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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Protect and rehabilitate victims of floods and river erosion

It's high time the authorities formulated a comprehensive river management strategy

LAST month, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released their landmark report on climate change that was termed a "code red for humanity" by the UN chief. The section of the report that focused on South Asia warned of increased risks of death, injury, ill health or disrupted livelihoods due to storm surges, coastal flooding, sea-level rise and inland flooding. "The risk of floods, and loss of life and property associated with floods, is highest in India and Bangladesh," it stated.

In less than a month since the report came out, we are seeing the real-time impacts of climate change as predicted. According to a report in *The Daily Star* on Thursday, around 30 percent of Bangladesh's land area is set to be inundated as the water levels of the Jamuna and Padma rivers are forecast to continue rising over the next three days. People from flood-affected districts have already been forced to leave their homes—many of them taking shelter, along with their furniture and livestock, on government roads and Water Development Board dykes—and there is an emerging crisis of food and drinking water. Reports from different districts paint a bleak picture of government assistance with delays in providing relief, inadequate relief or no relief at all.

According to a bulletin from the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, of the 109 water measuring points in different rivers, water is flowing above the danger level at 16 points, while water levels at another 50 points are increasing. Given that these changes in water level are being monitored and updated, there really are no excuses for the authorities for not having relief mobilisation and distribution measures in place. The provision of shelter, even for the short term, could also have been done, in the same way such efforts are organised during cyclone warnings.

However, there is a deeper issue that must be highlighted here. Despite the fact that global climate change is having serious negative impacts on Bangladesh, we cannot shy away from our own responsibilities in causing environmental destruction and failing to stop river erosion—both of which have contributed to the current state of affairs. On Thursday, this daily told the story of Jalalpur village in Siraiganj's Shahjadpur upazila, where 500 homesteads, a school and three mosques were lost to the Jamuna River in monsoon, and the remaining 100 to 120 houses are now at risk of being devoured as well. The day before, we reported on Chilmaripara village in Lalmonirhat's Hatibandha upazila, the entirety of which has been swallowed up by the Teesta.

There are countless other stories such as these. Data suggests that every year, some 55,000 people are made homeless by river erosion, and experts have long been stressing the importance of a national river management strategy to deal with associated risks. The government cannot drag their feet on this any longer. They must formulate long-term strategies and projects for river bank protection, and work with experts and NGOs to ensure that these projects are implemented where they are most needed—in the most efficient and transparent manner. Additionally, given the magnitude of these climate disasters in Bangladesh, the authorities should set up a permanent fund to rehabilitate the victims of river erosion and flooding, rather than putting together last-minute, haphazard relief programmes once these events have already occurred.

Stop elephant poachers at all costs

We must not allow the Asian elephant to become extinct!

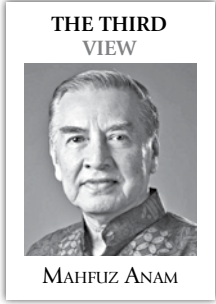
ACCORDING to a report published by this newspaper on Thursday, multiple smuggling syndicates are allegedly hunting the endangered Asian elephants in Chattogram region and the hill tracts. Law enforcers came up with this information recently after arresting five people in two separate incidents along with three elephant ivories in Chattogram. They also discovered that the tusks were being smuggled from Banskhali and the CHT after the smugglers poached the elephants in deep jungle.

In another report published on the same day, four individuals from Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazar electrocuted an Asian elephant and mutilated it in an attempt to cover up the killing. In recent years, according to the International Union of Conservations of Nature (IUCN), 12 elephants were killed after being shot by poachers, while in the last 20 years, at least 120 of these endangered elephants have been killed—mostly through electrocution and shooting.

Since 1986, the IUCN has labelled the Asian elephants as "endangered" as their population has declined by at least 50 percent over the last three elephant generations, which is about 60-75 years. In an attempt to circumvent the law and continue to kill elephants and sell their tusks, poachers have been using the pretext of human-elephant conflict. Reportedly, some of the smugglers apprehended by the police were on the verge of selling the elephant tusks for Tk 35,000. Law enforcers are now running investigations to unearth more information about the black market where poachers are selling elephant tusks after killing the animal.

Despite having laws in place to prevent the killing of these endangered animals and to punish poachers, it is disappointing that the authorities have been unable to stop a decline in the elephant population. The Asian elephant is the only living species of the genus *Elephas*, and we must do our utmost to protect them.

Unfortunately, the results show we have so far failed in that. That has to change. We cannot allow these animals to go extinct. The authorities must redouble their efforts to prevent poachers from taking advantage of human-elephant conflict to murder these animals. In that regard, the Forest Department and law enforcement agencies must work together. If needed, stricter measures should be put in place to prevent poaching and reduce human-elephant conflict. Finally, the authorities should do more to protect elephant habitats and also conduct more research on proper conservation of these endangered animals.



THE THIRD VIEW

WHAT happened recently in Barishal between a local mayor and an Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) is not the real story. Why it happened is. And in that story is hidden many facets of the crucial issue of the state of our governance. It happened because of a bitter political rivalry within the party and the unhealthy practice of dragging public servants into the fray to serve the agenda of politicians.

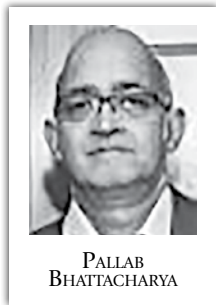
It was not a small incident. A total of 50 people got injured. Two ruling party leaders—one of them the local MP who is also a state minister, and the other the local mayor—are fighting for supremacy in the district. The local UNO, Munibur Rahman, got dragged into the melee and was targeted by the mayor, who comes from a very powerful political family and who, according to local reports, has now arrogated to himself the power to override all administrative prerogatives. The UNO's house was attacked by the staff of the city corporation, allegedly led by the mayor's men, which resulted in the UNO calling for police protection, which in turn led to firing by the law enforcement officers and finally ended up in police cases filed against the mayor.

The event became more revealing after the Bangladesh Administrative Service Association (BASA) reacted to it. In a press release dated August 19, it stated that "the incident shows how a government servant became victim in the hands of Mayor Semiatat Sadiq Abdullah and his city corporation goons", and termed them to be "rajnaitik durbritta" (political thugs/criminals). The press release further said that the mayor had put up many barriers in the work of the administration and was terrorising the whole district. BASA demanded the arrest of the mayor and hoped that the law would take its own course.

The mayor countered by lodging a set of his own cases against the UNO, accusing him of attempting to kill him.

Of course, the incident was not allowed to brew further. It was soon explained to have arisen out of "misunderstanding" and steps were taken to patch things up.

The event in Barishal is a microcosmic representation of the district-level rivalries that are going on in many parts of the country, among various aspirants of the ruling party for total control of their respective districts. The fight is usually, but not always, between the local member of parliament and the district leadership. This malaise is afflicting almost every district of the country today. When there is virtually no political opposition at the grassroots level, intraparty squabbles intensify resulting in splitting the local units and turning fellow party workers into mutual mortal enemies. This obviously make a mockery of party discipline—something that is almost non-existent even at the best of times—and opens up avenues for the rise of local hoodlums who are then used to disrupt the activities of their rivals in every possible manner, including



IN its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, India achieved two milestones in five days between August 27 and 31 while vaccinating its people. Both relate to a new high in the number of vaccine recipients—1.03 crore doses on August 27, and 1.28 crore on the last day of a month that saw nearly 18 crore doses being administered, up from 13.45 crore in July and 11.97 crore in June.

In all, more than 66.3 crore doses have been given so far and a little more than half of India's 94 crore adult population, who are vulnerable to due to the virus in terms of mortality, have either been fully vaccinated or gotten at least one dose. According to official statistics, almost all healthcare workers have received the first dose, and 83 percent got both the doses. Nearly 84 percent of frontline workers have been fully vaccinated.

The latest data on vaccination, coupled with low to moderate pace of new infection reports coming from most parts of India every day—which prompted WHO Chief Scientist Soumya Swaminathan to suggest that India may be entering "some stage of endemicity of the pandemic"—has brought some relief to the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after its handling of the devastating second wave in March-April faced severe criticism. Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya lost no time in

Who do our 'public servants' serve?

violence. Thus local politics becomes more and more about violence, and less and less about public concerns.

The propensity for violence—nothing new in our politics—leads to the rise of musclemen and the gradual decline in participation of politically conscious elements. In time, the party becomes filled with thuggish elements whose main purpose in joining politics is to extract benefits—and that's what they do, destroying the reputation of the party and eroding public support for it. Just as in economy "bad money drives out good money", Gresham's law also applies in politics, where hoodlums drive away genuine political elements from overall politics, allowing the vacuum so created to be filled up by the criminal elements. Thus criminalisation takes over local party politics to the detriment of politics in general, and ruling party politics in particular.

Leaders, on their part, to maintain their hold on these so-called "party workers", give in to their demands



TDS FILE PHOTO

and, as it happens all the time, they themselves become deeply involved in it and end up leading this process. This is the inevitable fate of parties who have been in power for a long time and who successfully, politically or otherwise, have destroyed all democratic opposition.

Then there is the vitiation of the process of law itself. Instead of the law taking its own course, it suddenly stops in its tracks. As a result of an understanding between the rival groups, legal process suddenly stops. Why? After all, guns have been fired, a house was attacked and 50 people in all were injured, some with bullet wounds. We are aware of civil cases where contesting parties may come to an "out-of-court" settlement. But for criminal acts?

Whatever may have been the merit of the BASA statement—facts on the ground prove that the allegations deserve to be looked into—the language used in the press statement shocked and surprised all, calling the mayor, an elected person, and his followers "durbritta" (criminal elements) and demanding the mayor's arrest. This is something very unusual in the administration's dealing with public representatives, where the elected representatives of the people are always supposed to be the "political

those who do not falter after a while. It is only the institutions that guarantee sustainability; everything else may ensure success for a while, but in the long term they all falter.

Of all the institutions that form the integral part of the governance process of a country, civil administration is among the most important. In Bangladesh, it is made up of a huge and complex structure consisting of, according to latest official figures, 15,04,913 officers and staff. For officers, who are divided into 26 cadres, we spend Tk 11,000 crore to pay salaries, and another Tk 26,000 crore for the staff per year. A staggering Tk 33,000 crore is spent for various perks for the above officers and staff each year. What we have here is a total of Tk 57,000 crore, making for 19 percent of our revenue budget that we, the tax payers, dish out annually. In 2015, the pay scale for the civil administration was doubled. A special interest-free car loan facility of Tk 30 lakh was allowed for officers of the rank of deputy secretary and above (administration cadre) with a monthly car maintenance allowance of Tk 50,000.

For all that, we, the public, are supposed to get a clean and honest bureaucracy. Pay and allowances are not the issue here. Efficiency, transparency

and accountability are. In fact, we would want everybody who works for the government to be justly paid for the services that they render. But who will ask what is the quality of service they render and how satisfied the public (whose tax money is the basis of all salaries and perks) are? The general public, the sources of all power in our "People's Republic", are never asked as to what their evaluation is of the services they get from our public servants. In fact, the term "public servant" itself seems more like a mockery as the public is made to feel like the "servant" instead of the other way around.

Has there ever been any study, research or investigation about how efficiently our administration is working? How long does it take for a file to pass through all the stages of government requirement? Has that timing improved? If not, then why? With the rising cost of bureaucracy, shouldn't efficiency become a must?

Then comes the question of transparency and accountability. Do we really know why certain cases are solved smoothly, while other cases are not? After all, if the ultimate purpose of public administration is to serve the people, then our bureaucracy should be subjected to all the modern accountability process that bureaucracies in other democracies are subjected to. Do we really search to find out why so many projects are delayed repeatedly, with huge increments in costs? Whose money is being so recklessly spent? Our planning minister recently lamented how his efforts to monitor projects are repeatedly thwarted.

According to a letter sent by the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to the cabinet secretary, a "huge" number of civil servants own and run businesses on the side violating their service rules. These government servants have either become contractors in their own names or in the name of their dependents, said the letter, sent on March 29. "The commission thinks such practices should be stopped immediately," the letter said. Section 17 (1) of the Government Servants (Conduct) Rules, 1979 forbids a public servant from engaging in any trade or employment. Section 17 (3) says not to permit any members of a public servant's family to engage in any trade over which said government servant has jurisdiction. Till date, we are not aware of any action being taken on this score. Normally such a letter should have created a storm. In this instance, if there was a storm, it was confined to a tea cup.

As stated earlier, graduating from the LDC status also means that we have to establish a more efficient administrative system that is commensurate with the modernisation process that we have embarked on. Tax payers will keep on footing a higher and higher pay bill for our bureaucrats, but their service, attitude and efficiency level will remain the same—this cannot be the ideal way forward for a country aspiring to be the "model" for development.

The Barishal incident and the letter of ACC chairman to the cabinet secretary make the question "Who do our public servants serve?" so much more urgent and relevant.

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Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.

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The country's apex medical research body, the Indian Council of Medical Research, said vaccines are "disease-modifying" and not always "disease-preventing", especially when it comes to breakthrough infections, which means a fully-vaccinated person can get the disease again unless Covid-appropriate behaviour is adhered to. Secondly, there are reports that immunity generated by natural antibodies (following infection) or by vaccines are prone to waning, and that is why many countries are thinking about administering booster shots.

The increasingly ramped-up vaccine production and supply in India also raise the possibility of resuming vaccine export. Being the biggest manufacturing hub, India needs to step into this area, especially for its South Asian neighbours. India had supplied 6.6 crore doses from 2020 to early 2021 before the second wave of the infection and shortage in production led to a halt amid severe criticism of the Modi government. The government is in a once-bitten-twice-shy situation now.

Despite its belief that no one is safe until everyone is safe, India may not be able to export vaccines again without first ensuring adequate domestic availability. True, India has an important role in promoting global vaccine cooperation, and the WHO's COVAX window is looking up to the supply of vaccines made in India. But India needs to have a balance between its international obligation and commitment to its own people.

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

Tackling Covid-19: Are good days waiting for India?

hailing the highest single-day feat of vaccine dose administration on both the occasions.

But numbers are just one, even though important, part of the much larger story in the drive against Covid and, drawing a lesson after the first wave, gloating over them is best avoided because the virus and its unknown number of mutations are highly unpredictable as evidenced by rising breakthrough infections affecting fully-vaccinated people in many parts of

is no clarity as yet about its possible virulence.

The main reason behind the sharp increase in the speed of vaccination—which had begun on January 16—in July and August is the drastic improvement in supplies of Covishield, the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid vaccine which is manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest vaccine manufacturer, and Covaxin, India's home-grown vaccine produced by Bharat Biotech. According to officials, vaccine availability is set to go up to around 22 crore doses in September and nearly 35 crore in October, while 35 crore doses are expected to be in supply in the final two months of the year, when the government aims to inoculate the majority of the adults. Bharat Biotech plans to ramp up its production at its new plant in the state of Gujarat. Equipped with a capacity of more than one crore doses per month, enhanced supplies from Bharat Biotech's Ankleshwar facility will be available from September.

India has to aggressively push ahead with enhanced vaccine supplies, because schools are gradually set to reopen in different parts of the country—a move that calls for vaccination of children and teachers on an urgent basis. The increase in vaccine availability and the results of nationwide serosurvey covering 70 out of India's 718 districts that indicated the presence of Covid-19 antibody in about 70 percent of the country's population is, no doubt, a good news for the government.

But there are reasons not to get carried away and instead be on the side of abundant caution, particularly after

The increasingly ramped-up vaccine production and supply in India also raise the possibility of resuming vaccine export. Being the biggest manufacturing hub, India needs to step into this area.

the world. There is simply no scope for being lulled into complacency, as had happened in the run-up to the second wave of the pandemic. For example, take the recent report about Indian and South African virologists detecting a new variant named C.1.2, which was first detected in South Africa. This new strain is likely to be much more transmissible, but there