

Have a safe and joyous Eid

Eid comes at an uncertain time, but together we can forge ahead

It is that time of year again, a time that brings to an end a month of fasting, spiritual dedication and reflection. A time that brings communities and entire countries together. A time of feasts and family bonding. As we prepare to embrace this moment – Eid-ul-Fitr will be observed either on Saturday or Sunday, depending on Shawwal moon sighting – things are falling into a predictable pattern. To celebrate Eid with their loved ones, tens of thousands of people have already left Dhaka on trains, buses, and launches. Reportedly, it has been mostly hassle-free so far, although, in the mad rush for home, some gridlock is to be expected along with some trouble getting tickets. We hope that all this will be kept to a minimum, and relevant government agencies will do their job properly.

This Eid, however, comes under less-than-ideal circumstances. Long-held concerns over high food prices have remained unaddressed, or ignored, causing suffering for a vast majority of the population. For Dhaka-based traders, the situation has been particularly grim. Although shopping markets are drawing heavy footfalls, the effect of the devastating fires in two popular markets for retail or low-end customers will cast a long shadow over the community. The incidents in Bangabazar and New Super Market – coming within the space of 11 days – together damaged about 4,000 shops. And like in past years, many workers in the garments sector will go back home without wages or Eid bonuses. According to an estimate, as of Wednesday, over 32 percent of RMG factories in seven industrial zones – including in Ashulia, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram – are yet to pay bonuses to their workers.

These issues and others may ruin the festive mood for poor households and those with fixed income. Every Eid in Bangladesh also comes with the additional threat of precious lives being lost in road crashes. There is an irony in the fact that we talk about people streaming out of the capital without hassle, as they did last year too, only for us to be likely slapped with a long list of crash victims at the end of the holiday. Historically, Eids are when most road crashes occur. Last year, for example, highway travels during the extended Eid-ul-Fitr holiday between April 25 and May 8 resulted in the deaths of 376 people. With the relevant authorities still in a state of denial about the true extent of danger on our roads, one cannot help but worry if the same scenario will be repeated this time. We urge the authorities to take all measures necessary to ensure the safety of travellers.

Heading into the Eid holiday, however, we want to focus more on the brighter side of things as well as the lessons of the holy month that we can hopefully carry forward. As a nation, the lesson that will most benefit us is that of giving generously (to those in need of help) and of working together for the greater good of society. We wish everyone a safe and joyous Eid. Eid Mubarak!

Don't criminalise free thought

Withdraw suspension of Salina Shelley, repeal DSA

We are alarmed by the extent to which intolerance has been institutionalised in the country, severely curtailing people's right to free speech. The latest victim to have paid a price for expressing an opinion – a satire, for that matter – is Salina Akhter Shelley, poet and acting principal of Chattogram Port Authority Women's College. The Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) suspended Selina on April 16, alleging that her Facebook status on the Arabic word Ramadan had “hurt” religious sentiments, and that such an act was punishable under the Digital Security Act (DSA). Five years since the infamous DSA was passed, we are still at a loss to understand what exactly constitutes “hurting” of religious sentiments, who is entitled to have hurt sentiments, and how one can objectively judge such a feeling.

By now, we have shouted ourselves hoarse over the various ways in which the vague provisions in the DSA have been misused to target human rights defenders, opposition activists, journalists, writers, cartoonists, etc. The list of who can be a target of the DSA – and the scope of what constitutes an offence – keeps on increasing by the day, so much so that any slightly critical or creative thought can be (mis)interpreted as offensive. Its broad and ambiguous provisions have created a culture of fear, forcing people to self-censor their opinions. For how long will this draconian law – which has no place in a country that professes to be democratic – dictate our thoughts?

After defending the law for the first three years of its enactment, the law minister in December 2021 admitted that it had been “abused in certain cases”, adding that a six-member team had been formed to address some of the concerns raised nationally and internationally. In February 2022, he claimed that the UN had given some suggestions to the committee, which they were looking into. But then, the relevant UN offices told *The Daily Star* that no such committee had been in touch with them in the two years since the minister announced its formation. Does it mean that all the talk of addressing concerns about DSA was just a charade?

On March 31, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called for an immediate suspension of the DSA until necessary amendments were made, including repealing two sections and amending eight others. We are alarmed that far from delivering on his lofty promises of reform, the law minister rejected the possibility of repealing the two sections flagged by the OHCHR, and stated in no uncertain terms that the DSA was here to stay.

The government's reluctance to amend or repeal the DSA is an ominous sign, particularly as the national elections approach. What's equally concerning is that thought policing, popularised by the DSA, now seems to have spread across the country, with different institutions taking it upon themselves to criminalise diversity of thought, as evidenced by the case against Salina. We urge the authorities to withdraw the suspension against her, and stop criminalisation of freethinking by any means.

Vilification of a well-known scholar is a threat to us all



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If you carefully read the introduction of the 15-volume *Bangladesh War of Independence: Documents*, you will not miss the fact that the original goal of the government initiative was to write a comprehensive history of the country's Liberation War. However, the project members chose to collect and publish documents related to the war instead. The reason they cited for this decision was the difficulty of “maintaining impartiality and objectivity and avoiding the possibility of distortion” in writing about a contemporary event, particularly a “revolutionary event” like the Liberation War. They were aware of the diversity of experiences during the war and wanted to ensure the representation of multiple perspectives.

The project was headed by famous litterateur and journalist Hasan Hafizur Rahman, and the authentication committee of the project included famous historians and educationists of Bangladesh, including Prof Mafizullah Kabir, Prof Salahuddin Ahmed, and Prof Anisuzzaman.

The publication of the documents was a great service to the nation. Most importantly, they set a standard and provided a guiding spirit for future research on the war. These values have become increasingly relevant in Bangladesh, particularly in light of recent events such as the removal of renowned academician Prof Imtiaz Ahmed from his position as the director of Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS). This action was taken following a propaganda campaign against his book *Historicizing 1971 Genocide: State versus Person*, which was published in 2009. Interestingly, one of the campaigners, Sheikh Hafizur Rahman Karzon, has been appointed as the new director of CGS.

The event has set a dangerous precedent not only for future research



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on the Liberation War, but also for academic freedom in Bangladesh. It is ironic that this has been done by the same university whose teachers sacrificed their lives to uphold their freedom of thought and conscience during the war.

The most shocking aspect was the statement released by the Dhaka University Teachers' Association (DUTA). It is disconcerting to think about the future of intellectual freedom in Dhaka University.

For the sake of reason, I must ask: if these teachers are truly concerned about the history of the genocide or the Liberation War, why have they remained silent for nearly 13 years since the publication of Prof Imtiaz Ahmed's book?

It is a globally accepted practice that, when disagreeing with a scholar's position, one should follow academic norms. These teachers could have written another book or

published articles in national and international media or journals to refute Prof Ahmed's observations. A serious reading of the book and contextualising all its content paint a different picture.

It is noteworthy that the Centre for Genocide Studies, Prof Ahmed's brainchild, was the first academic initiative of its kind in Bangladesh to study the 1971 genocide.

Bangladesh need not worry about it. While these criticisms may be valid, they do not justify the defamation and harassment of Prof Ahmed. We must not forget that hatemongers will continue to operate in the future. It is necessary to speak out against such actions, for not doing so will further shrink our free space.

Hasan Hafizur Rahman expressed regret in the introduction of the

How will our climate budget look post-NAP2050?



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Two facts related to climate-relevant funding in Bangladesh fascinate me. First, between 2015-16 and 2022-23 fiscal years, Bangladesh allocated 7.26-8.1 percent of its annual national budget as climate budget, which is 0.7-0.8 percent of the national GDP. Second, 18 years ago, the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) estimated to invest \$73.5 million in climate change adaptation over the following few years. But such strategic planning magnified manyfold in October 2022, when the government approved the National Adaptation Plan, 2023-2050 (NAP2050), targeting to spend \$230 billion over the next three decades.

Since the government is now preparing its annual national budget for FY2023-24, what changes can we expect to see in the climate-relevant allocations, post-NAP2050?

I think we can expect three specific achievable changes in the forthcoming climate budget. First, in the current fiscal year, with a total climate budget of Tk 30,500 crore, the three ministries or divisions (out of 25) with the highest climate allocations are Ministry of Agriculture (Tk 8,667 crore), Local Government Division (Tk 3,768 crore), and Ministry of Water Resources (Tk 3,484 crore). In addition, the climate budget also shows allocations against six thematic areas of the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, 2009. Here, the highest allocation is made to food security, social protection, and health (41.87

percent), followed by infrastructure (27.78 percent), mitigation and low-carbon development (13.36 percent), comprehensive disaster management (7.21 percent), capacity-building and institutional strengthening (6.71 percent), and research and knowledge management (3.07 percent). These thematic allocations broadly match the ministerial allocations.

In the FY2023-24 budget, we also need to see the geographical distribution of the climate allocations. The NAP2050 contains the latest climate vulnerability maps of Bangladesh considering a wide range of shocks (e.g. cyclones and floods) and stresses (e.g. rise of sea level and salinity intrusion), prepared by the Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS). The CEGIS can help the Finance Division to prepare maps combining climate fund allocations against the degree of climate vulnerability. These maps should carry information down to the upazila level, if union-level information is not available for now. We indeed need to know how much money is going to Dhaka and how much to Dacope (Khulna), Derai (Sunamganj) or Dimla (Nilphamari).

Second, in the forthcoming climate budget, a separate section should be added on investments to be made in nature-based solutions (NbS) to tackle climate change. Here, NbS means to protect, restore, create, and manage aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems to adapt to climate change impacts

as well as reduce carbon dioxide in the air, while increasing the local biodiversity. Focusing on NbS has two specific rationales. First, the NAP2050 has already included NbS as one of its six main goals. Second, unlike climate finance, our conservation finance is poorly defined and is essentially made of project-based, short-term investments.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest

By incorporating allocations for nature-based solutions into Bangladesh's climate budget, we can essentially bring together financing of two biggest crises of our times: climate emergency and biodiversity loss. The environment ministry should work with the finance authorities to develop a tool to collate investments in NbS by different government agencies every year.

and Climate Change and its concerned departments are showing low interest in sustainable conservation financing. Therefore, we are not going to see much progress in establishing new funds as outlined in the Ecologically Critical Area Management Rules, 2016, the Protected Area Management Rules, 2017, and the Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017 any time soon. But the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, agreed upon by 188 countries in December 2022 in a global biodiversity meeting in Montreal, Canada, emphasises conservation finance to minimise the

current annual gap of \$700 billion.

By incorporating NbS allocations into Bangladesh's climate budget, we can essentially bring together financing of two biggest crises of our times: climate emergency and biodiversity loss. The environment ministry should work with the finance authorities to develop a tool to collate investments in NbS by different government agencies every year. Our experience of preparing climate budgets should be useful here.

Over the last two years, Bangladesh has developed two climate-related investment plans: the draft Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2030 (MCP2030) and the NAP2050. The climate budget for FY24 should track how many of these financial targets have been achieved or have received commitments from donors and development partners. If we look into the NAP2050, about 72.5 percent of the \$230 billion fund has to be invested by 2040. This means the country needs to triple its current yearly investment, which now stands just above \$3 billion.

In 2016, with FAO and USAID, the environment ministry prepared the Bangladesh Country Investment Plan for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change (EFCC-CIP). This CIP was supposed to be accompanied by a monitoring mechanism to track investments in these sectors until 2021, but it didn't work out. Based on past experience, the ministry and FAO can work with the finance authorities to develop a monitoring and reporting tool to track investments to implement the NAP2050.

The NAP2050 is an ambitious plan with 113 priority actions in crucial sectors ranging from water, disaster management, agriculture, nature conservation and urban, to policy, institution, capacity-building and research. If the NAP2050 can't make us rethink the way we prepare our climate budget, that will be a missed opportunity.