

The Daily Star

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Thank you, PM, for freeing Tentultala

Ownership ambiguity must be clarified

WE wholeheartedly thank the prime minister for ordering the authorities concerned to keep the Tentultala field in Dhaka's Kalabagan neighbourhood as a playground. This is not just a happy end for the local protesters—who have been demonstrating for months against the construction of a police establishment on the field—but it has also set an example for how the few open spaces in the city must be protected from being lost to rapid urbanisation.

However, there is one area of concern which remains. As this daily reported on April 29, the home minister has said that “the playground would be open to everyone, but would be under the jurisdiction of police.” If the Tentultala field is to be a playground, meant for public use, why would it be under police jurisdiction? Would it not be more appropriate for the playground to be under the jurisdiction of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC)? We hope this issue of ownership ambiguity will be cleared up soon. If it is the police which has control over the playground, there is no guarantee that there will not be a reversion of the prime minister's directive, and that the police will not again resume constructing its establishment on the field. Furthermore, given the high-handedness with which the police reacted to locals peacefully protesting at the site, we remain apprehensive about how accessible the playground would really be to the community if it remains in their jurisdiction.

During the coverage of Tentultala in the recent past, we were also shocked to see the state of the land. Given that it was not officially a playground, it seems to have been used even as a dumping ground for the surrounding area. Now that it has been recognised by the prime minister himself as a playground, we hope those in charge will do their part to beautify the field, so it may serve its now official purpose of being a place of play and respite for local children.

The premier has freed the Tentultala playground for public good, and against the wishes of police and, to some extent, the home minister. For that, we are grateful to her. We now hope the field will be turned into a proper public park and a much-needed breathing space for the Kalabagan locals. For this, the DSCC must lend its hand, as it is the only body capable of maintaining the Tentultala playground as it should be.

Here we go again!

Govt must intervene decisively to bring down edible oil prices

WE are alarmed at the overnight surge of the prices of soybean and palm oil, following Indonesia's export ban on crude and refined palm oil on Wednesday. The prices have gone up by Tk 10-15 per litre once again in a market that has seen prices raised in seven phases in the last one year alone. Though traders say the latest hike is due to a supply crunch, according to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), about 850,000 tonnes of palm oil and 406,000 tonnes of soybean oil have been imported in the first three and a half months of this year, which should last the country at least another one and a half months.

Traders alleged that the refiner companies and dealers manipulated the supply of the essential product in a bid to push the prices up further. Unfortunately, this has become a trend in the edible oil market. We have been observing with increasing apprehension how the government has failed to reign in the unscrupulous businessmen who are consistently creating artificial crises in the market. According to the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection, prices are being manipulated at four stages of the value chain involving refiners, dealers or supply order traders, wholesale traders and retailers. The syndicate is so powerful that even the government's attempts to stabilise the market—through import of edible oil, withdrawal of import duties and fixing of prices—seem to have had limited to no effect in easing the consumers' plight.

We understand that 53 percent of the cooking oil used in Bangladesh is palm oil, of which 80 percent comes from Indonesia. Indonesia's export ban on crude and refined palm oil will thus have a negative impact in the future, if the government does not act fast to import palm oil at competitive prices from alternative sources. Shortage of supply in the international market will likely affect domestic prices in the near future, which is all the more reason for the government to take stern action against the syndicates who have been causing havoc in the market since the beginning of the year. It must ensure fair price adjustment in light of international prices, and punish errant traders and importers who try to exploit the situation as well as rectify its lax oversight of kitchen markets.

Bangladeshis, particularly from lower-income groups, have been struggling to make ends meet with prices of all essential items spiralling out of control over the past few months. The rise of edible oil prices, yet again, is inhumane. We are at a loss to understand why the government has allowed the organised syndicate of unscrupulous businessmen to hold such a crucial market hostage to their criminal whims. The people deserve better than to be at the mercy of such greed.

Puti Maach and the Selfish Giant



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Puti maachher praan (Many lives of a puti fish)

A small “puti” fish leaps out of the water and plops back in. Yes, even fish can contort muscles and use their fins in ingenious ways to glide, squiggle or somersault. They do so when they get startled—when they are pursued by some predators, or pursuing food themselves. The jump of a small fry can create a small ripple, but it can reach many shores—including that of Ganabhaban.

The constable who silenced the teenage boy, nabbed for joining the protest of his activist mother live-streaming the invasion of a patch of land by police, saying, “Don't you dare jump too much, you *puti maachh*,” did not expect his action to draw such hullabaloo. Thanks to media uproar, the boy and his mother are now released from police custody. The battle for the field is won/lost (depending on which side of the story you want to side with) after the ultimate intervention of the prime minister, who could see through the riddle.

The riddle intensified when Kalabagan police claimed the legal right to build their station on a piece of an abandoned property allocated to them by the deputy commissioner's office. The community, however, had been using that particular plot for the last 50 years for different purposes, including Eid gatherings, washing of dead bodies for funerals, games, fairs and festivities. Their attachment to the field is sentimental. Many residents gave their loved ones the last rite in this field; many come here for a morning or evening walk; and for the most, this is the place for their Eid *jamaat*. And for the children, this is the only place where they could play some sports, albeit in the dust.

The name *Tentultala* suggests that there was probably a tamarind tree in the field, but now the place looks like a dusty patch with few scattered trees on the side, offering a much-needed breathing space for the people living in the stifling concrete jungle of Kalabagan. The police needed a permanent station to render service and security to the community. Ironically, in securing the place, they became a source of insecurity for the people they are supposed to protect.

Construction materials in a barbed-wire zone became the bone of contention. Members of the civil society added voice to Syeda Ratna, whose citizen journalism

brought the issue to the fore. The spirit that she and her son displayed at a place named after tamarind made me think of spirits of a different kind.

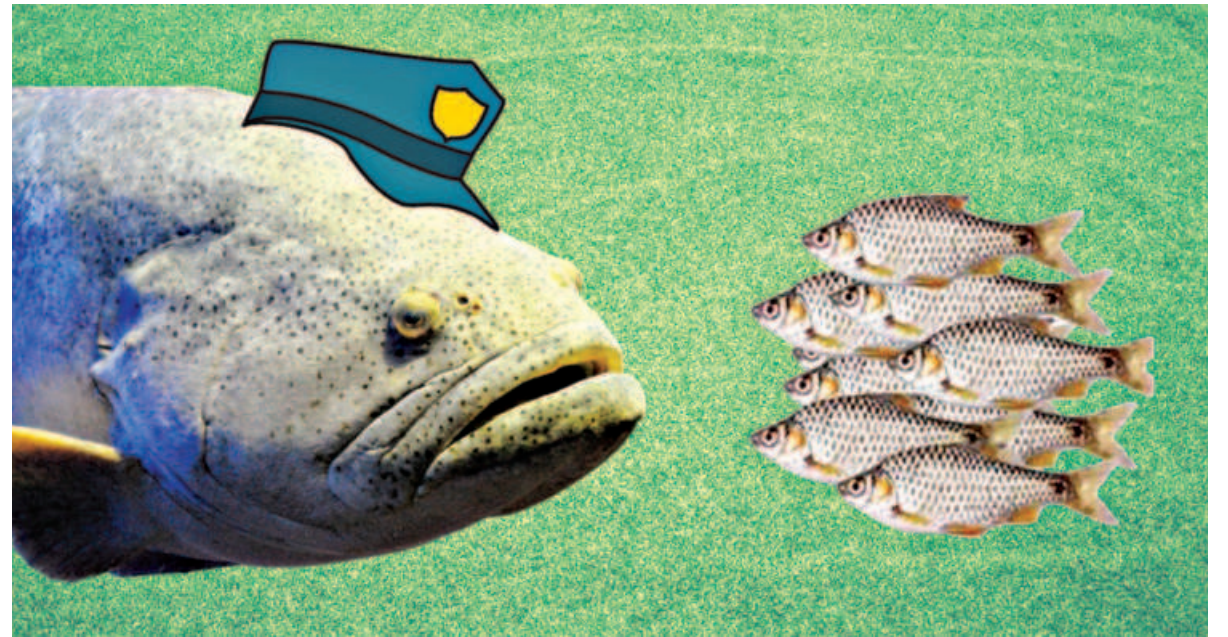
Tetul pata Tetul pata, tetul boro tok (Tamarind leaf, tamarind leaf; Tamarind's so tart)

Legend has it: tamarind trees attract ghosts and other paranormal activities. I found two scientific explanations. The

to be a messenger of God who came to take the giant to the heavenly garden now that he had shown love.

Tumi thako dale, ami thaki khale, tomar amar dekha hobe moroner kale (You're in the branch up there; I'm in the water down here; Death will bring you and I together)

Any avid reader will know the answer to this riddle. The fish and the tamarind



▲ VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

In absence of the rightful owner, who never took possession of the land, the place allowed the presence of the residents to thrive. But there are spirits that do not like free spirits to roam.

acidic content of the tamarind leaf and the high amount of carbon dioxide released by the plant do not allow other plants to grow under it. Stories of many unnatural deaths are associated with this species. The seedy-shaped fruits hanging in a bunch can be scary at night when winds cause them to swing.

Ghosts in popular culture exist in the twilight zone of belief and non-belief, presence and absence. The field, with its diabolical status of simultaneously “being” and “not being” a playground, is thereby a figurative ghost. It was once allocated to a non-Bangalee architect for designing the neighbourhood before the Liberation War. In absence of the rightful owner, who never took possession of the land, the place allowed the presence of the residents to thrive. But there are spirits that do not like free spirits to roam. Fences were erected, and the mobility was stopped. Police appeared like the Selfish Giant in Oscar Wilde's short story who put up a sign “Trespassers will be prosecuted” to stop children from coming to his cherry orchard.

In Wilde's story, the cherry orchard of the giant was filled with blossoms when children were playing in it. But the Selfish Giant put up the warning sign and scared the children away. The garden stopped blooming, and winter started reigning. By the time the giant realised his fault and allowed a crippled boy to enter his garden to play, it was too late. The boy turned out

come together when they meet in the cooking pot. The drama that we witnessed reminds me of the local delicacy of *puti maachher tok* (tangy puti stew). The underlying tone, however, is a sad one.

A playground or a park is important for the healthy survival of a populace. In the last 22 years, the number of playgrounds in Dhaka dropped from 150 to 24. Thirty-seven wards of the city out of a total of 129 do not have a playground. The global standard requires an acre of green land for every 5,000 people. That means, for 25 million Dhakaites, we need 2,500 fields. In a generous estimate, we have about 150. The per capita green space in Dhaka in 1995 was 0.5 sq-m as per Rajuk, but it decreased to 0.052 sq-m in 2009. This is a recipe for death. Our construction mania is a destruction mantra.

The splash of the spritely puti maach is a wake-up call for all of us. Not always will we have a fairy godmother to save us from selfish giants. Life is not a fairy tale. To people this tale with living characters, we need to infuse the setting with ingredients of life. Parks and playgrounds are cases in point. The sooner our administrators realise that, the better for us.

I believe the residents of Kalabagan will gather in Tentultala ground to say their Eid prayers, and raise their hands to pray for the timely interventions of the activists, media, and the prime minister, who made a joyous difference. Eid Mubarak!

Time for another non-aligned movement?



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SAYEED AHMED

I was watching the BBC during the US' 2003 Iraq invasion when one statement especially caught my attention.

“Saddam loyalists are still putting up stiff resistance across Baghdad.” Anyone fighting a foreign invasion was labelled as a “Saddam loyalist.” It echoed President George W Bush's previous declaration, “You are either with us, or with the terrorists,” to intimidate the Taliban of Afghanistan in handing over Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 carnage. The Taliban leadership did offer Bin Laden to any third country, but Bush turned it down. Countries that intended to remain neutral had no option but to kowtow to American and Nato's lines as the world no longer had a balancing power after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Cold War supposedly ended after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and many other leaders in the former Warsaw Treaty member countries enjoyed warm relations with the US and other Western nations. The world became a unipolar planet, and everyone thought humanity had entered a new era.

But two US invasions shattered the flimsy facade of any image of the end of history: Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003, with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as the launching bases, both of which are well-known for their support of international terrorism and militancy.

The post-Cold War world has witnessed three main areas of global

power rebalancing: a) Expansion of Nato in Eastern Europe; b) Rise of China as an economic and military power; and c) Re-emergence of Russia as a military power under Vladimir Putin. The US has so far engaged China on economic and technological fronts only, although military confrontation has always remained a possibility. But with Russia, the confrontation has remained military, as Nato kept expanding right up to Moscow's backyards along Russia's western borders. What we are witnessing in Ukraine is the last scene of the play, in which an American-trained and equipped Ukrainian army—in the likely presence of British and American military advisers—are fighting a battle against the Russians. It's an American proxy war against Russia that neither can afford to lose.

But the irony of the war is not lost on the developing countries of the world. The US, along with Nato, invaded Afghanistan and Iraq on extremely flimsy and questionable grounds. Neither of these victim countries could launch any direct attack on American interest, and both lie many thousand kilometres from American borders. After years of misadventure, the invading troops left both countries in tatters, opening rooms for many militant factions to fight out their differences.

For Russia, the war was perhaps inevitable. Imagine how the US will react if a Chinese or Russian military adviser turns up in Mexico. A look at the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when Soviet Union installed missiles on Cuban soil that could hit the US, should leave us in no doubt that Washington would retaliate with nuclear weapons if required. Nato expansion up to the Russian borders couldn't be a goodwill gesture towards Moscow. All these new Nato member countries can and have allowed American arms and troops on their grounds with the Kremlin within their easy reach. Russia, a country with a huge military arsenal and a long history of warfare, was

destined to act. And it did.

But where does that leave the rest of the countries who have no military interest, nothing to gain and only to lose from this superpower war? The upward prices of oil have affected everything, including basic supplies such as food grain. When many countries were hoping to restart their economies following the Covid-19 fallout, the Ukraine war shattered any such prospect.

The World Bank has warned of slower growth and increased poverty in most countries. The war has triggered high commodity prices because of stronger US dollar, increased transport cost, and supply chain disruptions. Wheat from Russia and Ukraine that feed millions in the developing countries will not be available anymore, because of the sanctions on Russia and production and shipping issues in Ukraine. Tourism, the major income earner for many countries such as Sri Lanka, will take a tremendous hit. Soaring prices for oil and wheat alone will severely hamper growth in many developing countries. All oil-importing countries, including China, Indonesia, South Africa, India, and Turkey, will have to spend a lot more on energy. The global economic growth will slow down significantly. Millions will slide down into further poverty and struggle for mere survival. The situation is like that during World War II between two groups of colonial powers, when millions perished in the colonies. In Bengal, a province under British India, the number of deaths from starvation in 1943 due to British war policies ran into several millions, and none of them had anything to do with either of the warring parties.

Should the developing nations have to pick a side in such a conflict when neither party is looking after their interests? The world needs a new non-aligned movement, as it did after the first Cold War, so that the developing nations can take a neutral stance.

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