. This will give 175 million children the opportunity to receive quality education. Achieving this will be a challenge for the world. But let us not forget that behind each of these statistics is a child who looks to education as the path to a better future.

Through the GPE, we will direct investment and action to where they are needed most. Together, governments, businesses and individuals can and must invest in children's futures. Like boys, girls deserve an education, and we cannot let them down. Our ask is simple: Step forward and fund their education.

We can only achieve the future we and they want by investing in the generation that will build it.

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