



A large number of children in Bangladesh are suffering from multiple respiratory and immunity-related diseases, thanks to air pollution. FILE PHOTO: AFP

## Let us live, or we leave

Dhaka's toxic air is killing our future generations



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AIMAN R KHAN

You don't have to smoke a pack every day to get lung cancer in Dhaka – the air you breathe here will do it for you. Breathing this air is unfortunately not a choice for us; it's a necessity. A necessity that is also our kryptonite – a slow poison that kills us every day. Deep down we know that none of us is well. Regardless of our habits, we are all coughing every day. The few trees that are left in Dhaka have also given up. Their once green leaves are now covered with thick layers of dust.

In Dhaka, we do not live; we survive.

"Dhaka maintains its position consecutively at the top five of the lists of most polluted cities in the world," a ranking that we don't wish to be a part of, but our effortless performance leaves us "breathless." While smokers can consciously refrain from smoking in front of children, the poisonous air of this city mercilessly enters their still developing respiratory systems. As a result, their immunity is heavily compromised. Currently, a majority of children in Dhaka – and Bangladesh – are suffering from multiple respiratory and immunity-related diseases. So, are we really consciously letting our children slowly die right before our eyes?

Dhaka's air contains mercury, chromium, nickel, zinc, arsenic and all the other deadly elements that can cause chronic respiratory complications in humans, especially in children. With their lungs still developing, children are getting exposed to extremely harmful particles present in the air in Bangladesh. Unlike adults, they have a higher lung capacity, which makes them inhale a larger amount of air, thus making them more prone to breathing in this poison.

According to The State of Global Air 2019, a report by the US-based organisations Health Effects Institute and the Institute for Health Metrics

and Evaluation, "The life of a South Asian child will be shortened by 30 months on average as they grow up in the current high levels of air pollution." Air pollution is directly linked to diseases that can kill – pneumonia, bronchitis and asthma and many other irreparable lung and heart conditions. The smaller symptoms are mild lung infections and allergies. There is a sudden spike in infant mortality and premature births Dhaka, which can also be linked to air pollution.

What do all these statistics and

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health records mean to the ones responsible? Nothing notable has yet been done to address and tackle the situation.

Back in 2020, the High Court directed the authorities to submit a report within a week on what measures they had taken to reduce air pollution. Three years later, just last month, the court again called in the authorities concerned as to what they had done to implement the directives issued back in 2020. Noticing that nothing has been done yet, the court asked the authorities whether they

"want to kill us."

All that the authorities concerned are doing is to go after the brick kiln owners to stop their operations. But brick kilns are just one of the contributors. Nothing has been done to stop the bus companies who run public buses with apparently no fitness whatsoever. These buses still emit thick black smoke, in the presence of the traffic authorities who are responsible for regulating said vehicles. Small factories inside the city also emit poisonous smoke as by-products. The regulatory authorities don't seem to bat an eye as these violations keep occurring.

One doesn't have to be an expert to test how much dust is present in our air. Just stand on the footpath by the Tongi Diversion Road for 10 minutes. Your eyes will start to burn and you will start coughing heavily even if you are wearing a face mask. Imagine this amount of poison entering your body every day. What's even more worrisome is how it's affecting our children.

Paediatricians these days are busy treating children with allergy-related complications caused by air pollution on a regular basis, not to mention respiratory issues. If this goes on, we have to prepare for a very sick and unwell generation ahead.

The popular quote "The great Bangladeshi dream is to leave Bangladesh" seems to make a lot more sense now that parents have to see their children suffer while breathing in poisonous air. No wonder parents who can afford it are sending their children abroad for a better life. What used to be an "elevation of standard of living" has now become just the bare minimum – to be able to breathe clean air. If I want my children to live, I'd either have to buy them an expensive gas mask with an oxygen tank, or leave this country for good. No matter how unpatriotic it may seem, I don't want to see my kids gradually die before my eyes. More and more families are emigrating to other countries to provide this basic necessity to their children, and I think nothing tops anyone's priority of ensuring a healthy life for their children. If the authorities concerned do not act now, we will have to pay a heavy price in the future.

## BOOK REVIEW

# The ongoing economic peril and our plundered future



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KAMAL AHMED

On March 2, 2023, this daily reported that Moody's, a major global rating agency, had downgraded its outlook of Bangladesh's banking system from stable to negative. The report called this "a crushing development" that would make "foreign transactions trickier and costlier for businesses and banks." It also noted that the latest downward revision came after the lowering of ratings of the Social Islami Bank Ltd and putting the ratings of seven Bangladeshi banks' under review for downgrade in December.

Reading the story reminded me of a recently published book titled "Lunthito Bhabishyat: Bangladesh Arthanaitik Shonkoter Chalchitra" (A Plundered Future: The Realities of Bangladesh's Economic Crisis), in which Zia Hasan, a well-known researcher on development and economics, examined what prompted international financial institutions and rating agencies to change their assessments of Bangladesh's economy within a few months.

Hasan, in his essay, argues that though Moody's announcement of placing Bangladesh's Ba3 rating under review for downgrade was made on December 9, 2022, the crisis originated years ago with careless spending and reckless borrowing from both domestic and international sources. He argues that the economy has been facing far greater risks than what the national and international institutions have been projecting. According to Hasan, most of us have been focusing on three known issues: loan-GDP ratio, interest liability (which has reached about 20 percent of the revenue), and expected higher liability of paying off new interests

in parliaments without an effective opposition meant that none of the economic and governance issues have been meaningfully debated. Besides, concentration of unaccountable power has resulted in the creation and consolidation of a few cronies who have built their wealth enormously, and many of them have transferred assets abroad.

The book has four other critical reviews on a few other crucial issues: robbing of the banking sector, aggravating the national economy; unaccountable and unabated corruption in the power sector

**The author shows how seriously flawed our calculations of GDP are and how such inflated figures mislead other economic measurements. He points out that there are some sizable domestic and foreign liabilities that have not been taken into account, thereby understating some unavoidable consequences. By the time we would realise the actual gravity of the crisis, it would be too late, Hasan claims.**

to have. These changes include defining loan defaults, limitations on holding directorships and day-to-day management of banking services. Reading Shawkat's analysis reminded me of one of the reports published in this daily about the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) diagnosis of the problems in the banking system, including the high volume of defaulted loans, as one of the three domestic risks that derail the economy in the short- to-medium term.

Another insightful analysis in this book is about the power sector, which, according to its writer Ismail Ali, chief reporter of the daily *Share Biz*, identifies as one of the root causes of the current economic peril. Using the available official data, he scrutinised rationales for paying capacity charges, tax exemptions and land allocations at cheaper rates, who have benefitted from all these special favours, wider variations in cost calculations, discounts on domestic loans, and the piling up of foreign debts. His dissection of the so-called quick rental contracts detects several follies, including paying the price for power to local independent producers in foreign currencies. He argues that it has facilitated transfer of wealth abroad. He also argues that the so-called inflated and unrealistic capacity charge agreed upon with India's Adani Group would only benefit the billionaire. Ismail says that the indemnity act enacted to protect everyone involved in decision-making in the power sector has resulted in reckless and to some extent anti-national contracts.

Professor Ali Riaz in his scholarly piece examines the development principles of the Awami League government, in which a clear trend has emerged showing its emphasis on megaprojects. The objective is to make development projects more visible than their cost-benefit analysis. He draws lessons from global experiences, including those of the US and China, and identifies some fundamental weaknesses including reckless spending, high level of corruption, and lack of accountability, which have



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

and loan instalments. But there are three kinds of risks – known known risks, known unknown risks, and unknown unknown risks – and the last two risks are being largely ignored in most of the assessments.

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Zia Hasan's forensic examination of the state of the government exchequer is a part of the book. Ali Riaz, the book's editor and a distinguished professor of politics at Illinois State University in the US, explains in his introductory note how Bangladesh, with a gradual weakening of governance, accountability and the rule of law – which he describes as a "slow burn" process – has reached the current stage. Riaz argues that since 2014, two controversial elections resulting

building up huge liability for the state exchequer; the government's development philosophy that reflects its fascination with megaprojects; and phenomenal growth in money laundering by cronies of the powerful elite.

Once you read this book, every time you come across a story on defaulted loans, management failure of bankers, political interference in banking, directors abusing their positions, their influence over the administration or inability of the regulators, you will understand how we ended up here. In his chapter, Shawkat Hossain, head of online at the daily *Prothom Alo*, takes us through the evolution of banking in the country, both under public and private ownerships, and tells us how the robbing of banks transformed from using guns to gaining control of the board room over the last five decades.

He compiles most of the violations of rules in sanctioning and disbursing loans, validated afterwards with political interventions to the extent that required changing laws as many times as those offenders wanted

contributed to the growing debt liabilities. A comparison between all megaprojects in Bangladesh and similar projects in other countries would certainly make one aware of the absence of accountability and democratic governance.

The final chapter of the volume is an overview of money laundering abroad, the government's inaction and its political association. This chapter is written by Tarique Chayan, senior reporter at the daily *Manab Zamin*, in which he argues that political patronisation is the main reason that enables the powerful and corrupt elites to launder their ill-gotten wealth to safe havens and discourages, if not prevents, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) from taking any effective role to tackle it. Though the available data shows a three-fold increase in money laundering between 2004 and 2015, the actual level of asset flight is thought to be much higher.

Learning these facts together may not be a happy reading and certainly is a depressing exercise, but it is essential to comprehend what is happening in the country's economy.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Doles out
  - 6 Job reward
  - 11 Blunt of "A Quiet Place"
  - 12 One with a record
  - 13 Grown girl
  - 14 Garden starters
  - 15 Tooth layer
  - 17 Flying mammal
  - 19 Cook's need
  - 20 Sewing aid
  - 23 Tennis star
  - Andre
  - 25 "— Lisa"
  - 26 Recipe units
  - 28 Overly suave
  - 29 Pad
  - 30 Dir. Opposite
- SSW**
- 31 That lady
  - 32 Attempt
  - 33 Second-largest nation
  - 35 November stone
  - 38 Messing on TV
  - 41 Full of energy
  - 42 TV talk star
  - 43 Push away
  - 44 Was out
- DOWN**
- 1 Kitty cry
  - 2 Moody music
  - 3 Schedule
  - 4 Flair
  - 5 Nerve junction
  - 6 Bowler's button
  - 7 Skating jump
  - 8 Skating surface
  - 9 Lawn material
  - 10 USN rank
  - 16 Make damp
  - 17 Conductor's need
  - 18 Once more
  - 20 Place for a break
  - 21 Central
  - 22 Mean-spirited
  - 24 Devious
  - 25 Unruly group
  - 27 Holiday events
  - 31 Greenish brown
  - 33 Spelunker's place
  - 34 Small valley
  - 35 Ship sealer
  - 36 Bullring call
  - 37 Orange seed
  - 39 Workout unit
  - 40 Social worker



### TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

S H A M E L S C A M  
T U D O R L A R G O  
A M A S S A W A I T  
G E M S H U S T L E  
E R A F O G T E E L  
S U N L I G H T  
S T A G O R E S  
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I M O N I T S E W S  
L E M O N M I D I S  
A G A T E A L O N E  
C A N E T O N G S