

Over 45,000 Rohingya refugees affected

Why do these fire incidents keep happening?

THE stories of loss and devastation that are coming out of Balukhali after two separate fires tore through the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar on Monday are heart-wrenching. A report in this daily yesterday described the area as looking like a "war zone", with distraught refugees sifting through the debris in an attempt to salvage their belongings, as smoke continued to billow from the estimated 10,000 houses that were destroyed in the blaze. According to the latest estimate, around 45,000 refugees have been affected by the fires and at least 11 have been killed, including three minors. What is even more concerning is that up to 400 refugees are still missing in the wake of the fires.

One can only imagine how traumatic this must be for the refugees who have already suffered the loss of their homeland and all that they hold dear after becoming victims of genocide in Myanmar. Some of the refugees have spoken to *The Daily Star* of the pain of losing not just their savings and whatever minimal property they owned, but also their cherished memorabilia of a homeland they fear they may never see again. They have also spoken about the lack of water in the camps, and how many saw gas cylinders for cooking—which had been distributed on that day—explode and contribute to the fire spreading further.

This is not the first time that fires have broken out in the refugee camps. In January this year, around 3,500 Rohingya refugees were left homeless after a similar incident. This begs the question: despite having prior experience, why were the camp authorities not prepared for such an eventuality? Why, despite the presence of government and humanitarian organisations, is there no system in place that helps refugees to safely store flammable objects like gas cylinders, provides fire safety training, and equips local volunteers with the tools necessary to control fires while waiting for the fire service to arrive?

The Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh are one of the most densely populated refugee camps in the world, so it is understandable that such fire hazards are difficult to deal with. Be that as it may, there is no excuse for not being able to protect the lives and belongings of such a marginalised population that has already been on the receiving end of such terrible persecution. The authorities must immediately investigate the latest incidents of fire and unearth the factors that contributed to it, so that the government and humanitarian organisations can work together to ensure that such devastating events do not occur again, and if they do, there are systems in place to control them before they get out of hand (which must include the speedy arrival of the fire service). The refugees who have been affected must also be adequately compensated for their losses.

Thousands suffer from lengthy gas supply disruptions

Relevant authorities must be held accountable

ALMOST all throughout Tuesday and even Wednesday, thousands of people in different parts of Dhaka city suffered due to a disruption in gas supply to their homes. According to the Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company's director of operations, the disruption happened when, on Monday night, a Titas feeder line was damaged in Amin Bazar during the construction work of Salehpur bridge over the Turag river. On the other hand, officials from the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) alleged that the gas line was installed without their permission, and that it should not have been so close to the main road in the first place. In response, the director of Titas dismissed both allegations. All this while, people across the city struggled to cook and many had to buy food from outside.

It is disappointing to see such lack of communication between vital organisations like the RHD and Titas, as well as their reluctance to accept accountability, despite both being under the government's jurisdiction at the end of the day. As these authorities try to avoid shouldering their responsibility, it is the general people of Dhaka whose continual sufferings are being disregarded. Gas lines being damaged during construction work is nothing new for the people of Dhaka. Even last June, a similar disruption continuing for nearly eight hours occurred in seven areas of the capital when a gas pipe was accidentally severed (leading to a fire) by the Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) workers while they were working on a sewage line.

In a megacity like Dhaka, where we are seeing rapid urbanisation every hour of the day, it is quite baffling to see this many people being deprived of something as basic as a regular supply of gas. And all for the lack of planning and coordination among the organisations that must work together in order for the city to function seamlessly. It is high time for all parties responsible for the city's utility services to cooperate with each other and to carry out their work in a manner that is beneficial to every citizen. These organisations and departments have a mandate to provide timely services to the people who inhabit this city, not simply to look after their own organisation's interests or shift blame when such events occur.

Consequences of reducing the main opposition to naught

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



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MORE than a decade ago in July 2010, I wrote an article titled "When state is the cause of its own insecurity". The piece was compiled by the prevailing political situation at that time. What I tried to convey in that

article was that: of all the threats that impact national security and influence the course of politics, the greatest stems from the state itself. That view is not mine alone. The state becomes the cause of its own insecurity because of what it does or does not. When the government of the day errs in its duty to guarantee the basic rights of citizens, state security is endangered. The coercive instruments, though no longer the exclusive monopoly of the state, are wielded with impunity by it—it being answerable to none but to its conscience. Inappropriate reactions to various situations had made the state vulnerable from within.

What I had also ventured to opine was: "In Bangladesh today, in most of the realm of our activities as a citizen, our space has been so severely constrained that it is giving rise to the worry that we may willy-nilly become victims of bad governance, with coercion as the main instrument to keep everyone in line. Particularly when saviours become predators, and the state, whose primary responsibility it is to ensure the physical safety of its people, is unable to ensure that fully, when political space is denied to the opposition and when all types of subterfuges are employed to send an indirect message to the media to exercise self-censorship, inevitably, confidence in the system is sapped. Extreme repressive measures over time become the norm, and the government assumes a repressive disposition and the regime an authoritarian character; all these are recipes for internal flux."

These comments were made during the seminal stages of the second incarnation of the Awami League (AL) as the country's ruler and when the most-detested Digital

Security Act had not been formulated, let alone enforced so ruthlessly, nor had the incidences of extrajudicial killings reached such a proportion as it has in recent times. Our prediction about the character of the government has come true in many respects. What we witnessed then was nothing that we had not seen before when the BNP was in power. But the AL returned with a vengeance, and the scale was upped manifold. Most of what one had feared have come to pass.

Bangladesh has slipped one position

democratic rights to his people.

What, however, was not covered in the aforementioned article was the harmful consequences of denying political space to the opposition and reducing state institutions to a level where they no longer serve the nation, but instead become the handmaidens of the administration. Three long-term but extremely damaging consequences that result from this state of affairs are: the main opposition party becomes a political non-entity, elections become an exercise

parliament facing every kind of hurdles in organising politically—is fraught with danger because the sum total of all these is a kind of chemical reaction, metaphorically speaking, that creates a vacuum in the political arena and offers the ground for other elements to rush to fill the void. And the most likely of these elements, who happen to be fairly well-organised, are the faith-based parties, most of whom strut themselves up by aligning with either of the two major political parties. But apart from these, there are religious groups who do not claim to be political organisations, but nonetheless command the support and influence of a large segment of the people in this country. They offer opinions and take positions on national issues that go down well with some sections of society.

Despite claims to the contrary, courting these groups by the political parties and hobnobbing with them to curry their support (since they command large vote banks) is a common political strategy. Compromising with these elements has become a part of the policy for ensuring the perpetuity of political rule.

What political expediency has done is to empower these elements to the point where they now pose as a virtual opposition to the government. National issues with religious overtones are being used to oppose various policies of the government, something that the opposition parties, including the BNP, have not been able to do. What that might eventuate in is that these groups—using the same platform that they are currently using to voice their opinions through the religious lens—will project their views on exclusively political matters through the same lens. The upshot of this is that a time might come when they will assume the mantle of the political opposition and the people might mistakenly take them as alternatives to the traditional political parties. A new force with their own agenda might emerge in the political arena and command the support of a section of the people, with some possibility of changing the fundamental character of politics in the country.

Are we at all thinking about these possibilities?

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In the absence of a strong opposition camp, faith-based groups are becoming the X factor in politics. STAR FILE PHOTO

in the World Press Freedom Index to 146. While we have climbed four notches in the democracy index, there is little to celebrate on that account because Bangladesh is still classified in the "hybrid regime" category, which means that substantial irregularities often prevent the elections from being free and fair, according to a report by the research and analysis division of the Economist Group.

The situation that motivated venting this anguish in writing has worsened further. Trust in democracy and state institutions, regrettably, has sapped. That cannot be a flattering commentary at a time when we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of our independence and the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, who had fought to guarantee the

in futility for the people with the results a foregone conclusion at the national and local levels, thus causing people to lose faith and trust in politics and the electoral system. It may not be out of place to mention that in spite of the expressed position of the AL about a strong opposition, its actions have betrayed its desire to ensure that the only political party capable of standing up to the AL is turned into a political non-entity. And they have been fairly successful too. But the BNP has its own failings too, which have reduced it to what it is now.

The situation in the political arena—a parliament in whose formation the people had little part, an opposition in the house that partly belongs to the ruling party, the main opposition outside the

Navigating a rising tide of blue ocean business

INGRID VAN WEES and MELISSA WALSH

THE global economy would not exist without the ocean. Ocean-based industries contribute USD 1.5 trillion annually and hundreds of millions of jobs in fishing, shipping, marine tourism, and renewable energy. These economic services, however, are at risk due to unsustainable marine practices and overexploitation of ocean resources.

This year, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report identified biodiversity loss and environmental damage by humans as two of the biggest risks to the global economy. Continued business-as-usual approaches will result in reduced natural capital—such as fish from the sea—and disruptions in supply chains. These risks are material to most businesses, even those that indirectly rely on the ocean, as more than half of

surprise. The "blue ocean" was flagged as a metaphor for a space of limitless business opportunities as early as 2005, when W. Chan Kim and Rénee Mauborgne published their ground-breaking book "Blue Ocean Strategy". They contended that many companies were competing in so-called "red oceans" established markets with an existing number of competitors and often razor-thin margins, such as, for example, low-cost family cars.

Conversely, they argued, "blue ocean" markets provide an underdeveloped business space ripe for innovation with vast opportunities for sustainable and profitable growth such as, for instance, the fully electric cars developed by Tesla Motors.

This potential is rapidly being realised. Businesses now have a choice: compete in crowded markets of the "red ocean" with increasing financial, climate and

in Hong Kong, China, holds two sustainability certifications for its work tracing each fish from dock to plate, allowing it to charge premium prices. The Sustainable Seafood Fund—which aims to deliver fishery improvement projects to reduce fisheries investment risks, including pipeline development, repayment risks, market risks, and execution risks—partners with corporate buyers using long-term purchase agreements to secure fish and repay investors through fees based on volume or value.

In solid waste management, 60 percent of global land-based marine plastic pollution comes from five countries in Asia. To enhance its margins, Indorama Ventures, a global manufacturer in polyethylene terephthalate, commonly abbreviated PET, is expanding its plastic bottle recycling capacity and decreasing ocean waste. The environmental benefits earn the company blue ocean credentials, relevant for environmentally conscious investors.

Blue is the new green

The global green economy is worth nearly USD 8 trillion. But the new frontier is the blue economy, and it too is booming.

Take clean energy. The terrestrial green energy market is vibrant but limited by land available for capacity expansion. Oceans can provide limitless supplies of renewable energy. Offshore wind alone could generate 23 times more power than the present total global electricity consumption.

With global offshore wind costs plummeting by 32 percent in 2019 and expected to decrease further, the huge markets of Europe and the People's Republic of China could reach USD 400 billion of investments over the next two decades. Even the global shipping industry, once powered by fossil fuels, is catching on. New market entrant NEOLINE is developing a sail-based maritime transportation business in the North Atlantic, offering decarbonised shipping that is price-stabilised due to significantly lower exposure to fuel prices.

Diving into the deep blue

To feed the world we should also look to the seas, where sustainable aquaculture is growing strongly. First-movers like Norwegian firm Cermaq are developing facial recognition technology for salmon farming to conduct biological tests on each animal, enabling targeted applications of food and chemicals and reducing environmental and economic waste.

Oceans 2050, a foundation established by the granddaughter of Jacques Cousteau, the famous ocean

explorer, focusing on advocacy for ocean abundance restoration, is pioneering regenerative seaweed aquaculture that will sell both carbon credits and a premium food product while creating jobs for vulnerable coastal and island communities in twelve countries in Asia, Europe, North and South America. This trend is not limited to fish and seafood. Traditional crops are being grown in underwater pods to conserve energy, water, and chemicals.

Purpose-built companies are being developed with the primary aim of investing in nature to make our oceans healthy and more resilient.

CLS is a global company operating in 90 countries to provide high-tech fisheries management products and services, such as electronic monitoring systems. Aquaai Corporation builds robotic fish that combine real-time data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning to deliver marine monitoring and compliance services. Other innovators include the company Wipsea, which stands for Wildlife Process Solutions for Environmental Assessment and which uses drones and big data to improve marine megafauna monitoring, and the foundation CHARM which invented coral-farming robots.

The blue future is now

The pandemic offers governments around the world a chance to "build back bluer" by using the economic pause to reimagine sustainable development and reinvestigate stimulus spending on the environment.

For companies considering new blue opportunities, the time is now to get preferential access to new funds. Many are already taking advantage. Investors such as Mirova are capitalising funds for private ocean investments such as the Althelia Sustainable Ocean Fund at USD 132 million. Funding is also available to design blended public-private blue investments through the global network for blended finance, Convergence. Accelerators like Katapult Ocean are investing in blue start-ups, while platforms like Investible Oceans are connecting businesses to investors. The "1000 Ocean Startups" coalition is bringing together the global ecosystem of incubators, accelerators, competitions, matching platforms and venture capital firms supporting startups for ocean impact.

The global blue economy is fast becoming a profitable, sustainable reality. The question facing traditional businesses now is: will you be part of the pollution, or part of the solution?

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A view of the Bay of Bengal from Sandwip, Chattogram.

PHOTO: HOSSAIN TAREQUE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

global gross domestic product (GDP) is moderately or highly dependent on nature.

Pressure is building on unsustainable businesses to disclose climate and nature-related risks. With credit rating agencies mainstreaming sustainability assessments and transition planning, and global accounting standards being updated to ensure inclusion of sustainability risks, there is simply no place to hide.

Moreover, the financial sector is seeing unprecedented demand for sustainable investment opportunities. Partly due to the ongoing pandemic, the growth of funds focused on sustainability is shattering records. International agreements are being forged to remove harmful subsidies that support unsustainable businesses.

These trends should come as no

nature-related risks; or explore the largely uncontested potential of the blue ocean.

Riding the blue wave

Large firms are pivoting to ride the blue wave. A study commissioned by the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy (Ocean Panel) on "Ocean Solutions that Benefit People, Nature and the Economy", published in 2020, found that sustainable ocean investments could produce USD 15.5 trillion in net benefits by 2050 and build future-focused industries that generate six times more food and 40 times more renewable energy.

In the fisheries sector, reducing the 35 percent of seafood wasted in the value chain could have measurable environmental and economic benefits. M&C Asia, a major seafood importer