

Can a state agency just gobble up land?

BADC must stop filling water retention area in Gabtoli

It's alarming to know that the state-run Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) has filled 11 acres of a 53-acre water retention area in Gabtoli, Dhaka in violation of the Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act-2010. Even more alarmingly, the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), and the Department of Environment (DoE) – which together were responsible for the land – did nothing to prevent the filling although it continued for over six months until March. The area in question is marked as water retention land in the Detailed Area Plan (DAP). Reportedly, the BADC got neither a land use clearance from Rajuk nor any environmental clearance certificate from the DoE, both of which are mandatory.

A correspondent of this newspaper found that the BADC has set up a fence around the area and an excavator was being used to level it. Using a dredger, the height of the ground has been raised by up to about six feet. All these activities, locals fear, will adversely affect the drainage in and around Gabtoli City Colony, Goidertak, Mirpur, Mazar Road, Mohammadia Housing, Mohammadia Homes, Navodaya Housing, Shyamoli Housing, and Mansoorabad Housing. They also said that when it rains, waterlogging happens in that area. Earlier, some of the water used to recede through the now-occupied land. Now that it has been filled up, they expect the waterlogging problem to get worse.

After much delay, the DNCC, which made lofty promises about preventing waterlogging in the past, wrote to the BADC on March 29 to suspend the land development work. It also concurred that construction of a proposed four-story building meant for a tissue culture laboratory would seriously obstruct drainage. Unless the land filling is stopped and reversed, it will badly affect locals by aggravating the waterlogging problem. While the BADC is the obvious guilty party here, we cannot help but ask why the DNCC failed to intervene sooner or more strongly, as it should have.

Meanwhile, Rajuk, just like the DoE, pretended to have no idea about what has been going on with a category of land deemed extremely important for a city to function. Contradicting all their versions, however, the project director of the Central Tissue Culture and Seed Health Laboratory at the BADC claimed that there was no water retention land at the project site. Additionally, he claimed to have obtained permissions from the authorities concerned when the project was approved, but failed to produce any document to back up his claim. So, the question is, which of these government organisations is lying?

As things stand, it is the BADC that must take responsibility for how things turned out. The way it has gone about occupying or filling that crucial land, without any care about its environmental effect or the suffering of the people, is completely unacceptable. It just shows how unaccountable some of the government organisations have become. We urge the higher authorities to immediately stop the land filling in Gabtoli, and restore and properly preserve the water retention area.

Rana Plaza victims are still owed justice

Lack of progress in the trial process is deeply upsetting

A disaster of the scale of the Rana Plaza – considered the deadliest garment factory accident in history – must involve a multidimensional response. Healing or recovery must take place at the victim level, at the industrial level, and at the state level. After 10 years since the 2013 accident, which killed 1,135 people and injured about as many, we must admit that there has been noteworthy progress in terms of industrial reforms as well as rebuilding the lives of individual survivors. Of course, the memories of horror will live on, and some grievances may never be addressed. But the families of victims have come a long way from that moment of utter chaos and helplessness. But what about the justice that the state owes to them?

As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, there has been little progress on that front in all these years, despite repeated appeals from rights and labour organisations to expedite the trial process. A total of three cases were filed after the accident: one for murder (by police), one for violating the Building Construction Act (by Rajuk), and one for corruption related to the construction (by ACC). All cases are still stuck at various stages of the investigative process.

In the murder case, there are currently 39 accused and 594 witnesses. Of the witnesses, the testimonies of only 36 have been recorded so far, which shows how sluggish the entire process has been. Although various reasons have been cited for the delay, none of them are too convincing given the importance of the case which required fast-tracking. The other two cases have also suffered unjustifiable delay. All this makes one wonder whether the families of victims will at all see justice and finally have some sense of closure. The state has a historic responsibility to hold to account all individuals and parties culpable for the disaster. Every day wasted because of inaction pushes any possibility further away.

It is a shame for us that even today the survivors and those advocating for their rights are having to come out on the streets to demand fair compensation and justice. Although there has been a lot of activity to ensure workers' rights and safety at RMG factories since 2013, many of the demands raised so far remain unmet, including compensation equal to lifetime income, free lifelong treatment of injured workers, punishment for those involved in the collapse, confiscation of the Rana Plaza land and permanent rehabilitation of the injured there, etc. These demands are certainly legitimate, and can be met without much delay. The question is, why aren't they?

Taking stock of the 10 years of the Rana Plaza disaster gives us an opportunity to understand what have worked and what haven't, and to start afresh. Therefore, we urge the authorities to critically examine why the justice system has failed to deliver for the Rana Plaza victims, and ensure that all barriers to the trial process are removed. We cannot move ahead without ensuring justice in this darkest chapter in our industrial history.

Why is safe drinking water so hard to get?



Kallol Mustafa is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

As always, this summer we are seeing a shortage of piped water supplied by the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) in various parts of the capital. The crisis is more severe in Adabar, Shekhertek, Jurain, Muradpur, Nandipara, Badda and Banasree areas, where you hardly get any water in the pipeline – and if you do get it, it's dirty. Residents of these areas are forced to spend extra money to purchase water from Wasa water trucks, which is not available on time. There are many other areas in Bangladesh where there is a shortage of clean drinking water, in some places throughout the year.

Water is an essential element of life and one of the most important fundamental rights of citizens. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that all people – urban or rural, rich or poor – have access to safe drinking water. Although Bangladesh is going through significant infrastructural development, not enough investment has been made to ensure the availability of safe water for all. There are wide disparities in the availability, quality and prices of water between



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FILE PHOTO: AFP

Due to the neglect and inaction of the state, water supply has been virtually privatised in the coastal region. At one such private water business in Satkhira's Shyamnagar, one has to buy water for Tk 2 per litre. Shyamnagar now has 25 such plants for around 400,000 residents.

urban and rural, central and coastal, rich and poor people.

It is the responsibility of water supply and municipal authorities to supply water through pipelines in cities and towns. According to the WHO-Unicef Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report, 68.3 million people in Bangladesh (41 percent of the population) don't have access to safely managed drinking water. Only 159 municipalities out of 328 across the country have piped water supply systems. And even where piped water supply is available, not all households get access to it. For example, there are more than 12,000 households under Mongla municipality, but the number of water connections there is only 2,700.

The availability and quality of water are not the same everywhere and in every season. The tariff, too, varies from place to place. At the residential level, the price per thousand litres of water is Tk 15.18 in Dhaka Wasa. For the same amount

of water, Chattogram Wasa charges Tk 18, Rajshahi Wasa Tk 6.81, and Khulna Wasa Tk 8.98. Residents of Chalna, which is just 25 kilometres away from Khulna city, have to pay Tk 0.5-1 for just one litre of water.

The quality of piped water is relatively good and its availability is also higher in the affluent areas of towns and cities. In impoverished areas, water is often not available during the dry season, and what is available is dirty, smelly and contaminated. According to a report by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) titled "Water Governance in Dhaka," the daily per capita water consumption in Dhaka is 360 litres on an average. The per capita water consumption in affluent areas like Gulshan and Banani is 509 litres, while it is 215 litres in middle- and lower-middle-income areas like Badda, Kuril and Joar Sahara, and only 85 litres at households in the informal settlements. On an average, 22 percent of the households surveyed do not have access to water as per the demand.

Groundwater drawn up using tube wells is considered comparatively safe. However, in many places, safe water sources are shrinking due to arsenic contamination and the lowering of groundwater table. According to a survey conducted by the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) in 2021-22, excessive arsenic was found in the water of 14 percent tube wells across the country. And according to a 2019 cluster survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Unicef, 20 million people in the country drink arsenic-mixed water.

People living in the mountains and coastal areas suffer from an acute water crisis. According to DPHE data, 63 percent of the population in Rangamati, 61 percent in Bandarban and 78 percent in Khagrachhari

have basic water coverage, which in reality is just 50-60 percent of the population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area. The rest of the population have to depend on springs and streams as water sources. But as the hills are being cleared of forests and the sand and boulders are being extracted, those springs and streams are drying up, which is causing an

Besides, there are some rainwater harvesting projects by NGOs that are insufficient compared to the need.

Instead of making safe water accessible by reducing the price in the coastal areas, it seems the government is working to increase the price of water in the urban areas. For example, instead of Dhaka Wasa, the responsibility of supplying water

to the Purbachal New Town has been handed over to a public-private partnership entity comprising Rajuk and the United Delcot Water Limited, a private consortium comprising the United Water (Suqian) Co Ltd from China and Delcot Water from Bangladesh. The total cost of the project, including installation of 15 deep tube wells and pipelines, is set at Tk 592.39 crore, with Rajuk bearing Tk 299.80 crore and the consortium Tk 292.39 crore. The consortium will run the supply for 11 years to recover their investment and make a profit before handing over the responsibilities. Meanwhile, Rajuk will provide Tk 56 crore in maintenance cost every year.

On the one hand, extracting more groundwater will put additional pressure on the already depleting groundwater reserve. On the other hand, inequality in access to water will increase due to water being supplied by a for-profit private entity. Already, the household water tariff fixed at Purbachal is 31 percent higher than that in Dhaka Wasa.

It seems the ongoing economic growth and development activities have failed to ensure safe drinking water for all. Sources of safe water have been reduced due to the pollution of rivers and water bodies, uncontrolled usage of chemicals and pesticides, construction of dams and barrages by India on the transboundary rivers, and salinity intrusion in the coastal areas. Instead of surface water, the dependency on groundwater has increased dangerously. Taking advantage of this crisis, commercialisation of water has also risen. To change this situation, the government must stop treating water as a commercial product and take the necessary steps to ensure safe drinking water for the entire population in the country.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Concern about widespread gas leaks

On Monday night, many residents in the capital complained of gas leaks. These complaints arose as people began detecting the smell of gas in various parts of Dhaka city. Now, Titas Gas has reassured citizens that there is no danger in lighting stoves and that the issue has been resolved.

However, this is a constant fear that people in the country must live with. Over the past few years, there have been a number of fire or blast incidents caused by accumulated gas

in homes, industries, markets, and even at a mosque (in one known case). And, given the frequent fire incidents happening especially in the capital since the beginning of this year, it is not shocking that citizens' first response was to panic. All this points to the need for the authorities to take issues of fire safety seriously, across the board. No gas leak or irregularity in building design should be taken lightly.

Ali Ahmed, Dhaka

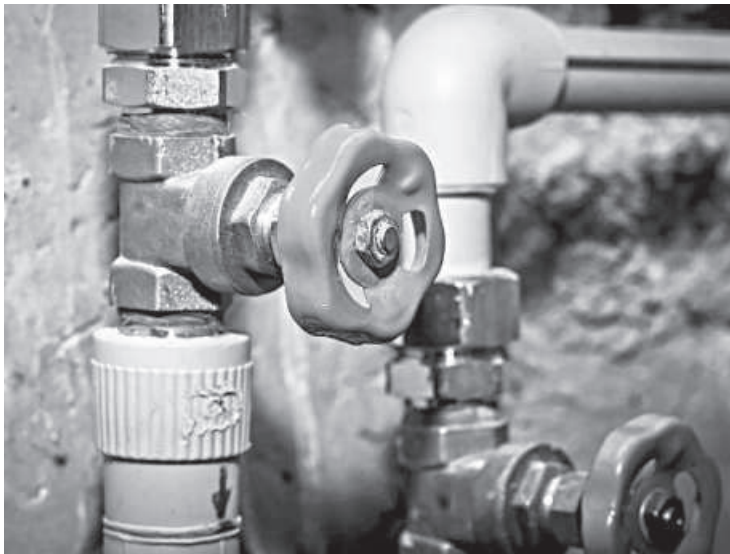


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