

Disaster lies at humanity's doorstep

Urgent measures have to be taken to address global climate change

A new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report titled "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis" released on August 9, shows dire consequences for the planet unless we act now. According to it, the Earth's average surface temperature is estimated to hit 1.5 or 1.6 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels around 2030 in all five of the greenhouse gas emissions scenarios—ranging from highly optimistic to reckless. Just three years ago, the IPCC had predicted that such a scenario would arise nearly a decade later. But the new report projects that humans have less time to act than earlier thought.

One of the reasons for this changed projection is the degradation of natural carbon sinks such as forests, soil and oceans that had absorbed around 56 percent of all the carbon dioxide (CO₂) that humanity has chucked into the atmosphere since 1960. But these natural allies of ours are showing signs of becoming saturated, which means they might soak up less carbon from the atmosphere in the coming decades.

The estimates are particularly grim for Bangladesh, as the report predicts that the country is likely to face more frequent and intense heavy rainfalls, flooding, and cyclones due to global climate change in future. Moreover, the frequency of category 4 and category 5 cyclones may increase, which could badly affect coastal areas. Last year, Bangladesh suffered its longest and second-worst flood since 1998, and the IPCC report suggests that the likelihood of such a scenario persisting is quite high. The increased frequency and intensity of rainfall that the report forecasts could also pose a massive danger for agriculture and food security in the long run.

According to environmentalists, the frequency of flood and cyclones has already increased in Bangladesh in recent years. And unfortunately, according to the IPCC, most of these impacts are irreversible, and hence cannot be remediated even if greenhouse gas emissions decline dramatically. Along with that, it also said heatwaves and humid heat stress over South Asia in general will increase and be more severe during the 21st century. This illustrates how this issue extends beyond borders and ultimately concerns everyone.

Even though, collectively, humans may not be able to reverse some of the damage that has already been done, the majority of what is to come can still be prevented. But for that, as the report suggests, humanity must act sooner rather than later. Global leaders, as a result of the pressure that has been exerted upon them by people from all continents, have often made lofty promises to address climate change. However, all too often, we have seen them failing to act accordingly. This is where people must stay relentless. Only the general public's persistent pressure can make global leaders stick to their words and address this grave danger that is now at humanity's doorsteps. If our civilisation is to survive, we must not shy away from this great responsibility of protecting our planet and our species—we must face it head-on.

Justice must be served for Narayanganj fire victims

Probe body finds negligence of DIFE and factory owner

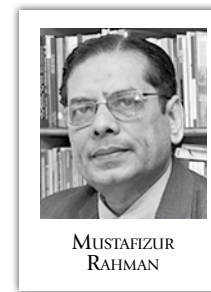
ONE of the probe bodies formed after the devastating Hashem Food and Beverage factory fire in Narayanganj last month has finally finished their job and submitted their findings, putting the blame on the government's factory inspection department as well as the factory owner for their negligence and lack of compliance with safety rules respectively. The result was, 57 innocent lives were lost, including that of several children. We were loath to call it an accident then, and wouldn't sanctify the killing by labelling it a mishap. The probe report has validated our opinion. In several editorials following the gruesome incident, we had averred that government agencies responsible for exercising oversight must share the blame for the fire and the deaths.

It is because of their acts of omission and commission that factories like the Hashem Food and Beverage in Narayanganj manage to cut corners in matters of safety and wellbeing of the workers. Eventually, the lacunae are exposed but at the cost of precious lives of the workers, as has happened in this instance, and in many other similar instances before.

We had particularly pointed our fingers at the line agency responsible for monitoring safety measures in workplaces, i.e. the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE). It is shocking and utterly unacceptable that the DIFE had visited the factory, according to our report, a month before the fire, but did not check its safety measures. What they did do was see whether the workers were following Covid-19 safety guidelines. If they had taken the trouble to spend a few minutes there, they would have discovered that nothing inside the factory was going right as far as the safety of workers was concerned. This cannot be explained away as happenstance. Every single rule was being violated, including the fact that the factory was operating illegally, without the clearance of the DoE and the UNO. How could such glaring truths escape their attention?

It is shameful that most of the violations are done in connivance with those that are entrusted to check these violations. We have been crying hoarse about manpower shortages in the DIFE. But even the few personnel the department has do not do their jobs properly. They turn a blind eye to the shortcomings, but not for nothing though. Meanwhile, tragedies keep happening. It is time for the authorities to stop giving lip service to workers' safety and do something substantive about it. Apart from beefing up the operation of DIFE with proper manpower, we believe the errant officials should face severe punishment for their failure to do their duty. The only thing that would be more reprehensible than their criminal negligence is if they, as well as the factory management, escape justice, and if proper checks are not instituted to ensure no such violations take place in the future.

Should Bangladesh be worried about Vietnam's apparel performance?



MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

Vietnam has outperformed Bangladesh and emerged as the second-most important exporter of apparel in the global market in 2020. Should Bangladesh be concerned by this? What signals does this transmit for the medium-term prospects of Bangladesh's export-oriented apparel sector?

The recently published WTO Trade Statistical Review 2021 revealed that Vietnam ranked second in terms of export earnings from apparel in 2020, pushing Bangladesh to the third position. Bangladesh's share in the global apparel market has come down to 6.3 percent in 2020 from 6.8 percent in 2019, whilst that of Vietnam has gone up from 6.2 percent to 6.4 percent over the corresponding period. However, this should not come as a surprise. Since 2010, Vietnam has been

in 2020 dipped by eight percent compared to 2019, with global apparel exports coming down by about nine percent. Both Bangladesh and Vietnam experienced falls in export earnings, by 15 percent and seven percent respectively. A large number of enterprises in Bangladesh had to suffer frequent stoppages in production during April to June, 2020. Orders were cancelled, leading to loss of potential export earnings, and significant discounts were asked for, resulting in lower export earnings. Some of the orders that required relatively short lead time were shifted to enterprises in Vietnam, since during this time, enterprises there were operating in full swing. It took some months for Bangladesh's RMG sector to revert back to pre-pandemic levels of production.

As Bangladesh started to recover from the worst impacts of the first wave of the pandemic, towards the end of 2020, the situation gradually got better and orders started to pick up. Over the past few months of 2021, enterprises in Bangladesh have been receiving more orders from major brands and buyers. The situation has indeed been reversed—because of the

that of about seven percent for Bangladesh. Thus, the recent performance of Vietnam did not emerge out of the blue; success was built over the years, by creating and expanding on a number of advantages. Almost three-fourths of Vietnam's apparel destined for the global market is produced by foreign companies, with close ties with foreign buyers, brands and markets. This has allowed the enterprises to be more tuned in to the shifting demand structure

What is also to be noted in this connection is that over the past years, Vietnam has been quite aggressively pursuing bilateral and regional trade agreements.



A woman works in a garment factory in Dhaka, on May 3, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

moving strategically to consolidate its position in the global apparel market. Key elements of this strategy included moving up the value chain, and product and market diversification, implemented through targeted policy interventions and actions—and the country has achieved impressive success in pursuing this over the past decade. Vietnam's emphasis on productivity and skills enhancement, and on intra- and extra-apparel diversification, has meant that it has been able to reduce its dependence on apparel while also significantly raising its earnings from apparel exports. The apparel sector in 2020 accounted for about one-fourth of the country's total export earnings of USD 281.4 billion, whereas in Bangladesh, apparel counted for more than four-fifths of total exports of USD 42 billion. Higher productivity and better prices have also allowed the country to pass some of the benefits from entrepreneurs to workers in the form of higher wages. Average wage in Vietnam's apparel sector is about 1.5 times more than that of Bangladesh.

The above should nonetheless be considered with a caveat—2020 was no normal year. The world merchandise trade

resurgence of Covid-19 in Vietnam and its adverse impacts on the economy, some of its orders are being shifted to Bangladesh. Consequently, it is highly plausible that Bangladesh will be able to supersede Vietnam in 2021 and regain its ranking as the second largest exporter of apparel in the global market, a position that it had held for more than a decade.

The question is, should Bangladesh be complacent in view of this likely outcome in 2021? In the context of the above mentioned fluctuating fortunes of the apparel sector, the issue that merits serious assessment is whether Bangladesh will be able to sustain the momentum of the past years over the medium-term future, and whether it will be able to consolidate its position as the second largest exporter of apparel by withstanding the increasing competitive pressure from Vietnam, as well as other challengers like India, Cambodia and Turkey, which are competing in some of the same market segments.

Vietnam's global export market share in 2010 was about 2.9 percent, when the same for Bangladesh was about 4.2 percent. Since then, Vietnam has been able to post an average growth of 11 percent as against

of the global apparel market. One example of this is the structural change in the supply capacity of non-cotton-based apparel. Vietnam's apparel exports are increasingly being dominated by manmade fibre-based items, export of which is experiencing a relatively faster rise in the global market. Vietnam is also gradually moving into fashion and design-based components of the market where prices are higher and domestic value addition is larger. Its emphasis on development of backward-linkage textile sector, complemented by connectivity with foreign direct investment (FDI) driven forward linkages, provides its apparel sector an added advantage. One issue that is not given due attention, but should merit consideration, concerns net domestic value addition from the export of apparel. Strong backward and forward linkages have meant that domestic value addition in Vietnam has been on the rise in recent years.

What is also to be noted in this connection is that over the past years, Vietnam has been quite aggressively pursuing bilateral and regional trade agreements. These will provide the country preferential market access in the EU thanks to the Vietnam-EU Free Trade Agreement, in the Canadian market by taking advantage of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and in the markets of Japan, Australia and China on account of being a member of the recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). All these will provide Vietnam with a significant competitive edge over Bangladesh, particularly in view of Bangladesh losing preferential market access as a result of its graduation from the LDC group in 2026 (the EU preferential access will continue till 2029).

However, Bangladesh has the potential capacity to compete with Vietnam from a position of strength if the required homework is carried out in full measure during the run-up to LDC graduation over the next five years. Over the past years, Bangladesh's apparel entrepreneurs and workers have demonstrated their capacity to learn and grow in the highly competitive

Latest IPCC climate report shows time is running out to save the planet



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
SALEEMUL HUQ

THE science of climate change is assessed every six or so years under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was set up several decades ago by the United

Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO)—and it consists of the governments of all UN member states.

The IPCC does this assessment by inviting leading scientists from around the world to study scientific literature and assess the latest developments in the science of climate change. It is important to note that the IPCC does not do new research itself, but rather assesses the existing body of scientific research and gives its assessment to the governments, who have the responsibility of approving the final Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) based on the underlying scientific report.

It is also important to explain that the IPCC is divided into three Working Groups of which the first (WG1) assesses the status of climate science, the second (WG2) assesses the status of impacts, vulnerability and adaptation, while the third (WG3) assesses the status of actions to tackle climate change by mitigation as well as adaptation.

The IPCC is currently reporting its sixth assessment report and, last Monday, the final report of WG1 was released with much fanfare. I had the privilege of being a lead author of the IPCC's third, fourth and fifth assessment reports and have been closely associated in contributing to the IPCC's WG2 for many years. As

such, I am sharing my take on the major outcomes of the recently released WG1 report of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6).

The first message is the clear and unequivocal statement that human-induced climate change, due to the emissions of greenhouse gases over nearly 200 years, has now definitely raised global mean temperature by over one degree Celsius and that this has already caused

change. These scientists are now able to make these attributions more quickly, as was demonstrated in the last couple of weeks with the heatwave in north-west US and Canada, as well as the wildfires in Greece and Turkey and floods in Germany and China.

In fact, it is probably correct to say that from now on, every record-breaking extreme weather event can be reasonably attributed to having been exacerbated by



Human-induced climate change has already caused many extreme weather events that are much more severe than they otherwise would have been. PHOTO: STAR

many extreme weather events such as heatwaves, wildfires, floods and cyclones that are much more severe than they otherwise would have been.

This is a significant breakthrough in the attribution science for severe weather events, which in the past took a lot of time after the event was over for the scientists to give their verdict on whether they were indeed made more severe because of human-induced climate

change. This is in effect ushering in a new era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change for the foreseeable future for all of humanity.

The second major finding of the AR6 is that the global temperature goal of staying below 1.5 degrees Celsius is slipping away rapidly, and unless drastic actions are taken immediately, we may cross that key threshold within a decade. This means

global apparel market. This is owed no less to the policy and financial support provided by successive governments. For many brands and buyers, when they say "China plus one", they consider Bangladesh as the "plus one" country for purposes of sourcing. However, in order to take advantage of this, a renewed effort must be made to improve Bangladesh's performance in several areas.

Bangladesh will need to build industrial parks and RMG clusters with common services and required infrastructure. Policies must be geared to encourage changes at the enterprise level, in such areas as technological upgradation and adoption of advanced technologies, improvements in managerial and management capacities, skills enhancement and raising of productivity. Since many services are embedded in merchandise trade, quality of services, including financial services and digital platform-based services, ought to also be significantly improved as part of raising overall competitiveness of the apparel sector. A time-bound structural shift to cater to the fast growing non-cotton segment of the market must be taken through appropriate changes in the incentive structure and with assistance from funds.

While one of the key strengths of Bangladesh's export-oriented apparel sector is that it has been overwhelmingly a domestic entrepreneurship-driven sector, going forward, Bangladesh should take necessary steps to attract more FDI. A number of initiatives are being taken now in this respect, including establishment of special economic zones. These need to be significantly fast-tracked. To note, FDI flow to Bangladesh was USD 3.6 billion and USD 1.6 billion in the pre-pandemic years of 2018 and 2019 respectively, compared to USD 16.1 billion and USD 15.5 billion for Vietnam. Keeping in mind the upcoming LDC graduation, with consequent loss of preferences for exports, including for apparel, Bangladesh should, as has been the case with Vietnam, aggressively pursue the goal of signing FTAs and Closer Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with important trading partners. There should be a focus on developing production networks and value chains with regional partners, and with important trading partners such as Canada, Japan and others bilaterally, and also possibly with RCEP, to ensure preferential market access. These will enable Bangladesh to opt for both product diversification and market diversification in RMG. However, this will call for careful preparation, domestic policy reforms, and formidable negotiating skills since, unlike the case for LDCs, such partnerships will entail significant measures of reciprocity and exchange of both offer and request lists.

Bangladesh does have the capacity to face the growing competitive pressure and emerging challenges in the global apparel market, from Vietnam and others, if the past performance of our export-oriented apparel sector is anything to go by. However, at the same time, one should also concede that the future is not going to be a mere progression of the past. It will be what we make of it.

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we must enhance the urgency of action in moving away from fossil fuels like coal, petroleum and natural gas as quickly as possible to renewable energy in every country. This means that the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which all countries have submitted or are still about to submit, needs to be truly ambitious to ensure that the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold is not crossed.

The third and perhaps most important message is the possibility of irreversible changes in the physics of the global atmosphere, such as the complete destruction of the Atlantic conveyor system or the release of methane from below permafrost regions like Siberia. These will be such game-changing shifts that the results are completely unpredictable.

The above messages are part of the SPM, while the 4,000-page underlying report has more details of what are the possible climate change related impacts in every region of the world, including in South Asia and Bangladesh. One of the innovations introduced in this sixth assessment report is that location specific impacts data are now available for scientists in each country, including Bangladesh, to delve into. The impacts for the Ganges Brahmaputra river delta show the likelihood of more intense precipitation in the monsoon season, leading to more severe floods, while there could be less precipitation during the dry season, leading to more severe droughts.

The bottom line from the IPCC AR6 is that time is running out and actions have to be stepped up urgently by everyone, especially the governments who will be meeting at COP26 in Glasgow in November this year. There is not a moment to lose.

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