

Will G7 and COP26 herald a new era?

Climate action groups gear up for a busy 2021



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

As the world strives to fast-forward the economy in an attempt to recover from the pandemic, climate change has rightly emerged as a major concern in all international forums. The International Energy Agency (IEA) warned in its "Net Zero By 2050" report released last month that our current reliance on fossil fuels must drop fast, and that drastic measures are necessary if climate disasters are to be averted. Fortunately, policy leaders across the globe are not unaware of these issues, and activists have not allowed the immediate cause—i.e. fighting the pandemic—to overshadow the long-term goal: an urgent need to address the threat of climate change.

An important contributor to this conversation is the group Climate Action Pathways (CAP) that has organised 20 virtual conferences over the previous year in anticipation of the three-day G7 summit, which starts today, and COP26 in November. I attended the 18th session of CAP on May 19 with Quamrul Chowdhury, Lead CAP & LDCCS Lead Climate Negotiator, moderating the discussion. Several experts from around the globe also participated in it.

For those who need a reminder, COP26 is the next annual UN climate change conference. COP stands for Conference of the Parties, and it will be attended by countries that signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—a treaty that came into force in 1994.

This is the 26th session of COP and will be hosted in partnership between the UK and Italy. The conference will be held in Glasgow from November 1-12, 2021—a year later than planned due to delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Climate Channel based in Toronto, Canada has brought together negotiators, academics, policymakers, and climate activists to create a better awareness of the challenges we face in implementing

the Paris Agreement to limit emissions to control global warming and to find innovative and effective adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Pushing for more ambitious goals
COP26 will be the biggest summit the UK has ever hosted, with around 30,000 attendees expected if it goes ahead as a fully physical event. Many people see it as the most significant climate event since the 2015 Paris Agreement, when all the signatories to the UNFCCC agreed to keep temperatures well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

COP26 is critical because it's the first moment when countries must set out more ambitious goals for ending their contribution to climate change under the Paris Agreement. In this context, the IEA's recent report on the state of policy actions to combat global warming is worth noting, given the fact that the influential agency is not an environmental group but an international organisation that advises world capitals on energy policy. "Nations around the world would need to immediately stop approving new coal-fired power plants and new oil and gas fields and quickly phase out gasoline-powered vehicles if they want to avert the most catastrophic effects of climate change," warned IEA.

Climate Action Pathway on Climate Channel

CAP's recent virtual conference was participated, among others, by Felipe Diaz of Chile; Raju Pandit Chhetri and Manjeet Dhakal, climate negotiators from Nepal; Prof. Alan Miller, an internationally recognised authority on climate finance and policy from the USA; and Prof. Jacqueline Klopp of the Earth Institute of Columbia University. Quamrul Chowdhury kicked off the discussions with a call to nations to prioritise the task of setting a course to reach a net-zero emission in the future and limiting the temperature rise to 1.5-degree Celsius.

One of the participants mentioned that last year was already 1.2 degrees Celsius hotter than pre-industrial times—dangerously close to the 1.5-degree limit



Climate advocates are anxiously looking forward to the tone of the three-day G7 summit which starts today in the scenic Carbis Bay, Cornwall, UK.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

set by the scientific community. Under current commitments, including the recent ones, we are still heading for a disastrous temperature rise of 2.4 degrees by the end of the century.

Prof. Alan Miller, quoting from a recently published World Bank report, praised the efforts undertaken by the government of Bangladesh to promote its Solar Home Systems project. Miller, who played an important role during the negotiations for the Montreal Protocol (on CFC), encouraged future climate negotiators to address other climate pollutants, including CO2 and methane, in smaller groups. We need "more actions and not just talk", he cautioned.

G7 summit in the UK

Various climate advocates are anxiously looking forward to the tone of the G7 summit to be held in the scenic Carbis Bay, Cornwall. The host, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office has announced that he will use the UK's G7 Presidency to unite leading democracies to help the world fight and then build back better from the coronavirus, and also create a greener, more prosperous future. The UK has invited Australia, India, South Korea

and South Africa as guest countries to this year's G7.

In addition to addressing geo-political issues and "championing our shared values", the summit can be expected to take measures to lead global recovery from the coronavirus while strengthening resilience against future pandemics. Other relevant areas to be tackled include promoting our future prosperity by championing free and fair trade, tackling climate change, and preserving the planet's biodiversity.

All the participants at the CAP online forum recognised that many world leaders have not yet come to grips with the extraordinary transformation of the global energy system that is required to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Fatih Birol, IEA's executive director, said in an interview that, "The sheer magnitude of changes needed to get to net-zero emissions by 2050 is still not fully understood by many governments and investors." Net-zero emissions don't mean countries would stop emitting carbon dioxide altogether. Instead, they would need to sharply reduce most of the carbon dioxide generated by power plants, factories and vehicles.

Any emissions that could not be fully erased would be offset, such as by forests or artificial technologies that can pull carbon dioxide directly out of the atmosphere.

One of the major concerns that I shared with the CAP meeting is that once the ravages of coronavirus are mitigated, developing and developed countries could go back to their prior posture where each side blames the other for the failure to address the major outstanding gaps in funding, carbon reduction goals, and mitigation and adaptation. The USA has been pointing the finger at India and China for their reliance on coal-powered plants, while the developing countries are asking the richer countries to own up to their role in providing financial support to compensate for the "loss and damage".

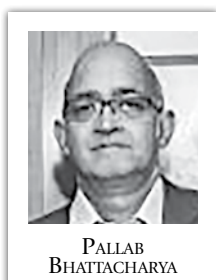
President Biden's pledge to cut US greenhouse gases at least 50 percent below 2005 levels by the end of this decade faces significant political obstacles. Nonetheless, at a virtual summit of 40 world leaders that Biden hosted last month, Japan, Canada, and Britain joined the European Union in committing to steeper cuts while China, India, and Russia did not.

Need for an urgent plan of action

The IEA advocates that if the world's governments want to change course quickly, they need to pay attention to some important benchmarks in the coming decades. In 2021, nations should stop approving new coal plants unless they are outfitted with carbon-capture technology to trap and bury their emissions underground. By 2025, governments worldwide would start banning the sale of new oil and gas furnaces to heat buildings, shifting instead to cleaner electric heat pumps. By 2035, automakers would stop selling new gasoline- or diesel-fuelled passenger vehicles. By 2050, virtually all cars on the roads worldwide would either run on batteries or hydrogen. A very bold and laudable plan, and a tall order, indeed.

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Assam's NRC: Through the prism of a migrants' descendant



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

MUCH has been written about the flawed and controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the northeastern

Indian state of Assam and the mammoth humanitarian crisis that has triggered. But what makes young award-winning journalist Abhishek Saha's book "No Land's People: The Untold Story of Assam's NRC Crisis" stand out easily is that the author has woven the struggles of his family and ancestors, who came to Assam from erstwhile East Pakistan two years after the 1947 Partition, with the predicament of lakhs of those who now find themselves excluded from the NRC and their desperate efforts to get included in it with whatever documents they can get hold of. The book poignantly brings out the hardship of the people running from pillar to post to get the documents to prove their citizenship, many of them ending up in detention centres.

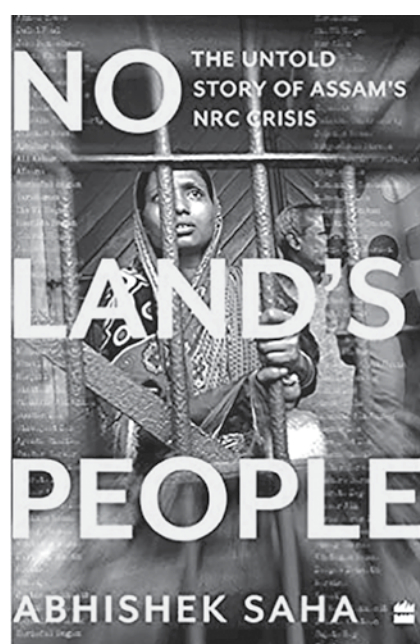
Published by Harper Collins, India, the 303-page book—as the author makes it clear in his note—is based primarily on his reportage for *The Indian Express* newspaper, and divided into four parts and 22 chapters. Almost every chapter is splattered

with several anecdotes of the plight of his own family and ancestors and other immigrants, the humiliation and trauma they went through, the frantic search for documents in the run up to the finalisation of the NRC and the exercise to prove their citizenship. As Saha says: "Assam citizenship imbroglio is a deeply personal story for me; it strikes at the core of my being."

The trials and tribulations faced by his family being from the then East Pakistan have left scars on the psyche of not only Saha but also many other migrants. One particularly traumatic incident Saha recalls is how his father, pursuing higher studies in Guwahati in 1979 when the movement against "foreigners" had begun in Assam, was "gheraoed by a group of Assamese seniors" as he was coming out of his class at the Guwahati Medical College and forced to write on a piece of paper "that he was a Bangladeshi and had obtained a permanent residence certificate" from the Barepta district administration by bribing officials."

He adds: "Baba remembers the incident as the worst day of his college life. Never had he ever been humiliated like that." The exercise of writing the book from the perspective of a Bengali migrant family could have easily run the risk of being seen as biased in dealing with this sensitive issue in Assam. But Saha has succeeded in taking a dispassionate view of the NRC crisis.

As the book tells its readers, Assam



"No Land's People", by Abhishek Saha.

is a cauldron of "large-scale migrations. Its tea plantations, oilfields and coalfields attracted migrant workers from eastern and central India." Tracing the trajectory of migrations into Assam over the years, the book reminds how "Hindu Bengalis, fluent in English, came to avail themselves of fresh opportunities that colonial rule opened up, leading to allegations of their hegemony over the Assamese; landless Muslim peasants from East

Bengal came to cultivate fertile land, encouraged by colonial policies and some Muslim leaders; Marwaris from Rajasthan arrived to trade, Nepalis came as soldiers and cattle-herders; and refugees from East Pakistan came in batches after Partition."

An important piece of statistics in the book quoting the 2011 language census in Assam is that the population of Assamese speakers stands at 48.38 percent, as against the 28.91 percent of Bengali speakers in the state.

Two messages coming out of the book are: (1) the ethnic and linguistic fault lines in Assam had existed much before the Partition of India; and (2) denial of the fact that "migration is an undeniable human reality." The book quotes a report written by CS Mullan, a colonial officer of the then Indian Civil Service, in 1931 which pointed to the threats posed by in-migration in Assam to the land and culture of "native Assamese people." The book's author says that Mullan's report remains a reference point even today in Assam. Saha argues that "much of the political foundation of contemporary Assam" was shaped by the illegal migrant issue and it was against this backdrop that the 1951 NRC in Assam was prepared.

Having extensively chronicled the problem of cross-border immigration in Assam and the failure to draw up a correct NRC, the author maintains in the epilogue to the book that "it can be argued that only a reliable list of citizens—separating out non-citizens

living illegally in the state—can put the historical anxieties of Assam to rest..." With this, Saha appears to tread into a grey and debatable area: who will certify a "reliable" NRC? That apart, the 2019 NRC was conducted by a bureaucracy susceptible to manipulation and corruption. What is the guarantee that a similar exercise by the same administration would produce the desired result? This is, however, not to say that there is no need for a documentation culture in India. The challenge is to make NRC as widely acceptable as possible.

"No Land's People" leaves the readers with a sense of scepticism. The debate over who belongs to Assam and who does not remains unresolved. Secondly, the linguistic, ethnic and religious divides in Assam always lurk behind the façade of "syncretic and inclusive" culture in the state. The author admits this in the "Introduction" (page xvii) to the book.

And he ends the book on that theme by pointing to a collaborative musical composition by two cultural legends, Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika, to propagate the message of Bengali-Assamese unity during the riots in Assam over Bengali language in 1960. However hard Saha would like to believe in the message of the Biswas-Hazarika composition, he himself dismisses "all wishful thinking (as) the realist in me begs to differ."

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent of *The Daily Star*. He writes from New Delhi, India.

QUOTABLE Quote

MACKLEMORE
(1983-)
American rapper

A life lived for art is never a life wasted.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Summer music?
- 6 Gives a hoot
- 11 Knight wear
- 12 German sub
- 13 Nary a soul
- 14 Be eco-friendly
- 15 First numero
- 16 Fourth-yr. students
- 18 "Aw, shucks!"
- 19 Particle
- 20 Casual top
- 21 1963 Paul Newman film
- 22 Reverbed
- 24 Livens (up)
- 25 Convent group
- 27 Diner buy
- 29 "The Joy Luck Club" author

DOWN

- 1 Vienna's river
- 2 Like O. Henry tales
- 3 Easy progress
- 4 Take in
- 5 Electra's brother
- 6 Use foul language
- 7 Homer's pop
- 8 Bit of guesswork
- 9 Slacken
- 10 Spirited horses
- 17 Bureaucratic nuisance
- 23 Motor need
- 24 Be a snoop
- 26 Drained
- 27 Some Louvre paintings
- 28 Clarke of "Game of Thrones"
- 30 Made amends
- 31 New parents, e.g.
- 33 Church areas
- 39 Wisdom bringer
- 41 Dir. opposite SSW

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

G	E	S	E	B	L	O	A	T		
A	G	A	I	N	L	E	D	G	E	
P	O	R	T	S	I	N	D	E	X	
T	E	N	A	N	T					
A	S	H	A	U	K	E	T	E		
M	O	W	E	R	S	B	A	I	T	
P	L	A	N	E	T	E	A	R	T	H
L	O	R	E	R	A	T	T	L	E	
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A	M	A	Z	E	O	N	R	Y	E	
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

YOU'RE ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT GETTING MARRIED

DON'T YOU WANT TO GET MARRIED?

ACTUALLY, I'D LIKE TO JUST SKIPTO BEING A RICH DIVORCEE

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

GO, HAMMIE, GO!

RUN, BUDDY!!

HUSTLE! HUSTLE!

YOU CAN MAKE IT!!

GOOD THING THE BATHROOM IS CLOSE.

WE SHOULD CUT BACK ON THE GATORADE.