

The land of polluted rivers

The authorities must take action now

It has been known for some time that the six main rivers surrounding Dhaka, considered as lifelines of the megacity, are being polluted at an alarming level by industrial and other wastes. But a new study has now revealed that at least 56 rivers flowing through different parts of the country are suffering from extreme pollution during the lean period – when natural flows of rivers are at their lowest. Whereas around two decades ago, river pollution was confined to mega-cities like Dhaka and Chattogram, it has now clearly spread to every town in the country. In other words, riverine Bangladesh has turned into the land of polluted rivers, and is well on track to becoming the land of dead rivers, should things continue along their current trajectories.

The Rivers and Delta Research Centre (RDRC), which conducted the new study, tested the levels of pH, dissolved oxygen (DO), chemical oxygen demand (COD) and biological oxygen demand (BOD) of more than 50 selected rivers in Dhaka, Khulna, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Barisal and Chattogram divisions. Unfortunately, every single one of them was found to be polluted. Alarmingly, plastic and polythene pollution were prevalent in all 56 rivers that were surveyed. And this should come as no surprise. This newspaper only recently reported how the authorities have made very little progress in implementing the High Court's directive from three years ago to the Department of Environment (DoE) to put an end to the use of single-use plastic in hotels, motels, and restaurants in coastal areas. Similarly, almost nothing has been done to implement the more than 20-year-old ban on the use of polythene and throwaway plastic bags in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, industries across the country continue to freely pollute rivers. The fact that the RDRC found only some rivers outside Dhaka where there are no big factories to have DO levels within the standard range confirms this. According to official records of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), around 350,000 kilogrammes (350 metric tons) of toxic waste is dumped into rivers every day from about 7,000 industries and other residential areas in greater Dhaka and its adjacent areas alone. But instead of preventing such mindless dumping of toxic waste, the authorities, too, are contributing to it by dumping various wastes into the rivers themselves.

On top of killing our rivers, such actions have been seriously impacting the local communities, especially people living near the water bodies in terms of their health and livelihoods. Thousands of individuals and families are dependent on the rivers for their livelihoods through fishing. With increased pollution, more and more fish are dying in these rivers, leaving hundreds of fishermen without any sources of income.

To us, it is clear that all the different ways in which rivers are being polluted, actually stem from the same root: the apathy of the authorities in safeguarding them. That is why, despite endless court directives for different authorities to take action, none of them gets properly followed through.

We demand that the authorities amend their ways. The courts should also consider handing out strict punishment to the authorities for their repeated failures to abide by court orders concerning our rivers. Additionally, the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) should be given some executive powers with more logistics and manpower to protect the country's rivers.

Mega-projects, mega-corruption, mega-greed

For how long will public money be plundered without any accountability?

In a capital where traffic remains the most pressing concern for an overwhelming majority of dwellers, the only thing the government agencies seem interested in is wasting – or rather, consuming – public money on ill conceived projects. According to a report by this daily, government agencies have undertaken eight different projects in and around the capital, ignoring the Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) and without consulting each other. For instance, the Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) has already spent Tk 321 crore in conducting a feasibility study and preliminary design for a 258km subway network in the capital and adjacent areas, while another government agency is already implementing a plan for six metro rail lines about 140km long.

More inconceivable still is that five of these projects have been initiated along a single alignment, with different agencies proposing and implementing their own agendas, without any coordination or consideration as to how these projects will work in tandem, or whether they will ease public suffering at all. The agencies did not even bother to consult with the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA), which is responsible for coordinating transport-related projects in Dhaka and five surrounding districts, and is currently reviewing and updating the RSTP. As a result, it is only likely that most of these projects will end up in the bin and, in the process, crores of taxpayers' money will be wasted without anyone having to answer for them.

But how can this be the state of development work in the country, particularly at a time when we are repeatedly told that Bangladesh's economy is bleeding profusely and that we all need to practice austerity? How can flyovers be built only to be broken? How can feasibility studies be conducted and designs finalised only for the project to be scrapped a few years later? How can such ludicrous projects be funded with the limited amount of taxpayers' money that should be going into social safety net programmes, health, and education?

It appears that the civil servants invested in these projects only care about them in so far as they are a means for them to earn some major bucks. The mega-projects, now synonymous with mega-corruption, seem to have whetted the mega-appetite of our government officials, so much so that repeated calls for austerity, from the prime minister no less, are being left unheeded. The question now is, will the PM – and the government at large – continue to allow such ruthless and reckless plundering of public resources at such a critical juncture, when the country and its people are suffering so acutely?

We demand accountability from the respective agencies and the government for these wasteful projects. It is downright disrespectful to the people of this country that their hard-earned money is being looted by those whose job it is to ease their suffering and ensure their best interests.

Why the Draft Data Protection Act is Concerning

Ambiguity, inadequate protection for sensitive data, and excessive control



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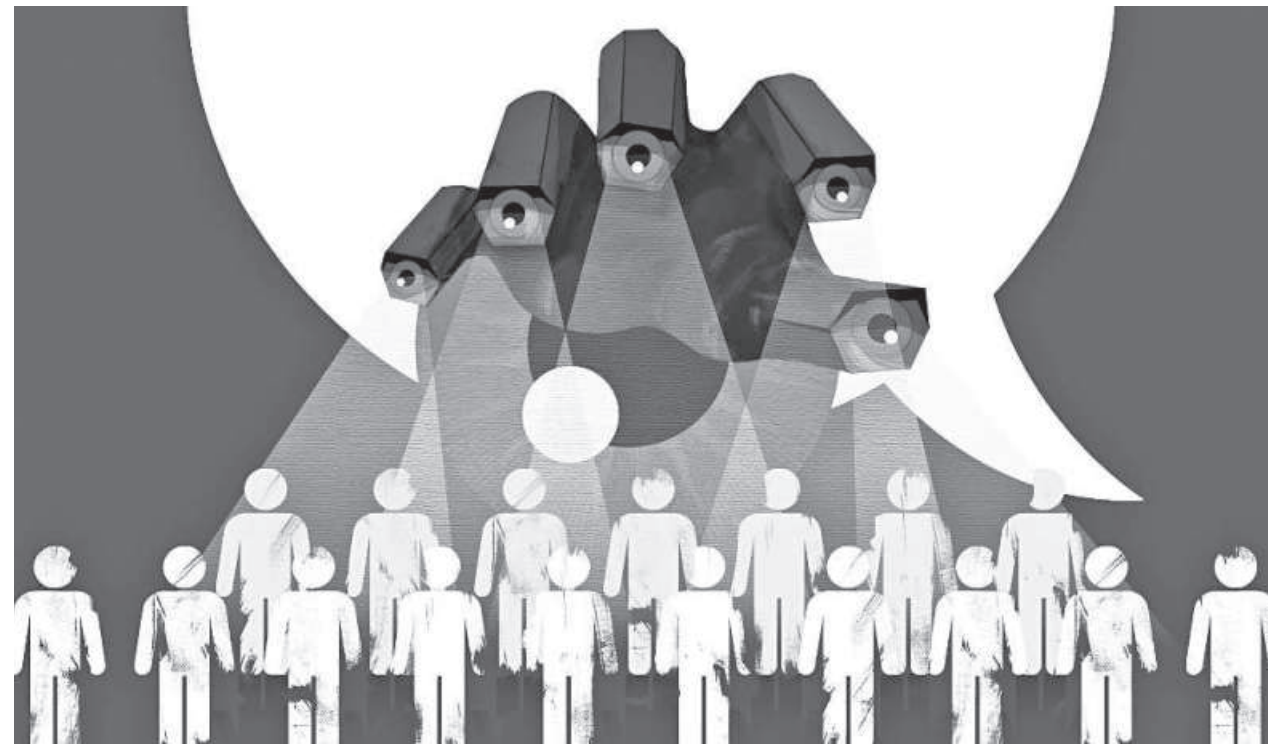
The proposed Data Protection Act (DPA) of Bangladesh has raised some serious human rights and business-related concerns at home and abroad. The draft law poorly defines the classification of data and does not follow the international standards to define privacy. It also does not mandate that privacy-related data fields be removed from telecom voice and data call records, broadband internet packets, intercepting sources, financial sources, and smartphone app crowdsourcing data.

The United Nations has shared 10 observations and objections regarding potential human rights violations through the DPA. Amnesty International said the legislation would put individuals' privacy at risk. The law, if passed, will allow deep government surveillance in the guise of data governance and interference with individuals' privacy rights, not to mention increase the space for abuse of power. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and local experts say it will protect the government's interests, not the citizens'.

The UN pointed out that the definition of "sensitive data" in the draft DPA was quite limited – it doesn't include disclosure of information related to race or colour, political opinion, trade association membership, religious or other beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. The draft does not clearly define personal data either, and the principles of data protection stated in the fifth article is not enough.

The localisation of data as stated in the draft law would create serious risks of surveillance and human rights violations, according to the UN. Law enforcement agencies would be allowed open access to any private data. Section 33 of DPA empowers the government to exempt law enforcement and intelligence agencies from the application of the act, which may include surveillance of data centres and servers in Bangladesh. Private and public companies may be pressured to disclose confidential information, which would undermine democratic governance.

Corporate executives, if non-compliant, can be held personally accountable under this framework. According to the UN, while administrative fines for data privacy violations are reasonable, the proposal of imposing criminal liability is not consistent with the principles of criminal law or international



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standards. The purpose of this legislation should be data protection, not regulation. The UN is also concerned about the collection, usage and retention of data on Bangladeshis residing abroad and recommends to withdraw data localising obligations.

No data structure is complete without independent authorities, the UN said. Without sovereign authority and auditing mechanisms to check abuse, even the best laws in the world would be meaningless. Bangladesh should ensure a DPA that does not conflict with the country's Right to Information (RTI) Act and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As the Atlantic Council explains, the expansion of the digital economy does raise concerns regarding data privacy that need to be addressed, but imposing blanket restrictions on information flow, along with vague enforcement provisions, will not strengthen consumer protection.

Data is the "new gold" in the world today. From digital marketing, product designs, digital trade and commerce, to artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality-related application development and deployment – all are based on big data mining. If properly designed, data localisation may serve local economic interests. However, for data giants such as Google, Facebook,

technical problems. As a result, a country can create conditions for the establishment of a sufficient number of data centres within its territory for job creation and investment flow, but technically cannot dictate that all data be localised within its border.

Last month, US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas expressed concern that if the draft DPA was passed with the condition of strict adherence to data localisation requirements, some American companies currently operating in Bangladesh might be forced to leave. The ambassador said over 2,000 start-ups might have to go out of business as a result.

Clearly, online freedom and business investment are both linked to the legal framework of data protection.

Almost all data centres in Bangladesh are built and maintained by foreign contractors and engineers. Even the Bangladesh Bank's SWIFT software, commercial banking software, driving licence system, and income tax digitisation projects are mainly maintained and troubleshooted by foreign engineers. The National Identity Card scheme is the only nationally managed one. If foreigners and law enforcement agencies are all given access to sensitive private data or data centres,

personal data is available in the telecom call detail record (CDR). If personal data is not isolated and removed from public sourcing, it will remain subject to potential misuse. Localisation of data under non-abuse conditions is helpful for business development in the country. But in a country where there is no sound electoral system, functioning democracy, good governance and accountability, abuse and impunity for abuse is the main danger.

There is a need for a detailed definition of sensitive data classification, data handover scopes, sales and marketing scopes – for traders, corporates, and government agencies. There must not be any impunity for state forces in the question of invasion of personal privacy. In matters of state security, law enforcement agencies will receive special confidential information only with the permission of a court in pending matters; even there, a third party witness has to be ensured. Otherwise, with free access to sensitive data, the law enforcement forces will make the country's digital arena a toxic breeding ground for citizen harassment, oppression of political opposition, and suppression of freedom of expression in the name of state interests.

A fresh climate change accord between Bangladesh and the UK



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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This week, the United Kingdom Climate Change Accord. The first recommendation I will focus on is the opportunity for collaboration on research to tackle the twin global challenges of climate change and poverty, building on the very rich foundation of collaborative research between universities and research institutes in both countries. This can consist of a strategic partnership to encourage collaborative research proposals to be submitted in a competitive manner on tackling climate change and poverty at the same time. Such strategic funding of research would replace the current ad hoc collaborative research that is already taking place, which produces good research but does not add up in terms of impacts on the ground.

Such strategic funding would not only benefit Bangladesh but also the UK, and indeed many other countries

as well. It will be a genuine global public good in terms of the knowledge it will generate.

A second aspect of this proposal would be to enhance the scholarship funds for students from Bangladesh to go to the UK for their postgraduate and PhD level studies and also provide scholarships from the Government of Bangladesh to UK students to come to Bangladesh for research and even enrol in study programmes here. The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University Bangladesh (IUB) already hosts many visiting researchers from the UK each year, but such arrangements are all done on an ad hoc basis. A more strategic programme could involve other universities in Bangladesh hosting students from the UK. This would again reinforce the mutual benefits to be gained by both countries.

The third aspect of a more strategic approach to collaboration is technology transfer and involving the private sector in investing in clean energy and clean technology. Later this month, an event will take place in Bangladesh to discuss ongoing activities and the potential for further collaboration on science and technology between the UK

and Bangladesh, organised by the alumni network of Imperial College in London (the premier science and technology university in the UK). The many alumni of UK universities in Bangladesh, whether in the government or private sector, are a great foundation of human resources that can be built on.

The final aspect of possible investment under the Accord is on the issue of loss and damage from climate change – for which a breakthrough agreement was reached at COP27 in November 2022 to establish a funding mechanism to address loss and damage. A new partnership has sprouted between UK-based research organisation International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and ICCCAD in order to set up a knowledge generation and capacity building initiative called ALL.ACT, which had its global launch in Dhaka just a few days ago. The UK Bangladesh Accord could support this initiative, too.

As the UK and Bangladesh celebrate half a century of close bilateral relations, it is a good time to take this relationship to the next level by collaborating to tackle the joint global challenges of climate change and rising poverty.