

No more dirty tactics before election

AL must stop obstructing the opposition’s right to free assembly

It has now been confirmed that it is the local Awami League leaders and their allies who are actually enforcing the transport strikes in divisional cities right before the BNP rallies. The ministers who have been claiming otherwise are also surely aware of this; therefore, we feel insulted that they keep trying to pull the wool over our eyes by claiming that transport associations are independent and have made the decisions of their own volition, when they clearly are not.

Just like in Khulna, Mymensingh, and Barishal, transport owners in Rangpur called a 36-hour strike from October 28, a day before the BNP rally. Mozammel Haq, president of the Rangpur Motor Malik Samity which called the strike, is an adviser of AL's Rangpur City unit while Mashiur Rahman Ranga, general secretary of the body, is a Jatiya Party lawmaker from Rangpur. Similarly, in a report this newspaper published on Friday, it revealed that the strikes called in Khulna, Mymensingh and Barishal were all called by associations either directly controlled by local AL leaders or their loyalists. And there is no reason to doubt that this instruction was not passed onto them from high ranking party members – especially given how well-coordinated it has been.

It is extremely disturbing just how much transport associations, similar to all other associations in various sectors, have been completely politicised by the AL and used for its narrow political purposes. Even in this case, let us not forget that ordinary citizens have also been suffering as a result of the lack of private transport. The transport sector, in general, has been a mess as a result of this deep politicisation, which has been leading to deaths from road accidents on a regular basis – and no meaningful reforms have been taken to fix the sector because of political reasons, despite the heavy cost to citizens.

The revelations about the transportation strikes verify the concerns expressed by the people, civil society members, the media and opposition parties – that the AL is unwilling to respect the opposition's, and the people's as an extension of that, right to free assembly. It is still unwilling to provide a level playing field to the opposition right before the election, in the interest of making our dysfunctional democracy somewhat functional. And that, we believe, does not bode well at all for the country going forward. Therefore, we would like to call on the AL to refrain from using such dirty tactics, and instead, let the opposition exercise their rights and, most importantly, let the people exercise their rights to decide the fate of the country going forward.

On the verge of starvation

Govt must check food inflation, ensure food security for all

A World Bank survey conducted between June 2020 and May 2022 has found that around 30 percent people in Bangladesh are currently facing food scarcity. This is despite the fact that the country's economy made a recovery from pandemic-induced shocks, according to the report. The survey has found that 13 percent of people went to sleep hungry in May this year, compared to seven percent in June 2021. During the same time, the number of people who could not afford to buy food and those who didn't eat in 24 hours also increased. These findings have been revealed at a time when we are already worried about the rising inflation that has affected purchasing capacities and the food shortage that the country might face in the coming months.

It is true that our economy showed some quick signs of recovery after the first two waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, but before its effects could trickle down to the poverty-stricken people, they were left to confront the cost of living crisis. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, and thanks to poorly thought-out interventions by the government, inflation has now surged out of control, further reducing people's access to food. Although the government has taken some measures to provide essential food items to the poor at subsidised prices, they have been woefully inadequate in reaching all the people who need such assistance. The government's inability to check inflation means that more and more people are having to make compromises on their nutritional needs.

Currently, 68 percent of the county's population are struggling to buy food due to their sky-rocketing prices, according to a survey by the World Food Programme. These people, who do not have enough cash to meet the day-to-day food expenses of their families, are either being forced to take loans or use up their savings. At present, it is not only rice, wheat, meat and vegetables that are being sold at extremely high prices, but even eggs, a low-cost source of protein for the low-income people, have gone out of reach for many.

So, how to bring the situation under control? The government should not only take concrete measures to check food inflation – by importing food grains and bringing down food prices through proper market interventions – but it should also strengthen its Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Food For Work (FFW) programmes to reduce food insecurity. While these steps can give some temporary relief to those most vulnerable, as long-term measures, we should focus on increasing our own food production in order to avert any future food crisis. Since the country is continuing to regularly face natural disasters, including floods and the recent cyclone, the farmers in the affected areas need to be given cash incentives as well as fertilisers and fuel for irrigation at subsidised prices. The food scarcity and high inflation in the country can only be checked through proper policies and their effective implementation.

Something is rotten in the state of things



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. If wishes were fishes, we would all swim in riches. Yet wishes are all that we have.

When our city fathers assumed their offices in 2020, they presented their visions of a smart city. They shared their pre-election plans to excite our wish list. Now and then, they meet in convention centres and star-studded hotels to offer us various alphabetic soups brewed with further visions and strategies to support their dream. We, Dhakaite, await the day when all will be “smart” without being “smarted” daily. Our wishes neither ride nor swim.

Things are so desperate that newsmen receive anonymous phone calls from an on-duty transport official with a plea to do something about the traffic tailback on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway that reached Banani flyover from Tongi's Millgate. This happened on Wednesday following the onslaught of cyclone Sitrang. The perennial pain caused by the elevated expressway, BRT and MRT achieved new heights when the extra downpour inundated many parts of the roads. Hours of waterlogging damaged their upper crust, resulting in many potholes. Traffic slowed down. Those responsible for controlling traffic felt helpless against the negligence of the city authorities who failed to clear the drainage, remove various roadblocks, including fallen trees and debris, curate construction sites and stop the narrowing of the roads for a host of reasons. Why the road veneer did not last long is another question that we dare not ask.

The woes of the city are well known. I won't trouble you by repeating the obvious. What intrigues me is that phone call stating a problem by a man who is both a solution and a part of the problem! The traffic surgeon wished that a news report would draw attention to the issues that he is failing to address through his line authority. The anonymity of the call, however, suggests how gagged the system is. The muted voice desperate to find a speaker through a newspaper is symbolic of our pent-up frustrations and tension.

The shelf-life of the projects to ease the trouble of commuters has doubled, and the cost quadrupled. In August, a



In August this year, a BRT girder crashed onto a car in Uttara and killed five.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

fallen girder killed five passengers in a car, and the construction of BRT was stalled by the mayor. An initial investigation found the Chinese firm guilty of severe negligence, but a fault in the contract makes the firm entitled to a counterclaim. No penalty can be imposed because of our lack of judiciousness in signing the contract.

The contracts are in favour of the overseas firms, since we failed to secure our national interests. With allegations of commissions being shared, one wonders why these construction firms can remain so oblivious to our local causes! Clearing the adjacent areas next to the pillars, securing the sites with protective gear, night lights and hazard signage, and creating bypass or alternative routes are no-brainers. How can massive constructions take place on the busiest of roads without any care for the daily commuters? And if a man in uniform, in charge of maintaining the site feels helpless in this scenario, then there sure is a problem.

I can only assume that this situation is aggravated by many non-technical

brace against the global recession that is looming large, we hear the topmost civil servants wishing for a dream house worth 43 crore taka decked with multiple swimming pools and large-screen TVs. Their luxury is planned at the expense of our misery. The irony is, the top bureaucrats, who fail to secure our national interests, have no qualms in claiming the larger share of the development pie for themselves.

This is the kind of top-heavy administration that Bangabandhu resisted throughout his political career. As early as May 28, 1948, in a meeting of the Progressive Muslim League, the young student leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman demanded that “the salary of the chief secretary should be reduced to Rupees one thousand and those of MLAs and Ministers should be reduced to make provisions for the enhancement of pay of all ill-paid officers [and primary teachers]”. This reveals Bangabandhu's reservations against the top-heavy nature of the administration. Ironically, we pursued Bangabandhu's vision without understanding his spirit.

of affordability, sustainability and accountability are kept in the dark, which allows tales of second homes of government officials abroad to flourish.

On Thursday, two minor news items were published. One serving government official was arrested for neglecting his parents, and another retired government officer for buying a three crore taka flat against a revealed asset statement of Tk 52 lakh. These are breadcrumbs compared to the types of misuse of power and mishandling of money that we constantly hear about. But if this is a warning shot for the personnel in charge of government projects, then we should hail these stories as a welcome move.

Potholes, flooded drains and unkept construction sites are signs of negligence by our public officials. They are symptomatic of the dark side of our administration. Unless these officials are “smartened”, we will never have a smart city. For that, we need the office-holders and office-bearers to work together, not for self-gratification but for public satisfaction.

How do we prepare our cities for the inevitable wave of climate refugees?



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As global warming continues to cause sea levels to rise, vulnerable countries like Bangladesh are poised to experience severe disasters with ever-alarming frequency. According to IPCC6, about 17 percent of our population must be relocated within the next decade due to these rising sea levels. This begs the question: what will be the impact of such a large-scale migration? More importantly, how should we prepare?

Disasters tend to strike primary zones, and peripheral areas as well, to varying degrees. Human migration from affected zones to unaffected ones in post-disaster situations create multiple problems for both host and migrant populations. Most people typically migrate to their nearest urban cities or population centres. Issues arise in the host cities when infrastructure and essential services like availability of freshwater, healthcare, decent livelihood opportunities and affordable housing are overburdened by the unanticipated influx of these migrants. Oftentimes, migrants are met with social resistance as well.

Similarly, migrant hosting towns suffer significantly from the standpoint of governance and in ensuring

essential public services to all. Influx of migrants affects not only land usage patterns, but also alters water systems when waterbodies need to be filled in to make space for new slums. This leads to waterlogging issues, while also putting a strain on the already depleting groundwater levels. Crime rates also rise when some migrants resort to illegal means of obtaining gas and electricity, alongside getting involved in petty crime and theft due to a severe lack of employment opportunities. Therefore, when we think about relocating 17 percent of our population, the challenges discussed here are magnified manifold.

Although complexities associated with the migration process remain, we cannot stop migration. Hence, to accommodate large migrations sans the social breakdown, the focus should be on building climate resilient and migrant-friendly cities.

A climate resilient migrant-friendly city can be essentially described as one with climate-resilient infrastructures and services like low-cost housing, accessible education, healthcare, water and sanitation. It is imperative that these towns have well-developed livelihood provisions for the migrants.

Ideally, the host cities should be located near economic hub zones or water bodies with high economic development potential.

When we think about livelihoods, the first thing that comes to mind is agriculture. Agriculture plays a crucial role in our economy and a large portion of our vulnerable population is engaged in agriculture. So, designing climate-resilient livelihood strategies without an integrated agricultural component would be unrealistic at best. Rather, we should mainstream innovative practices e.g., sack gardening, vertical gardening, usage of saline tolerant seeds, and bring about a shift in land use patterns to ensure continuity. Green/eco-friendly livelihood practices should be incentivised to motivate youth. A few options include hydroponic cultivation, seaweed cultivation, vermicompost, climate-smart farming, integrated farming, etc. In the face of growing population and land scarcity, the latter is a worthy option to maximise agricultural production using the same area of land.

However, livelihood diversification is also needed, and skills and knowledge transfer are essential in that regard. To ensure people's ability to secure jobs with a decent living wage, we should set up human development centres in every migrant town. These centres will promote green skills training that will help them find alternative livelihoods that are sustainable. Most importantly, industrial decentralisation is instrumental in ensuring that they get employment upon receiving the requisite skill sets and knowledge.

Without decentralisation, people will start moving in droves towards big cities like Dhaka and Chattogram. This will also improve other commodities like roadways, hospitals, housings etc.

Special emphasis must be placed on building resilient infrastructures, as these are the most vulnerable to calamities and disasters. It is understandable that logistical, bureaucratic and administrative hurdles make this a less lucrative area of concern, which could explain the paucity of initiatives in this regard. Very few private organisations are keen on investing in building resilient infrastructures. However, addressing this should be easy if we can turn existing government rehabilitation programmes, e.g., Ashrayan, to focus on building climate-proof infrastructures. Private sector actors may be brought in to facilitate the process.

Simultaneously, focus should also be given on the social aspects and the willingness of the host population to accept and share provisions with migrants. To bring these changes in behaviour and action, investments are vital. At the end of the day, these cities will prevent a loss in autonomy of both host and migrant communities.

Forced migration resulting from climate change is a harsh reality in Bangladesh. Given that migration is a gradual process, this level of resettlement will not happen in a day. However, it has already begun as towns are accommodating migrants beyond their capacities. Let's think ahead and take sustainable action by investing in climate-resilient and migrant-friendly cities to strengthen our social systems.