

A breath of poisonous air

Declare state of emergency till Dhaka's air is breathable again

FOR those of us who live in Dhaka and breathe its air, it's hardly shocking news anymore that the city is one of the most polluted in the world. Over the past several weeks, Dhaka topped the list of the worst offenders on multiple occasions, with its Air Quality Index (AQI) score beating that of China's Wuhan or India's New Delhi. Even then, we are shocked by a recently published report that highlights that in the last six years, Dhaka has had clean air for only 38 days! The study, conducted by Stamford University's Center for Atmospheric Pollution Studies from 2016 to 2021, states that the average AQI score in Dhaka was 219, which falls in the category of "extremely unhealthy," when the permissible AQI score is 0-50.

According to the study, unplanned and uncontrolled road-cutting and construction cause the most air pollution (30 percent), followed by brick kilns and factories (29 percent) and black smoke from vehicles (15 percent). It is inconceivable how we have allowed ourselves to reach this horrifying state, and worse still, that we seem to have accepted this as the status quo. Despite the deteriorating AQI readings year after year, we have done alarmingly little to address the pressing and persistent causes of air pollution. At a conference on Thursday, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh admitted that Dhaka was the most polluted city in the world, and that they were "working to get rid of the problem." As part of the public who are breathing in this poisonous air every day, we demand to know the details of such plans, along with a timeline of how long it would take before we can take a breath of fresh air again.

The High Court on November 24, 2021 issued nine instructions to the Department of Environment (DoE), two city corporations and the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) to make sure that waste-carrying vehicles, construction materials and construction sites are covered with tarpaulin, and that water is sprinkled on the streets of Dhaka to control air pollution. It is evident that these instructions are not being followed, and that the authorities are, yet again, failing to monitor the implementation of these directives. Who will monitor the authorities? It's high time they were held accountable for their consistent failure to make Dhaka liveable and breathable for more than 20 million people.

According to the Environment Conservation Act, 1995, when air quality deteriorates to such a level as it has in Dhaka, the DoE must issue a public warning about the associated health hazards. No such warning has been issued by the authorities, which, as highlighted by Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), "indicates their sheer negligence." With over 10,000 people dying in Dhaka alone every year due to air pollution, and another 153,000 across the country (as per World Bank data), the authorities must recognise and treat it as a state of emergency requiring urgent attention.

Stop the silent killer

Greater awareness about NCDs needed to save lives

HEALTH experts tell us that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) strike silently and kill a large number of people all over the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), NCDs kill 41 million people each year, equivalent to 71 percent of all deaths globally. Each year, more than 15 million people die from an NCD between the ages of 30 and 69 years, and 85 percent of these "premature" deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. Cardiovascular diseases account for most NCD deaths, or 17.9 million people annually, followed by cancers (9.3 million), respiratory diseases (4.1 million), and diabetes (1.5 million). These four groups of diseases account for over 80 percent of all premature NCD deaths.

NCDs have also been identified as a major concern in Bangladesh, needing due attention and intervention. Latest statistics show that about 67 percent of all deaths in the country are caused by NCDs. On top of that, around 20 percent of the population suffer from hypertension, 10 percent from diabetes, and as much as two million people suffer from cancer every year in the country.

In this regard, Bangladesh's health minister said that NCDs were increasing because of changes in lifestyle and diet, obesity, tobacco consumption, environmental pollution, and misuse of medicines. He suggested creating wider awareness among the people so that the diseases could be detected early and treatment could be started immediately. He said this while addressing the first National NCD Conference 2022 virtually, in which WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was also in attendance. The WHO chief mentioned the increasing use of tobacco and unhealthy lifestyle as two major reasons for the growing cases of NCDs. He emphasised taking steps to ensure equitable healthcare services at primary level for those who are suffering from such diseases.

We note that the need for raising awareness at community level has been reiterated by health practitioners and researchers at the conference. Behavioural change through effective communication is essential as a large segment of the population has little knowledge about most NCDs and how to prevent them through improving lifestyle. Delay in consulting a qualified doctor in a proper health facility is one major factor that takes a patient from bad to worse.

We believe there is a health communication department under the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), which prepares health communication materials and organises dissemination programmes across the country. The communication experts should be given full support to create greater awareness at the community level to minimise the incidences of NCDs and ensure good health of the citizens.

This week in black and white



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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THE mystery of nine dead zebras over a period of three weeks at the Bangabandhu Safari Park in Gazipur has been solved. Experts identified bacterial infections and infighting during the mating season as the causes of death of those striped animals. The media sensation over the sad end of these gorgeous creatures, native to Africa, has alerted the authorities, and they have promised better care for the herd in the park, where captivity is given an air of freedom.

The black gloom that shrouded the incident is beginning to be replaced by a bright white possibility. Life is like a zebra—there is usually a white stripe after a black one. The pattern, in its repetitive form, is quite symbolic of our walk of life. When the visual symmetry was replicated to construct the first ever pedestrian crossing in Slough, England on October 31, 1951, a local MP compared the initiative with the striped animal. The name stuck. Zebra crossings have become a part of our everyday lingo. Chances are that you use a zebra crossing every day without realising their colour scheme and significance. Worryingly though, one news outlet recently asked random drivers and passers by whether they knew what a zebra crossing was; most had no clue. Maybe jaywalking has become the new normal in a city where traffic rules do not work. Maybe life cannot be seen in black and white anymore.

Nevertheless, the alternate patterns of hope and sorrow dictate life. Humans live on, knowing life goes on despite sorrows; the black stripes of life will be momentarily or eventually be replaced by white ones—either here or hereafter. It is hope that springs life.

The protesters at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) donned white shrouds and brought out a funeral procession, vowing to brace death to bring new life to their campus. They wanted an end to the miseries caused by the indifference of the authorities. The protest spread fast across other campuses. The dubious actions of police and pro-government student body, and the mysterious inactions of the university administration, added fuel to the fire. Social media started presenting the events in all their colours. The technicolour focus of the agitation was, however, given a monochrome treatment. The supply line of the movement was strategically

cut off. Suspicions were raised about their funding sources and ulterior motives. A group of vice-chancellors expressed their solidarity with their marooned colleague to act as a counter-pressure group.

The original protest of changing the quality of dormitory life veered from its course once subjected to police brutality and invisible interventions. The next phase

students of SUST—or any public university, for that matter? The 28 students who observed the hunger strike had a brush with death. They showed remarkable determination to press home their demands. They reminded us that a university is not just a development project with bricks and mortars or a computerised platform with hardware



▲ In the face of scare tactics and brute force, the students of SUST remain determined to stand for their cause.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

of the protest focused on the resignation of the supreme guardian of the university, who not only failed to protect his students, but allegedly instigated the police attack. Students corralled their vice-chancellor, while security forces cordoned off the protesters. The freedom to protest in captivity soon proved illusory. One sci-fi writer flew in with a ray of hope. He appeared as a saviour to save grace for both parties. The protesters reluctantly broke their fast with the hope that their demands would be delivered. An opportunity has now been created for the vice-chancellor in question to have an honourable exit. One black stripe is crossed for now, to move on to the subsequent white stripe.

Let's review the two striped realities. The authorities have promised that they would resolve the plights of the zebras in Gazipur Safari Park as well as the students of SUST. It is important that we understand what ailed them in the first place. For the animals from the savannas, the reduced perimeter to roam around caused an unhygienic and unliveable condition where bacteria thrived. The infection could have also spread through their diets. Then there was infighting. The death of nine animals has probably saved the whole herd, which will now be taken under special custody.

Can we expect the same for the

and software, but also a living organism. The hunger, pain, and discomfort are real. The development mantra of new buildings and infrastructures hardly looks at the existing body of students and their daily requirements. The calorie intake of a university student is a fraction of the minimum requirement suggested by World Health Organization (WHO). The food quality within the allotted budget is impossible to be improved, unless a subsidy is given. Time to be creative then.

Can the food budget be prepared based on the number of students who opt to eat at the dining of a dormitory? If one can afford or prefer to eat at a dining mess or cafeteria, one should not be considered for the meal budget. The alumni network can be used to initiate an "adopt-a-junior" programme. There should be a combination of government and personal initiatives to improve campus life. In the universities overseas, alumni members play a significant role in doling out funds and support services. Such networks strengthen the fraternity and inspire the present students to remain committed to their institutions.

It's time we saw life beyond black and white and became creative. As one philosopher puts it, "Freedom would be not to choose between black and white, but to abjure such prescribed choices."

Of Buddhadeb, Azad and Award



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REJECTING or returning official awards is not uncommon in India. What is not often seen is how such recognition sparks divisions in a party, and this came out quite clearly when senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad, former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir (when it was a state), was chosen for the Indian government's third highest civilian honour, Padma Bhushan, on the eve of India's Republic Day on January 26.

Azad, the most prominent Muslim face of the Congress party for decades, welcomed his selection for the award, saying it was good to be appreciated for one's public service by a government of the other side of the political divide—a reference to the BJP dispensation headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But Azad's senior party colleague Jairam Ramesh did not agree with him. In fact, within hours of the award announcement, Ramesh took to Twitter to have a dig at Azad. Ramesh contrasted former Chief Minister and Marxist veteran Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's rejection of the same award and had a dig at Azad by playing with words. Terming Bhattacharjee's refusal of the award as "the right thing to do," Ramesh said he "wants to be Azad, not Ghulam."

Officially, the Congress remained silent on the issue, but at least four more senior leaders of the party—Kapil Sibal, Shashi Tharoor, Anand Sharma, and

Manish Tewari—welcomed the honour for Azad. It should be noted that Azad, Sharma and Sibal are among a group of 23 Congress leaders who had shot off a letter to Congress' interim President Sonia Gandhi last year demanding organisational overhaul, in a move seen as a veiled attack on the Gandhi family. It is not just the group of 23 Congress leaders who have flayed Ramesh for his dig at Azad. Senior leader Ashwani Kumar described Ramesh's jibe as "a shameful innuendo... intended to rob both the award and its recipient of the deserved dignity."

Two aspects of the political ripples caused in the Congress by the award for Azad stand out: 1) It came at a time when the relations between the BJP and the Congress have touched a new low; and 2) It showed the wide chasm in the grand old party. It needs to be said that Azad shares a warm relationship with Modi. The strongest evidence of this came to the fore in February last year, when Azad retired as a member of Rajya Sabha. Speaking on that occasion, the Indian prime minister had broken down a number of times during his nearly 15-minute speech while recalling his close association with Azad. Looking back, it is difficult to believe that Modi was just being nice to a retiring member, and that his remarks were not a throw-forward to the future.

Unlike the Congress, the CPI (M) was prompt to convey to both Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and the media that it had always been against accepting official awards. But the whole exercise came after hectic consultations over phone among the party's top brass and the Bhattacharjee family. The party leaders recalled how its leader EMS Namboodiripad had turned down an offer by the then Congress government headed by PV Narasimha Rao to be

named for Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian honour in India, in the 1990s. It may be recalled that the CPI (M) had in 1996 shot down a move to allow its veteran leader Jyoti Basu as India's prime minister, a decision years later termed by Basu himself as a "Himalayan blunder."

Opposition leaders have in the past made it to the government's awards list. The Narasimha Rao government had chosen former Prime Minister Morarji Desai for India's highest civilian honour, Bharat Ratna, and another former Prime Minister and BJP's tallest leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee for Padma Vibhushan. India's former President Pranab Mukherjee, who spent his entire political innings in the Congress, was honoured by the Modi government with Bharat Ratna without rumblings in his party in 2019, and Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar with Padma Vibhushan in 2017.

The awards for Azad and Buddhadeb are being seen differently among a section of political observers. According to one view, it could be seen as an attempt by the Modi government to reach out to the opposition parties. The other view is that the political implications can be gauged by the split in Congress, which is already in the grip of factional feud, in reacting to the honour for Azad and a not-so-subtle message to West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress, which had waged a four-year struggle against the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government before replacing it in 2011. The BJP cannot be oblivious to the fact that it had received help from the CPI (M) in shedding its politically untouchable tag in the 1980s, when the top leaders of the two parties, along with some other opposition leaders, shared the dais against the then Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi.