

## Are safe roads and the right to live too much to ask for?

We want justice for Nayeem and all other victims of road accidents

THE killing of a Notre Dame College student by a garbage compactor vehicle of the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) on November 24 has once again brought to light the sorry state of road safety in our country. Nayeem Hasan, a second-year student of Notre Dame College, was going to college in the morning when the DSCC vehicle hit him. As he fell on the street after being hit, the driver ran him over, injuring him severely. Nayeem later succumbed to his injuries. Reportedly, the compactor vehicle that killed Nayeem was not being driven by any of the appointed drivers of the DSCC, but by a cleaning staff. On November 25, another road accident killed three college students and injured two others as a CNG-run auto-rickshaw was hit by a BRTC bus in Chandpur's Kachua upazila. In both cases, the drivers fled the scene immediately after the accidents. At the time of writing this editorial, another accident in the city's Panthapath area was reported, where another waste compactor vehicle of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNC) ran over Ahsan Kabir Khan, an employee of the *Daily Sangbad*.

As students across Dhaka have been protesting with their six-point demand—including justice for Nayeem and compensation for his family—they pointed to the fact that the demands of the 2018 road safety movement have not been met by the authorities till date. People continue to lose their lives on the roads on a daily basis, while the issue of road safety is never taken seriously by the authorities concerned. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, 3,222 people lost their lives in road accidents in the first six months of this year.

After the student movement for safer roads in 2018, the government formulated the Road Transport Act, 2018, which has not been fully enforced yet. The government had relaxed several sections of the act at the demand of the transport owners and workers, which goes against the interests of commuters. The result of the authorities' indifference towards implementing the law is the ever-increasing chaos in our road transport sector, resulting in more deaths and injuries on our roads.

To prevent our road safety from deteriorating even further, the government must implement the Road Transport Act, 2018 without further delay. It should hold discussions with transport experts and all concerned stakeholders to make the law effective.

In the case of Nayeem's death, we want to ask the DSCC authorities: Why was the heavy vehicle being driven by a cleaner, instead of an appointed driver? The fact that there are only 86 drivers for the 317 heavy vehicles that the DSCC owns answers the question to some extent. However, we hope that the committees formed to investigate the incident will find the real problems that lie at the root of this crisis. The authorities must do everything necessary to make our roads safer. The time for excuses is over!

## Modernise state-run fertiliser factories

Instead of giving them huge subsidies, why not invest in better machinery?

OUR state-run fertiliser factories are consuming a huge amount of natural gas to produce urea fertiliser at a much lower efficiency than their modern peers, according to a report published by this newspaper on November 25. They are a perfect example of how terribly inefficient many of our state-run factories have become, and how the authorities have appallingly turned a blind eye to them, despite these factories wasting away many of our precious resources.

The amount of gas these four factories are wasting in just nine days is enough to produce a day's electricity for the entire country, according to an estimate by the government's Power System Master Plan. In 2019, these four factories churned out 796,000 tonnes of granular urea using double the amount of gas—a key ingredient for manufacturing urea—that should be required for the task. On average, the four factories consume 43.72 million cubic feet (mcf) of gas to produce one tonne of urea, whereas the global standard is 25mcf, according to documents of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC).

The low efficiency of these factories has been attributed to old machinery with no overhaul in years, interruption in gas supply, and a lack of skilled workforce by government officials. According to experts, this has been an open secret for many years. Then why have the authorities not done anything about it? The wastage has already stressed the country's fast depleting natural gas reserve and incurred huge economic losses—as these factories have had to run on enormous government subsidies, the amount of which has also been increasing year after year. The authorities could have easily invested in better, more modern machinery for these factories and still saved taxpayers' money—as well as the country's precious gas—instead of endlessly providing them with such massive subsidies.

The fact that the authorities have failed to address these issues for decades shows an uncalled for apathy on their part, which is completely unacceptable. The concerned authorities must be made to answer for failing to modernise these factories, as well as for wasting so much of the country's limited gas reserves and public money. We call on the government to immediately take necessary steps to modernise these factories, to make sure that such wastefulness is stopped and to ensure that this message is sent loud and clear to all state-run factories and the people in charge of their operations.

## EDITORIAL

# The maladies that poisoned the UP elections

*There are several reasons behind the violence and the absence of contest*



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE elections of 1,198 union parishads (UPs) were held in two phases. We have noticed five notable features in these elections. First, the main opposition party BNP boycotted these elections, which were held using the party symbol. However, some BNP activists contested these elections as independent candidates. Second, there were no contests or nominal contests in many UPs. So far, 253 chairman candidates have been "elected" unopposed. In many cases, rival candidates were forced to withdraw their candidatures.

Uncontested elections cannot be called

of the chairman candidates with the boat symbol were defeated in the first phase, in the second phase this rate increased to 42 percent. In the second phase, the boat symbol was not even competitive in 131 UPs. This is because the nomination trade has reached an alarming level. We have observed in the past that in local elections, held with party symbols, the number of candidates and their quality drastically declined, and the voters, given the opportunity, rejected these undesirable candidates. Rising commodity prices, diesel price hikes and many recent unpopular decisions made by the government have also contributed to these results.

Another important feature of these elections is violence and the consequent loss of lives. Although only seven people were killed in the first phase, at least 39 were killed in the second phase. It should be noted that almost all victims of these conflicts were the members of the ruling

obvious to anyone that the widespread violence within the ruling party during the UP elections, nomination trade and uncontested elections are the fruits of the poisonous tree we have planted in our politics. Politics is a noble profession, the goal of which is public service. But the purpose of politics in our country has become the well-being of individuals, coteries and the parties in power. In fact, we have turned politics into a profitable business. People in our country now join politics aiming for personal gains, instead of public service. Receiving a party portfolio or winning an elected position increases the winner's profile and ensures the flow of goodies. In fact, it is through these portfolios and positions that they become connected to a patronage chain and receive continued illegal benefits and get rich. Because of their positions, they can also get away by committing crimes. This is possible because the

disappear through nomination trade, threats and other influences. Therefore, the prevalent culture of self-interest in our politics—rather than politics driven by public interest—is really the disease behind the continued violence. In addition, winning unopposed makes the pay-offs from investments made through nomination trade certain.

In modern states, a system of checks and balances is instituted through the creation of certain institutions to prevent the abuse of power and benefiting from it. To this end, several constitutional, statutory and non-state institutions, such as political parties and civil society, are created to provide safeguards. Such a system to prevent the abuse of power by politicians and illegally benefiting from it reflect the accumulated wisdom of scholars over centuries, that unlike in monarchy, a democratic system needs an adversarial system. In states where this adversarial system becomes ineffective—that is, people enter politics for personal benefits instead of public service—the democratic system becomes non-functional. In an undemocratic system, people capture power to benefit themselves and create a nexus of cronies, and compromise institutions to hold on to power. With such an arrangement in place, the incumbents are unlikely to ever voluntarily relinquish power.

Conducting local government elections under the party symbol—which spreads factionalism and divisiveness at the grassroots—is another problem fuelling the ongoing violence and uncontested elections. Due to flagrant partisan biases of the bureaucracy, law enforcement agencies and other institutions, the winning—sometimes without contest—of the ruling party nominated candidates is almost guaranteed. As a result, the candidates belonging to the ruling party use every means possible, even violence, to oust each other to get the party's nomination. Therefore, if the local government elections continue with the party symbol, violence and uncontested wins are likely to continue.

Another disease behind the growing violence and uncontested elections is the inaction of the Election Commission. The present EC has not only sent our electoral system into exile, but the election commissioners themselves also appear to have gone into exile. This is evidenced by the fact that the commission does not give exemplary punishment to those who engage in violence and intimidation, nor does it debar the candidates supported by the offenders, which it has the power to do. Even when the situation turns unmanageable, the commission does not postpone elections or cancel the election results in the event of tainted polling. It goes without saying that criminals are encouraged if they enjoy impunity. Therefore, the Election Commission, a constitutionally independent body with enormous power, cannot avoid the responsibility for all the anomalies and violence in the ongoing UP elections.

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**Violence during and in the aftermath of the union parishad (UP) elections has revealed a gaping flaw in our electoral system.**

PHOTO: STAR

elections. Election means choosing from alternatives. In the absence of alternatives, elections degenerate into a meaningless game where voters are deprived of their voting rights.

Third, there are allegations of massive "nomination trade"—buying nominations with money or influence—in these elections. Consequently, the most competent candidates were deprived of nominations in many cases, making these local government bodies at the doorstep of the people extremely corrupt.

Fourth, independent/rebel candidates of the Awami League have been winning at a high rate in these elections. Based on available information, although 28 percent

party. Why such violence despite the absence of the BNP in the elections?

In our view, the interlinked problems of election of many candidates unopposed and the growing violence in these elections are merely the symptoms of the disease, not the disease itself, which needs to be identified and treated for good. As paracetamol can cause temporary remission of fever of a malaria patient, law enforcement agencies and other authorities, too, can provide temporary solutions to the problems—especially during violent elections—but for the patient to truly get better, the disease must be treated with appropriate medications.

On closer examination, it will be

difference between the ruling party and the government has disappeared in our country, and almost all corrupt activities take place under the protection of the ruling party. The higher the position, the greater the amount of patronage. In fact, being a member of parliament (MP) is like having a golden deer at your disposal.

It is no wonder then that the activists of the ruling party are in an all-out competition to get these positions. Since the benefits are finite, each aspirant ruling party candidate leaves no stone unturned to make others leave the electoral arena. The relatively powerful candidates do not even hesitate to resort to violence, if they are unable to make their opponents

KRISTINA SKIERKA and RICHENDA VAN LEEUWEN

WHEN applied to droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, floods, or other extreme weather events, the term "unprecedented" is getting old. In August, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest report about the dire realities we face, a drought exacerbated by global warming already had been raging for years across much of southern Africa.

It seems as though world leaders are finally ready to take meaningful action, but there's a critical group regularly missing from key climate meetings like the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow: local, climate-focused small businesses that already are making a difference in their communities. Small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) working on climate adaptation and mitigation are a crucial but underestimated partner in the fight to reduce emissions.

Even though climate financing options are increasing, SMEs' role in sustainable development continues to be overlooked. Their predicament is one shared by more than 200 million SMEs of all types in developing countries that cannot get the funds they need to grow, facing an estimated USD 5.2 trillion annual financing gap. International investors focus on getting dollars out the door through larger deals, while local capital is kept on the sidelines by high collateral requirements and unmanageable interest rates for early-stage businesses.

SMEs represent 90 percent of businesses and provide more than 50 percent of jobs worldwide according to the World Bank, so they have a key role to play in creating opportunities in economies struggling to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples like SELCO India,



**Small and medium enterprises, like this solar plant in East Africa, can do a lot for climate change adaptation and mitigation, but are often ignored in the planning of climate action and strategies.**

FILE PHOTO: AFP

a pioneering off-grid solar company, and Husk Power, an innovative pay-as-you-go renewable energy provider operating in Asia and Africa, show that with the right amount and type of financing and technical support, small businesses can improve lives through energy access—a key international goal. Off-grid renewables also help power sustainable mobility in both rural and urban settings.

Small businesses also have an important role to play in greening agriculture. Land use for crop and livestock production accounts for 24 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and farms are vulnerable to droughts, floods, and rising temperatures. Financing climate-smart agricultural entrepreneurs is essential for making our food systems more resilient. Here, too, off-grid renewable energy has become

indispensable, providing power for irrigation, processing grains, and operating the cold rooms and coolers needed to store dairy products, fresh seafood, and fruits and vegetables. In India, Technoserve is helping small farms withstand and adapt to the climate crisis and raise their productivity without increasing emissions.

As these examples show, when small businesses have the financing and support they need, they can drive economic growth while mitigating emissions and supporting adaptation to climate change. That is because small businesses are more agile and adaptable—and respond to local needs much faster and more effectively—than large organisations. They also offer governments and policymakers an opportunity to try out new ideas, revealing both pitfalls and best practices before initiatives are scaled regionally or

nationally.

Achieving the global goal of net zero emissions requires policymakers, investors, banks, and others to attend to SMEs' needs much more effectively than they have in the past. For starters, the world needs far more finance vehicles and instruments that are tailored to small businesses working in the green economy. That means a mix of lower-cost, long-term capital and blended finance, as well as easier access.

The world also needs more business accelerators focused on adaptation to climate change. There are only 25 such green accelerators located in non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Funding research and establishing professional networks will drive support to businesses that have strong growth potential.

Better metrics to assess success will be needed. That does not mean lowering environmental, social, and governance standards. Instead, it means devising indicators specifically for green enterprises in the SME sector to help them demonstrate their effectiveness and attract more investment.

Finally, investors must not overlook women, who produce up to 80 percent of food in the Global South. Women are also the most vulnerable group to the effects of climate change. Investing in female climate entrepreneurs benefits the climate, food production, and overall prosperity.

Small businesses are integral to climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience. Providing them the financing and support necessary to help them succeed is in everyone's interest.

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