

Amnesty for black money is unethical

It will not reduce capital flight, only encourage the corrupt

We wholeheartedly agree with the chief of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) who opposed the proposal to reintroduce unconditional amnesty to whiten black money by investing it in real estate. Recently, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) made the proposal for a return of this opportunity for five to ten years in order to prevent money from being laundered abroad. Such a suggestion would be considered preposterous under different circumstances. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that we are hearing about this “indulgence”.

In FY 2021, the government gave this opportunity for black money to be legalised through investments in real estate, no questions asked about the source of funds, upon payment of a certain amount of tax. The amnesty allowed black money subject to a 10 percent tax, while a compliant taxpayer had to pay 30 percent in tax which was later reduced to 25 percent.

But as the CAB's president, also a former chief of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), has said: this practice is not acceptable because it would only encourage the illegal accumulation of wealth. Many individuals in the country earn money legally but do not show that in income tax returns, resulting in assets becoming untaxed. Thus, the government's efforts to improve its tax revenue will be nullified with an unconditional amnesty as it will only encourage tax evasion.

We agree that this move would be unethical and unconstitutional. It will give the wrong message to those who earn illegal income – that it is “okay” to do so as long as they invest it in real estate later. On the other hand, it is discriminatory towards those who faithfully pay taxes and contribute to the country's development. Moreover, in the long run, it will be detrimental to our society, with more and more real estate being gobbled up by a certain group of people who do not care how much the prices go up, leading to further inequality of wealth and assets.

The justification given by the FBCCI is that investments in flats, plots, commercial buildings and shopping malls will keep money inside the country and thus curb capital flight. Even if that were true, a country cannot bend the rules of ethics to prevent money from being laundered abroad. Also, can it really be guaranteed that individuals who have, over the years, laundered thousands of crores of illegally-earned takas and bought expensive real estate abroad, will suddenly start investing at home because of this amnesty?

It should be noted that the National Board of Revenue has since imposed rules that taxpayers will have to pay 25 percent on undisclosed funds and pay a 5 percent penalty on payable taxes. We echo the CAB chief's opinion that all businesses and individuals are responsible for paying their fair share of taxes and abiding by laws and regulations. Therefore, the government should focus on reducing corruption which is the root cause of the massive accumulation of black money. The proposed amnesty, if reinstated, will only increase corruption instead of curbing it.

No relief yet from extreme heat

We must be careful and address underlying reasons behind it

Bad news: the severe heatwave that has been sweeping through the country for about a week may continue for a few more days. On Sunday, Dhaka experienced its hottest day in the last 58 years, with a temperature of 40.5 degrees Celsius. Things are even worse off in some places outside the capital, with Chuadanga recording 42.2 degrees Celsius on Saturday – the highest in this season. In such a situation, the risks of heat strokes are quite high, with people experiencing cold-related illnesses.

Doctors say that a heat stroke, if untreated, can have immediate and long-term health consequences. One may recall that last July, during a lengthy heat spell in the northern region, at least 70 people died of heat-related illnesses. No doubt, the ongoing record-breaking heatwave and the relentless air pollution in urban centres make a terrifying combination for the ordinary people, with the poor and disadvantaged suffering disproportionately.

The problem is, the causes behind the ongoing heatwave are so multifaceted that there is no single entity that we can point our finger to or seek redressal from. There are no easy solutions either. While experts recommend that children and elderly people should remain indoors during the day, this is not an option for many, particularly day labourers and informal-sector workers who cannot afford to not work. Given the insanely high prices of most essentials, people are forced to bear the impossible heat during work, commute, and even rest.

There is no denying that human-induced climate change is largely to blame for the heatwave. It is a fact that our cities, particularly Dhaka, are ill-planned. Structures are being erected on any piece of land that is empty, without a care about how it will affect the surrounding environment. Tall buildings clustered around each other not only block wind flow and trap heat; the heavy use of air conditioners also contributes to higher temperatures. In the countryside, rivers are drying up, leaving behind sandy patches which emanate unbearable heat, making living and livelihood difficult for local communities. Given the increasing lack of wetlands across the country thanks to pollution and encroachment, people feel hotter than they otherwise would. And with more greenery being destroyed than is planted, it is no wonder that we are facing this intense heatwave.

Only long-term planning and thoughtful policies can rein in the extreme weather events we are witnessing today. We urge the city corporations, local administrations and all development authorities to stop the current trend of mindless urbanisation and deforestation. Water bodies must be protected from encroachers. Those responsible for choking rivers and canals must be brought to book. Decentralisation of Dhaka, too, must be prioritised. While the public must be aware of how to not fall ill during an extreme heatwave, global and local leaders must stamp down on the larger causes behind it.

Fiscal policies that could tackle air pollution and climate change



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Views expressed in the article are
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Bangladesh is going through a rapid urbanisation process, and its economy is undergoing significant structural changes. This transformation has the potential to harm the environment as carbon footprints tend to increase with urbanisation, as many studies have shown. As industrialisation progresses, it drives urbanisation and elevates energy consumption, resulting in a surge of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. This, in turn, causes a major environmental and climate-related problem – specifically air pollution.

Pollution has resulted in an alarming level of PM_{2.5} concentration in the air of Bangladesh, which was found to be much higher than the WHO-recommended levels in recent times. This worrisome trend highlights the urgent need for effective measures to tackle the detrimental effects of industrialisation on the country's environment and public health.

Bangladesh has made a pledge through its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to significantly reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions unconditionally by 6.73 percent in five crucial sectors by 2030: electricity generation, transportation, industry, waste management, and land use. Under conditional commitment, i.e. with foreign financing and technology support, Bangladesh is targeting a further reduction of 15.12 percent in GHG emissions. Implementation of these commitments will require huge resources, for which, the country needs to generate resources domestically, too. And doing so requires appropriate fiscal measures.

Environmental degradation and climate change impacts create externalities that can be reduced through appropriate pricing mechanisms. This would help generate resources to address the negative impacts of climate change. Besides, government spending also needs to be aligned with environmental and climate goals. Given that Bangladesh is at the forefront among climate victims, we must adopt fiscal initiatives that address this issue. The national budget is one avenue for taking such initiatives as it spells out specific measures for spending and generation of resources from various sources.

Our existing fiscal policies to promote green transformation are limited. However, there are a few initiatives in place to facilitate the greening of our economy. The



Without proper planning and monitoring, urbanisation can lead to significant environmental degradation.

Renewable Energy Policy 2008, for one, grants VAT exemption for certain renewable energy equipment and associated raw materials, as well as the corporate income tax exemptions for renewable energy producers for a five-year period. The Finance Act, 2014 introduced an environment protection surcharge, and two green funds have been established by the Bangladesh Bank – the Refinance Scheme for banks and financial institutions, and the Green Transformation Fund for export-oriented industries.

To encourage sustainable production and consumption, more accessible tax incentives and green funds are needed. Climate-focused fiscal measures involve not only spending on green initiatives, but also generating resources through appropriate taxation. The government can leverage the high demand for a green transition in different sectors by mobilising resources through budgetary measures, and allocating them towards greening the economy. In order to tackle air pollution and climate change, the government can take some important measures right away.

First, the government ought to fulfil its commitments as outlined in the Renewable Energy Policy. Presently, there are VAT exemptions for solar panels and batteries. But no

considered for electricity generated from renewables. The Renewable Energy Policy provides for the possibility of such an incentive tariff, allowing it to be priced up to 10 percent higher than the highest purchase price for electricity generated from fossil fuels.

Third, under the Finance Act, the one percent surcharge on goods produced by industries that contribute to environmental pollution must be fully enforced as soon as possible, in order to encourage environmental conservation.

Fourth, to promote the transition towards more sustainable practices, an effective strategy is to introduce a carbon tax on fossil fuels. Several studies have suggested that raising the price of carbon is the most effective and potent approach to tackling global warming and minimising air pollution. The revenue generated from this tax can be allocated towards the development and advancement of renewable energy sources. The Bangladesh government aims to implement a five percent carbon tax on fossil fuel prices by 2025, with a subsequent increase to 15 percent by 2041. However, from FY2024, the government may commence a carbon tax initially set at three percent. A carbon tax will serve as a significant incentive for businesses and individuals to shift away from fossil fuels and towards cleaner energy alternatives.

One may oppose a carbon tax due to concerns that it would result in increased energy costs for consumers. However, the revenue generated from such a tax can be utilised to provide rebates and dividends to consumers, ultimately mitigating the impact of any potential fuel price increase.

Fifth, to encourage the adoption of sustainable and renewable energy

TEXTBOOK REVISIONS IN INDIA

History rewritten is not really history



A CLOSER LOOK

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“Gandhiji’s death had an almost magical effect on the communal situation in the country. Partition-related anger and violence suddenly subsided... The government of India cracked down on organisations that were spreading communal hatred. Organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were banned for some time.”

These are some of the lines that have been erased from Indian school textbooks by the Indian National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in the name of “review” and “text rationalisation.” This, however, is not the first time that the current regime (or any regime) in India has tried to rewrite history to allegedly push their narrative and mould the impressionable minds of young students.

In 2002, when the first NDA government was in power, led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, authorities had tried to portray Muslim rulers as invaders in textbooks, depicting the mediaeval period of Indian history as a dark phase.

When the UPA government came to power in 2004, they had their share of chances to push their own agenda.

Cartoons of Jawaharlal Nehru and BR Ambedkar that were deemed offensive had been removed from textbooks. This led to NCERT advisers Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar resigning from their positions, as they did not agree with the changes.

And then, in 2017, the current regime initiated a new campaign to drive a more right-wing national narrative among school students.

In three phases, major changes have been made in school textbooks, removing the significance of Mughal rulers in Indian history, the dislike of Mahatma Gandhi by the Hindu right wing, and all references to the 2002 Gujarat riots – during which the current prime minister was the chief minister of the state – that killed more than 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus, according to conservative official estimates.

A helicopter view of the recent changes made in history, political science, and sociology textbooks helps identify how specific segments – containing what are unpalatable truths from the current regime's perspective – have been strategically deleted to curate a certain narrative. While entire chapters might not have been

deleted in all cases, specific contents have been erased, so that students get only a watered-down version of some historical events. For instance, while the chapter “The Mughal Empire” in the history textbook for Class 7 remains with an overview of the Mughal empire, a two-page table on the milestones during the regimes of emperors Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb has been removed.

While it is important to update textbooks to keep students updated with recent events, a deliberate attempt to rewrite history – as has been extensively attempted by the Modi government, with Amit Shah in a 2019 speech saying, “It is our responsibility to write our history” – is highly irresponsible, not to mention detrimental to the holistic development of the young generation and to nation building overall. It will essentially keep the young generation uneducated about certain aspects of their history – events that have shaped their collective national identity.

While historians and academics in India have condemned the recent changes in textbooks from an academic point of view, there are fears that, over time, such moves will further marginalise minority communities – especially Muslims – and create an environment where they feel isolated. Any representation of them as invaders who had ruled India with savagery may lead to further communal tensions.

The Indian authorities must realise that by rewriting history, they are only taking away from the ability of

the young generation to rationalise their roots. Such moves would in fact prevent them from becoming inclusive or feeling empathy for the diversity that India is known and admired for.

In this regard, it would be unfair if I do not reflect on the textbook revisions that have occurred in our own country. Over the years, various governments have tried to shape our own national history to drive their version of events, especially those surrounding the Liberation War, and the roles individual leaders played in our struggle for independence.

Apart from that, earlier this year, the government had to pull two books out for correction amid pressure from certain quarters. This is a highly unfortunate scenario. We are a nation proud of its religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. We must embrace this and do everything possible to promote our true national essence.

Coming back to India, the authorities there have contributed tremendously to the economic growth and development of India, and do not need to resort to historic revisionism to win the upcoming 2024 elections. But in the current context of high religious polarisation, which has reached a point where the historic Nalanda's Bihar Sharif was burnt by a Hindutva mob, such moves by the government to erase Muslim history from textbooks will only contribute to the collective marginalisation of the community. Indulging in such activities will also be counterproductive for the current regime in the long run. After all, the truth always comes out eventually.