

Blatant threats to voters unacceptable

Awami League leader Milon must answer for his intimidation tactics

DEFYING all the rules and regulations, and the code of conduct defined by the Election Commission of the country, the president of Awami League's Haripur union unit in Kushtia Sadar upazila, Milon Mandal, has set an example of utmost intolerance to the participation of other political parties in the upcoming Haripur union parishad elections. He has threatened the local voters with dire consequences if they do not cast their votes for boat (Awami League's symbol), saying a list was being prepared so no one would be spared after the polls if they did not comply with his wish.

He categorically declared in a public meeting that people would have to cast their votes only in favour of the party-nominated candidate, and that any disrespect to the party would not be tolerated. Issuing threats that he would not allow the people voting for other candidates to enjoy the benefits of development in this union, he went so far as to say, "Don't go against the boat, no one can save you. No one can stand by when you will be in danger."

Democracy is one of the pillars of our constitution, and its very essence is acknowledging the people's right to vote for the candidate of their choice. It is alarming that we have reached such a state that an influential local leader of the ruling party feels confident enough to make a mockery of our constitutional right in a public meeting, using such direct language, without any fear of consequences.

When the Awami League talks about upholding democracy through making elections free and fair, such incidents from a local leader cast shadows of doubt on its intentions to truly institutionalise democracy. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that leaders like Milon be restrained before further damage is done to body politic. More importantly, action must be taken against him for his blatant disregard for the constitution and electoral codes of conduct.

BB's new plan for Covid-hit people encouraging

Its success will depend on proper disbursement of funds

W e welcome the Bangladesh Bank's decision to roll out a Tk 500 crore stimulus package to support people who migrated to the villages from the cities due to the economic hardship they faced because of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a report by the central bank, a large number of urban people who went back to their village homes after losing their jobs and sources of income in the past two years still remain unemployed. Therefore, it plans to provide funds to the returnees at six percent interest, so they can engage in income-generating activities. The Bangladesh Bank will provide the funds in eight categories, which include small businesses, farming, fisheries and livestock, purchase of small vehicles in the transport sector, etc. What is notable about this scheme is that the borrowers will not only get loans at lower interest rates, but they will also be able to get the funds without providing any collateral.

Several reports and studies published during the two years of the pandemic have revealed how people were pushed into poverty because of the several lockdowns enforced to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. A survey carried out by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem) on 5,577 households found that 42 percent of the families were pushed into poverty by the pandemic. Another study has found that, due to the rising expenditures and depleting savings, 27.3 percent of the urban population—particularly from Dhaka—temporarily migrated to their villages. Although a portion of these people later returned to the city, around 10 percent of them stayed back. Unfortunately, many of them still remain unemployed due to a lack of job opportunities in the villages.

Although the government provided a number of stimulus packages to address the economic impact at the beginning of the pandemic, evidently those were not enough to address the hardship of those pushed into extreme poverty. Against this backdrop, the central bank's decision to provide them with loans at low interest rates to engage them in income-generating activities is very encouraging. However, the success of this scheme will depend on how efficiently the funds can be disbursed to those who need it the most. The lenders should be careful and transparent in selecting the recipients, and women should be particularly encouraged to apply for it. Moreover, the process to get the loans must be made easier for the people. Lastly, it must be ensured that the recipients get enough time to repay the loans.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Speak up for the housewives

In this era of women empowerment, when there are so much efforts to establish women's rights and gender equality, they are still being tortured physically and mentally by their husbands and in-laws. Despite spending precious years of their lives take care of their families, many housewives suffer domestic violence. Their stories remain unheard; they hardly have anyone to stand up for their rights. Let's speak up for them.

Dr Tahia Noushin, Green Life Medical College

A convenience that is killing us

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUIZ ANAM

U SING plastic is very convenient. But now it is posing a threat to our healthy living. A few days back, I was cleaning my study and decided to discard some old plastic music and film discs, and asked my house help to throw them away. He said without a moment's hesitation, "Don't worry, I will throw them into the lake." Totally shocked by his suggestion, I reprimanded him for the idea, but at the same time, I realised several things.

How deeply are we aware of nature's plentiful gifts that sustain our life, and how much are we polluting them? Are we at all aware how fertile our land is—how, almost effortlessly, its dense vegetation replenishes our existence, and how neglectful we are of it? Do we ever stop to think about what our rivers mean to us?

Millions of years of deposits of

growth and prosperity.

The rising figures for plastic waste over the last 15 years is quite alarming, but the real threat comes from the effects of that pollution on a country like ours.

Bangladesh's basic features are its population and its intimate relationship with nature—especially its rivers. According to the latest United Nations figures (as stated by Worldometers), around 165 million people—which is expected to rise to 172 million by 2025—live within 130,000sq-km (the area seems to have decreased from 144,000sq-km) as of 2020, which makes for a density of population of 1,265 per sq-km, one of the densest per capita human habitation in the world.

What does such a huge population living in a very small land area actually mean? Simply put, it means that those who live in it must take extremely good care of the soil, water and air—the environment in general—so that it can continue to nourish us as best as it can.

What the World Bank study reveals—and what we need to worry about seriously—is how plastic, which is thrown

and Dhaleshwari—whose shorelines are being encroached upon and waters being poisoned.

The World Bank report elaborates the nature of the plastic waste problem. The national per capita consumption of plastic rose from three kg to nine kg in 15 years—from 2005 to 2020. However, the per capita use in Dhaka in 2020 is 24kg. The daily plastic waste in Dhaka is 646 tonnes, of which 310.7 tonnes go to landfills, 77.5 tonnes into canals and rivers, 17.3 tonnes into the drains, and 240.5 tonnes are recycled.

According to this report, 77.5 tonnes of plastic are being poured daily into our canals and rivers, which makes for 2,325 tonnes a month and 27,900 tonnes over a year. Take the case of drains into which 17.3 tonnes are being dumped daily. No wonder most of the drains in Dhaka are clogged, and the slightest rain leads to waterlogging in many areas of the city. Dumping plastic waste into drains is the surest way of making them non-functional. We are pumping 646 tonnes daily into landfills, which may lie behind the rising cases of titling of high rise buildings in

end, and no incentive to the public to change their habits led to the failure of these early initiatives. The government's Eighth Five-Year plan (2020-2025), however, takes a comprehensive view of the problem and has suggested some holistic approaches towards its solution. This daily has been pursuing stories on

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Mismanagement of plastic waste and a lack of enforcement of the laws to regulate plastic use have led to the grim situation Bangladesh is in now.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

sediments brought down from the Himalayas is what Bangladesh is. Our land, people and culture are a gift of our rivers. We are so proud of our folk music, but can we imagine our Bhatiali and other folk songs without the rivers? The young votaries of much of Tagore's and Nazrul's songs will miss out on their intrinsic beauty as we have destroyed most of the nature's gift that they wrote about.

If today's Bangladesh is a story of great economic strides, generating justifiable self-confidence, it is also a story of destroying nature's precious gifts that should worry us deeply, and raise serious concerns as to the future viability of our ecosystem.

Though saving the environment is the most crucial challenge for Bangladesh, how many of us really know about it, care about it, and are willing to change our behaviour for it?

On December 20, 2021, the World Bank released a report on the situation of plastic pollution in Bangladesh. We had a vague idea about the threat that plastic waste posed, but what the report reveals amounts to a fundamental threat to our future

away indiscriminately after use, degrades over time into microplastics (less than five mm in length) and are released into the environment, posing significant threat to humans and ecosystems. This non-biodegradable material is entering our food chain and literally throttling nature's process of regeneration. Because they never dissolve, these plastic wastes destroy the natural qualities of the soil, with the effect that with time, the latter loses its regenerative capacity. Just consider the impact of such an eventuality on our food security.

Then comes the question of using the rivers as the dumping grounds for many pollutants—chemicals, solid waste, sewage, industrial waste, and now plastic. I remember reading a report sometime ago, that when an attempt was made to dredge the Kamaphuli River, the machine was rendered inoperable due to a thick layer of plastic waste, which over time formed the top layer of the riverbed. Can we imagine the condition of the river when its bed turns into a layer of plastic? This is now happening to three rivers that surround Dhaka city—Balu, Turag

Dhaka and other cities, not to mention affecting the quality of soil. Plastic-ridden landfills pose a threat to our rapid urbanisation.

An interesting figure to take note of is, while our annual national per capita consumption stands at nine kg, it is 100kg in Europe. Yet, we are among the worst affected countries simply because of the mismanagement of the waste. Here is an area that needs urgent and concerted attention.

Thin single-use plastic bags account for most of the waste. We can start addressing the issue of plastic pollution with this one item. Ironically, Bangladesh is the first country in the world to ban use of plastic shopping bags, done back in 2002. But this pioneering move amounted to nothing, even though a High Court order was issued in support of this. That innovative policy fell by the wayside under the influence of plastic bag producers and the proclivity of our consumers to prefer such bags over the bulkier jute bags and easily tearable paper bags. A UNEP study from 2018 revealed that selective banning, frequent change of policies, no control at the manufacturing

The political rumblings in India over 1971



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

As a teenage school student in 1971 living in Delhi, I had a limited idea about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But on March 7 of that year, when my father, then a teacher in Delhi

University, was listening to Bangabandhu's speech on his old Murphy radio set, I, standing next to him in the room, was electrified by Bangabandhu's voice and his words inspiring an entire nation to join the Liberation War. It was a voice like no other politician I have ever heard.

Looking back, I feel that his words never gave the impression of being carefully chosen, but were part of layman's language that came out from the depth of his heart and conviction about the future of his country. As I grew up, that voice and those words have remained with me, and to be precise, continued to haunt me. They do it even after half a century.

I had a glimpse of the spill-over effects of the Liberation War in Bangladesh when I went to Kolkata during the annual summer holidays in 1971, when I saw clubs, political parties, government agencies and NGOs undertaking relief work for the Bangladeshi refugees in the border areas. It was the picture of a highly united India using their meagre resources to help out hapless inhabitants of another country, which left a lasting impression on me. In other words, it was a whole-of-India approach.

So, on December 16, 2021, it was rather disappointing to see rough edges

evident on that united India as politics was being played out on the issue. I wondered how far we had travelled from the heady days of 1971. Not that political differences were not there back then, but the political fault lines in today's India are unprecedented.

In the run-up to and during the party's build-up to the celebration of Vijay Divas, Congress leaders, including Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and AK Antony,

the 50th year of Bangladesh's liberation ... during the course of the last one year ... the present government... I have not heard a sentence of praise, appreciation (for) the role played by Indira Gandhi. I feel sorry about that."

In 2020, Sonia set up a committee, chaired by Antony, to plan and coordinate the party's activities to commemorate the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Many view the Congress' marking this year's Vijay Divas as part of its strategy to

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complained that Indira Gandhi was never singled out for her stellar role in 1971 during the Indian government's official programmes marking the day. Sonia said Indira Gandhi would have wanted the party to celebrate Vijay Divas "not in a boastful spirit or in a spirit of self-glorification, but in a spirit of reflection and resolve." Her dig at the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi was not to be missed.

At the event, Antony said the then opposition leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee had hailed Indira Gandhi after the 1971 war victory as "Durga," and many other opposition leaders hailed her as "Shakti." "But," he quickly added, "as India marked

chip away at the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) plank of nationalism by reminding the country that it was Indira Gandhi who played a key role in the break-up of Pakistan. The combined voice of Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka against no mention of Indira's role at official programmes are seen by political analysts as having been made keeping in mind the coming assembly elections in five states—particularly in Uttar Pradesh, which is so crucial for the BJP. This year being the golden jubilee year of the 1971 war, the events relating to it acquired more visibility than those held on the previous anniversaries. Interestingly, Rahul made the remarks at a public rally in Dehradun

river pollution and encroachment for over 25 years. The slow progress in protecting the rivers, the authorities looking the other way when big and powerful business conglomerates occupy rivers to build factories, and the bureaucratic web that stifles actions to protect the environment, do not portray an encouraging picture of the government's seriousness in containing environment pollution in general, and tackling the plastic menace in particular.

This story should suffice: After decades of polluting the Buriganga through the tanneries at Hazaribagh, the government decided to shift them to Savar, after building a tannery estate there. This estate was to have all modern facilities, including a central effluent treatment plant (ETP) to treat all of the toxic wastes of all the industries located there. The estate idea started in 2004. Nothing happened till 2009, and it was finally completed in 2016. In the meantime, the Buriganga continued to be polluted with toxic waste. The tender for the ETP was floated in 2012, signed in 2016, and the work was completed by a Chinese company and handed over to Bangladesh in June 2020. On a trial run during the handover, it was discovered that the ETP facility did not remove all the toxic elements, like chromium, arsenic, other heavy metals and the saline content in the water. In other words, the ETP plant was NOT going to stop river pollution—the very purpose behind setting it up. (So, why did we take over the project? Meanwhile, by 2016-17, all the factories were relocated to the Savar estate by a government order, and have been polluting the Dhaleshwari River ever since.

Here, we have a case of being back to zero after nearly two decades of time wasted, spending nearly Tk 1,000 crore on the ETP, and untold crores on environmental degradation and financial burden on the factories because of the relocation.

So after killing the Buriganga with toxic pollutants, we are proceeding full speed in destroying the biodiversity and marine life of this new river. So miserable is the performance of the Savar estate and the central ETP that last month, the parliamentary committee on environment recommended that the Savar tannery estate be closed down due to its devastating impact on its surrounding areas.

With such an inspirational story about our concern for the environment, how effectively we will control the plastic menace is an open question.

Mahfuiz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

on December 16 that virtually kicked off the Congress campaign for the coming assembly poll in the northern state of Uttarakhnad.

The closest an official function came to acknowledge the then Indian government's role was on December 16, when Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, according to a defence ministry press release, spoke how "the historic victory of 1971 was achieved through the valour, gallantry, and professionalism of the commanders and troops and was (the) result of meticulous planning, dynamic leadership and innovation at multiple echelons." One hopes "multiple echelons" include the then political leadership.

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The 1971 war leading to the emergence of Bangladesh is a seminal event in post-World War history, and it should unite rather than divide India. The new generation should be told about it, and any discussion on that war is inseparable with the role of Indira Gandhi. There is broad agreement across the political arena in India that the 1971 war was a rejection of the notion of nationhood based on religion and promoted all-inclusive nationalism rising above politics. The victory in 1971 was shaped by a combination of political, military, diplomatic and people-to-people aspects in India, and it should be kept that way.

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