

## The Daily Star

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### Institutionalised mismanagement in CPA

#### The port authorities must answer for the misallocation of funds

The number of irregularities haunting the Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) is truly staggering. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), the state coffers were robbed of Tk 258 crore for 26 counts of irregularities by the CPA between fiscal 2017-18 and 2019-20. They include violations of Public Procurement Rules 2008, Income Tax Ordinance 1984, National Board of Revenue's order and statutory regulatory order, Chittagong Port Ordinance 1976 and Central Public Works codes and breach of contract terms. For each of the irregularities, the CAG sought explanation from the CPA chairman and the shipping secretary, but got no answer, according to the CAG report submitted to the parliament in June 2022.

The CPA chairman, however, has refuted this allegation, saying that his organisation had answered each of the enquiries made by the CAG. He further said that the CPA was not involved in any financial irregularity in regards to one anomaly mentioned in the report concerning the procurement of a tug boat. The CPA had signed an agreement with New Western Marine Ship Builders for the procurement of a high-power tug boat for Tk 37.75 crore, Tk 3 crore more than the shipping ministry's estimated cost of Tk 34.72 crore, the CAG said. The contractor was supposed to deliver the tug boat by June 2017, but as of May 2020, the tug boat remained undelivered. Consequently, the shipping ministry asked the CPA to take punitive action against the supplier. But the port authority continued to pay the contractor in violation of the Particular Condition of Contract, instead of taking any action against the contractor like cancelling the contract or confiscating performance security or blacklisting it.

The state coffers were also deprived of Tk 32.27 crore after CPA's accounts and finance department deducted income tax from the bill of berth operators at a rate prescribed by the National Board of Revenue from fiscals 2017-18 to 2019-20. Another Tk 30 crore was lost because the CPA's estate department had failed to collect rent from companies for CPA's leased out properties. Despite not achieving its set targets, the port authority gave Tk 29.27 crore as incentive bonus to its officers and staff in fiscal 2019-20. This was counted as another irregularity by the CAG, which called for the collection of the amount back. Moreover, the CPA incurred a financial loss of Tk 10.9 crore for rental cars and minibuses, overshooting the ceiling set by the finance ministry for such expenses.

All of these indicate that corruption and mismanagement within the CPA have become rampant. At a time when the prime minister herself has repeatedly called on different government ministries to practice austerity, the CPA's decision to exceed its expenditure ceiling set by the finance ministry without hesitation illustrates how little those in charge of it care about saving public money. Additionally, the number of irregularities discovered by the CAG shows that corruption within the CPA has become institutionalised. And that is extremely concerning. It is time for the government to demand answers from the CPA, and to punish those responsible for its errant behaviour. The government should also look to recover the misallocated funds, as recommended by the CAG.

### Protect Mro community from violent land grabbers

#### The government must punish perpetrators and ensure indigenous land rights

We are appalled by the news of an attack on over a dozen homes in a Mro village in Bandarban's Lama upazila on Monday. The attackers are allegedly involved with a rubber plantation in the area and their goal, it appears, was to intimidate the indigenous people and drive them out of their land. As per our report, members of the community were even able to identify a few people who led the attack. When contacted, Kamal Uddin, Lama Rubber Industries Limited's manager, denied the allegations of the attack. However, he insisted that the villagers were building new houses on 400 acres of land that belonged to the company, not to the community. The Mro people, on the other hand, say the land in question is their ancestral home, and as such, belong to them.

What is more infuriating is that this is not the first such attack on the community. According to previous reports, the company has been attempting to drive out indigenous people for some time in order to seize their land. The locals accused its employees of torching crops on more than 300 acres of land belonging to the three villages' indigenous population on April 26 last year. They also claimed that criminals poisoned a small water flow in the hills near Rengyan Mro Para on September 6. These are acts of terrorism and should be dealt with accordingly. However, the state seems unwilling to take proper action against the perpetrators, despite repeated appeals by the Mro community for protection.

What makes the issue particularly complicated is that the Mro community does not have rights to their ancestral land, as land rights were never transferred to them. Instead, the state has been transferring land rights to companies that are driving out indigenous people to make space for their commercial projects. These business interests are often linked with powerful quarters and perpetrators are therefore able to carry out acts of violence against indigenous people with impunity. This is not acceptable. The state needs to take proper steps to transfer land rights to indigenous people and make sure that nobody can attempt to drive them out of their ancestral land.

It is not just the land of the Mro villages that has been under threat. Since 1997, other indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have also lost their land to other private rubber plantation owners and horticulturists. The indigenous population of Madhupur and Dinajpur experienced the same thing. Such repression of the indigenous community is reprehensible.

It is evident that the Bangladeshi government's failure to implement the CHT Accord fully, particularly the provisions dictating the traditional land rights of the indigenous communities in the region, has pushed them towards insecurity, aggression and violence. We urge the state to take all necessary measures to protect the rights of the indigenous people. It must investigate the continuous threats and attacks on the Mro community in Bangladesh, take urgent actions against the perpetrators and provide protection to the families who have been living their lives in fear.

# Will pre-election politics remain peaceful or become violent?



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As we enter 2023, there remains palpable anxiety and nervousness about the national political landscape. It is expected that the 12th parliamentary election will be held at the end of this year or early next year, thereby making everything in politics revolve around the issue of the national election. In a way, the ruling Awami League has already kicked off its campaign, as the prime minister, in her last three public meetings – in Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, and Jashore – sought votes for "the boat" in the next parliamentary elections. Another such meeting is scheduled to be held in Rajshahi in the first week of February.

Steps have been taken to revive the almost dormant 14-party alliance by allocating them two parliamentary seats for the upcoming by-elections in six constituencies, which fell vacant due to the resignations of BNP members.

The resignations by those handful of BNP MPs were also a tactic of mounting pressure on the government to agree to the opposition's demand of reintroducing a non-partisan, poll-time caretaker government. The BNP and most other political parties have long been accusing the AL government of capturing all state institutions, including the Election Commission (EC), the police, and public administration by employing partisan officials in such a way that a fair election would not be possible as long as the incumbent government remains in office.

Though ironic, the AL, which had imported and ditched the caretaker system is now facing the toughest challenge over its reluctance to bring it back. Almost all other political parties, except those who are in alliance with the AL and the Jatiya Party (JP) – who had fought the last election under a seat-sharing deal – have already indicated that they wouldn't join any election under the current government.

Though the ministers have ruled out any deviation from the current form of the constitution in order to make the next election an inclusive exercise, it is hard to imagine a scenario where a repetition of either of the two previous elections would be acceptable to anyone both within the country and abroad.

In 2014, the AL had used the argument of constitutional continuity in governance to counter criticisms of uncontested renewal of office. But, in 2018, it realised that the same logic would not work again and made a

strategic move to make the election inclusive. In February 2018, PM Sheikh Hasina even offered to form an all-party poll-time government and engaged in dialogue with opposition parties, including the BNP. It still remains a mystery why the BNP and its allies went on to participate in that election without replacing the partisan government with an all-party interim administration. As a result, the 2018 election, despite all its massive irregularities, including ballot stuffing the night before, became an inclusive election.



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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It is, therefore, expected that new tactics will be deployed by the AL in the next election. If the offer for an all-party government in 2018 was meant to produce a participatory election, would it be unreasonable to expect another new proposal from the government ahead of the upcoming general election? Such a proposal can change the course of political dynamics, after all.

The recent resurgence of BNP's organisational strength and support worries many political observers about the possibility of intense agitation and political violence throughout 2023.

harassment and persecution. It explains why the party has taken a very cautious approach in maintaining peace and abiding by rules in holding protest rallies. Keeping protests peaceful despite losing 15 of its comrades in the ongoing movement, according to party members' claims, is rare in our political history.

Whether the BNP and other opposition parties will be able to maintain this policy of avoiding confrontation would be one of the telltale signs of what is to come in the rest of the year.

This policy, so far, has helped the BNP hugely. Its mobilisation power, after 16 years out of government and continuous persecution for over a decade, has drawn everyone's attention. The ruling party has realised it, too. But, instead of making any attempt to negotiate the issues in contention, it appears that the AL has taken a provocative stance. It has been employing aggressive and confrontational programmes like organising parallel rallies and resorting to so-called peace enforcing activities, including searching mobile phones and surveilling opposition activists.

essential for holding a good election.

CEC Kazi Habibur Awal first mentioned the need for a consensus on February 28, 2022, immediately after taking his oath, and since then has voiced this opinion several times. Though the BNP has refused to accept the current EC as a neutral referee, it doesn't nullify his plea for a consensus.

Similarly, foreign governments – Western ones, in particular – have been calling for a free, fair, and inclusive election which will meet international standards. More importantly, their definition of a free and fair election includes ensuring a level playing field for all potential contenders, full freedoms of speech and organisation, freedom of press, and respect of human rights.

Political observers have cited the exclusion of Bangladesh from President Biden's first Democracy Summit as a message to the current government that there's too much deficiency in democratic norms and practices, which need to be addressed. If such exclusion continues in the second Democracy Summit (scheduled for March 29-30), what impact will it have on the next national election?

# Reflections on the climate change actions of 2022



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

The year 2022 was indeed a critical year for tackling climate change at global, national, and local levels.

Let me start at the personal level by acknowledging two major events for me. The first was at the beginning of 2022 when I was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by the British Government and later given the medal at Windsor Castle by Prince William. The second was at the end of the year when the leading science journal in the UK, Nature, selected me as one of their top ten global scientists for 2022 for my work on climate change. I am grateful for both of these honours and hope that they will enable me to do even better in my field in 2023.

Next, on the global level, the achievement of the fund for loss and damage at COP27 in Egypt in November must be highlighted. This was an aspiration which climate vulnerable developing countries, including Bangladesh, had been fighting for – without success – for decades. We were finally able to achieve this breakthrough by a combination of excellent technical research and

the strong diplomacy displayed by the vulnerable developing countries, together with the bigger group of developing countries, under the able leadership of Pakistan at COP27. We were able to convince even the most reluctant countries, such as the US, to finally agree to set up this new fund for loss and damage from human-induced climate change.

Of course, much still needs to be done to make the fund a reality, with money flowing in and then flowing out to reach the victims of climate change and address the losses and damages they are suffering already. We hope to achieve this next year at COP28.

At the national level, several major achievements in Bangladesh included the adoption of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) for our mitigation targets and also the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) for our adaptation actions, which will enable us to move forward on both mitigation and adaptation.

Also, the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) makes an even more ambitious and transformational attempt to leapfrog the country from

resilience to prosperity in the face of climate change over the next decade.

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**One important new element we will need to take up in 2023 will be carrying out national actions on loss and damage from human-induced climate change, which is unfortunately now a reality that goes beyond just mitigation and adaptation. This will need a combined effort from the government as well as from civil society members and academics.**

combined effort from the government as well as from civil society members and academics to develop a national loss and damage mechanism.

At the local level, too, much has happened around the world, with the adoption of the eight principles of

locally-led adaptation (LLA) by many countries and funders, and which are now being implemented in several countries – including Bangladesh.

In fact, the Bangladesh office of the Global Centre for Adaptation (GCA) was declared as the Global Hub on LLA by the chair of GCA, Ban Ki Moon (former secretary-general of the United Nations) and by PM Sheikh Hasina in December 2022. This will give Bangladesh an opportunity to share its experience and knowledge on LLA with other countries both in the Global South and the Global North.

However, the most disappointing aspect of actions to tackle climate change in 2022 was the lack of finance from the developed countries to support actions in developing countries, which again fell far short of the USD 100 billion that was promised for each year.

The only silver lining is that the share of the funds that are being provided for adaptation have indeed increased.

2023 is going to be much more challenging in terms of the actual impacts of climate change in Bangladesh and around the world. Every country will have to move faster to be better prepared in its mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage recovery actions.

It is to be hoped that COP28 in November 2023 will see the actual operationalisation of the fund for loss and damage that was established at COP27 in 2022.