

Save Turag from polluters, grabbers

DNCC's indiscriminate waste dumping on riverbanks is inexcusable

Over the past few decades, many of our rivers have faced slow death while some are on the verge of being robbed of life due to indiscriminate dumping of all kinds of waste and unabated grabbing. Despite repeated pleas from activists, nothing much has changed. The four rivers surrounding Dhaka have also been frequently in the news for their sorry state – they are being grabbed and polluted not only by influential quarters but also by government entities who are supposed to protect them. This is most unfortunate.

According to a report by this daily, Turag River is now facing a serious threat from none other than the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC). The eastern shore of the river, which falls under the jurisdiction of DNCC, is gradually being filled up with industrial and household waste. Reportedly, the river channel has significantly shrunk from Gabtoli to Nawaberbagh, as DNCC workers are dumping a huge amount of waste on the banks of both sides of the river. Moreover, the walkway being constructed by the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has also fallen victim to indiscriminate dumping of garbage. DNCC workers are reportedly hampering the work of the BIWTA by dumping waste on their construction sites. In some cases, the DNCC even crossed the river's demarcation pillars while doing so.

We fail to understand why the DNCC authorities would allow their workers to dump waste like this. What possible reason could they have, if any, for not performing their duty of protecting riverbanks from harm? How will we save what's left of our rivers if government agencies themselves pollute them? Reportedly, the BIWTA requested the DNCC to not dump waste several times in the past, but to no avail so far. In February 2019, the Turag River was given the status of a "living entity" by the High Court, denoting rivers' significance in our life. The way relevant authorities continue to treat rivers is thus most baffling.

Evidently, nothing much has changed since the High Court gave a 17-point directive in 2009 chalking out clear guidelines to save our ailing rivers and water bodies. At that time, the court asked the authorities concerned to demarcate the rivers after holding surveys, set boundary pillars, publish a list of legitimate leaseholders of river land, evict grabbers, build walkways, plant trees, dredge the rivers, etc. Has any of those directives been implemented? Not really, as various reports indicate. Rather, all rivers across the country, including the four surrounding the capital, have been facing systematic damage. Why is it so difficult for the authorities to abide by the HC guidelines and save this most precious natural resource of ours?

We urge the DNCC to stop dumping waste on the banks of Turag immediately. The BIWTA, the National River Conservation Commission and other related agencies should also play the role expected of them. We must protect our rivers from continued pollution and encroachment, and must dissuade government agencies from leading this carnage.

It's football, but it's not just about it

Enjoy Qatar World Cup but don't forget workers who made it happen

Yet another World Cup is finally upon us. After intense speculations about the 32 participating teams and their superstars who epitomise the game's power across the globe – as well as a 12-year build-up since Qatar was chosen to host this event – it will open on Sunday, with the host team taking on Ecuador in Group A. If you're a football fan, watching on TV from the comfort of your couch, or out on the venue, be ready to enjoy a month of footballing extravaganza. The games promise to be nail-biting, uplifting or heartbreaking, depending on which team you're rooting for.

This is the first-ever World Cup to be held in the Arab world, and the first to be staged outside of the northern hemisphere's summer window. Both facts are important for different reasons. Without going into detail, let's just say that they represent the change that football as a sport, and as a concept, is going through. For most fans in Bangladesh, however, the FIFA World Cup is a chance to watch their favourite teams lock horns with each other on the grandest of stages. Defending champions France, Brazil, Spain, Germany, and Argentina are tournament favourites, but don't rule out lesser teams. Of course, as always, Brazil and Argentina will be the two teams most closely followed. The playful frenzy that rival fans bring to the tournament, despite having little connection with those countries, is a unique feature of the game which, we hope, will not degenerate into anything beyond that.

Football today is not just about football, however. In a testimony to the increasing polarisations in the world, events off the field are becoming as important as events on it, sometimes for compelling reasons. The 2022 World Cup – and Qatar's role in it – has also been the subject of years-long scrutiny by human rights observers, who noted allegations of corruption, mistreatment of migrant workers, as well as criticism of Qatar's human rights records. One may recall a damning report by *The Guardian* early last year saying that more than 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had died in Qatar since it won the right to host the World Cup. We have come across stories of returnee migrants, involved in various construction projects related to the World Cup, who accused their Qatari employers of harsh treatment and wage theft. Their stories should not be drowned under the cacophony of cheers by football fans.

So while we welcome the World Cup 2022 from a sporting perspective and hope it will create joy and fond memories – as such events have historically done – we also hope it will be a moment of reflection on the plight of migrants, including those from Bangladesh, working in the Gulf countries. All of us need to work together to ensure their rights are protected, and their sacrifices honoured.

Why provoke the opposition and punish citizens?



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KAMAL AHMED

The diatribes meted out by the ruling Awami League leaders to the opposition BNP ahead of its scheduled grand rally in Dhaka has reached a new level of squabble in politics, making people nervous and worried over a potential confrontation. Friends and acquaintances have one common question to any journalist they meet: what's going to happen on December 10? These worries are not unreasonable. Recent developments, especially the evermore resurgence of the BNP's grassroots and supporters to defy all those obstacles put up by the ruling party, their cohorts and police makes it clear that the opposition is very much alive and kicking, and has not run out of steam in the last 16 years since its unpleasant exit from power.

Actions that have been replicated in each of the divisional rallies, so far, seems to be from the same playbook that includes not granting the preferred venue, enforcing a localised transport strike, clearly aimed at preventing people from attending the opposition rally, and police launching a campaign to arrest alleged suspects belonging to BNP on spurious grounds. That's not all. There are so-called vigilante actions by the local Awami League activists or their student and youth units, in the name of maintaining peace and resisting anarchy. But none of these tactics seemed to work. People have reached the venues by boat, vans and even by walking days early with pulled or flattened rice and molasses, and spent the night lying on the ground.

Then we heard from the ruling party's second in command, General Secretary Obaidul Quader, that the BNP would not get spared in December though they are getting mercy now. Since the BNP's month-long campaign against the government was launched, he has made "Khela Hobe" (won't be a walkover) a battle cry and used



PHOTO: STAR

Overcoming obstacles on the way to the venue, thousands of people gather for the BNP rally at the Dak Bungalow intersection in Khulna city on October 22.

it in every speech he made whether indoors or outdoors, in parliament or a public meeting. One may ask if "Khela Hobe" is not a provocation, what else is? If allowing the opposition to hold public meetings is subject to discretion or goodwill gesture of the ruling party, then can that party claim it is committed to upholding the constitution? Doesn't it violate Articles 37 and 38 of our constitution?

Contrast in administrative actions regarding political rallies could not be starker when it comes to BNP and other parties. There were two mass gatherings in Khulna just five days apart in October. The first one was on the 22nd organised by the BNP, which prompted a virtual siege for 48 hours of the city as it was cut off from the rest of the country due to a sudden, but all out transport strike. The second meeting was on October 28, but the organiser was Islami Andolon Bangladesh led by Pir Mufti Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim. There was no strike, no obstruction and no harassment of the

ground where the Awami League held its Dhaka district conference would never be given to any other party for security issues due to its proximity to a number of key public installations (KPI).

It is true that the government did not call the transport strike, but the claim that the government is not responsible is laughable as everyone knows about the dominance and control of the ruling party in those organisations representing transport owners and workers. Besides, according to the Road Transport Act 2018, it is the government who has sole authority to regulate and control all sorts of vehicles plying on the road. The licensing conditions for granting route permits clearly stipulate that no transport can suddenly pull out of service and cause disruption in public services. So, the government's inaction to end these strikes suggests some mystery, if not collusion.

Provocative languages used by ministers have two-fold implications

– one is to encourage their supporters and ruling party activists to become more aggressive, which we have seen in almost all cities where the BNP held its divisional rallies. Whether it is intended or not, the aggression among their supporters only intensifies. Those images of hundreds of motorbike riding activists belonging to Chhatra League and Jubo League taunting BNP supporters on their way to the rally venue certainly raises the risks of violence. The inflammatory language can certainly provoke confrontation, which so far, the BNP leadership have remarkably managed to control. Whether and how long they can and will keep calm and maintain their protests peaceful remains an open question. Sadly, the latest statement by the AL general secretary questioning BNP's softer approach raises new questions about the intention of the ruling party as some observers allege that the government is desperate to find an excuse to crack down on the opposition.

Concerns expressed by foreign diplomats and representatives of various international organisations, therefore, are not unfounded. It is hard to explain to those unfamiliar with our political culture and bloodied past why politicians in high offices use undemocratic language that encourages trouble, instead of political debate and resolution of disputes through dialogue.

If the objective of using such battle cries is to scare off the supporters and sympathisers of BNP and make their rallies appear smaller, undoubtedly that tactic has failed. Instead, sufferings for the residents of those divisional cities have prolonged from a few hours to a couple of days. Ministers and leaders of the ruling party should understand that punishing common people to get to their political rivals can never be justified.

The planned siege of Dhaka, cutting it off from the rest of the country like those divisional cities, as reported by some newspapers, to foil, or, at the least, disrupt the BNP's grand rally in December, on the part of the government is wrong both morally and politically. It has already been proven how counterproductive this tactic is in relation to BNP's divisional grand rallies. Repetition of a failed strategy should stop now.

Is SAARC's university losing its glory?



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MOSTAFA SHABUI

The South Asian University (SAU) in New Delhi is not only a point of pride for India but also for all South Asian countries. So far, SAU has been the most successful initiative of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries. The institute started its journey in 2010 at a temporary campus in New Delhi's Chanakyapuri (a diplomatic zone) as part of an agreement among the SAARC nations.

SAARC nations established this university to ensure quality education for all eight countries' students. But in the last few years, the SAU admins seem to have moved away from the right track.

Currently, the number of students in the university is around 600, including 60 to 70 Bangladeshi students.

Since 2010, many students from the eight countries have completed their Master's and PhD degrees in various disciplines from SAU and contributed to many national and international sectors. Students from less developed countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan, and Bhutan get a rare opportunity to study in a diverse and vibrant academic environment at SAU.

Sitting in Delhi, students from the eight countries are learning about the history, sciences, tradition, politics, economy, state policy, lifestyle, and the cultures of various South Asian countries. As a result, a mutual understanding is built up among students to then further the mutual interests of the entire region. The university's slogan is "Knowledge beyond borders," which creates a common sense of identity among students.

As a versatile academia, SAU is accumulating, generating, and

disseminating knowledge from a common platform for the socio-economic development of the region.

However, on November 4, the SAU admins issued suspension letters to five students. The proctorial committee expelled (rusticated) two students, suspended two students for the current academic year and suspended Sudeepo Das, a Bangladeshi PhD scholar of the economics department, for the current semester.

The admins claimed that these students were involved in acts of indiscipline and had violated the university's code of conduct.

But what really was the fault of the students? In reality, they have been suspended because, since October 13, they began a peaceful movement demanding the increase of stipends and merit scholarships for SAU students.

To quell the students' movement, the administration called the police to the campus, violating the SAU Act, 2016. The authorities also kept a prison van parked outside SAU premises, students told many international media outlets.

After the university administration took this harsh decision, the students intensified their agitation. On November 7, eight students from four countries went on an indefinite hunger strike outside the administration rooms on the fourth floor of the Akbar Bhawan. Meanwhile, two students from Bangladesh and one each from India and Sri Lanka fell sick and were treated in hospital.

Till the evening of November 11, four more students from different countries joined the hunger strike, but even that did not sway the administration. The university's vice president threatened to expel more students.

Meanwhile, many faculty members

have urged the acting president, acting vice president, and acting registrar to revoke the expulsion orders, but to no avail.

On November 11, 54 Bangladeshi students who are currently studying at the SAU wrote to the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi about the current status of their university. They also informed the Bangladeshi HC of the arbitrary suspension of Sudeepo Das.

The scholarships, stipends, and financial aid given to a few students, based on their merit and financial status, are not nearly enough, especially given the ongoing global inflation. Photocopying books and research journals costs a lot of money per month for every student. The

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university only gives out scholarships, stipends, or financial aid of INR 5,000 to INR 7,000, and only to international Master's students.

As a former student of the SAU myself, I had found that many faculty members used to pay mess fees (bills for buying food) on behalf of many needy students from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

During the recent hunger strike, I spoke to many faculty members, students, and staff members from different countries and found that there is a kind of dissatisfaction that has grown inside everyone. Many reported various irregularities in the administration. Many teachers are worried about the future of the

institution.

The arts faculty members, who were always vocal about students' rights, are being undermined every day. Professor Sasanka Perera, dean of the social science department, and Professor Ravi Kumar, chairman of the same faculty, resigned from their posts earlier this year due to the various irregularities and general arbitrariness of the administration.

At present, there are no non-Indian members in any of the administrative positions, even though 50 percent of the posts are supposed to be held by non-Indians, as per the founding agreement of the SAU.

Inside sources say that, in 2019, an empowered committee was constituted to look into the scholarship demands of students and it recommended that scholarships should be increased. But this was never implemented.

Some faculty members claim that the acting president has illegitimately taken out a massive sum of money as transport allowance. The salaries for faculty members, which were frozen before, have also been revised to reflect current realities. But when it comes to students, the SAU authorities remain insensitive.

Moreover, the South Asian University is not an Indian university. It is a specialised institution of the SAARC countries. Foreign students studying at this university are even given a special category visa. By law, it is an international organisation. But the university administration seems to have forgotten that and is treating it like a local institution.

After the recent arbitrary suspensions, I am afraid that many foreign students will no longer be interested in SAU.

The bottom line is that SAU is an international university that has been jointly established and financed by the eight SAARC nations. It has earned dignity and a good reputation within a short span of time. Now, when the university admins seem to be going in an undesirable direction, it is representatives from these eight nations who must come together to get SAU back on track.