

Coordinate relief efforts for maximum effect

Govt must approach rebuilding with an eye on the future

AS floodwater in Sylhet and surrounding districts has begun to recede, with the exception of a few newly flooded areas, a clearer picture of the damage and suffering caused is beginning to emerge. And it's evident that human factors are as much to blame for that as nature itself. This has been highlighted by two recent reports that focused on how ill-planned relief efforts prolonged suffering, and how ill-planned development in the region prolonged flooding.

The first issue is, of course, a major concern at the moment. Insufficient government relief has been criticised from the very start. Added to this was the haphazard manner in which private donations of food and medicine were handled, with no central supervision of such efforts. In fact, lack of coordination has been a central theme of the rescue and relief operations. We're told that the authorities, after about two weeks of flooding, have now decided to coordinate all relief efforts, private and public, through committees formed at the upazila and union levels with government officials, public representatives and community leaders in attendance.

This is a good step, of course. But it brings no joy when you consider the massive suffering already caused by the government's lack of preparedness. And it brings no certainty of ending suffering soon when you remember how past engagements of local ruling party leaders in similar disbursement efforts were often marred by allegations of misappropriation. We're already witnessing the painful aftermath of this flood, with people desperate for relief to feed their families and cattle. Newspaper reports are replete with heart-breaking stories of their horrendous experience. Also, at least 73 people died between May 17 and June 23 owing to flood-related causes. All this is evidence that for these committees and relevant agencies to deliver results, they must be honest, swift, and proportionate, and supported by much larger contributions from the government's own fund.

Over the past two weeks, the region's agricultural, fish and cattle farming sectors have also been devastated, requiring a painful rebuilding process. This cannot be done without, among other things, a conscious undoing of the damage done to the composition of the haor region. According to a recent study, approximately 86 percent of the haor region has been filled over the last 32 years, dangerously reducing its water retention capacity and thus prolonging flooding. For any rebuilding of life, property and industry to work in the long run, we must look at the bigger picture and allow a seamless integration of our development and haor preservation priorities.

We urge the government to undertake its relief and rebuilding efforts with an eye on the future. These must be expedited given the current situation, and extended to cover all the victims.

Profit shouldn't be the goal of a public university

How will DU justify making huge profits from admission tests?

We're surprised to learn about the huge profit that Dhaka University has made from its admission tests held this year. According to a report by a daily, the profit made from the admission tests for the 2021-22 academic year stands at Tk 17 crore. Although DU authorities claim this to be the university's income, the question is, can a public university make such profits by taking exorbitant fees from admission-seekers?

Reportedly, the DU administration has increased the fee for admission tests every year since the 2019-2020 academic session, citing various reasons. While the fee was Tk 350 in 2018-19, it was increased to Tk 1,000 by 2021-22. This means the fee was increased by a total of Tk 650 in just three years. Is this justified? Apparently, for the DU authorities, it is. In fact, they've managed to cook up a reason for their action every time. The first time, during the 2019-20 session, they said they had to "slightly" increase it because they were taking written tests for the first time. The reason for the increase the following year was that they were holding the exams outside Dhaka which needed extra spending. This year, they came up with a unique reason – that they could not "adjust their costs" last year through increased fees.

When the new fees were finalised, the university's vice-chancellor claimed that they didn't have any motive to make profits from admission tests and that their spending for the tests was "much higher" than the money received from selling application forms. But now we know that they have actually made a good profit from their sale.

This is just an example of how our higher education sector has been commercialised over the years, and how this has been affecting many students who struggle to pay for the exorbitant test fees. While a profit motive from a private university makes sense, the same from a public university, funded by the public, doesn't. It is not just unreasonable but also totally against its character as a social institution. While charging a student what is necessary to pay for expenses related to a two/three-hour test should have been their goal – which shouldn't be too much – it appears university officials and teachers are being driven by self-serving interests. There are also questions whether public universities are spending their earnings and budgetary allocations to serve students. These institutions, like any other institution, should be made accountable for their decisions. Commercialisation of higher education must be stopped.

The newest challenge to environmental goals



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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It was reported that US President Joe Biden will be travelling to Saudi Arabia next month and finally kowtow to its rulers. For months, particularly since the war in Ukraine started, the USA has been trying to nudge the autocratic rulers of the oil-producing kingdom towards increasing oil production to bring down its price. However, the Saudi Arabians have been playing hardball and even appeared to have endorsed the Russian geopolitical goals in defiance of US efforts to get King Salman to align itself with Nato to choke Putin's war machine.

So, what caused this turnaround for Joe Biden? Well, to be fair to him, one must concede that the US president, who will turn 80 this year, has been buffeted by a number of unexpected events both at home and abroad. The war in Ukraine and the galloping inflation would have been a major existential crisis for any leader, and makes us wish we were led by "a sophisticated thinker, intelligent and unashamed, willing to tackle issues of great complexity without reducing them to sound bites."

Sadly, Biden is now stumbling from one dead-end to another. In a certain way, the journey undertaken by Biden can be likened to the one described in James Joyce's masterpiece, "Ulysses". This year is being celebrated worldwide as the 100th anniversary of the publication of "Ulysses". The novel, which describes a day in the life of Leopold Bloom, is made up of different temporal narratives or a series of different stories criss-crossing each other, similar to what Biden and others in power are going through.

Needless to point out, the current global situation presents a major setback for the environmental goals outlined in the Paris climate summit. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) met in Bonn, Germany, in the shadows of the Climate Change Conference from June 6-16, 2022. By all accounts, the climate negotiators failed once again to agree on how to cut emissions in line with the Paris accord of 2015 which called for governments to limit global warming to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius above temperatures of the pre-industrial era. The sudden jump in oil prices and the global policy realignments have pushed the climate agenda away from the wishful thinking that permeated climate activists



▲ Smoke billows from a chimney at a combined-cycle gas turbine power plant in Drogenbos, Belgium April 27, 2021.

PHOTO: YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

five new coal-powered power plants, and many other countries including Germany is now reconsidering their plans to phase out thermal plants. Right after Russia invaded Ukraine, a news report in Reuters announced, "Germany signalled a U-turn in key energy policies floating the possibility of extending the life-spans of coal and even nuclear plants to cut dependency on Russian gas, part of a broad political rethink following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine."

Moreover, large developing countries including South Africa and India have been speaking out voicing their reservations about the Paris and Glasgow agreements. "They say it shifts more of the burden to developing countries to cut emissions, even though emissions from rich countries are responsible for most of the earth's warming since the industrial era", writes Matthew Dalton in the *Wall Street Journal* (June 17, 2022).

According to climate scientists, the world is likely to go over the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit in the early 2030s. And the data are not very encouraging. Greenhouse gas emissions will need to fall 43 percent by 2030 compared with 2019 for us to stay within the "1.5 degrees" limit. But, emissions are expected to fall around 7 percent only by 2030 under the plans

submitted ahead of the Glasgow summit.

The war in Ukraine, global inflationary pressure, and the uncertain economic future, including GDP growth, have thrown environmental priorities into the backburner. The high price of energy and the prospect of a recession has led to a paradigm shift in the energy forum, away from energy transition to energy security.

The price of energy could determine what happens next. Demand for coal, natural gas, and other forms of fossil fuel could increase with rising aggregate demand and inflation. If there is a recession, on the other hand, prices of energy might stabilise, but in the short run, that could also trigger a carbon-intensive stagflationary growth.

On the one side, we have the oil producers who received windfall profits this year, and led their main cheerleader to gloat. Summarising his views on energy security and the climate crisis, Saudi oil minister Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud told CNBC that the world's top oil exporter would not shy away from fossil fuel production.

On the other side, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said the Kremlin's assault on Ukraine will likely have major implications for global heating targets, particularly as many countries turn to coal or imports of liquefied natural gas as alternative sources to Russian energy. He cautions policymakers that the shift away from fossil fuels is vital to avoid a cataclysmic climate scenario. Instead of countries "hitting the brakes" on the decarbonisation of the global economy in the wake of Russia's invasion, "now is the time to put the pedal to the metal towards a renewable energy future," Guterres pleaded.

Myanmar military's new survival strategy

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SINCE independence in 1947, Myanmar has seldom experienced democracy. On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military seized power again in a military coup, overthrowing the democratic government. However, this time the army is struggling to seize control in the face of a three-pronged resistance – international pressure, war with armed groups, and resistance from its own Bamar tribe. Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, formed the National Unity Government (NUG) against the military regime. In support of the NUG, more than 300 armed resistance forces, or People's Defense Forces (PDF), have been formed across Myanmar by the country's pro-democracy people. In the past eight months, there have been some 2,800 armed clashes between the military and various ethnic groups and the PDF in various parts of Myanmar. More than 3,000 military members have been killed in such clashes since the coup.

Local administrators and officials, supporters of the military government, are also facing various threats and attacks. On April 7, the PDF shot the vice-governor of Myanmar's central bank, who was appointed by the military government. The Tatmadaw has adopted a number of new strategies to strengthen its power by suppressing such armed resistance.

To suppress the PDF, the Tatmadaw is forming a People's Security Force (PSF) led by the police, the people's militia, the fire service, volunteer civilians, political parties and members of the Youth Buddhist Association (YMBA). By doing so, they are trying to turn the "military vs civilian" war into a "civilian vs civilian" war. The military recruitment process

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has also come to a standstill due to the disinterest of the general public. So far, about 3,000 soldiers and 7,000 police officers have quit their jobs and become rebels, a number that is likely to increase in the future.

Despite losing its numbers, the military wants to show the world that the internal situation in Myanmar is under control.

The military government enacted a new police law with constitutional powers. As a result, members of the police now have to fight as law enforcement and frontline fighters, which are commonly seen during civil wars. Moreover, the police can now search anyone anywhere and arrest them without warrant.

Recently, the regime revoked the citizenship of 11 leaders of the NUG. A number of NLD-backed ministers and political leaders have been sentenced to different jail terms for alleged crimes. Political analysts predict that the Election Commission may cancel the registration of NLD and SNLD, the two largest political parties in Myanmar, accusing them of not submitting their financial audit reports. This is how these two parties may be barred from participating in the pre-announced elections of the military government in August 2023. However, doubts still remain as to whether this election will be held at all and how participatory it will be.

Although the armed forces took the initiative to implement a ceasefire agreement by inviting various armed ethnic groups on the Armed Forces Day held on March 27, no armed group except for five small ones (ALP, DKBA-5, KNU / KNLA-PC, PNLA, RCSS) participated. On top of that, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing tried to legitimise the military takeover by inviting all former generals to the Armed Forces Day celebration.

The military government is attempting to gain international recognition in a

number of ways. In March, senior military officials attended a conference of Asean defence chiefs. However, Asean member states are still divided over the coup in Myanmar.

The Tatmadaw has already started trading using Chinese, Indian and Thai currencies to avoid western economic sanctions. While big gas companies like Total and Chevron have left Myanmar, companies from Thailand and Korea are gradually replacing them. Myanmar's military is preparing to accept the Russian Ruble as an alternative currency to the US dollar.

By adopting the aforementioned internal tactics and diplomatic manoeuvres, Myanmar's military is trying to legitimise the coup and its other actions. The Tatmadaw, which has been at war with various armed groups for the last 75 years, is determined to hold onto power at any cost. Maybe, these strategies will help it to stay in power again for an indefinite period, as the world has already been divided into two groups on the issue of Myanmar because of geopolitical interests.

So, what will be Bangladesh's position regarding the Rohingyas? Recently, the US has dubbed the Myanmar military's ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingyas as "Genocide". Although there is no immediate visible effect of such declaration, it is expected to create pressure on Myanmar in the long run. On the other hand, the focus of global powers, especially the western countries, is also shifting away from the Rohingya repatriation, as the world is now more concerned with the Ukraine crisis. Delay in the repatriation process will create more risks not only for Bangladesh, but for this entire region. Considering the current context of Myanmar, Bangladesh should try to resolve the Rohingya issue through military diplomacy, as the military directly or indirectly always influences Myanmar's decision, even when they are not in power.