

The Daily Star

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Time to equip fire service properly

Increasing fire risks mean the fire service too must increase its capability

We are quite concerned about how ill-equipped the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) remains to deal with the growing threat of fire in our cities, especially the capital. While the number of fire incidents has doubled in the last 14 years thanks to unplanned urbanisation – it was 12,182 in 2009, which swelled to 24,102 by 2022 – the capacity of the fire service hasn't grown concomitantly. This is quite frustrating.

There is no doubt that firefighting has become much more difficult these days. Firefighters have to deal with traffic on their way to a scene, often through narrow streets ill-fitted for large vehicles. Then there is the challenge of finding water in a city with few ponds and lakes. Once on location, they also have to deal with curious onlookers crowding round the scene, and the increasingly tricky fire situations putting their life at greater risk, as seen in some recent incidents. Against such a backdrop, it is unacceptable that the firefighters would also be hamstrung by institutional challenges such as lack of training and proper equipment, manpower crisis, budget constraints, etc.

It is partly because of these problems that 14 firemen were killed and 225 injured while on duty over the last five years, according to an estimate. These challenges have been highlighted in a recent report by this daily which shows how the fire service is being overwhelmed by the triple whammy of increased fire incidents, increased external challenges, as well as internal issues. One of the issues that has been flagged is the lack of training and specialisation. Firefighters need both advanced and specialised training. As a former fire chief has said, there should be specialised teams within the fire department to tackle different kinds of fire situations. "Police or Rab have their specialised units like the bomb disposal unit or cybercrime unit, but for firefighters, there are no specialised units," he said.

Given the situation, there is a dire need for increasing budget support to the FSCD as well as recruiting and training more firefighters. In the current fiscal year, the FSCD got a budget of around Tk 733.57 crore, which translates to around Tk 44 per capita. For context, this is far less than what the Delhi state government spends (around Tk 332) or West Bengal spends (around Tk 65) per capita. Also, in any modern city, the ratio of police and firemen should be 2:1, meaning one firefighter against two policemen. In Bangladesh, however, there are less than 14,000 firefighters against 2.13 lakh cops. These people – as first responders to fires, explosions, road crashes, landslides, launch capsizes and other calamities – endure physical and mental trauma on a regular basis. They need more, not less, support, and not just financial. Before expecting them to save citizens from every calamity imaginable, we need to create a conducive environment for them to function, both for their sake and that of the wider society.

We, therefore, urge the higher authorities to properly fund, equip and train the fire service so that it can serve us better going forward.

Fuelled by inefficiency

Govt must phase out inefficient power plants, rethink energy policy

The government's ambitious energy policy over the past decade increasingly appears to have been built on irregularities, inefficiencies, and a lack of accountability of various stakeholders. A recent study conducted by the Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN) explains why, despite generating 58 percent more than what we need, there are still power shortages in the country. It notes that of the 150-157 active power plants currently in operation, only 39.8 percent are running properly. A whopping one-third of the fossil-fuel-based power plants were found to be faulty, with 18 percent suffering some form of mechanical problems. Out of the 43 state-owned power plants, as many as 22 were found sitting idle for more than half the time, while nine out of 23 publicly owned independent plants suffered fuel crises for approximately 40 percent of the time.

Since the current government came to power, it has increased the country's electricity generation fivefold, reducing load-shedding dramatically (till it reappeared in our lives last year). To do so, it built fossil-fuel-fired power plants – often ignoring protests from activists about their harmful impacts on the surrounding communities and environment – and gave permission to set up quick rental power plants across the country. A decade later, it appears we never really needed all of these power plants. In fact, we have been paying an incomprehensible amount of money as capacity charges for many of these plants to essentially sit idle every year. The CLEAN study found that the 12 worst performing plants, which stayed out of operation or faced technical difficulties for the longest time, were actually paid Tk 2,336 crore in capacity charges in the past year alone.

The study also found that the solar power plants ran without problems for 97.8 percent of the time, and that if we replaced the liquid-fuel-based power plants during the day with solar, we could have saved \$322.15 million every year. The question is: why are we still operating and investing in fossil-fuel-based power plants when cheaper, cleaner, and more efficient alternatives are available?

It is horrifying that the government invested so much money in establishing these power plants, without proper planning to begin with, and then did not even bother to ensure their smooth operation. At a time when the country is suffering from the worst economic crisis in over a decade, what possible justification can there be for such wastage of public funds? Instead of focusing on reducing the many inefficiencies in the energy sector, the authorities, unfortunately, seem bent on rewarding poor performers and passing down the ever-escalating costs of power generation to the consumers. Over the past year, we have not seen any indication that the government will move away from this course of action.

We ask the government to rethink its current policy, take urgent steps to phase out non-performing power plants, and address the inefficiencies that are driving electricity prices upwards for consumers. We urge them to open their eyes – the statistics quoted above speak for themselves.

How different is Dhaka's outlook from the US Indo-Pacific Strategy?



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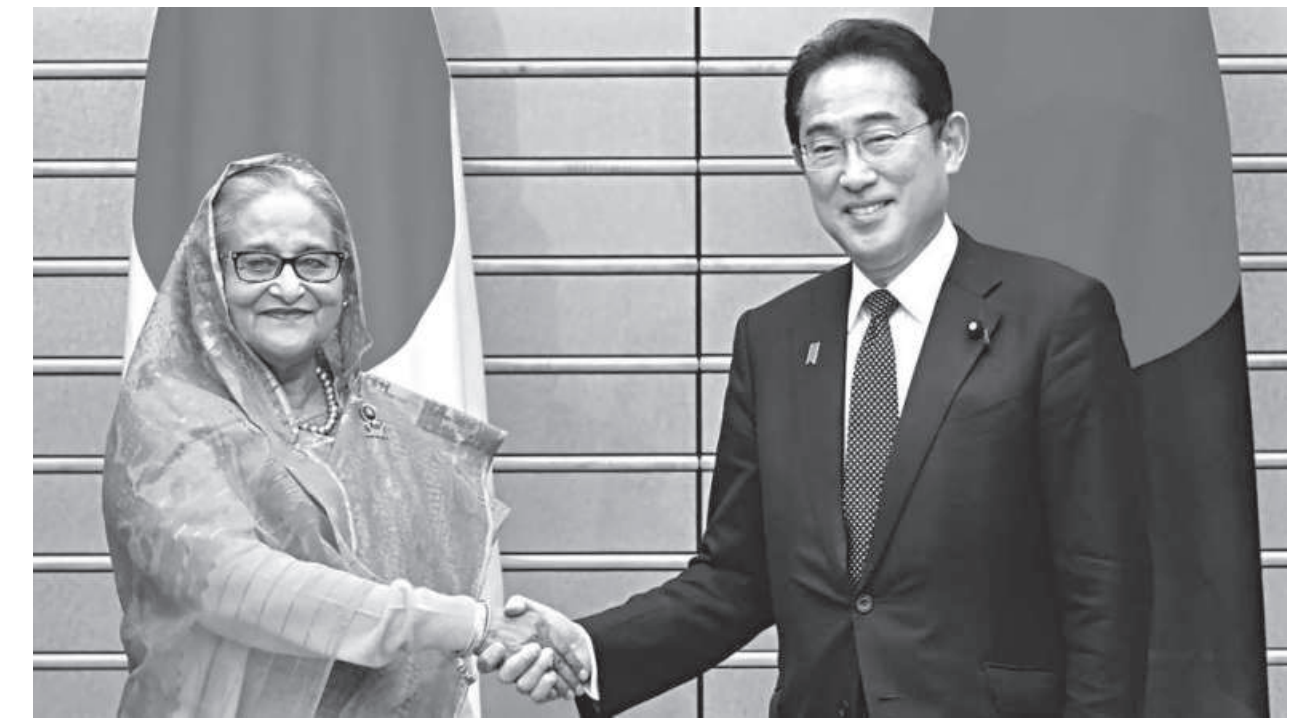
After months of speculation and anticipation, Bangladesh has unveiled its "Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO)," which "envisions a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all." The United States, which originally conceived and floated the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), has been urging Bangladesh for the last few years to join them in implementing the IPS. Though Bangladesh doesn't use the term strategy or IPS, the vision it lays out is remarkably similar to the IPS.

If we review the joint statement made on June 2, 2022 after the second Bangladesh-US High-Level Economic Consultation held in Washington, it would be difficult to differentiate the language. The joint statement under the subhead Infrastructure/Trade reads, "Both countries share a common vision of a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and secure Indo-Pacific region with shared prosperity for all."

These words have been repeated innumerable times by the US officials to define both the IPS and Quad, another smaller alliance among the US, Australia, Japan and India. On July 28, 2021, after the US-India Strategic partnership dialogue held in Delhi, US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken said, "We share a vision – India and the United States – of a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. We'll work together to make that vision a reality."

Secretary Blinken amplified this vision again in his recent Asia tour that included the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in Tokyo. Before going to Tokyo, he visited Hanoi and on April 15, he said, "Our countries can advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, one that is at peace and grounded in respect for the rules-based international order. When we talk about 'free and open,' we mean countries being free to choose their own path and their own partners and that problems will be dealt with openly; rules will be reached transparently and applied fairly; and goods, ideas, and people will flow freely across land, the seas, the skies, and cyberspace."

Rules-based international order, free flow of goods, capital, services and people, across the seas, the skies and cyberspace are all included in the objectives set by Bangladesh in its outlook. The Bangladesh Japan Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with her Japanese counterpart Kishida Fumio at the Prime Minister's Office of Japan on April 26, 2023.

PHOTO: PIO

issued after the formal talks between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on April 26 also provides some idea as to why our foreign ministry chose to publish its IPO prior to her three-nation tour – to Japan, the US and the UK. All these three nations have significant roles in pursuing the policy of open and free Indo-Pacific with a shared goal of countering China's growing political, economic, and military power.

It's worth noting that the Bangladesh-Japan joint statement begins with the two prime ministers' reaffirmation of "their commitment to realising a free and open Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law, where the rights, freedoms and sovereignty of all countries, regardless of size or power, are protected by international law, rules and norms." They particularly affirmed that "maritime order based on common values such as freedom of navigation is a cornerstone for stability and prosperity of the international community and that the use of the sea as global commons will contribute to the development of (the) blue economy."

Similar objectives had been expressed earlier in the joint statement

issued at the Second Bangladesh-US High-Level Economic Consultation. The statement added that the US briefed Bangladesh on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and Bangladesh welcomed additional information on the supply chain resilience and decarbonisation pillars of the IPEF. Bangladesh also sought US technical assistance to sustainably

remote Spratly archipelago. China claims almost the entire South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, which is also claimed in part by the Philippines.

China still maintains its claim defying the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of the Philippines. There are also competing claims by Malaysia,

explore its ocean resources and further develop its blue economy, it noted.

All these interactions took place well after China's warning of "substantial damage" to ties if Bangladesh joined the US-led Quad alliance. On May 10, 2021, the then Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming said Bangladesh should not join Quad, and if it did, then Dhaka's relations with Beijing would "substantially get damaged." Terming Quad a military alliance aimed against China's resurgence and its relationship with neighbours, he claimed Bangladesh would not derive any benefits from the initiative.

All these statements and documents clearly show that keeping trade routes between Asia and the rest of the world free, open, and secure is at the core of the Indo-Pacific strategy or outlook. How China appears on the opposite side of the new strategic convergence of other nations is perhaps being better portrayed in the recent cat-and-mouse sea chase in the South China Sea. A BBC journalist, who witnessed and recorded the encounter on April 23, said a Chinese Coast Guard ship blocked a Philippine patrol vessel, causing a near collision in the waters near Second Thomas Shoal in the

Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan. The sea encounter took place just a day after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr met Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang in Manila, and expressed hope for open communication lines on the South China Sea dispute. Similar territorial disputes exist between China and Japan in the East China Sea.

The unveiling of the Indo-Pacific Outlook has been broadly welcomed by many Bangladeshi analysts and diplomats, who have pointed out that it is based on the dictum "Friendship towards all, malice towards none." Whether this dictum would be enough to address the Chinese concern about committing to the objectives of rules-based order and a free and open Indo-Pacific has to be seen in the coming days.

There are also suggestions that this policy is aimed at making up with the US as the latter's insistence on making the next parliamentary elections free and fair and criticisms over human rights abuses and press freedom in Bangladesh have caused some strain in the bilateral relations. But the question is even if there was such an intent, whether that would have enough soothing effect.

The environmental and social injustices of shrimp aquaculture



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Shrimp aquaculture – the farming of shrimp for commercial export – was promoted in Bangladesh as a solution to combat the impacts of climate change as well as to promote economic growth by expanding non-crop agriculture. This practice, while providing short-term economic benefits, has done more harm than good and has introduced new social and environmental injustices to the country's coastal villages. This case is an example of how well-meaning climate solutions can have detrimental effects on the communities at the centre of the issue. It is also a lesson that successful adaptation strategies should be a collaborative effort among grassroots organisations, community members, policymakers, and practitioners.

Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, intensive shrimp aquaculture was expanded as a means of bolstering economic growth. Paddy fields were flooded and turned into shrimp cultivation enclosures called *gher*. The government saw this practice as a lucrative export opportunity, while development agencies promoted it as an adaptation strategy to climate change. If farmers can't keep the

rising sea levels from destroying their fields, they could at least use the increased saltwater to grow something else. However, the case of shrimp aquaculture in Bangladesh is an example of how some adaptation strategies make people more – not less – vulnerable.

There is a general agreement that the coastal regions of Bangladesh are experiencing environmental impacts such as rising soil salinity, waterlogging, and decreased biodiversity. But there is a disagreement about what causes these transformations. Developers and government agencies attribute them to climate change, while residents of the impacted villages attribute them to direct local changes, especially the transition from rice farming to shrimp aquaculture.

One of the main environmental impacts of shrimp farming is a drastic shift from a multifunctional mangrove ecosystem to a privately-owned, single-function aquaculture system. As saltwater from shrimp cultivation salinates the surrounding soil, the land is made unsuitable for growing trees and produce. Additional environmental impacts are degraded biodiversity, sedimentation, pollution,

and disease.

Not only has shrimp aquaculture caused environmental degradation, but it has also led to a loss of livelihood. In the village of Kolanihat in Khulna, a district in southwest Bangladesh, outside investors came into the district and started making *gher* on agricultural lands. Landowners were given offers to buy or lease their land for these *gher*, but they were rarely or never paid (Paprocki, *Threatening Dystopias: The Global Politics of Climate Change Adaptation in Bangladesh*, 2021). Similar experiences were shared in the neighbouring Sathkhira and Bagerhat districts.

As shrimp farms salinate and waterlog the surrounding land, trees and vegetation die out, leading to a lack of shade and harsher work environments. Before this ecological change, farmers used to grow fruits and vegetables in abundance to share with their neighbours. Now, they have to travel elsewhere to buy produce, with no excess to share (Paprocki, 2021). Shrimp agriculture also contributes to potable water scarcity, leading villagers to travel several kilometres a day to bring back drinking water. Many resort to collecting drinking water during the monsoon season and rationing during the dry season, leading to serious health consequences.

Shrimp aquaculture also exacerbates the existing gender inequalities. Outmigration is gendered; men who worked in paddy fields are forced to migrate to urban areas to find work. Women are then left to take on increasing household and farm responsibilities. Residents

also reported an increase in gendered violence; outsiders who settled in villages for the shrimp business harassed and committed violence against women, especially if they were alone or if it was late at night (Paprocki, 2021).

While development agencies have been promoting shrimp aquaculture as an adaptation strategy to climate change, communities have been mobilising around a different vision of the future by creating local movements against commercial shrimp aquaculture. In 1990, a village in Khulna resisted an armed attack led by a wealthy businessman, who tried to forcibly flood and seize their embankments. Because of their protests, the village's fields are still full of rice paddies and vegetable gardens. Similar uprisings have occurred in other villages, and local community members have been organising efforts to fight back against forced aquaculture. As part of Nijera Kori, landless farmers have been organising against commercial shrimp aquaculture for the last 30 years.

Effective climate action should be just, equitable, and centre the voices of people who are disproportionately affected by climate change. Using shrimp aquaculture as a climate change solution was a top-down approach shaped by the existing systems of power and resource distribution. In order to create and implement equitable climate solutions, it's crucial to understand the work being done at the local grassroots level and to work together as community members, practitioners, and policymakers.