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Stalemate between UN and GoB over Rohingya relocation not productive

It risks undoing the goodwill garnered by Bangladesh over the years

AS of yesterday, the government has started relocating Rohingyas from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal under Hatiya upazila of Noakhali, amidst calls by the UN and other human rights organisations to halt the relocation process. In a statement on December 2, the UN stated that it had not been allowed to carry out technical protection assessments and humanitarian missions to the island despite repeated requests, nor has it been involved in the preparations for the relocation. There are widespread concerns that the island is flood-prone and may get submerged during tidal surges, and that there is limited access to healthcare and other facilities compared to the Cox's Bazar settlements, where various national and international organisations have been working together for years to ensure the basic rights of the refugees.

The government has cited the destruction of forest and hills and risk of landslides in Cox's Bazar as reasons for choosing the island as a temporary housing site. While we understand the compulsions of the government, which has thus far graciously hosted 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in the Cox's Bazar settlements at a heavy price, we are at a loss to understand why the UN, which has played an integral part in the refugee resettlement thus far, have been left out of the relocation process, and why their assistance, as well as their assessments, have been turned down.

Such a stand-off between the UN and the GoB is not productive in the least and risks undoing the goodwill garnered by the latter over the past three years. It is of utmost importance that we remain transparent in our dealings both with the refugees themselves and with our development partners. We must dispel the concern that refugees who have volunteered to relocate have been provided misleading information about the actual conditions at the camps, and ensure that journalists and aid workers have free access to the refugees during and after the relocation.

The UN, which has offered to review the safety, feasibility and sustainability of Bhasan Char and develop plans and budgets, in consultation with GoB and other NGOs, INGOS and donors if they find they can engage operationally on the project, must also understand why the GoB is running out of patience. We urge the UN to be more realistic and sympathetic towards a country that has done so much and now faces an ecological disaster in the areas where they are currently hosting the refugees.

There is still time for both parties to work together to resolve the current stalemate. We call upon both the GoB and the UN to do so without further delay, prioritising the rights and rehabilitation of the refugees who have already lost everything they once held dear.

A decade on, the law against domestic violence is toothless

Most women don't even know it exists

EVEN after 10 years after it was passed, the domestic violence prevention law has hardly been implemented in most districts of the country. Women, many of whom are regularly physically assaulted by their partners, do not even know that the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2020 (DVPP Act) exists. Legal experts and rights activists have been continuously voicing their concerns over the effectiveness of the law for a decade. In many cases law enforcement agencies and administrative officers did not take complaints seriously and refused to take the cases. Moreover, survivors believe that even if protection orders are given it is hard to enforce them and if they go to the court again with this issue, they are not welcomed.

Recent studies on domestic violence reveal that women mostly prefer to go to union parishad members or chairmen to seek solutions, where they also face victim-blaming, or are sent back to their perpetrators after an unlawful mediation by local administration. Another major concern is the unavailability of local law enforcement officers when the survivors seek support.

The ever-escalating number of domestic violence related incidents in the country demonstrates how ineffectual the law is. Meanwhile, everyday, women get beaten by their husbands, sometimes ending up maimed for life or dead. Societal attitudes towards domestic violence is very indifferent and even enabling, leaving women completely powerless against such violence. Financial insecurity, possibility of losing their children, social stigma associated with being a divorcee or just extreme fear, prevents women from speaking out, let alone file a case. This has to change.

Massive campaigns are needed to raise awareness amongst people on domestic violence, highlighting the existence of the DVPP Act. More field workers need to be trained in order to provide basic information about the law, as well as legal and psychosocial counselling to victims. The legal loopholes that make it difficult to take legal recourse must be removed. We also need to focus on increasing the number of shelters for survivors so that they are not forced to return to their assaulters. Establishing a monitoring cell to regularly check on the progress of trials and ensuring the accountability of relevant court officials will further prove beneficial. At all costs, we strongly demand the empowerment of victims of domestic abuse to seek and get justice.

What do we need DAP for if it makes the city further unliveable?



NAZNIN TITHI

AFTER years of wait, we are finally going to get the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) 2016-35 for Dhaka. Yet, there is nothing to be happy about it. Rather, it is quite shocking to learn about the countless flaws in the proposed DAP that have been pointed out by urban planners. Reportedly, the draft DAP was finalised without taking the suggestions of all the stakeholders—urban planners, architects, environmentalists and the government agencies concerned. As Rajuk has finalised the draft, debates have been raging among city planners as well as the general public on whether it would eventually make the city further unliveable and only satisfy the greed of some powerful quarters.

There are enough reasons to be worried.

Since the previous detailed area plan (DAP) remained largely unimplemented in the face of opposition from politically powerful quarters and influential realtors, and its tenure expired in 2015, the government took the initiative to formulate the DAP 2016-2035, which should have been completed a long time ago. However, according to the Town Improvement Act 1953, the government is supposed to formulate the Dhaka Structure Plan 2016-2035 before formulating DAP 2016-2035, which has not been done. So, there are some clear legal contradictions. And we do not know why it is taking so long for the government to publish the gazette notification of the structure plan since it has already been finalised.

According to the Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB), the implementation of the draft DAP will result in destruction of 70 percent of the natural water bodies in and around the city. Architects have also warned that the proportion of flood flow zones will be reduced to 17 percent if it is implemented, whereas the 1997 structure plan for Dhaka intended to keep 66 percent of the flood flow zones.

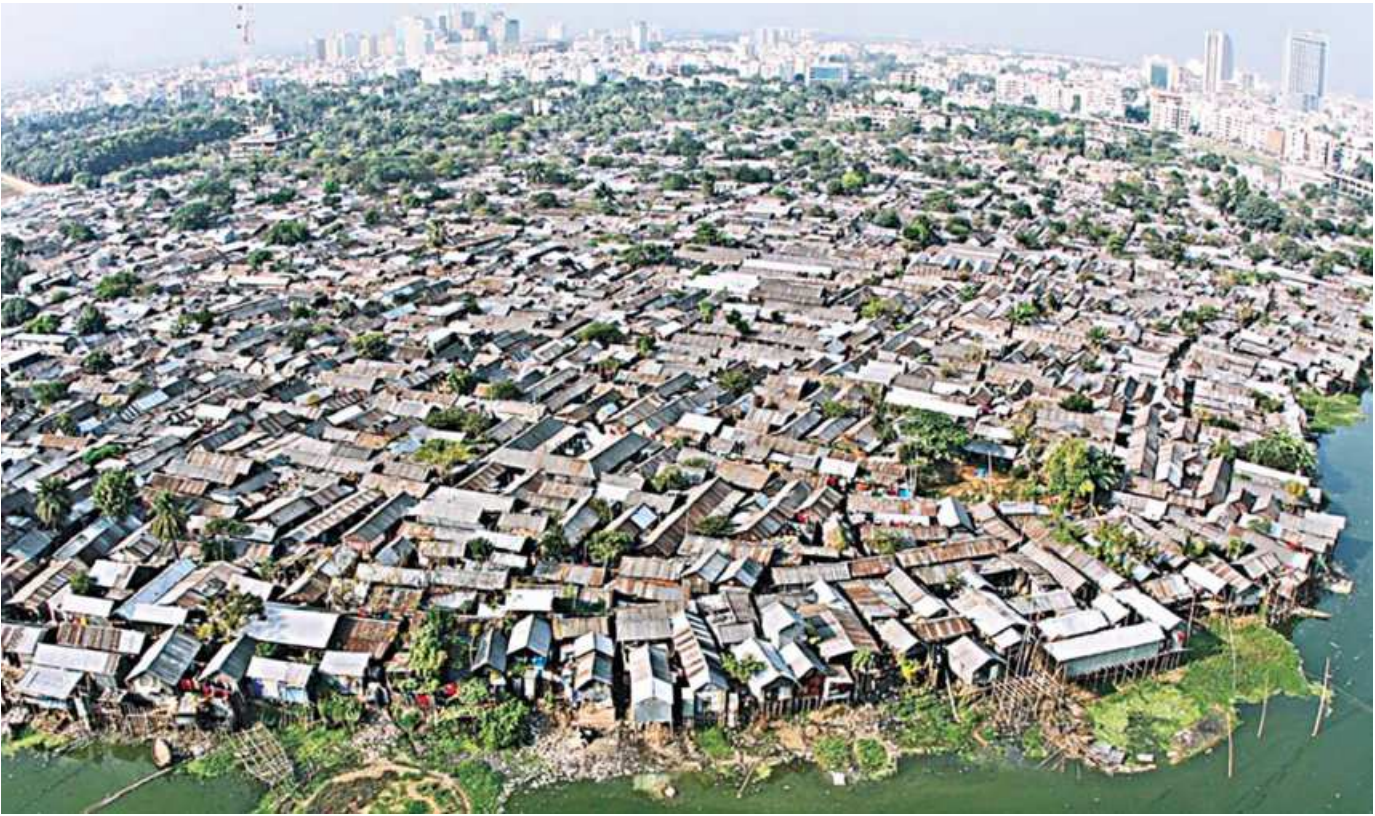
According to IAB, "There is a clear point in the Terms of Reference for preparation of the DAP, which mentions demarcating rivers, canals, water bodies, water retention and catchment areas based on surveys done during the British and Pakistani eras and *mouja* maps." Sadly, the draft DAP has ignored this point and proposed a modification in the classification of flood flow zones.

It has proposed two separate terms to define the flood flow zones—primary waterbody and general waterbody—and mentions allowing construction (conditionally) on the general waterbodies. This classification goes against Bangladesh Water Act-2013, according to which the characteristics of the flood-flow zones cannot be changed. Dhaka's waterlogging problem has

become so acute over the last few years that the only way to solve this urban disaster is to preserve the city's remaining canals, ponds and waterbodies and reclaim those that have already been grabbed. According to Adil Mohammad Khan, general secretary of Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), water retention bodies, including ponds and canals, should cover 12 percent areas of a planned city. Sadly, Dhaka has less than two percent of such area (*The Daily*

canals and have no road connectivity. This would certainly encourage the unscrupulous plot owners to grab the canals for making roads."

"The flood flow zones, agricultural land and water retention areas should be preserved according to the guidelines of the Dhaka Structure Plan 2016-2035, which has not been done in the draft DAP," points out Dr Akter Mahmud, Professor, Urban and Regional Planning, Jahangirnagar University.



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PHOTO: STAR

Star, July 22, 2020). And we all know why. A 2019 *Daily Star* report revealed that individuals, businesses, real-estate developers, and even government agencies have gobbled up 1,072 acres (57 percent) of the 1,879-acres of flood flow zones in core Dhaka city only in this decade.

However, if the DAP 2016-2035 is implemented in its current form, it would contribute to more waterlogging in the city as scopes have been created in its provisions to allow building structures on "general waterbodies."

While solving Dhaka's waterlogging problem would require establishing an integrated network of drains, canals, rivers and flood flow zones, which is called the "Blue Network" in the Dhaka Structure Plan, there is no mention of it in the draft DAP.

According to Iqbal Habib, joint secretary, Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon, "Instead of giving specific proposals to recover the 65 identified canals of Dhaka (now there are only 26), the draft has, in fact, allowed people to build houses in plots that are adjacent to the narrow

The need for conservation of the ponds, canals, rivers and flood flow zones, reclaiming the canals and waterbodies that have already been grabbed, and creating water retention ponds have always been highlighted by experts to prevent the city's waterlogging and flooding issues. Why then did conservation not get due importance in the draft?

Meanwhile, river and wetland grabbing by politically powerful people continue unabated. Only last Tuesday, *The Daily Star* reported that a ruling party MP has filled up more than 54 acres from the Buriganga river and wetland to construct a power plant and a private economic zone in Basila. As the National River Conservation Commission's (NRCC) probe has found, out of the 54 acres, at least 12.78 acres was part of the Buriganga, according to the oldest land record available, known as the Cadastral Survey (CS). And the rest of the 54 acres was wetland along the river and marked as flood-flow zone in the DAP.

The draft DAP, with its countless flaws, has disappointed those of us who

been designated as purely residential, the rest will be a mix of residential and commercial areas, which will seriously harm the city's environment. There is a provision to allow constructions that deviate from the building codes and do not have approval in exchange of a fine, which will only encourage the law-breakers. It also has controversial provisions about keeping road space. Furthermore, this draft does not emphasises low-cost housing facilities for low-income and poor people despite the fact that over 40 lakh people in Dhaka live in slums.

Needless to say, the proposed DAP needs critical evaluation by all stakeholders. Already the major loopholes in the provisions have been identified by city planners, architects and environmentalists. The government must listen to their suggestions and correct the flaws for making the Detailed Area Plan 2016-2035 for Dhaka efficient and sustainable.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

In Like a Lion, Out Like a Kitty



SHAMSAID MORTUZA

A lot of whimpers and whines are coming out of the White House as the sun sets on the Trump presidency. The man in question is convinced that he has been cheated out of power. A "subtle conspiracy" has overturned his flow of votes, and we won't be surprised if there is a call for "neutral caretaker government" somewhere down the road even though he himself has appointed a large number of judges during his tenure.

Even before the election, Trump brewed a conspiracy coffee to toxify the mail-in votes knowing very well that his supporters were likely to ignore the call for social distancing and come to vote in person. In contrast, his opponents were likely to play it safe by sending in their ballots. The voting pattern was thus proportional to the attitudes of the two party supporters towards the coronavirus. For one group, it was nature's revenge and needed a better and cautious management based on scientific information. For the other group, it originated in a foreign country under a very suspicious condition and eventually got exported overseas like immigrants creating unnecessary nuisance. While one group insists on masking the self, another group insists on demasking the other. The diatribe has become an endless source of amusement for the rest of the world who are tweeting back to the tweet-land.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei did not waste any opportunity to rub salt into the wounds of democracy. "What a spectacle!" Khamenei tweeted soon after the US election. Adding, "One says this is the most fraudulent election in US history. Who says that? The president who is currently in office." And then there is the ruling party's spokesman of Zimbabwe, Patrick Chinamasa, who said: "We have nothing to learn about democracy from former slave owners."

Even the mainstream US media warned of such backlashes from the "undemocratic" world. They compared the disgraceful attitude of the POTUS as the leader of the free world with those dictators and autocrats of countries sans democracy. The news of pre-emptive presidential pardons for three members of Trump's family as well as his personal lawyer solidifies the media suspicion.

In a post-Cold War unipolar world, the US positioned itself as the wholesale

of the United States offers one such example. On the United States one-dollar bill we see the insignia that includes an overseeing eye and an unfinished project symbolised by an unfinished pyramid. The two Latin slogans accompany the images on the seal: *annuit coeptis* (the eye of providence) and *Novus ordo seclorum* (new order of the ages). The founding fathers of America believed that God had favoured them in giving them the promised land and it was up to them to



A woman shows a Donald Trump boxing figurine at an election night watch party organised by the group 'Villagers for Trump' in The Villages, Florida, on November 3, 2020.

PHOTO: AFP

exporter of democracy all around the world: MacDonald's in Vietnam, Coca-Cola among the Taliban, or Nike in Russia, have been the symbolic images of liberalisation and democratisation instrumented by the US. While the country's military might gave the US a political high-ground, the moral and social fabric of the country was being constantly tested. Over the years, the country has departed from the Puritan belief in which America was once founded. The reverse of the Great Seal

complete the unfinished mission under the watchful eyes of the old world as well as of God. It is no coincidence that with such strong religious underpinnings, the Crusade tenor appears in American discourse every now and then.

One can, however, argue that Trump's behaviour has been far from that of a true Christian even though he has strong support among the right-wing Christians. Many evangelicals see him as a divine ally who has come to their aid to testify to God's habit of working in mysterious

ways. Trump himself curated his "Bible thumper" image and went on to compare himself with Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the US who "wrote, spoke and thought in terms of Scripture". Ironically, some of the Republicans who turned against their leader to prevent Trump from re-election called themselves as the Lincoln Project. The betrayal is also symptomatic of a far reaching change within the Republican Party. Under Trump, who lost in popular votes in two successive terms, the party that pivots on him has become a white fraternity who has no tolerance for ethnic minorities and immigrants.

In his effort to make America great again, Trump has ended up building a wall around the exemplary pyramid, making the project a site for private viewing. His detachment from many international bodies including the UN, his isolationist view on climate change, and his trade deals have made him lose the political high-ground for the US. No wonder, Trump's campaign relied on provoking fear about a leftist, socialist, globalist opposition that will end religion, gun rights and oil use. In a campaign rally, Trump said in Texas last year, "The radical Democrats want to destroy America as we know it." If these opponents are allowed to have their way, he said, there will be "no guns, no religion, no oil, no natural gas." And then he goes on to overtrump his nationalist Republican role model to boast, "Abraham Lincoln could not win Texas under those circumstances."

Well, Trump did win Texas. America, however, presents itself as a country that is divided more than ever. What lessons can be learned from the rise and fall of Donald Trump? The red surge that brought him to the White House four years back is now blocked by a blue wall. The thunderous roar with which he came to power four years back is fast fading into ridiculous meows. There are lessons to be learnt from this rise and fall of Trump.

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