

Rajuk must lead drive on risky buildings

Recent accidents highlight the urgency of proactive measures

A series of accidents in recent times have brought to light how vulnerable many buildings in Dhaka are to fires, explosions or collapses. Given the general disregard for building and fire safety regulations and the lack of enforcement by responsible authorities, questions can be asked about the electrical and structural safety of most buildings. However, one threat that is not talked about enough is their vulnerability to earthquakes, which, in a region considered highly vulnerable to quakes, should worry us.

According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, there are at least 41 highly vulnerable public buildings in areas under the jurisdiction of Rajuk: 23 in Dhaka, three in Gazipur, six in Savar, eight in Narayanganj, and one in Keraniganj. These have been identified after Rajuk, through its Urban Resilience Project, conducted a rapid visual screening of 3,252 buildings of government, semi-government and autonomous institutions. Those identified as highly risky following a subsequent preliminary engineering assessment (PEA) of 579 of all buildings need to be demolished. The question is, who will take the initiative?

Although Rajuk hasn't made public the list of the 41 buildings, we come to know about them from the report. Apparently, the authorities of those buildings are unlikely to demolish them of their own volition, but neither will Rajuk. Rajuk feels it has done its part by conducting the assessments and sending letters to the concerned institutions to vacate and demolish all dangerous buildings. We understand that demolishing entire buildings and relocating to safer alternatives are no easy task. There are also administrative challenges that can get in the way. But this has to be done, sooner rather than later. And as the central authority on development in this region, Rajuk must play a leading role in any demolition drive.

We have previously seen how lack of initiative, collaboration and coordination among government institutions can delay or undo vital, life-saving interventions. For example, over the last two decades, a total of 19 kitchen market buildings in Dhaka were identified as risky, yet those continue to be in operation to this day. Of them, nine are under the DNCC, and 10 under the DSCC. Despite promising to phase them out and relocate shops to new buildings, the city corporations have done little so far beyond putting up signboards. Millions continue to visit these establishments at great personal risk. Who will take responsibility in the event of a collapse or any other tragedy?

The standard response, after every tragedy, remains a mix of blame game and fruitless promises of action, but hardly anything concrete is done to prevent the recurrence of tragedies. Just imagine: In 2018, there were 19,642 fires in Dhaka. The number rose to 24,102 last year. If you add earthquake vulnerability to the equation, this city is literally strewn with ticking time bombs. Given the multidimensional safety challenge facing many of its buildings, we urge the government to take the safety issue seriously, as well as our unplanned urbanisation that is causing the threats in many cases, and make decisive interventions. There is no alternative to proactive measures at this stage.

Rajshahi faces a hotter future

Govt must prevent unplanned urbanisation from killing our cities

On April 17, Rajshahi city experienced one of its hottest days in over six years, with the mercury rising to a staggering 42.6 degrees Celsius. According to the meteorological department, this falls within the range categorised as a severe heatwave. The heat is so intense that health experts have warned residents to stay indoors for most of the daytime, up until 4:00pm, and even advised them to complete their Eid shopping after dark if needed. For the past two weeks, people have been suffering heavily as temperature has been hitting the 40-degree mark consistently.

A report published by Banik Barta further illustrates the challenge for Rajshahi. A lecturer at the Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET) said that irrespective of the temperature recorded, the "real feel" will be at least 10 degrees hotter. The decreasing amount of water vapour in the air of Rajshahi is responsible for this. Unfortunately, the situation has been more or less the same across the country. The question is, how can people function normally if the heat is this oppressive? What's equally concerning is that excessive heat can disproportionately affect the poor, and significantly lower productivity.

While we understand that urban spaces are one of the key drivers of development, it is the rapid and unplanned urbanisation that is now rendering many of these places almost unliveable. The decline in quality has been quite jarring. For example, between 1999 and 2019, Rajshahi's urban areas increased by about 16 percent, while the city lost 19 percent of its tree cover and four percent of its waterbodies and wetlands. Another study revealed that in the last 30 years, the city lost 17 percent of its greenery, and correspondingly, temperature has risen by 12 degrees Celsius. If the current trend holds, the city may experience much higher temperatures in the future.

True, human-induced climate change is largely to blame for the intense heatwaves we are facing today. But our city and development authorities cannot be excused either. It is the poor and unplanned urbanisation under their supervision, without much thought given to protecting natural spaces, that has resulted in localised "heat islands". Not just Rajshahi, this is a phenomenon experienced in Dhaka, Chattogram and Khulna too. If this mad rush for development continues, our cities will soon become all but uninhabitable.

Natural and green spaces play a crucial role in temperature regulation. Research has found that temperature tends to be higher in urban areas and barren lands than in wetlands and green spaces. We, therefore, urge the authorities to take note of the drastic rise in temperature in our cities across the country. To check this trend, they must act immediately. They must protect what remains of our wetlands and green spaces, and bring encroachers and polluters to book. Our cities must be developed in a way that they can be climate-resilient.

Is renewable deployment suffering from fossil fuel lock-in?



Moshahida Sultana Ritu is associate professor of economics at the Department of Accounting and Information Systems, University of Dhaka.

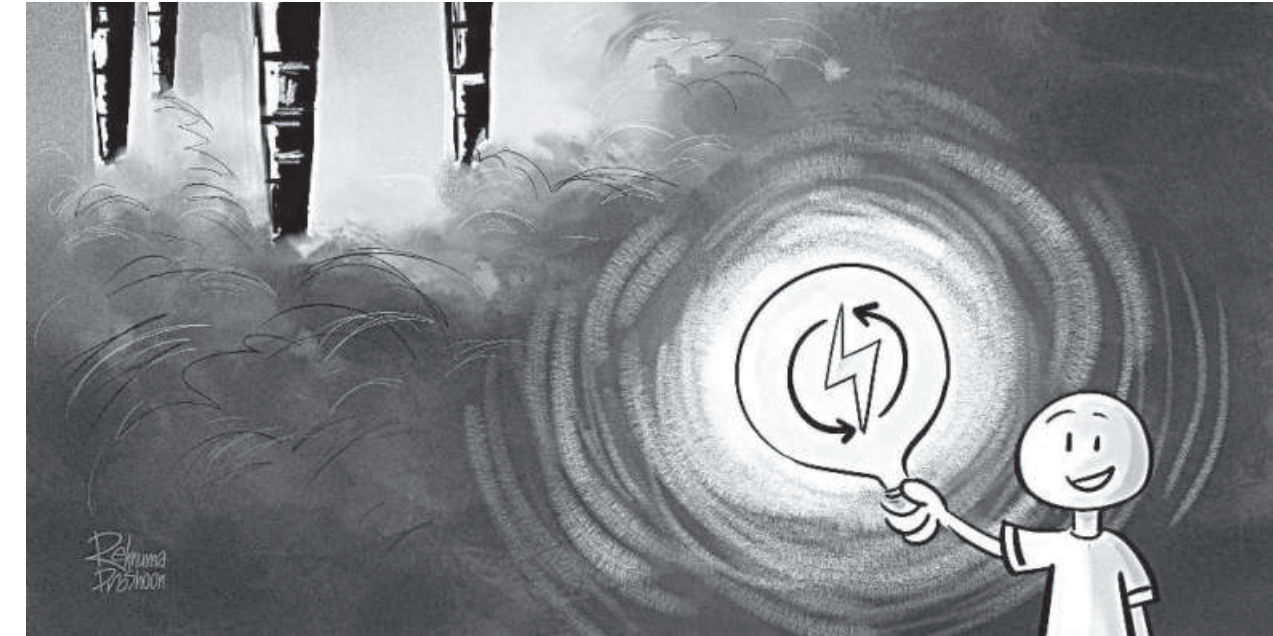
MOSHAHIDA SULTANA RITU

While the peak electricity supply reached 15,604MW in Bangladesh at the beginning of summer, many areas, mostly outside Dhaka, have been facing long hours of load shedding and disruption of economic activities. The reason behind the current crisis is not the lower installed capacity, but the inability to buy imported energy to run the existing power plants and interrupted services due to technical inefficiency. It is tragic to see that while people are suffering from the crisis, over 40 percent of installed capacity remains idle. It is even more tragic that the new capacity addition of 660MW from the trial operation of Rampal and import of 748MW from Adani's Godda coal-based power plant could not be of any use to reduce people's suffering. On top of that, more committed power plants including Matarbari, Banshkhali, Rooppur nuclear power plant, and the second unit of Payra are waiting to be finished.

The question is no longer whether Bangladesh has the installed capacity to meet the electricity demand. Rather, the question is whether Bangladesh will be able to pay for the imported energy to fulfil its demand amid the US dollar crisis coupled with high international prices and dwindling foreign exchange reserves.

The excruciating summer temperature and the deteriorating power crisis in Bangladesh brought back the agenda of solar electricity. In this respect, recent policy developments need attention. The draft renewable energy policy set a target to increase the renewables' contribution to 40 percent by 2041. So far, the feasibility of the target has been discussed mainly from the technical and economic perspectives. Previous debates mostly focused on grid capacity, intermittent supply, battery use, demand management, etc. Another concern has been the high cost of solar power, until the cost declined globally over the last decade. Now, the new experiences of integrating renewables to the grid are widely known. Significant spillover of knowledge around the world made solar technology accessible to countries like Bangladesh. However, while the fossil fuel lock-in as a barrier to clean energy technology adoption is widely discussed in the West, it is yet to receive much attention in Bangladesh.

Technological lock-in refers to the situation of persistent failure to switch to a new technology as replacing the incumbent technology becomes highly expensive. Although the term has been used by economists, historians and sociologists since the 1980s, scholars



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

have started to use "lock-in" in relation to fossil fuel use and the difficulty to switch to renewable energy. Others use the term carbon lock-in to describe a force that prolongs fossil fuel use despite knowing the risks of fossil fuels and having cost-effective alternatives. As a consequence, low-carbon technology diffuses at such a slow rate that the cost to society and the environment becomes too high.

Currently, many countries that are willing to phase out coal are finding it difficult to replace it, because it has already established a deep-rooted connection to society, institutions, and the economy. When a technology is adopted, it is not only about the energy it uses, it is also about the employment it creates, and the dependency it creates with the infrastructure, industry, and society. It is now very difficult for coal-dependent countries like Germany, India, Indonesia, and China to replace coal because it is expensive to replace the technology. The coal phaseout in those countries are slow, not only because the strong coal lobby resists phaseout, but also because it is expensive to compensate the workers, employ them elsewhere, and reorganise the infrastructure, economy, and institutions for clean energy use.

Considering the electricity overcapacity in Bangladesh created over the last decade, I want to say that Bangladesh, with its decisions to build coal power plants and an expensive nuclear power plant, has already started to feel the symptoms of technology lock-in. Even if Bangladesh wants to replace the

existing technology with renewable technologies in the future, the possibility is getting weaker every day.

The investment of billions of dollars in LNG infrastructure, coal, and nuclear power plants over the last decade has already made the incumbent projects irreplaceable. It has already become difficult to implement a clean energy plan because of the existing overcapacity. Financing new

seven percent average. The Russia-Ukraine war, dollar crisis, rising inflation, forex reserve crisis, and poor economic performance do not seem to increase the demand as high as the predicted growth level. So, the new addition by committed power plants will more likely increase the burden as more plants need to remain idle.

The current gap between predicted and actual demand has questioned the

renewable energy projects will most likely create some level of redundancy in the committed and existing installed capacity. Bangladesh's installed capacity of renewables is 966MW, which is 3.6 percent of the total installed capacity (26,700MW). The actual contribution to solar electricity supply is less than one percent (Ember 2023). By 2026, Bangladesh needs to install more than 1,500MW from renewable sources to reach the 10 percent target. The question is: don't we have to pay capacity charges to the idle plants? Obviously, we will have to pay unless the old ones are phased out.

Currently, the existing on-grid installed capacity of solar power is 367.81MW. There are 550MW solar park projects committed; all are at the implementation stage. The 200MW solar power plant in Gaibandha is operating on trial. Although there are more at the planning stage, there is little understanding of whether they will be implemented or not.

The rising overcapacity is a concern not only because it is expensive now, but also because it will potentially reduce our ability to switch to cheaper alternatives. According to the new draft renewable energy policy, the targets to increase the renewable electricity supply are 2,500MW by 2026 (first phase), 8,000MW in 2026-2030 (second phase), and 24,000MW in 2030-2041 (third phase). The targets assume total installed capacity will be more than double (60,000MW) the current installed capacity (26,700MW) by 2041. It is also assumed that Bangladesh's GDP will grow above

reliability of the demand estimation. Even the past electricity demand estimation of the 2016 Master Plan was based on the assumption of 10 percent demand growth. The draft Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) 2022 estimated that if the existing and committed power plants (gas, oil, coal, nuclear, and import) start production, by 2030 the total installed capacity will be 35,261MW. Based on various scenarios, the maximum demand in the same year will range from 31,709MW (low) to 41,890MW (high). After allowing for 10-15 percent reserve margin, the existing and already committed power plants will most likely satisfy the low scenario predicted demand, at the cost of limiting solar growth.

The existing coal-based capacity is 1,661MW, and committed capacity is 8,256MW. If more coal-based power plants are planned without considering the potential lock-in in the future, the electricity sector will again face a crisis. The persistent gap between actual generation and installed capacity has flagged the problem. It should ring the alarm now, rather than later when it will be even more difficult to replace the incumbent technologies. The government should learn from the crisis, revise the demand growth estimation based on more realistic assumptions, stop fossil fuel-based power plants, invest more on renewable deployment, and save the country from potential carbon lock-in. Expressing intention to transition to clean energy is not sufficient to save us from carbon lock-in.

We, as humans, must stop adapting to the unbearable



Debra Efroymsen is executive director at the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh and senior advisor at the Canadian NGO HealthBridge.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

It is astonishing the tenacity with which we cling to the untenable. We humans seem to have an infinite capacity to adapt to the unbearable, but when it comes to suggesting a solution, we resist with admirable, if misdirected, strength. We complain endlessly about problems, but are adamant in our belief that nothing better is possible.

This is, in a word, stupid.

Consider our modern cities, particularly those in South Asia. They are highly polluted. People regularly die on the roads. We spend a fortune building new roads, flyovers, and elevated expressways, and then spend some more on vehicles to drive on them. We spend hours stuck in traffic every day. But if anyone suggests that perhaps our current approach to movement in cities is wrong, we write them off as crazy or impractical or unrealistic.

As if our current situation is sane, practical, and realistic.

Sometimes I think that humans

are actually *too* adaptable. We learn to live with the unbearable. Air pollution and road crashes kill us, noise drives us crazy, and yet we fail to act urgently about these matters. We aren't happy that children can't play outdoors, but hey, they've all got smartphones now. The climate crisis threatens our very survival, and yet we can't be bothered to act about it, because we're too distracted by studies, work, and social media.

There exists a very different possibility for our cities. It's a radical solution to much of what ails us. It would be incredibly difficult to achieve, but if we were to achieve it, our lives would improve dramatically. It takes courage to dream of something radically better. And it requires intelligence, strategy, and persistence to achieve it. But if more of us dreamt it and worked towards achieving it, we could make it a possibility – and that would make it all worthwhile.

Major improvements in our lives

have not come about by accepting misery as inevitable. People have risen up and protested, whether it be against insane working hours, terrible working conditions, or denying women the right to vote. People dreamt big, worked hard, and through their dedication, intelligence, strategy, and persistence, they brought about change. Others called them crazy. Others told them they would never achieve their goals. But rather than listen to the naysayers, they persisted. Rather than be discouraged by their failures, they learnt from them. And we have them to thank for much that is better in our lives today.

Now, imagine being able to walk safely and comfortably in cities, without fearing being hit by a car, without choking on car exhaust, without being subjected to constant honking. Imagine being able to move around by bicycle, reaching your destination in little time and essentially at no cost. Or taking a rickshaw or a tram and actually arriving at our destinations in a reasonable amount of time.

Imagine children playing outdoors – remember when that was a thing? Skating, cycling, playing badminton, chasing each other, laughing. Clusters of school children walking or cycling to school together.

But why just children? Imagine youth having space outdoors to socialise and the ability to move about

actively and safely.

Adults, too, of all ages, walking, taking bicycles or rickshaws. Benches on the footpaths where people can rest under the shade of a tree.

Trees? Did I mention trees? Imagine a city with more parks, canals, and other green space. A city that is cooler, thanks to all the dirt, water, and trees. A city that doesn't flood despite the worsening climate crisis, thanks to plenty of natural drainage. Rainwater seeps into the soil and replenishes the groundwater. Because there's space for that now. Because that's what we prioritise now.

A city that invites nature back in. Connected green spaces populated with local birds. Clean canals populated with local fish. Air that nourishes rather than poisons us.

Cities that are good for our health, for the health of other creatures, good for our pocketbooks. Cities that are safe, pleasant to live in.

I know, it's hard to imagine. And you're wondering, "Okay, sure, but what do we have to give up?"

Well, of course you'd have to give *something* up. Nothing comes for free! You'd have to give up, let's see... filthy air. Terrible congestion. Frequent road crashes.

And, yeah, the convenience and "status" of owning/using an automobile or a motorbike.