

## We must prepare for major tremors

### Rajuk study highlights catastrophic risk of potential earthquakes in Dhaka

Human brains are not wired to appreciate the gravity of distant problems. As a species, we live from day to day, or from decade to decade at most. In Dhaka, where threats to one's life or wellbeing are a daily reality, it may seem difficult to prepare for threats like a single catastrophic event in some distant future. Yet, this is what we need to do now, especially if we want to minimise the damage of any major earthquake. Such a threat in Dhaka may be nearer than you think, and as per a new study by Rajuk, if it comes to pass, it will leave an unimaginable trail of destruction.

The study is the first major assessment of earthquake vulnerability in Bangladesh, which was conducted over four years with the assistance of the World Bank. A Prothom Alo report based on its findings says that Dhaka is indeed at risk of facing earthquakes. And if an earthquake of 6.9 magnitude occurs along the Madhupur faultline, which is very close to Dhaka, about 8,65,000 buildings will be demolished. If it occurs during the day, about 2,10,000 people will die, and 2,29,000 more will be injured. The financial loss to be incurred will also be huge, to the tune of \$25 billion, in addition to \$44 billion in rebuilding costs.

Astonishing as they may sound, there is no disputing the numbers released by earthquake experts. As the most crowded city in the world, Dhaka is naturally a highly risky zone when it comes to disasters – natural or man-made. Add to that its unsafe buildings, often constructed without following building codes or by filling up wetlands. Most of them are not earthquake-resistant, and remain poorly maintained, leading to several fires and explosions in recent weeks. As well as lack of awareness and greed on the part of building owners, Rajuk itself is majorly responsible for the region's unplanned urbanisation or the poor oversight of residential/commercial buildings.

In such a situation, earthquake is but one of the many threats facing residents. As per the new study, even a major earthquake along the Dawki faultline in Sylhet – the second of the two faultlines on which Bangladesh rests – will also have a devastating effect on Dhaka. In that case, at least 40,935 buildings will be demolished, while 16,000 people will be killed. The level of threat that Dhaka faces is stupefying, just as the level of indifference still being shown by those in charge of it.

While the massive humanitarian crisis that has recently unfolded in Turkey and Syria following a 7.5 magnitude earthquake may have alarmed many about our own lack of earthquake preparedness, whether it will lead to meaningful action remains to be seen. After all, historically, we have spent much more on responding to natural disasters than we have on reducing the risk of them. Experts have cautioned against this tendency this time, saying the minor tremors recorded in the last several years may herald a major tremor in near future. We must plan and prepare accordingly then, backed by a strong political will. Any action by the authorities, especially Rajuk, must reflect the urgency we face.

## A laudable cycle of good deeds

### Volunteer group giving free meals for good deeds done deserves praise

We applaud the work of “Bhalo Kajer Hotel” (Meal for Good Work), a charitable project of a non-profit organisation that gives out free meals to anyone in exchange for one good deed or act of kindness done on a given day. This is a rather innovative way of helping and inspiring the poor at a time when high inflation is pushing more and more people in desperate situations, with food corporations and traders further increasing prices of essential commodities ahead of the holy month of Ramadan. These efforts to alleviate the suffering of those in need really make us hopeful.

It is also good to know that the “hotel” has been able to serve them for a couple of years now, thanks to its dedicated pool of volunteers (or “daily team members”) and donors. The organisation's aim to not only feed the hungry but also encourage them to help others in return has launched a cycle of good deeds, which is highly admirable. The hotel currently operates in five different locations in Dhaka: Kamalapur, Bashabo, Korail Slum, Shatrasta Mor, and Karwan Bazar – serving two meals a day, six days a week. On Fridays, volunteers head towards different mosques to distribute food packets post-Jummah prayers. Besides, it also extends helping hands to anyone in trouble, such as feeding the victims of the Tejgaon slum fire recently.

Looking back over the past few years, it is the activities of such independent organisations and volunteer groups that have helped thousands of people at their hour of need. Back when the country was caught in the grips of the Covid pandemic, with lockdown causing immense pressure on the people of limited means, a number of organisations such as Bidyandondo, Red Crescent Society, Mehman, Brihonnola (an organisation consisting of transgender volunteers) and others readily helped citizens with food donations, free PPEs, help with the vaccination process, transportation for patients within Dhaka, etc. Neither the goodwill nor the voluntary work of these groups can be repaid; their actions have helped those in need in the most priceless and memorable ways.

So we commend the selfless labour of those behind these organisations – especially the Bhalo Kajer Hotel – and would like to encourage them to keep up their charitable spirit. The fact that they are still funding and distributing free meals, even when the prices of essential food items have skyrocketed, proves the strength of their intent. We hope the government and wider society will recognise their work properly. The authorities should also identify ways in which they can help these organisations in their missions, financially and logistically, to maximise the impact of their work. These groups can be a vital partner in the government's social protection schemes, especially with the ongoing economic crisis pushing large numbers of people below the poverty line.



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The message from Charles Whiteley, the European Union ambassador to Bangladesh, that the EU will not send any observers to the next parliamentary election if it is not participatory appears to be intended to encourage all political parties to make the election inclusive. The EU ambassador communicated this message to the BNP, the main opposition, on Sunday when they met in Dhaka. Media reports suggest that a similar message has been passed on to the government as well. Though participation or inclusiveness of an election is an important prerequisite, can it alone make elections credible or fair? Unfortunately, the 2018 experience proved otherwise.

If a participatory election means that the maximum number of political parties and independent candidates will take part in the race, the 2018 election was truly participatory. Even most other by-elections held afterwards, including the latest six by-polls to the parliamentary seats vacated by BNP MPs, were somehow participatory. But if elections are meant for voters to participate in freely, then none of these elections would be counted as participatory, let alone credible or acceptable.

Let's recount what the EU and some other countries said about the 2018 election. According to a Reuters report following the polls, the EU statement said, “Violence has marred the election day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the process and have tainted the electoral campaign and the vote.” The EU also called for “a proper examination of allegations of irregularities.”

The United States said, “We are concerned that election-day irregularities prevented some people from voting, which undermined faith in the electoral process.” It added that “credible reports of harassment, intimidation, and violence in the pre-election period made it difficult for many opposition candidates and their supporters to meet, hold rallies, and campaign freely.”

Echoing similar concerns, the UK's then Minister of State for Asia and the



The element of genuine election refers to voters having a real choice between distinct political options and contestants.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Pacific Mark Field said he was “aware of credible accounts of obstacles, including arrests, that constrained or prevented campaigning by (the) opposition parties,” and then urged “a full, credible and transparent resolution of all complaints related to the conduct of the elections.”

These observations came largely on the basis of media reports and very limited access to the polling stations granted to diplomats stationed in Dhaka as most of the foreign observers, except a few from India, were not able to monitor the polls. The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), which was expected to deploy the largest number of observers, regrettably terminated their mission just a week before the polls, saying it was “due to significant delays in the accreditation approval by the Bangladesh Election Commission and visa approvals by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” ANFREL was supported by the US and a few other nations.

Much before the ANFREL, the EU announced that they were not sending any observer team owing to a lack of preparation and resources. “Sending a credible observer mission is a very big operation. It requires a big number of

comes to sending election observers. First, an exploratory delegation will visit the country to assess the situation six months before the election. Then a long-term delegation will come, most probably two months ahead of the polls. Finally, another team of EU election observers will come to observe the election.

There are a number of instances when a major contending party changed its mind at the last moment on taking part in an election or boycotting it. In 1986, the Awami League broke the opposition boycott at the eleventh hour; in 2006, the party, along with its allies, announced boycott after the Election Commission declared Gen Ershad's nomination invalid. It is, therefore, an unrealistic proposition that election monitoring will be dependent on the participation of all major political parties. What prevents poll monitors from withdrawing if, at any stage, they feel that their exercise is meaningless due to foul play, or the integrity of the process is being tainted, or their own safety is at risk?

As the election monitoring process is a long-drawn-out exercise, one may wonder whether this is a premature

genuine election in its true sense, not a sham exercise under the pretence of maximum participation.

The term “genuine elections” is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to the Compendium of International Standards for Elections, the element of genuine elections may be understood at two levels. In the broader sense, the adjective genuine can be seen to bring in the adjacent political freedoms and rights, such as the freedom of expression, assembly, association, and movement. In the narrower sense, the element of genuine election refers to voters having a real choice between distinct political options and contestants.

It's a well-known fact that as December is the month of Christmas, the biggest religious celebration in the West, organising an observer team is a big ask for them. Therefore, it is understandable that any election in the later part of December or early January is likely to be affected by a lack of enthusiasm in monitoring on the part of Western nations. Hope our political parties and the Election Commission will keep it in mind when scheduling the general election.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Hypocrisy on Stilts in India



Shashi Tharoor,  
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SHASHI THAROOR

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is outraged again. On a recent visit to the United Kingdom, Rahul Gandhi – the leader of the Indian National Congress, the country's main opposition party – stated that India's democracy was under attack, and that this has global implications. Back in India, his comments triggered an uproar.

Several BJP representatives voiced outrage, characteristically exaggerated for effect. BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad, a former cabinet minister, accused Gandhi of calling upon the United States and Europe to “interfere in the internal affairs of India,” and demanded that both Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and his predecessor Sonia Gandhi “disown” his “irresponsible and shameful comments.” He concluded by declaring that the BJP “would like to emphatically state with great agony that Rahul Gandhi, in his speeches, has sought to shame India's democracy, polity, parliament, political system, and judicial system.”

Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur was no less melodramatic, pleading with Gandhi not to “betray” India before issuing a warning, “No one will believe the lies

you spread about India from foreign soil.” Thakur then tried to discredit Gandhi, calling him a “storm of controversies” who “does not lose a single opportunity to malign India,” and Congress as a whole, which, by taking “local issues to the United Nations,” had shown that it had “not yet come out of the thought of slavery.”

This political tempest in a teacup is not merely about the exchange of barbs between the ruling party and the main opposition party (of which I am a member). It reveals a more profound fault line in India's current democratic discourse – one that will become increasingly apparent over the next year as national elections approach.

The BJP's charge against Gandhi is a serious one. As Prasad took pains to stress, no matter which party is in power, India has always strongly opposed outside interference in its internal affairs. Ever since independence, India has been prickly about its sovereignty. After spending two centuries unable to determine their own political destinies, Indians were hypersensitive to any hint of meddling from abroad, especially from India's former colonial overlords and their allies in the West.

India's freedom from colonial rule

became associated with its “strategic autonomy.” The country reserved the right to choose its own stance on global issues. And it exercised that right, refusing to support either side in the Cold War and proudly leading the Non-Aligned Movement. This fierce independence – including aversion to lectures from foreigners on domestic affairs – united all parties in India's fractious polity.

This explains the potency of the BJP's accusations against Gandhi. Statements that would hardly raise an eyebrow if uttered domestically can be characterised as almost treasonous if expressed abroad – especially in Britain. The national consensus, embraced by all parties, is that India's political differences end at the water's edge.

But those railing against Gandhi for supposedly breaching this consensus ignore an inconvenient truth: the person who first committed this violation was none other than the BJP's own leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. During official visits abroad – starting with the US in 2014, his first year in office – Modi stunned Indians by declaring repeatedly that nothing good had happened in India over the previous seven decades. Only after his ascent to power, he said, could Indians hold their heads high abroad.

It was not only Modi's statements abroad that undermined this sacrosanct consensus. For the entire history of the Indian parliament's committee system, the External Affairs Committee was chaired by an opposition MP, in order to send the signal that the country was united on foreign policy issues. But, in 2019, the BJP replaced the Congress MP

filling that role with a BJP figure. (Full disclosure: I was the MP who was unceremoniously removed.)

It is a bit rich for BJP representatives to protest that Rahul Gandhi is violating national consensus and political convention, given that their own party has been the principal offender in this regard. It is also unjust: Gandhi selected his words carefully, precisely to avoid conveying any impression that he was seeking foreign interference in India's affairs. In fact, he stated explicitly and emphatically that the crisis of democracy facing India is “an internal problem,” “an Indian problem,” and “the solution is going to come from inside.”

Regarding outsiders, Gandhi pointed out that, given its scale, India's democracy is a “global public good.” If it collapses, “democracy on the planet suffers a very serious, possibly fatal, blow.” Given this, he noted, what happens in India is important not just for Indians; it also matters to the West. “We will deal with our problem. But you must be aware that this problem is going to play out on a global scale. It's not going to play out only in India.”

That hardly sounds like a plea for intervention. Instead, as Congress has argued, Gandhi was asking the world to pay attention to what is happening in India.

Indian media reported that Gandhi had wondered aloud about “why Europe and the US, the defenders of democracies, were oblivious to how a huge chunk of democracy in India had come undone.” Thanks to the BJP's hysterical overreaction, if the West had not noticed before, it is sure to be aware of the problem now.