

# Christmas – a lesson in empathy and giving

## Much-needed values in a crisis-ridden world

Today, Christians all over the world will be celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ with prayers, singing of Christmas carols and cherishing the value of family and friendship. While it is a day that is special for Christians, Christmas is also a day of festivity and joy for most people regardless of their faith. Which is why we should focus on the spirit of Christmas while respecting the traditions that make it such an uplifting occasion. Remembering the life, teachings and values of Jesus Christ – values that are essentially shared by all major religions – as well as trying to imbibe them in our daily lives can become the salvo that we seek in a world so plagued with strife and hatred.

We are living at a time when countries are at war or getting ready for war. Weapons that kill thousands have become products of lucrative business, making wars necessary for continuous profits for a few. Racism and communalism have become the most powerful tools used by autocrats and opportunists to brainwash or divide people for their parochial interests. Economic fallout from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have accentuated the discontent and helplessness of people. Selfishness, intolerance of diverse views, growing lust for the material, insularity, violence, deceit, callousness towards Nature – all the vices of humankind have gained momentum, resulting in unimaginable suffering, deprivation and misery for those outside the seats of power. This only has weakened the strength of humanity that seems to be rushing towards its own extinction. The world, therefore, is in a deep crisis. It can only be resolved if we consciously try to change this self-destructive trajectory.

The spirit of Christmas teaches empathy, kindness to those in need, forgiveness, tolerance of those who are different, sacrifice for the benefit of people, and adopting simplicity and honesty in life. Most of all, it teaches boundless love for humanity, regardless of difference in opinions, beliefs, appearance and gender. These are universal values that define humanity. These are embedded in the teachings of all faiths and non-religious ideologies. These are values that can help humankind to survive the apocalyptic future that seems inevitable.

In Bangladesh, Christianity was introduced by Portuguese traders and missionaries during the late 16th and 17th centuries. The Christian community, though now much smaller than before, has significantly contributed to Bangladesh, especially to education by establishing schools and colleges that are known for their excellent academic standing as well as through charitable endeavours to help the most underprivileged and neglected.

It is, therefore, important to recognise the contributions of the Christian community and all other minority communities in the development of this nation. Embracing the diversity of faith and culture enriches a society. It makes it stronger and more vibrant. Making people of all communities and faiths feel protected, valued and appreciated is thus crucial for our own sake. We wish all our Christian brothers and sisters a safe, joyous Christmas!

# Time for a renewables revolution

## Why sit on the proposal to produce 1,000 MW of solar power?

It's frustrating to know that an investment proposal to produce 1,000 megawatts (MW) of solar power has been gathering dust at the Bangladesh Power Division at a time when the country desperately needs to expand and diversify its energy basket. Reportedly, the proposal for the USD 1.79 billion project was submitted by a US-based company in February 2022, just before the Russia-Ukraine war, which caused global energy prices to soar forcing a dollar-strapped Bangladesh to stop LNG import from the spot market. The lack of response from the authorities – despite the project's potential to meet domestic needs and realign our energy policy with international commitments on renewables – is inexplicable, to say the least.

We are told that, if approved, this would be the biggest investment of its kind in Bangladesh. Lack of investment is among reasons cited for the lack of growth of our renewable energy sector. Why sit on the proposal, then? Is it because of any pushback from anti-renewables interest groups? Is it because of lack of land needed to produce solar energy? The last argument doesn't hold with the aspirant investors having secured 5,000 acres of marsh land in Swarna Dwip, Noakhali, following an agreement with Bangladesh Army, which is in charge of the island. Those who have long benefitted from Bangladesh's dependence on fossil fuels and its energy policy that left room for exploitation through collusive deals and exorbitant prices may have an interest in seeing any renewable project to not take off.

Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that proposals that advance the cause of renewables deserve serious consideration. Officially, the government remains in favour of this cause. According to the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan submitted in COP26, Bangladesh aims to meet 40 percent of its energy demand through clean power by 2040, as part of a bid to reduce the impact of climate change. Last year, it made a major leap forward when it scrapped plans for 10 new coal-fired power plants. Despite that, use of fossil fuels hasn't decreased, and is unlikely to do so in the near future. The push for renewables has somehow never gone beyond official plans, feel good commitments and cosmetic changes.

As the UN secretary-general has said, "our burning world needs a renewables revolution". For Bangladesh, it means waning itself off harmful fossil fuels including coal, oil, and gas, and redirecting efforts to scaling up renewable energy. Unfortunately, renewable initiatives still don't enjoy the flexible provision and facilities that fossil fuel-based power producers do. The playing field is decidedly uneven for the former. Experts warn that if such initiatives are unnecessarily delayed – there are currently unapproved proposals for producing 4,000 MW of solar energy – it will send a negative message, and may even affect adaptation funding for us.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to address the mismatch between our energy commitments and practices, and take steps to get rid of the bottlenecks in the process of undertaking renewable initiatives. The Power Division must support the cause through its policies and initiatives.

# EDITORIAL

## How will the latest BERC amendment affect energy prices?



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The worldwide norm is that the energy sector consists of either state or natural monopolies. However, monopolistic control can have adverse effects on consumers, to control which, regulators are appointed to ensure efficiency, transparency and accountability. In 1966, there were reforms in Bangladesh, where the vertically integrated power and gas sectors were unbounded into three categories of generation, transmission and distribution, out of which multiple companies were set up.

At the time, there was quite a bit of resistance towards creating a regulator, but finally, in 2003, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) was established, and the BERC act was passed. It became effective in 2007-2008 when they started fixing prices. Although the regulatory act says that oil and liquid fuel prices will be fixed by the regulators, from the beginning the government kept this authority to itself. The reason behind that was shown to be the fact that the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), a government organisation, was the single importer of oil and petroleum in the country. Government subsidies in the sector were also presented as a factor.

Since 2008, BERC started holding



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

prices due to government subsidies.

When utility companies have asked for a 60-100 percent increase, BERC eventually allowed a 10-20 percent increase – after cost analysis, they can find out the level of subsidies the government will provide. In this monopolistic situation with little accountability, there is no question of efficiency or cost-cutting; all expenses are borne by consumers. However, the process of holding hearings keeps the utility companies on their toes.

The recent amendment to the BERC act can change this. The reason for this amendment given by the government – pointing to subsidies and time-consumption – does not stand scrutiny.

First of all, the government has not sidelined BERC entirely, but has said that in special circumstances, it will have the authority to fix prices. They have said so without specifying what these special circumstances are, but we can assume that they can increase prices numerous times in quick succession if the need presents itself. The government may take into consideration the political and economic situation to make these decisions.

The BERC act allows for a maximum of 90 days to declare prices after a hearing. In the new amendment, the

And if applications are made on a regular basis, like in some countries where gas and electricity prices are routinely adjusted every three months, this means there can be price hikes four times a year. This is all within rules and regulations. So the whole process has been set by BERC through rules and regulations, but they can be adjusted and aligned with government policy. The government can decide how regularly they want BERC to adjust prices, or if BERC should implement an automated price adjustment process.

Currently, BERC is already fixing the price of LPG every month. Changes of LPG, oil and gas prices mean changes in the prices of diesel and petrol. The government is now saying they will allow petrol and diesel to be sold by the private sector. The price-fixing for petrol and diesel need not be different from the way LPG prices are fixed. BERC can fix these prices on the basis of some formula, which will have to be approved through a hearing process. Everybody must see what its components are, and how prices are going to be adjusted.

Of course, for liquid fuels such as diesel, there might be an upward or downward adjustment. Upward

tomorrow, the prices of octane, diesel and petrol should go down to only Tk 40-50 per litre. Will the buses reduce their fare then? If the government cannot ensure that, then the benefit of automated price adjustment will not be enjoyed by consumers.

These are issues that will have to be faced later on. But by making this adjustment, people are subject to arbitrary price fixation by the government without any accountability or transparency. The government should give us an explanation on why they are increasing the price, and what their losses are. For example, BPC recently adjusted prices saying that they are losing money. But because there was no hearings or transparency, it was later found that they actually made Tk 40,000 crore in a seven-year period.

If there was a hearing for oil price-fixing, BERC and the general people would have known that they made that much money when they did not reduce prices manually after global oil prices went down. It all comes down to basic fairness, and a transparent and accountable process of fixing energy prices.

Transcribed and translated by **Monorom Polok and Azmin Azran.**

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# When Will the Peace of Christmas Come Home?



Hanna Hanania  
is the mayor of Bethlehem.

HANNA HANANIA

As mayor of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem, I have the privilege of lighting the Christmas tree in Manger Square and attending Midnight Mass at one of the world's oldest churches, built in the fourth century by the Byzantine Empress Helena. But my most important duty is to help give people faith and encouragement. When I lit the Christmas tree on December 3, I expressed my hope that the light would radiate to the world our desire for peace, and we prayed together that Christmas would fulfill its promise and bring people together.

Bringing people together has two meanings for Palestinians living under occupation. It can mean the togetherness of time shared with friends and relatives. But as the mayor of the city where it all began for Christians 2,000 years ago, I must think of the larger Palestinian family.

The fact that we have been living for decades under occupation means that we cannot enjoy the sense of togetherness that all people want during their great holidays, particularly the religious ones. Our people in Gaza

cannot come freely to Bethlehem, and our brothers and sisters in Jordan and other countries cannot easily obtain visas from an occupying power that applies exaggerated entry restrictions. Citizens of other Middle East countries, like Lebanon and Syria, which have no peace agreement with Israel, have no chance at all.

The fact that a Palestinian Christian like me, or a Christian living in a nearby Arab country, cannot simply come to Bethlehem for Christmas should be unacceptable to everyone – as should the eight-meter-high wall that still encircles our city, despite being declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004. This wall is a constant reminder of separation rather than togetherness.

This year marks 150 years since the municipality of Bethlehem was established. Under Palestinian Authority law, a Christian Arab serves as mayor here and in similar Palestinian cities. But the challenge of keeping Christian Arabs in Palestine has become more difficult because of the occupation. While many

Palestinians suffer under foreign military rule and wish that they could leave, Palestinian Christians are leaving in larger numbers simply because they have connections with the wider world through churches and the tourism business.

Bethlehem's population has grown over the years, and so has the number of hotel rooms – something unavailable to Mary and Joseph 2,000 years ago. But the growth of our population and tourist accommodations has been restricted by the wall Israel built on our land, and by the occupiers' refusal to allow us to pursue normal urban planning, partly because of Israeli settlement activity. These settlements, too, have long been considered illegal by the United Nations Security Council, yet Israel continues to build and confiscate land in violation of international law, which forbids occupiers from benefiting from their military conquests.

Christmas is celebrated three times in Bethlehem, reflecting the rites of the three main churches that have been here for centuries. Catholics and those following the Gregorian calendar hold midnight mass on December 25, while Orthodox Christians, who follow the eastern calendar, begin their Christmas celebrations on January 6. Armenians hold the ritual on January 18. As we do every year, we will observe all the formalities dictated by the Ottoman Status Quo. This centuries-old system of unwritten rules requires a very strict protocol governing where

local leaders meet the head of the respective church and who is allowed to accompany the patriarchs and bishops at various entrance points.

Ten years ago, UNESCO declared Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity to be in danger. After extensive renovation by the Palestinian government, funded by private and official donors, the church's mosaics and other elements, damaged by a fire centuries ago, were restored. But we Palestinian Christians, who have been living continuously in Bethlehem for 2,000 years, do not want our churches to become museums. We want Christian pilgrims from around the world, including Arab Christians, to come to Bethlehem to visit the living stones. For now, we are blessed that our people still hope and insist on a better tomorrow despite the absence of any serious peace talks.

When we lit the Christmas tree, we prayed that the light from Bethlehem – from the darkness of military occupation – would reach the entire world. Our faith is not in a change of heart by our occupiers, but in the justice of our cause. Two millennia ago, the skies of Bethlehem were lit as angels heralded the birth of Jesus by declaring, "Peace on Earth and goodwill to all." This Christmas, all of us in his hometown continue to yearn for that true peace.

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