The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Let this day remind us of our ambitions

We must build on existing achievements and take the country forward

Today, as we mark our 51st year as a sovereign nation, we celebrate our triumph over the Pakistani occupation forces and the end of the genocide of 1971, and we pay tribute to the brave people whose sacrifices led to this glorious day. With a deep sense of gratitude, we also remember the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the four national leaders in steering us towards this chapter in our history.

There is no better occasion to examine what we have done with our hard-earned independence than the Victory Day. In terms of establishing ourselves as a sovereign nation, with a functional government and all the institutions of a modern state, we have been quite successful. In the last 51 years, Bangladesh has become an important player in regional affairs and established itself as a climate leader, bringing the voices of climate-vulnerable nations to the international stage. However, in terms of certain economic, social and human development indicators, we must acknowledge that our victory has remained incomplete.

Our economic indicators are perhaps where we have fared best comparatively. Despite the global shock of the pandemic, Bangladesh displayed great resilience and managed to recover faster than many other more developed countries. The World Bank's GDP growth forecast, while it has been revised downwards, is still 6.1 percent for the current fiscal year, and we continue to be on track for graduation from the LDC status.

But these achievements are diluted by how unequally their fruits have been distributed. Although so much of our success is built on the labour of workers in export-oriented industries and the remittances of migrant workers, the gap between the rich and poor continues to rise. According to the World Inequality Report 2022, just one percent of Bangladesh's population held 16.3 percent of total national income in 2021, and in recent months, media reports have exposed how the super-rich are becoming even richer through corruption, money laundering and loan defaults, even as the most marginalised households struggle with a crippling cost-of-living crisis.

We see the same inequality pervading almost every social indicator, from sanitation and housing to education and healthcare – although, in the latter, we have made considerable progress in terms of nutrition, maternal and child mortality, etc. However, it is in education where our greatest frustration lies, since we have turned it into a sector that values quantity over quality. For years, experts have been warning how our rote memorisation and exam-based system is failing to teach students real skills even as the number of GPAs has risen. Learning loss from the pandemic has only made things worse.

As we go forward into the next half-century of a liberated Bangladesh, we must focus on further strengthening our achievements, and look especially to the development of the education sector, since on it rests our future. We must vow to make quality education our first priority, so that our next generations, who will take the spirit of '71 forward, can turn Bangladesh into the country we dreamt of during the Liberation War.

We must check wildlife trafficking

News of a new transit raises fresh concerns about endangered animals

It is worrying to know that Chattogram has emerged as a transit route for wildlife trafficking. This has been confirmed after police, according to a report, seized several consignments of animals while being smuggled from the hilly areas of Bandarban and Khagrachhari via Chattogram. Several criminal rackets are said to be active around the region, using lax monitoring and ingenious methods to smuggle endangered species including hoolock gibbons, porcupines, fishing cats, leopard cats, and Kalij pheasants. Despite the danger that traffickers pose to our diminishing wildlife number, it is clear that the response of the authorities has been quite inadequate.

According to some officials, smugglers collect animals from the deep forests of Ali Kadam, Naikhongchhari, Rowangchhari, Chattogram's Banshkhali, and Lohagara's Chunti. They are then transported to the port city via Satkania and Lohagara or Chakaria. Two recent seizures by police have brought to light how this works – involving an intricate, multi-layered process of poaching, collecting, smuggling and selling, both at home and abroad, via transnational syndicates – eventually contributing to a multi-billion-dollar global business. Although police occasionally seize consignments of animals and animal parts, and arrest low-level criminals involved in carrying them, the ringleaders always remain untouched.

The extent of the danger that wildlife faces as a result can be understood from an official estimate that says that a total of 425 animals were smuggled to Chattogram from different areas in the 2021-2022 fiscal year. Chattogram being a route has a strategic significance for both domestic and overseas transportation, but it is neither the only route nor are forests in the division the only poaching hotspots. Given how unprotected our forests are across the country, and how lax the monitoring of forest offices and local administrations is, it is safe to assume the problem is much more widespread.

We must admit, however, that the fight against illegal wildlife trade is not easy. As well as novel methods being used by field-level collectors, carriers and smugglers, those behind the trade are also increasingly using hard-to-trace digital communication tools to connect with customers. Facebook, for example, remains a thriving marketplace for wild animals despite the tech giant's pledge to help combat the trade. The involvement of affluent, powerful collectors makes it even harder to prevent. One may recall the rescue of three capped langurs from the bungalow of a lawmaker, who reportedly kept them caged for four years, violating the Wildlife Conservation Act-2012. No legal action was taken against him.

The wildlife trade is thriving because of the involvement of such powerful benefactors as well as the failure of relevant authorities to take effective measures. This is all the more unfortunate at a time when our wildlife population is facing a multidimensional existential crisis with their habitats – forests and forest lands – being gobbled up, often by state agencies themselves, under various pretexts. We must stop this trend. The government must take stringent measures to stop the illegal wildlife trade.

How far have we progressed in our green energy goal?

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Bangladesh, along with the rest of the world, has come to a point where full transition to the use of green energy is one of the only options left to tackle global warming and impacts of climate change. Corruption-free green energy can also be an alternative to oil and gas imports – especially in the face of the global energy crisis. As per the National Solar Energy Roadmap 2021-41, Bangladesh can produce 20,000 megawatts (MW) of green electricity by 2041 with a medium-scale solar electrification strategy – despite land scarcity. The capacity can be further expanded to 30,000MW with a high-end solar model with reclaimed five percent land of river basin development projects, industrial rooftops, and other unused land.

According to the government's Power System Master Plan (PSMP) 2016, renewable power should have constituted at least 10 percent of our total capacity by 2021. As per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 7), least developed countries (LDCs) must have 12 percent of their total electricity consumption from renewable sources. As a candidate for graduation out of the LDC status, it is prudent for Bangladesh to generate 17 percent of its electricity from renewable sources.

The possibilities that solar power offers

Bangladesh's solar irradiance is much better than the global average (about 1.43 times that of the Netherlands). In the isolated islands of Bhashan Char, Char Fasson, Bhola, Manpura, and others in the Barishal-Noakhali-Chattogram region, it is possible to set up a sustainable, cost-effective model of renewable power generation, and a community grid with a combination of solar-wind power as an alternative to expensive electricity transmission. According to Rana Adib, executive director of the Paris-based renewable energy research firm Ren21, "An energy system based on distributed and decentralised generation is more flexible and resilient to those central shocks which are becoming more frequent with climate change."

It's true that land to set up solar power plants is scarce, but there are alternative options. Bangladesh needs to develop urban and rural "solar homes," on a massive scale, which are equipped with quality storage. There should be sufficient focus on quality panel supply, cheap and environment-friendly energy storage solutions, cost-effective and quality local battery production and supply chain, converters and DC appliances, etc. Medium- and large-scale solar storage projects should be considered as well. Lithium-ion batteries, flow batteries, ion-salt-water batteries, gravity storage, etc are other storage options. There are electrolysis-based hydrogen storage and transportation options, too.

Bangladesh has great potential for producing green electricity through solar panels. FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

The electricity transmission and distribution authorities in Bangladesh – DESA, Desco, Palli Bidyut, etc – have to allow the sale of solar power by individuals and the private sector and provide infrastructure services – for a commission in return. Individuals will store the solar power generated through systems developed with their own or funded investment, and sell the surplus power. For this, the distribution system has to be made smart. The financing model, too, has to be defined. And we have to make battery recycling systems environment-friendly. As green electricity production increases, demand for oil and gas will decrease, which will save foreign currency.

Check the corruption

There are five private solar power plants in Bangladesh, with a production capacity of only 116MW. Eighteen others are in the pipeline, with a collective capacity of 1,114MW. Despite the pitfalls of quick rental and IPP capacity charge and unit payment, solar power purchase agreements have also been termed in dollars. Purchase contracts were offered at prices that are 10-20 times higher than that in India, the daily *Share Biz* reported. Hence, solar power is becoming another way of draining forex reserves like the notorious quick rentals.

According to a report published by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) in September 2020, the cost of solar power generation in India and the rest of the world is gradually decreasing. India's 2019-20 auction to set up two-gigawatt (GW) solar power plants has awarded licences at record low prices, costing just Tk 2.73 (2.36 rupees) per unit (kilowatt-hour). A recent auction to set up a 2GW solar power plant in Dubai also fixed the cost of generating Tk1.42 per unit, according to the report.

In contrast, the production cost of two government-owned solar power plants in Bangladesh is Tk 13-14 per unit. The solar power produced from the private sector plants cost 13-19 cents or Tk 14-20 per unit. PDB's data analysis shows that the cost of power generation in private plants has been estimated at 11-17 cents or Tk 12-17 per unit, says the *Share Biz* report. This indicates that the country's green power sector has been set up to become a potentially loss-making sector.

Is hydrogen-based energy an option?

Production of hydrogen-based electricity is very expensive. It requires a completely new infrastructure for production, transportation, distribution, and even consumption (e.g. fuel cell cars). Utilisation of the thermal energy produced as by-products also requires integrated ecosystems.

Without creating an ecosystem, hydrogen-based energy production will become impractical in Bangladesh's corrupt public expense model. Basically, hydrogen fuel is not a solution to the current fuel crisis in Bangladesh, but it is a future possibility.

The world is moving towards using hydrogen fuel alongside solar and wind power. Essentially, hydrogen is being produced by using surplus green electricity. Where demand for green electricity is less than its supply, countries produce hydrogen from water through electrolysis, store it, and transport it to different places when needed. The huge amount of thermal energy produced in this process is used for other heating purposes (as seen in Germany).

Electrolysis is an old technology, which has not been promoted commercially before as it costs much more than the value of the electricity it produces. Because solar, wind, landfill or biomass-based power have become cheaper, the road map for hydrogen fuel generation is also developing. The "energy ecosystem" of hydrogen fuel is not limited to electricity alone. Besides thermal use, renewable hydrogen and ammonia industries are also getting integrated with it.

The question is, since Bangladesh's green electricity production rate is only four percent of the total national production, is any roadmap based on hydrogen fuel import commercially viable? Bangladesh needs ample research to find its best green energy mix and future energy potentials.

And what about hydropower?

Buying hydropower from India's Arunachal Pradesh is another option for Bangladesh. But given the water crisis centring the Farakka and Gajoldoba dams, the Brahmaputra hydroelectricity plant has strategic problems of withdrawing water from the country's main source of freshwater, the Jamuna River. Besides, it puts the biodiversity, environment and food security of Bangladesh at risk.

Other options

Surprisingly, waste and biomass power is totally neglected in the world's most densely populated country. Although it sounds unrealistic, public and private enterprises need to consider investing in solar power plants in North Africa and the Middle East and wind power plants in Western Europe to produce hydrogen and transport it back home!

Nasa's old wind potential map shows there is wind power potential in the coastal belt of Chattogram and Cox's Bazar unto the Naf River, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Panchagarh. In the past, the Dutch have shown interest in creating 3D wind maps. It is unacceptable that Muhuri and Kutubdia pilot wind power projects failed just due to corruption and careless planning and installation.

In the past, foreign exchange reserves have been spent to implement short-sighted and unsustainable energy models. Green electricity is an alternative to the import of oil and gas, and this is where the government must focus. The future energy security solutions require the implementation of smart and visionary, transparent, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible plans.

'Farha' is a window to Palestine's truth

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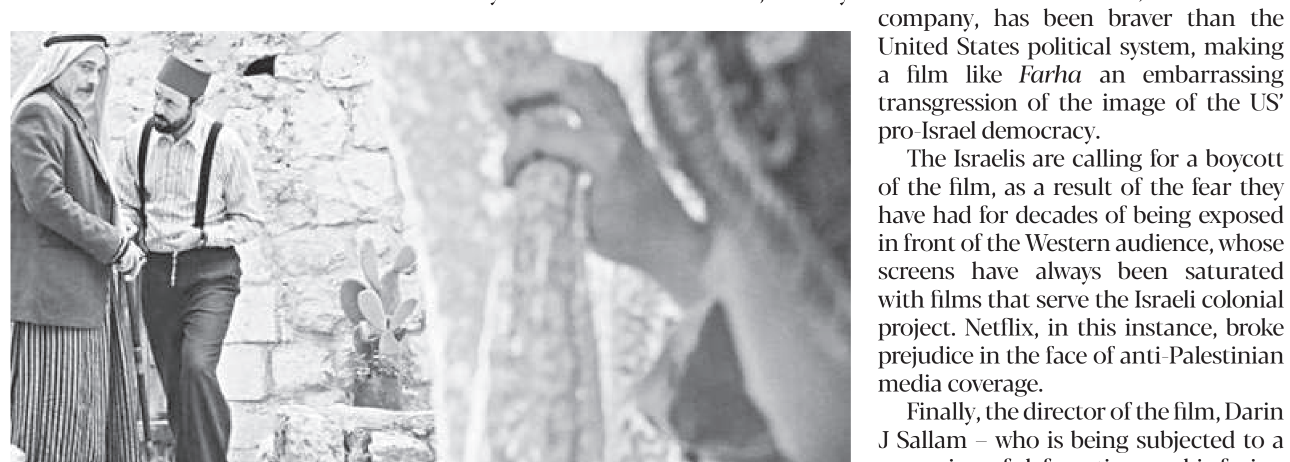
The international streaming platform, Netflix, is facing violent Israeli reactions for airing the Jordanian film *Farha*, which depicts the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians in the year 1948 (during the Palestinian Nakba). This has made the world aware of the reality of what took place 74 years ago. Every Palestinian who is a part of the Nakba generation can relate to the story of Farha – a story told from the perspective of a young girl who is a living witness to the crimes of the Israeli Zionists.

The movie represents every Palestinian and restores Palestine in the memory of the world – although the tragedy is still going on, and its features are still present, as the Palestinian refugees are still living in exile. The historical film has revealed the fear rooted in the depths of every Israeli, and that its narrative is extremely dangerous for the Zionists because it shows that the Israeli regime, as it is now, is nothing but a settler colonial project based upon the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population.



Still from "Farha" (2021), directed by Darin J Sallam.

The presentation of this film changes the prevailing pattern that has for decades dominated international stations and the Western media, which are biased towards the Israeli narrative in the majority of cases, and which always show Israel as a victim, and try to bury historical facts. Netflix, a global platform, succeeded in delivering the historical truth to its viewers all over the world.

Perhaps the response to these actions is not due to the facts, nor because of the one who tells them, but the real surprise is the one who presents them to the world. Criticisms and threats are routine whenever someone dares to claim a small testamentary space in historical records. Netflix, an American company, has been braver than the United States political system, making a film like *Farha* an embarrassing transgression of the image of the US' pro-Israel democracy.

The Israelis are calling for a boycott of the film, as a result of the fear they have had for decades of being exposed in front of the Western audience, whose screens have always been saturated with films that serve the Israeli colonial project. Netflix, in this instance, broke prejudice in the face of anti-Palestinian media coverage.

Finally, the director of the film, Darin J Sallam – who is being subjected to a campaign of defamation, and is facing attempts to drop the film that was nominated for the Academy Awards in 2023 – must be praised.

I recommend all readers to watch *Farha*, which is a mirror that reflects a small part of the Palestinian truth.

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