

Killing us one breath at a time

Air pollution is reducing people’s life expectancy in Bangladesh

A recently published global report on air pollution has revealed that the average life expectancy of a Bangladeshi has been cut by almost three years due to polluted air. According to the report, the life expectancy loss in Bangladesh is 2.91 years; 1.16 years is cut short by outdoor air pollution, while 1.53 years by indoor air pollution. The report also made a dangerous revelation that “air pollution reduces people’s average life expectancy by almost as much as tobacco use does.” Being one of the worst affected countries in the world in terms of air pollution, Bangladesh must take these findings seriously and try to mitigate the factors behind air pollution.

Bangladesh and its capital Dhaka have repeatedly been in the news for the past several years for suffering from the worst quality of air. In February this year, Dhaka’s air was found to be the world’s second-most polluted—its Air Quality Index (AQI) score was recorded at 194, which is considered “poor” or “very unhealthy.” According to the World Air Quality Report 2020, the average annual PM2.5 concentrations in the country was 77.1 micrograms per cubic metre, which was more than two times higher than the WHO-recommended level.

It’s only natural that this polluted air will take its toll on people’s well-being, since exposure to hazardous air leads to many short- and long-term health complications. Air pollution is directly linked to heart disease, chronic respiratory diseases, lung infections and cancer, as several studies have found. It’s among the top-risk factors for death and disability worldwide.

The main reasons for air pollution in Bangladesh were identified by the experts long ago. A report by the Department of Environment (DoE) and the World Bank in March 2019 pointed out that brick kilns, fumes from vehicles and dust from construction sites are the three main sources of air pollution in Dhaka. Sadly, illegal brick kilns are still operating across the country, despite the High Court’s directives to shut them down, while the number of unfit vehicles is also increasing on our roads. And nothing substantial has been done by the authorities to stop dust pollution from the construction sites.

Only recently, our average life expectancy increased by 0.2 years, according to a BBS study: it increased to 72.8 years in 2020 from 72.6 years in 2019. That unchecked air pollution will take away our hard-earned progress is totally unacceptable. Since the main reasons for air pollution have already been identified, it’s high time the authorities chalked out a special action plan to tackle the menace. They should prepare time-bound mitigation measures to set up air quality monitoring systems in appropriate places and save people from exposure to unhealthy air, as per the High Court directive.

Evacuate trapped Bangladeshis from Ukraine

One Bangladeshi citizen dead in attack on Ukrainian port

IT is disturbing to learn that a Bangladeshi sailor was killed after a vessel owned by Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC), which remains stranded at a port in Ukraine, came under a missile attack on March 2, 2022. The deceased, identified as Hadisur Rahman, 32, was the third engineer of the ship carrying 29 sailors. This is perhaps the first-known Bangladeshi casualty in the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine over fears of an expansion drive by the anti-Russian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) in the eastern European country. BSC officials have already confirmed the attack, saying efforts are underway to bring the trapped sailors back home safely.

In the eight days since the war broke out, it has been increasingly clear that its fallout will not be limited to Ukraine, or even Russia, which faces widespread condemnation and biting economic sanctions. The human cost—with over 2,000 civilians killed by now—is but a part of its already far-reaching consequences involving global trade, security, geostrategic relations, etc. Many are fearing a reversion to the frigid Cold War era, which will not be good for anyone.

Bangladesh—which on March 2 abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution demanding an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces, perhaps to protect its own interests by keeping the diplomatic channels open—will not be spared either. We’re already facing the brunt of rising international prices and trade uncertainties. With an estimated 2,500 Bangladeshis—mostly students—stuck in Ukraine, the danger may grow further if they are not urgently evacuated. We have heard harrowing tales of how they are passing their days in danger, without help, trying to escape through the heavily hit regions. This has rightly prompted calls for a clearer stance from Bangladesh and further diplomatic and humanitarian measures to ensure the safety of our citizens.

We’re told that hundreds of Bangladeshis have already crossed the Ukrainian border. Bangladeshi missions in Poland and Romania are said to be receiving expatriates leaving Ukraine through their borders. But clear safety assurances are needed from all parties, especially the Ukrainian and Russian authorities, and Bangladesh should continue to coordinate with them to ensure their cooperation. We urge the government to expedite its efforts in this regard, and post regular updates about what it is doing. Most importantly, Russia must stop the war now and all involved parties must pursue peaceful means to resolve their disputes.

A citizen’s manifesto for Election Commission



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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IN his first media briefing on February 28, 2022, the newly sworn-in Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal ticked almost all the right boxes. Speaking to the Election Commission (EC) press corps, he touched upon all the major issues raised. He pledged to work with honesty and sincerity to fulfil his constitutional duties to hold free and fair elections in Bangladesh. He invited all political parties, especially the opposition, to stay on the electoral trail and participate in the polls—regardless of what happens—for the sake of democracy. He talked about restoring public confidence in the voting process and the need for a consensus among political parties, assuring them of “swift actions” in case of any election-related complaints.

As first media briefings go, this was a pretty uplifting statement, rooted in a desire to signal a new beginning. The CEC struck a hopeful note about the future, but was cautious enough not to oversell it by pointing out the fault lines. He even made, earlier in the day, a meme-inducing comment about having only blood pressure, and no other pressure at all.

Despite the positive vibe, however, one may be pardoned for having a sense of *deja vu*, and of stagnation, seeing how certain words and phrases have a way of coming back. We seem to be stuck in a time loop in which the same conversations keep happening. Imagine, for a second, travelling back to February 15, 2017, when KM Nurul Huda was sworn in as the chief of the 12th Election Commission. In his first public comment, he too talked about trust, neutrality and gaining the confidence of all political parties. He, too, promised to uphold their constitutional duties to deliver free and fair elections. Five years later, we all know how that ended.

This is not to cast aspersions on the new EC—which deserves the benefit of doubt despite how it was formed—or the CEC’s sense of responsibility. But the repetitive nature of these conversations and promises is a sad commentary on how our present electoral system keeps throwing up the same problems over and over again. The disastrous tenures of the last two commissions should be enough to shake us into a new sobriety: the realisation that “it’s not really working.” This is where the need for a



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

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revolutionary EC comes up.

Let me explain what I mean by that. I don’t mean a large-scale revolution involving drastic changes—in how we resolve the bigger issues of EC formation, election-time government, or the overall electoral exercise—which, frankly, are beyond the scope of the present EC. What I mean is a personal, doable revolution on

to working in a milieu that demands adherence to orders from upstairs, which needs to change now. A conscious decoupling from that habit would also mean breaking from the bureaucratic tradition of preferring norms to results.

For example, in engaging with the opposition parties, the bureaucratic way would be to invite them for dialogue. “The BNP has already said they will not join elections,” the new CEC commented. “But can’t we still sit with them? Invite them over for tea?” Good point. But this merely ensures the continuation of the formality of dialogue; it doesn’t promise results. The opposition parties will need more than verbal assurance to be convinced of this commission’s sincerity. With all the laws, rules and constitutional provisions at their disposal, it may be tempting to hide behind legal mumbo jumbo to avoid difficult questions of representation and fairness. This is where a result-oriented commissioner would be different.

What does it mean to set individual examples of honesty and integrity? For a commissioner, it means upholding the highest ethical and professional standards in all their conducts. It means taking a lesson from the distasteful allegations of financial anomalies raised against the last EC, or the allegations of lies, inaction, favouritism and not doing the bare minimum to uphold the sanctity of their office.

As for undertaking changes within their institutional mandates, there can be any number of them, and they will have to decide what best serves the democratic process. Among some of the unresolved issues that come to mind are the concerns over using Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). Or the demand for reforming the Representation of the People Order (RPO) to give EC field officials magisterial power to promptly deal with irregularities during national elections. (Traditionally, the roles of returning officers with magisterial power are given to deputy commissioners.) Or the debate about deploying the army to maintain law and order during elections. The EC can, undertake some decisive changes that will help calm frayed nerves and combat election-related irregularities. The question, in the end, is not “if they have the power,” but “if they have the will.”

Unfortunately, the EC culture is built around following the letter, not the spirit, of the EC rules and laws. This, as we know from previous experience, rarely adds up to a spirit of reform and moving forward. Only a revolutionary mind, accountable only to the people, can rise to the occasion, change how things are done at the EC, and get us out of the present deadlock.

Can Ukraine war spell a nuclear disaster?



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IN a callback to its trigger-happy Soviet days, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, blocking all avenues of dialogue and negotiation. In the eight days since, things have only escalated. Russia has already occupied the Ukrainian cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. They have attacked and/or captured sensitive installations, including military bases, airports, land ports, and the Chernobyl nuclear power station.

As per an estimate, more than 9,000 people have died so far, at least a million have become displaced, and massive destruction has swept over the Ukrainian soil. Russia’s main goal now is to seize control of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, as soon as possible.

This is Russia’s deadliest and most sensitive military strike in two decades. The attack sparked a war of attrition between NATO member states and the former communist bloc. It is difficult to say where this war will end up. While the NATO superpowers—that is, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—are currently refraining from military action, Russia is facing strict economic sanctions.

Concerns over the severity of the attack on Ukraine are spreading all over the world. Per barrel oil prices have jumped from USD 70 to USD 110. Food prices are already rising. As a result of the Covid-19

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crisis, the world economy was already in a state of turmoil. Although there are many concerns in my mind, the biggest one is the safety and security of Ukraine’s nuclear power plants.

Fifty-one percent of Ukraine’s electricity comes from 15 running nuclear power plants. These are Russian Generation II plants that were built in the 1970s and lack fortification and safety features of the current Generation III-plus reactors. Their safety system cannot last more than half an hour without electricity. Moreover, all these nuclear reactors are incapable of withstanding missile or bomber strikes. Cyber attacks can also destroy the power system and data system of a power plant. This could lead to a catastrophic situation like Chernobyl if the power transmission line breaks down, or the power dependent emergency cooling system is not turned on in time.

The three major nuclear accidents that have occurred so far globally (Three Mile, Chernobyl and Fukushima) have all had contributions from the inefficiency or negligence of certain plant workers. Now, if the workers are mentally strained or worried about the security of their families and the country, then there is a good chance that a nuclear accident may happen. In the case of the nuclear industry, it is known to all that ensuring safety and security is largely dependent on human performances and reliability. The rest depends on equipment quality and reliability of the systems.

Another highly sensitive issue is nuclear security risks. Enriched material security at nuclear facilities is extremely fragile during times of war or political instability. As a result, domestic or regional terrorists may utilise this

opportunity to hijack radioactive material in an attempt to make a dirty bomb, or even a nuclear weapon. Imagine the damage that could cause! None of us would be safe.

On the first day, Russia launched a military offensive in Ukraine, taking control of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on the Belarusian border, and taking its staff hostage. The Chernobyl site, though inactive, is still undergoing waste management at its four reactors, and Ukraine has set up a central waste management facility there to handle highly radioactive waste generated from the country’s 15 nuclear power plants. According to international law, a nuclear power plant can never be the target of a military strike. If a nuclear power plant is hit mistakenly by a wayward missile or a bomber, the damage could be greater than all other devastations of the war combined. This will spread radioactivity in the neighbouring countries. Russia may not want to launch direct attacks on Ukraine’s nuclear power plants and may instead take control of them. But this will result in Ukraine’s defence system no longer working. Then, Ukraine will have nowhere to go.

Experts and policymakers from the international community, including those from the International Atomic Energy Agency, are concerned about the safety and security of Ukraine’s nuclear power plants. In this scenario, both countries should be very alert and prudent. The irreparable damage from the Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear accidents is still being borne by Ukraine and Japan, respectively. We don’t want to witness war anymore. It is our expectation that responsible policymakers will act sincerely to protect future generations.