

There is a war going on against nature

Dhaka losing its greenery is just the tip of a colossal iceberg

Imagine the worst thing that can happen to a city from an environmental point of view, and then multiply it by two. That, too, may not be enough to portray the disastrous transformation that Dhaka has been going through, with about 56 percent of its green spaces vanishing over the last three decades. That's the finding of a study covered in a recent report by The Daily Star. To convert it into numbers, the city had 12,745 hectares of vegetation in 1989. By 2020, it came down to just 5,599 hectares. The study reached this conclusion after analysing the historical changes of green spaces in the entire Dhaka metropolitan area.

Such statistics bring clarity to an otherwise jumbled state of affairs involving a rapidly evolving landscape. Its population boom and aggressive urbanisation meant not only unplanned construction of roads, residential buildings and industries, but also a steady depletion of green spaces such as parks, open grounds, trees, croplands, roadside plants and areas covered in any green infrastructure. Since 1989, Dhaka's green spaces with dense forest declined from 17 percent to 2 percent, while green spaces with moderate forest declined from 24 percent to 16 percent. While an ideal city should have at least 25 percent green space coverage, Dhaka has only 8 percent, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.

What happens when green spaces are encroached like this? Heat islands are created. As a result, Dhaka has witnessed a rise in temperature of nearly 3 degrees Celsius over the last 20 years – with its air, water and land pollutions rising to insane levels. This is a disturbing development, all thanks to our blind pursuit of development and poor planning. It's like we're waging a war against nature, not just in Dhaka but across the country as well. You see hills being levelled, waterbodies being filled or encroached, and forests being razed to the ground. Just as we write this, hills at the Holichhara tea garden in Kulaura, Moulvibazar are reportedly being cut to construct a road, without the approval of the Department of Environment.

But this is not a war we, or anyone, can win. Experts have thus called for an urgent reduction in the damage done to nature, at a time when climate change is already wreaking havoc on Bangladesh. For Dhaka and other cities, they highlighted the importance of land-oriented mitigation measures such as creation or preservation of what little green space is available, through better urban and population planning, which can prevent the rise of temperature and other associated risks. Dhaka has a lot of undoing to do in this regard. We urge the government to take the warning signs seriously and take appropriate measures.

ICJ ruling raises hope for Rohingya justice

World community must find a durable solution to the crisis

We welcome the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of the trial of the Rohingya genocide case. This gives us hope that the Myanmar military will not be let off the legal hook easily, even as it continues to dillydally in the repatriation bid with Bangladesh. The court's ruling paves the way for the case to be heard in full, which we hope will lead to justice sooner than later. The trial and finding a long-lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis are both key priorities, and both should be given due importance.

It's been several years since the Myanmar military committed what has been termed "ethnic cleansing" with genocidal intent, the kind of which the world hasn't witnessed in recent decades. Although the junta has been rejecting the "genocide" aspect of the crisis, the World Court on Friday invalidated its objections. The central argument of Myanmar was that Gambia, which brought the suit, had no standing to do so at the top UN court. But the president of ICJ, Judge Joan Donoghue, made it clear that Gambia, as a state party to the 1948 Genocide Convention, can act to prevent genocide, and that the court has jurisdiction in this case.

The Rohingyas have had to go through a series of calamitous episodes since they were brutally murdered, raped and ousted from their ancestral homes in Myanmar. The trauma still haunts them as they wait in squalid camps in Bangladesh to go home and begin a new life. But safety, dignity and integration are of essence while their fate is being decided, and care should be taken so that they do not fall from the frying pan into the fire. No doubt the question of international justice and accountability will be crucial in finding a durable solution to the crisis. We believe all parties involved should maintain their focus on the question of confidence-building among Rohingyas, first by ensuring swift justice in the ICJ case, and then by ensuring that their return home is accompanied with their rights as citizens restored.

In this regard, we would like to reiterate the importance of starting the repatriation process which has been dragging on for a couple of years. As well as getting justice for what happened to them in the past, the Rohingyas are equally concerned, and rightly so, about what will happen to them in the future. World leaders cannot champion the cause of justice and fairness on one front, and abandon its pursuit on another front.

Communalism or intolerance: What ails Bangladesh?



Khushi Kabir is a rights activist and the coordinator of Nijera Kori.

KHUSHI KABIR

I like to call myself a citizen of Planet Earth. I have tried to state, time and again, that borders and boundaries that define our nationhood are merely artificial creations. Since the time Homo sapiens first traipsed the planet, they spread out as continents began to form; new cultures, languages, rituals and beliefs also found its place. However, nation-states, the countries, were formed much later, dividing these people who had coexisted for a long time before into different nationalities, thus creating the "other." Believing strongly that we only strengthen and broaden ourselves as humans when we learn to accept, understand, value and respect different cultures, ways of life and ideologies, including religions in whatever forms or even lack of, believing that any nation worth its salt would welcome diversity and pluralism in all forms, since it can only strengthen and broaden a nation and its people further, is what it takes people and nations forward to newer and wider horizons.

However, having said that, I cannot help feeling a sense of satisfaction that I was born in and belong to this land

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that is Bangladesh. Feeling pride in the long history we have of resistance, of fighting for our collective right, was instilled in me from a young age. No other nation that I know of has gained its independence like we have, where almost all people, irrespective of class, locale, religion, ideology, education, occupation and ethnicity, came together in ensuring, in fighting for and supporting in whichever way they could the dream of an independent Bangladesh. The ideology and the principles prevalent at that time – and I was around then – was what was incorporated in our first constitution framed in 1972. Democracy, secularism, socialism and nationalism. Albeit the word used was Bangalee nationalism, an identity that was rejected by our only elected indigenous MP of the then parliament, MN Larma, of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Today, as I write, I ask myself and those reading this to understand what went wrong. We need to ask what has happened to the principles this nation fought so valiantly for. What has happened in these 50 years since we won our war of independence? I am angry, frustrated, devastated, saddened



Witnesses to the event in Narail, some who came to Dhaka to speak to various groups and at various rallies, described in details the horror of that day.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

and ashamed at certain events that have overtaken our lives. Over the past few days, we have been talking about what, to our shame, was allowed to take place in Lohagara, Narail. This is not the first time. Those who create such incidents have a single script that they follow uniformly. Whether we have borrowed this script from our neighbouring countries or they may have borrowed it from us is of little consequence now. I refuse to measure ourselves as to whether we are more or less tolerant than other countries. Our measurement should be on what and how we wish to see ourselves as. What are the goals and the principles we have set for ourselves, and how far have we moved away or how far are we still from our expectations?

Though much has been written about Lohagara, it took me time to sit and write this. I was feeling so frustrated, so incapable, so angry at not being able to do anything. The incident started exactly as other similar attacks in other areas, with a social media post that someone – usually an innocuous person, sometimes illiterate and usually not internet-savvy – having posted on Facebook a status or post that is considered "hurting the religious sentiments" of the majoritarian religious group – in Bangladesh's case, Muslims. There exists the Digital Security Act (DSA), whereby anyone can initiate a case that their religious feelings have been hurt by a certain post. In Lohagara, as elsewhere, immediately through leaflets, agitating sermons at mosques, madrasas and other religious places of gathering, mob frenzy was created. People, neighbours who lived in apparent harmony and friendship until the attack suddenly became fearsome, frenzied mobs, out to lynch, attack, demand huge amounts of

of that day. I myself heard one whose home was attacked state how many of the attackers were their neighbours, people they had had good cordial relations with. Many affected families are terrified to return home even today.

A common factor, as mentioned earlier, is the Facebook post. Here, too, as in earlier incidents, the post leaves much to be suspicious about. The Facebook page in question was supposedly opened just two days before the attack, as we were told. Most people know how easy it is to open an account in anyone's name without their knowledge. I do not know what happened in this case, but there is definitely enough reason to feel that this may very easily be a manufactured post in a false account. If the objectionable instigating matter was just posted the day before, how could people so quickly know and get access to the post, circulate it and create mob frenzy?

Mob frenzy, communal attacks, attacks on people with different views, positions and beliefs are created deliberately. You need instigators with powerful and vitriolic rhetoric to be able to whip up this kind of violent frenzy. To use religion as a tool is the easiest. I fail to understand why belief in one's faith is so flimsy that a simple post can hurt one's sentiments. What about the Jumma khutbas that are often instigating against different religions, using obscurantist dogma and vitriolic speech? Does that not hurt the religious sentiments of people from other religions? The same goes with waz mahfils. I, as a woman, feel utter disgust at the way some of the sermons are given, even on YouTube, by people who claim to be religious leaders. Where is the DSA then?

In most cases of attacks like Narail, the alleged accused gets arrested, and

that exist, who seem to have no prior knowledge of the agitation being organised, nor the violence itself. We have not forgotten Sulla in Sunamganj, Taindong in Khagrachhari, Nasirnagar in Brahmanbaria, Rangpur, Bhola, or Cumilla. I am sure I may have inadvertently left many incidents out.

Each time, the story is the same. Each time, the action is the same. Arrest the poor illiterate, or absent so-called violator of Muslim sentiments, while no action is taken against the rest. Of course, the sentiments of the followers of other religions or ideologies are of no concern. Not while we still have a state religion. I worry and feel inadequate as a defender of human rights amid the sudden spate of publicly insulting Hindu teachers, violence and threats against people who are upfront about their strong sentiment in being secular or attacks on women wearing clothes they feel comfortable in. What is most worrying is that people feel that there is no need to wait for due process of law, if some vested quarters are not comfortable or in agreement with what they feel is right. It is time that rule of law, democracy, accountability and the government machinery started to function as they are meant to. This is definitely not the Bangladesh that people fought and gave their lives for. We wait for a day when we will see a truly democratic, secular, inclusive, Bangladesh that is accountable to the people, ensuring everyone has a right to live in dignity and freedom. With the basic principles that our Liberation War was fought for established. To enable us to reach that stage is to begin a process to ensure and establish accountability of the state to its citizens as the first step. The way to become a truly inclusive, democratic and secular state is to start now. Today.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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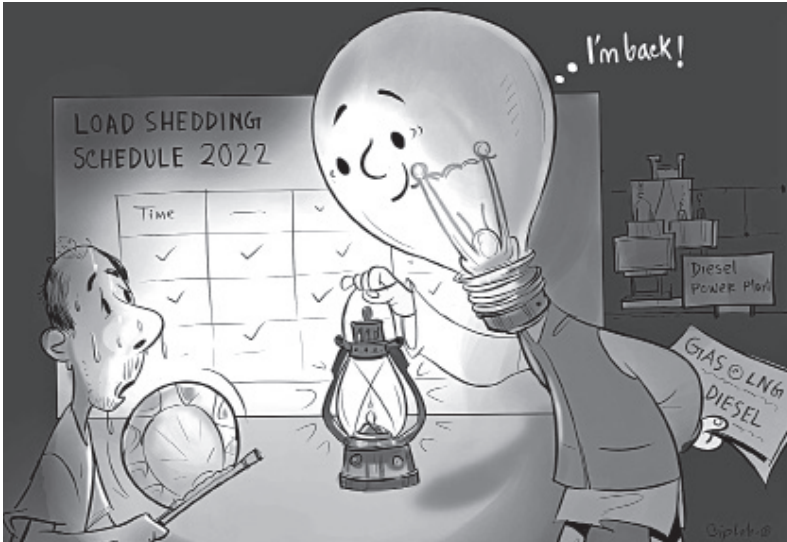
Policymakers also to blame for our energy crisis

There is no doubt that the world has been going through a phase of great turmoil brought about by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Nearly all countries are struggling in many ways, including economically, as a result of all the destabilisation that have occurred over the last two to three years.

Europe and other developing countries are becoming increasingly concerned in terms of their own energy security. And the world energy market has become quite unstable. All of these are affecting Bangladesh also.

However, the fact still remains that external shocks are bound to happen every few years, even though no one can fully predict when they will occur. And policymakers in Bangladesh have done all the wrong things, which has simply weakened us and left us even more vulnerable to such external shocks.

The ongoing loadshedding that the people are suffering from is



mostly the fault of the policymakers. It is well known that Bangladesh is a gas rich country. Then why have we not been exploring and finding more gas reserves as our current reserves

deplete? It is so that special interests can continue to profit.

Despite the fact that we have increased our power generation capacity, why is it that the government

continues to extend contracts of quick rental power plants? And, as an extension of that, pay enormous amounts of capacity charges to their owners using taxpayers' money? It is so that special interests can continue to profit at the expense of the people and the nation.

Imagine all the things we could have done had the government not wasted so much money paying capacity charges for idle power plants. Yes, global factors have definitely harmed us. But it is because our policymakers' bad decisions, or rather decisions that they intentionally took to benefit a few, that our sufferings have increased so much. And the worst part of it all is that we are now again the ones who are being made to pay for it. This sort of corruption is what is holding our country back from becoming a truly prosperous nation, and why its people are having to continue to suffer.

Muniruzzaman, Dhaka