

Now is not the time to lower our guard against Covid

Ignoring health guidelines could lead to a catastrophe

WITH people lowering their guard against Covid-19 during the Eid celebrations, health officials and experts fear that Bangladesh may face a grimmer health crisis than before. The relaxation of lockdown, public disregard for social distancing and uncertainty over vaccinations has made the situation more volatile at a time when all four Covid-19 variants of global concern, including the one devastating India, have made their way into Bangladesh.

Despite seemingly getting a head start, Bangladesh's vaccination programme has all but stalled, as only two percent of the country's population have so far received the double-dose of AstraZeneca vaccine while less than four percent got the first shot. In the meantime, at least 10,645,697 mobile phone subscribers travelled out of Dhaka between May 4 and May 15, many of whom are now returning to the capital. In spite of the government ban on long distance buses, people have resorted to different means to make their way into the capital without following any of the health guidelines, putting themselves and others at serious risk. This great movement of people from one end of the country to another and back could potentially provide the perfect opportunity for the virus to spread rapidly.

Amid the ongoing uncertainty over vaccines, health experts have warned that unless people strictly follow health guidelines, including the wearing of masks, Bangladesh could get into a crisis situation like the one we are witnessing in India and Nepal. Unfortunately, as this newspaper reported on Monday, most people seen travelling across the country have been ignoring their advice and the government's enforcement of the guidelines has also been non-existent during the Eid holidays.

As all of this has created the perfect environment for the virus to spread, the government should pre-emptively take the necessary precautions now, rather than repeat the same mistakes that were made by India. That includes ensuring uninterrupted oxygen supply at every district hospital and arranging oxygen generators at all hospitals in cities as soon as possible. Now is the time for the government to strictly enforce the health guidelines, as failure to do so may result in catastrophic consequences.

Sorry state of a river excavation work

BWDB must be held accountable for botching it up

EXCAVATING streambeds and banks to improve navigability of rivers is a routine work in Bangladesh. Crores of taka are spent every year for this purpose. Because the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB)—the state agency responsible for surface and groundwater management—has been doing it for so long, one could be excused for expecting some degree of efficiency in how it conducts the work, especially in taking care of the excavated earth so that it doesn't wash back and undo the very purpose of this exercise. The reality, however, couldn't be further from this—as evidenced, most recently, by an excavation work in the Charalkantha River in Nilphamari. According to a report, the agency excavated an 80-kilometre stretch of the river last year, only for most of the excavated earth to make it back to the river later and shrink it to a mere channel at most places.

Forget about the cost of this project. Just the fact that there were no proper disposal or compaction measures for the excavated earth, a basic requirement for a project of this kind, shows the height of inefficiency of those behind it. As a result, not only is the river constricted again by washed-down earth which had been piled up on its bank, locals are now cultivating paddy on large patches of the filled-up river! In some places, locals have also complained about one side of the river facing erosion as the excavated earth had been dumped on the other side. Who will take responsibility for the riverside households and privately-owned agricultural land ruined by this ill-advised decision? Here is a project that not only squandered about Tk 114 crore in one year and damaged life and livelihoods, but also did the very opposite of its intended goal by further constricting and refilling the river.

This is, unfortunately, not a one-off incident. We often come across news of such botched-up operations by the river authorities. Apparently, what to do with the excavated earth and sand remains a perennial mystery. But such excavations are neither new nor difficult to execute with proper planning—countries around the world have been doing that for a long time. True, sometimes there can be natural causes for riverbeds silting up. But that is no excuse for mismanagement, inefficiency and poor planning leading to such artificial silting and consequent sufferings of the ordinary people. This is exactly where the authorities should put their focus on. The BWDB must be held accountable for such failed excavation projects.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

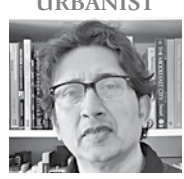
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Our rising entrepreneurs

The youth are the future of Bangladesh, but after they finish their undergraduate degrees, they spend long periods of time looking for a job. This is a very common scenario, because there are few jobs available compared to the number of unemployed candidates. However, some do end up starting their own small businesses, curbing unemployment in the process. The Bangladeshi corporate environment needs to be more friendly towards such startups and encourage the risk-taking mentality of the new entrepreneurs.

Abir Hasan Himel, North South University

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

EIGHT years ago, in May, a large crowd staged a sit-in at Gezi Park, next to Taksim Square, Istanbul's bustling public plaza in the downtown of its European side. People wanted to save the park's 600 trees that would soon be cut to clear space for a massive "Ottoman-style" shopping mall. What started as a local environmental movement quickly snowballed into a national agitation against heavy-handed government tactics.

The Gezi Park demonstration also revealed something fundamental and even universal: people's ecopsychology—the emotional connection between humans and nature. When that connection is severed, humans feel pain. A growing body of research indicates that contact with natural environments contributes to improved health and psychological wellbeing. This is particularly evident in dense urban areas.

Trees are the most common signifier of nature. They are our most intimate connection to nature. Khalil Gibran wrote: "Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky." When we see a familiar tree in our neighbourhood or park felled, we experience anguish. The Australian environmental philosopher

The consensus that in a socially mature society, it is not okay to replace trees with restaurants, must become a vigorous political force.

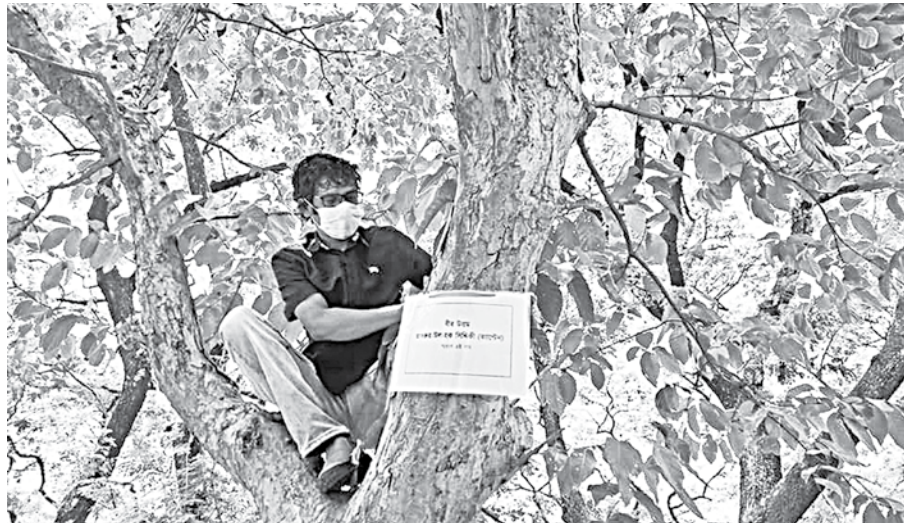
Glenn Albrecht calls this melancholic feeling "solastalgia"—a kind of eco-grief experienced by a community when it feels that its environmental umbilical cord has been broken.

Almost a hundred years ago, in 1928, Rabindranath Tagore poignantly foreshadowed the solastalgic crisis in our cities with what could be called a "Bolai effect." Tagore's character Bolai is an introvert, a motherless, nature-loving boy who had the habit of staring at trees for hours and speaking with them without uttering a word. He would flinch at the mere thought of cutting a tree. In a *debdaru* forest, Bolai would feel at home and silently communicate with large trees, as if they were people—his uncles, his grandparents, his friends. The Bolai story reveals Tagore's deep commitment to a spiritual dimension of environmental ethics. In a deltaic country with a fragile ecology, we are all supposed to be Bolais.

The environmental disaster at

Suhrwardy Udyan has inspired a broad Bolai effect. It is heartening that people are protesting this "ecocide." But it is also tragic to see that on the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs and the Ministry of Housing and Public Works are spearheading a misguided development project at Suhrwardy Udyan that would desecrate the glorious histories of the Liberation War. Why fell trees that are

Her placard read: "Give me oxygen. I want to live." Ironically, the slogan is eerily similar to that of Covid-19 patients across hospitals. Perhaps the little girl reminds us that trees are humanity's best defence against pandemics. I do not think I have seen a more brilliant idea of activism than this: To save the remaining trees at Suhrwardy Udyan, environmental activists have named them after different *muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters). This is



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PHOTO: COLLECTED

integral to the city's cultural ecology? Who needs any restaurants inside a historic park? Would any civilised society today construct a mammoth parking lot inside an iconic park?

There is no restaurant inside Washington DC's National Mall—the two-mile-long expanse of open space that serves as a symbol of democracy at the heart of the US capital. Dhaka has no shortage of restaurants, and Suhrwardy Udyan is the last place to need another seven restaurants. We do not have to commercialise every square inch of Dhaka and other cities. There are certain areas that should be protected like sacred ground, without the profanity of eating and partying. The whole point of going to Suhrwardy Udyan should be to understand historical legacies, learn the names of trees, hear birdsongs, experience solitude, heal the mind, breathe fresh air, and meditate, not eat burgers and arrange loud picnic parties! A park is where people learn to develop an empathy for and an understanding of the biology of how nature nurtures us. Any development project for Suhrwardy Udyan should include a mission to educate the public about the histories of 1971, as well as horticulture.

A writ petition has been filed at the High Court to challenge the felling of historic trees at Suhrwardy Udyan, and the clearing of trees has been halted in the meantime. The other day, a little girl came to the park with her mother to protest.

their symbolic resistance: to cut trees is to kill freedom fighters. Deeply moving.

But is this romantic environmentalism enough to stop the kind of ill-conceived development that is mutating the ecological and historic DNA of Suhrwardy Udyan? While we need activism to build public awareness of environmental responsibility, it is no longer effective as a deterrent, primarily because it is mostly reactive and resistive. It does not anticipate potential environmental disasters and help create preemptive policies to prevent them from happening in the first place. Furthermore, current activism neither offers acceptable alternatives to bad development, nor build broad political coalition that could counteract the malpractice of top-down planning. It is time to reengineer the very idea of activism against environmental injustice.

Development is not the problem. On the contrary, development is necessary. But land-grabbing, crony capitalism, nefarious arrangements of *bhag-batoara*, and political opportunism in the name of development are the problem. Stifling the public interest to maximise personal gain is the problem.

What environmental activists need now are new types of coalition building and strategic advocacy. A coalition of like-minded politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, professionals, academics, civil society, and activists would make it impossible for an imprudent minister or a chairman to make unilateral decisions to transform a national park or a heritage site.

Palestine burns, again



SHAMSHEER M CHOWDHURY, BB

THE sight of an Israeli soldier kicking a Palestinian Muslim while he is in the midst of his afternoon prayer, right in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan in Jerusalem, was

yet another graphic demonstration of the disdain with which Israel treats Palestinians in their own homeland and the cruel manner in which this manifests itself in open view. Over the last couple of weeks, Israeli brutality against the Palestinians has reached new heights, this time with the eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and the forced transfer of civilian population into territories illegally occupied by Israel. This was followed up by unprovoked attacks by the Israeli Defence Forces on innocent devotees at the Holy Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

We have also been witnessing relentless missile attacks on civilians in the Gaza strip, resulting in the deaths of close to 200 Palestinians so far, including many women and children, and wounding hundreds more. The death toll continues to mount with each heightened Israeli attack. Israel's Zionist government of course justifies its brutality as "self defence", a reference to the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. Not surprisingly, the Biden administration's reaction to all this effectively echoes the position of the Jewish state. Pro-Israeli members of the US Congress do the same, as they have done for decades.

Uri Avnery, the late anti-Zionist Israeli professor once famously said, "Israel is a small America and America is a large Israel". Seeing what is happening in the power corridors of Washington DC, it would be hard for any sensible mind to disagree with him. Similar views have been expressed by Dr Norman Finkelstein, an American Jew with a doctorate from Princeton University. What makes Dr

Finkelstein's livid criticism of the Zionist policies of Israel and of the atrocities on the Palestinians more potent is that both his parents were imprisoned by the Nazis in concentration camps. That experience has only hardened his resolve on the need for speaking out openly against both Israeli policies against the Palestinians, and Washington's sustained defence of it.

Many find it convenient to blame the Muslim world's inability to speak out openly against Israel and act accordingly. They forget that in 1948, 1967 and 1973,

unable to form a government, is the latest incarnation of this toxic mindset. The powerful Zionist lobby ensures that sympathisers in the outside world will stand by them, no matter what.

This time though, the voices of opposition to Israeli actions and US policies on the long running Palestinian-Israeli conflict has reached relatively higher sound decibels. There are more sympathetic voices inside the US Congress and among the common people as well. This has caused deep concerns within the



Israeli forces continued to bombard Palestinian territory well into Tuesday morning.

PHOTO: MAHMUD HAMS/AFP

it was countries like Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Jordan and even Bangladeshis that had laid down their lives for the rightful cause of the Palestinian people to have a state of their own. But over time, hardliner Israeli leaders have continued to distort history and alter geography through illegal occupation of Palestinian land and increasing Israeli settlements on them, knowing full well that Washington's veto power in the UN Security Council will protect them. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, indicted and facing a corruption case in Israel and

Democratic Party itself. The open display of the Palestinian flag by two members of the English FA Cup-winning Leicester City football club at London's hallowed Wembley Stadium on Saturday is part of a rising chorus. One hopes such peaceful acts of protests will gather momentum and policymakers in the countries who speak so loudly of human rights and justice everywhere but maintain silence when it comes to Israel, will finally wake up, take notice and deny Israel its culture of impunity. One hopes the telephone talk between President Abbas

Evidence- and knowledge-based strategic advocacy should focus on building public consensus that environment-friendly development is the greater good in the long run. Strategic advocacy should empower responsible and empathetic leaders by encouraging them to commit to an ethical vision of environmental stewardship rather than exclusively relying on legislative measures. Strategic advocacy should help institute policymaking that warrants accountability in public works.

Nobody reminds me of better strategic advocacy than Rachel Carson, the acclaimed author of *Silent Spring* (1963), a book that galvanised the environmental movement in the USA in the 1960s. In Bangladesh, it is Dwijen Sharma, the eminent botanist whose study of nature struck a chord with the public.

Suhrwardy Udyan is too important a historical venue to be the playground of a ministry or two. That an architect of the Public Works Department can singlehandedly redesign Suhrwardy Udyan without any national oversight and expert vetting is absurd and infuriating. A park redevelopment that requires the felling of existing trees that are intertwined with histories of Bangabandhu should be rejected. Any development of this hallowed ground where many landmark political events—from Bangabandhu's March 7 speech to the surrender of the Pakistani army on December 16, 1971—took place must be scrutinised by a high-powered commission comprising public officials, politicians, experts, and members of civil society. The Commission of Fine Arts, a federal agency in Washington, DC, is "charged with giving expert advice to the President, the Congress and the federal and District of Columbia governments on matters of design and aesthetics, as they affect the federal interest and preserve the dignity of the nation's capital."

The idea of historic preservation should not include just TSC, Kamalapur Railway station, Ruplal House, and Kantaji Mondir. It should also include trees, waterbodies, and biodiversity that bear witness to national narratives. The development that comes at huge environmental cost is no development at all. The consensus that in a socially mature society, it is not okay to replace trees with restaurants, must become a vigorous political force.

According to some news media, at least 150 trees have been chopped down in Suhrwardy Udyan. Is it time we discovered the Bolai in each of us? We should all go to Suhrwardy Udyan and hug the trees that remain. I do not know how to process my own hypocrisy that I am preaching biophilia from the other side of the planet. In moments of self-doubt, I draw strength from the belief that trees not only provide us with abundant oxygen, but also forgive, like mothers. Or Mother Nature?

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and President Biden will bring some respite, even if a short lived one. However, Netanyahu's response to that does not give much reason for optimism.

While many vested quarters would want to push any discourse on this conflict into the background, for the people of Bangladesh, it has a special place. The support and solidarity of Bangladesh and its people for their Palestinian brothers and sisters in their struggle for justice and statehood is steeped in history. From its very birth in 1971 as an independent state, Bangladesh has all along stood steadfastly with the just cause of the Palestinians and has not for once wavered in its stance, which is founded on the universal principles of democracy, human rights, human liberty, history and justice—the same values on which the glorious Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971 was based.

Bangladesh staunchly supported the Palestinians' against Israel during the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and dispatched a medical team and relief supplies for Palestinians even when the country itself was recovering from the ravages of the Liberation War of 1971. Bangladesh recognised Palestine as a state very early on and maintains warm and friendly relations with it. In 1978, Bangladesh was elected by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as the Vice President of the Al-Quds Committee. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's latest strongly worded letter to President Mahmoud Abbas of assurances of continued support for the people of Palestine in the backdrop of the latest situation, and her unveiled criticism of Israeli actions, is yet another clear manifestation of our policies. It represents the will of the people.

Highly regarded Palestinian politician Hanan Ashrawi once said, "We are the only people on Earth asked to guarantee the security of our occupier... while Israel is the only country that calls for defence from its victims".

Sadly, nothing can be closer to the truth than that.

Shamsheer M Chowdhury, BB is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.