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Govt report to UNHRC masks a bigger problem

It must ensure justice for victims of enforced disappearance

FOR the first time, the government has responded to the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) working group on enforced disappearances by submitting the information sought on Bangladeshi cases. While we recognise the effort, we must express our disappointment that it took the government so long to respond to a matter this serious. It displays a type of callousness that is not only concerning, but also extremely damaging to the country's image. Moreover, it sends a bad signal about how much importance the government places on human rights, rule of law, and accountability of different state organs.

What is further concerning is that the UNHRC has already stated that the information provided by the government is inadequate. Reportedly, its response consisted of details about 76 incidents of enforced disappearance. The working group said that information on 66 of them is inadequate. Having taken so long to prepare its response and having faced censure for that, surely the government could have done better. This has, unfortunately, become a pattern for the government when it comes to enforced disappearances.

Over the last decade or so, hundreds of people have allegedly been forcibly disappeared. Nearly every time, however, officials dismissed the reports off-hand, and even make jokes about the victims, despite there being witnesses to these abductions in many cases. In fact, instead of showing sympathy to the families of victims and helping them out, law enforcers have repeatedly been accused of intimidating and harassing them, as well as refusing to file their complaints.

To prepare the report for the UN, law enforcers had to visit the families of victims. Some of them told this newspaper that this was the first time they had ever been contacted by the law enforcers, which simply sums up the whole scenario. Our report also includes narrations from families on how they were threatened and harassed to disbelieve what they saw with their own eyes or heard with their own ears—of their loved ones being taken away by people in plainclothes identifying as law enforcers—and to change their stories more in line with the state's.

This entire situation is nothing short of shameful. We reiterate the UNHRC's call on the government to ensure protection of human rights defenders and the families of victims of enforced disappearance. Moreover, it is the duty of the state to find these people or their bodies. It needs to stop avoiding its responsibility by giving lame excuses such as that these people are hiding, when it is evident that hundreds of people cannot disappear like this without there being some powerful force behind it.

CAAB cannot just randomly fill up a water body

It is against our conservation law

WE are shocked to learn that the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) is filling up a large pond at the capital's Ashkona area to build a housing project for its officials and employees, in clear violation of the conservation law. While the CAAB chairman claims that they are not violating any law as the land is owned by CAAB, not RAJUK, environmentalists say that the around-30-acre pond is clearly earmarked as a water body in RAJUK's Detailed Area Plan (DAP). Reportedly, the aviation regulator has also not taken any permission from RAJUK before starting to fill up the pond which has long been used as a water retention area for Ashkona, Uttar Khan and Dakkhin Khan areas. It goes without saying that, without the pond, the waterlogging problem in these areas will aggravate further.

Dhaka has already lost the vast majority of its ponds, canals and waterbodies due to unplanned development. A study by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) in 2019 found that individuals, businesses, real estate developers, organisations, and even government agencies gobbled up 1,072 acres (57 percent) of the 1,879-acre flood flow zones in Dhaka metropolitan areas over the last few decades. The result is that city residents have been experiencing regular waterlogging during monsoon, with many residential areas and main thoroughfares going under knee-to-waist-deep water even after a moderate rain.

For example, waterlogging in the East Jurain area has now become a year-long problem, making the place almost unhabitable. Reportedly, the neighbourhood was developed on the flood flow zones and agricultural land, filling up a number of big canals. Since Ashkona, Uttar Khan and Dakkhin Khan are already suffering from regular waterlogging, filling up this large pond may also make this situation more permanent, which will eventually affect surrounding areas, too.

Against this backdrop, we think CAAB should immediately shun this project for greater public good but also because it is illegal. We hope the authorities concerned, including RAJUK, will take necessary measures to stop the project and recover the pond. We have already lost too many wetlands, and cannot afford to lose any more. Furthermore, CAAB authorities must be held accountable for taking this project without permission and for violating the law. If a government agency undertakes such a damaging project and goes unpunished, it will certainly embolden others to do the same.

Big projects, big dreams

But where is that omelette we've been promised?

OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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BADIUZZAMAN BAY

IN a 2014 article on sterile policy measures of European technocrats, Slavoj Žižek cited the example of Romanian leftist writer Panait Istrati who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s. It was a time of big purges and show trials. So a Soviet apologist, trying to convince Istrati of the need for violence against the enemies of the state, evoked the proverb, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." To which the latter tersely replied, "All right. I can see the broken eggs. Where's this omelette of yours?"

The same can perhaps be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the drive for development in present-day Bangladesh. For years, big government projects and initiatives were packaged under that umbrella term with a promise to end the country's perennial poverty. Citizens were assured that there would be food at affordable prices, jobs in every household, proper housing, schooling, and healthcare. That their rights would be protected, their mobility unrestrained, and their safety guaranteed. In return, all they have to do is have faith and be patient. But seeing how long that waiting period has been, citizens may well ask: Okay, where is that omelette that the government keeps promising us?

The omelette and broken eggs are apt metaphors for the ever-widening gulf between that promise and the reality. The omelette, or as you may like to call it *"Sonar Bangla,"* is the glue that has held a disgruntled nation together. For 50 years and counting, it gave politicians the equivalent of the American Dream to entice citizens with a future that would be transformative—not just for the nation in general, but at the individual level as well. After all, what is development if its fruits are not enjoyed by all intended beneficiaries? The broken eggs, the price to be paid for the proverbial omelette, give them a sobering reality check.

The pitfall of measuring development based on macrodata is that it shows the big picture, but fails to account for development achieved, if at all, on a micro/personal level. There is no scope for taking stock of the lived experience of individuals. One of the reasons for having public representatives in the policy circles is that they can offer insights that technocrats sitting in their armchairs cannot. But if the lived experiences are any indication, both groups have miserably failed to recognise or offer any solution to the continued sufferings of ordinary people.

Just think of all the road- and transport-related projects taken up over the last decade or so. Have we experienced increased mobility during this time? Have our roads become safer? Do women and girls feel more secure? Does any of us? Despite all the money that has been spent during this period, the daily traffic hasn't thinned out, nor has it become more manageable. Out in the highways, the mobility has increased somewhat, but at the cost of commuters being more at risk than ever before. The state of air and sound pollution—largely due to mismanagement and irresponsible behaviour in the transport sector—has deteriorated to a point where Dhaka is cited as a cautionary tale for botched urban planning.

As I write this, a national daily reports that the price of rice has increased again, despite the high yield of Boro rice. We're repeatedly told how Bangladesh has become self-sufficient in food production. On the other and more relatable side of this picture is how access to food is becoming costlier and more difficult by the day. How do you reconcile these contrasting scenarios? The prices of all food and non-food items have skyrocketed beyond comprehension, even though ordinary citizens' capacity to purchase hasn't risen concurrently. More people today are living in semi-starvation. The sad part is, this is never reflected in any official statistics. The robust economic growth figures shown by the government are thus either designedly selective or manipulated to cover the gaping hole underneath our feet.

True, our economy has grown in size and scope, but so has public spending on ill-planned and ill-executed projects. Unnecessary projects are being taken up to fill the coffers of groups with vested interests, even before the scars of old projects are healed. Amid ongoing concerns about a currency crisis, there seems to have been a realisation in the policy circles about the importance of tightening our purse strings from austerity measures, leading to the cancellation of foreign trips of public officials and postponement of projects requiring imports. But the drive wasn't born out of a genuine desire to cut all unnecessary expenses of the government, which would have required fixing internal, systemic challenges that are draining public coffers across the administrative spectrum. Today, public projects and initiatives are essentially money guzzlers—thanks to corruption, mismanagement and lack of coordination. They exist to serve the interests of the politico-bureaucratic complex. Citizen welfare makes for good lip service only.

ILLUSTRATION: STAR

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The situation in law enforcement, education, health, environmental and other sectors is no less dystopian. Many had hoped that the end of Covid-19 would usher in Vivid-22, but the pandemic has laid bare—for all to see and panic while doing so—how fundamentally flawed these sectors have been all along, nipping in the bud any lingering romanticism about the pre-Covid time. The pain and sufferings that are being caused on a daily basis are bound to disillusion anyone.

I can rattle off a long list of problems dogging each public sector from newspaper reports alone, which show how the lived experience hasn't reflected the rosy picture drawn of the country's development. It's getting increasingly harder to navigate the chaos, insanity and unending suffering on the streets and markets, in the employment and service sectors, in educational institutions, and in virtual space. The question is: How long will we have to bear with the encumbrances of development before we see a truly transformative future?

Green finance must be open to SMEs

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE garment industry of Bangladesh has made significant strides in sustainability. We now have the highest number of LEED green factories in the world—nearly 160, with another 500 in the pipeline. Furthermore, 40 of the top 100 LEED factories globally originated from Bangladesh. BGMEA, the apex trade body of Bangladesh's garment industry, has pledged to the UNFCCC's Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action with a pledge to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 30 percent by 2030.

There are several green finance avenues, such as the Refinance Scheme for Green Finance, Green Transformation Fund, Technology Development Fund, SREUP, Green Climate Fund, and many other international funds available to support the green revolution in our industry.

But are *all* the companies in our industry able to access green finance?

The answer, at the moment, appears to be no. The evidence for this can be the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) factories in Bangladesh who are still operating in survival mode, despite an abundance of orders. The orders are often going to larger, LEED-certified factories that can afford to keep expanding, thanks to green finance. The number of SMEs, meanwhile, is diminishing.

A successful economy needs a mix of large corporations and SMEs. An industry composed almost solely of multi-nationals would stifle creativity and reduce risk-taking and entrepre-neurialism.

In a recent article published in the *Financial Times*, titled "Wall Street's new mantra: Green is good," it was made clear that, while banks and financial institutions once saw green finance as a niche issue, now it is mainstream and a major source of profit.

Globally, the inclusion of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) priorities in the corporate space has made sustainability obligatory for all. Bangladesh's export-oriented garment industry is part of the global value chain, and therefore factories have to embrace sustainability—and it requires investment, which requires access to green funding.

The problem for SMEs is that tapping into green finance is not straightforward at all. There are several reasons for this.

One of the main reasons is that the SMEs often don't have a healthy enough balance sheet to meet the criteria for green funding. They often fail at the bank's due diligence stage. The irony is that, in many cases, SMEs are the very businesses that need green funding the most. That's because their factories are often inefficient, use old, carbon-intensive technologies, and are likely to cause pollution, among other issues.

Another challenge is that most of these funds are only for purchasing machines or tangible assets. Consultancy, training, capacity-building and other intangible investment requirements are generally beyond the purview of green finance, which creates a problem for SMEs.

The other concern is that SMEs may need specialist, tailored green finance support. They may have a lack of collateral or have had previous bad loans. Yet their case for green finance may be a strong one. Will a commercial bank be able to recognise this? Will they have the know-how and be able to provide more than a tick-box exercise?

A successful economy needs a mix of large corporations and SMEs. An industry composed almost solely of multinationals would stifle creativity and reduce risk-taking and entrepreneurialism. After all, where is the incentive to take risks and try new things when there are few smaller competitors snapping at your heels? The large players need to be kept on their toes to ensure that our garment industry keeps moving forward.

With all this in mind, I propose five possible solutions for policymakers that could make green finance more accessible for SMEs.

First, group funding may be introduced so that small-scale entrepreneurs can come together and make collective applications to banks and financial institutions for green funds. Could the BGMEA or a similar body facilitate that?

Second, a lighter due diligence framework for SMEs may be set with support mechanisms in place to help them with the administrative burden of applying for green finance.

Third, a common gateway of funding could be created, where companies only have to apply for green finance at a single window and banks will create customised syndicates to support their clients.

Fourth, insurance entities (such as Atradius) could be urgently involved to facilitate and balance risks for investors. These exist in most countries and are the route to green finance for SMEs.

Finally, if brands want to collaborate—this is a concrete way and an invitation to do so—we all know that access to CAPEX investment is the key hurdle to overcome to drive impact in our industry.