

Stop cutting trees in Dhanmondi

City authorities must focus on protecting greenery amid rising heat

In Dhaka, concrete is everywhere. It is not only under our feet and above our heads; it seems to have infiltrated every aspect of our lives. While urbanisation, or rather concretisation, has been the overriding theme of Dhaka's development history of the last two decades, it has certainly not been without costs, especially in terms of degradation in the quality of life as well as nature. Extreme heat is on the rise around the world, but so is our vulnerability to it in Dhaka, thanks to its disappearing greenery and wetlands, which could have offered some protection against the heat.

Against this backdrop, it is disheartening to see how the authorities of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) decided to handle a routine beautification work. The DSCC is reportedly carrying out a Tk 9.62 crore project to beautify roads in different areas of the city, and as part of it, a road divider on the Shatmasjid road in Dhanmondi is being rebuilt with old trees planted on the divider being cleared. Since the clearing began, local activists and environmental experts have been protesting against it. While talking to *The Daily Star*, an expert said that a city turned into a veritable heat island and routinely ravaged by air pollution must think "100 times" before cutting trees, especially if the purpose is something as transient as beautification. The question is, how can there be beauty without trees? How can it be justified if life-giving nature has to be sacrificed for it? Activists have rightly called the DSCC move "irresponsible", "senseless" and "suicidal".

We cannot agree more. In a way, through such activities, we are digging our own grave. We cannot just concretise and beautify our way through a place and hope to live blissfully detached from its consequences. Those consequences, which far outweigh any perceived benefit of such activities, are very much real. And they are already being felt. The ongoing heatwave in the country, which began after a temporary respite in the wake of the Eid holiday, is once again causing suffering. According to new research, 37.5 percent of people in our villages and 5.3 million people in Dhaka are at risk of facing extreme summer heat. Along with the rise in temperature has returned loadshedding, with greater frequency outside the capital, with the authorities reportedly struggling to generate sufficient electricity because of the crisis of fuels and dollar.

In such a situation, researchers have recommended planting trees, installing water taps in different parts of major cities, creating a tree-covered park in each neighbourhood, and preserving wetlands. The importance of preserving and planting trees cannot be overestimated. We, therefore, urge the DSCC mayor to immediately stop their tree-cutting initiative in Dhanmondi and elsewhere in Dhaka, and find a way to improve road sights that doesn't harm trees. The DSCC can learn a thing or two from the DNCC, which recently appointed a Chief Heat Officer to help reduce temperature and also announced a plan to plant 200,000 trees. Such initiatives are vital to preserve what little life still left in Dhaka's environment.

Evacuate all Bangladeshis stuck in Sudan

They need financial and psychological support to get back on their feet

The experiences of those who have been evacuated from conflict-torn Sudan to Bangladesh are truly harrowing. But we are pleased that they are now safely back in Bangladesh, having suffered many challenges and uncertainties along the way including a constant threat of harm, shrinking access to life-saving essentials and not knowing whether they would ever make it back to their country alive. So far, 136 out of the around 1,500 Bangladeshis who were living in Sudan when the fighting began have been successfully brought back. Out of the 1,500, some 700 have already registered to return to Bangladesh.

On May 4, it was reported that some 600 Bangladeshis stranded in Sudan had safely reached Port Sudan from Khartoum, the capital of the country, and were waiting to reach Jeddah by ship. From the accounts of those who have returned, it can be ascertained that the violence and chaos that is happening in Sudan is still out of control. Right now, people there have zero security for their life and property. Many of the returnees testified that they had found themselves right in the middle of firing between the rival factions of the Sudan military government. Some of them had to leave their homes empty-handed – in some cases, after their belongings had been looted by men involved in fighting – or leave their loved ones behind.

The trauma they experienced is sure to have lasting effects. Financially, many of these returnees have been ruined as a result of this sudden catastrophe. As we understand from media reports, different ministries of the government and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are set to provide reintegration support to the returnees. Besides financial and other material support, it is essential that they are also provided with psychological support to help them readjust to normal life, after having gone through the trauma of war.

While providing these facilities to the returnees, the government needs to work steadfastly to pull out the rest of the Bangladeshis still stuck in Sudan. Even though we must congratulate the government for working hard to try and get all Bangladeshis there to safety, relative to some other countries, its response has been somewhat slow. Many of the Bangladeshis still stuck there may not have much time left before they are put in harm's way, unless they are urgently rescued.

Keeping that in mind, the government needs to have its missions in Sudan and close by working double time to arrange for their safe exits. It also needs to coordinate with other countries of the region – particularly Saudi Arabia, which has been extremely helpful in the rescue of the 136 Bangladeshis – to figure out the logistics of how they can be best evacuated safely. In the meantime, the international community should come together to negotiate a permanent ceasefire in Sudan to prevent more unnecessary suffering for its people and for the citizens of other countries still stuck there.

What's our priority in the Indo-Pacific Outlook?



Zillur Rahman is executive director of the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) and a television talk show host. His Twitter handle is @zillur

ZILLUR RAHMAN

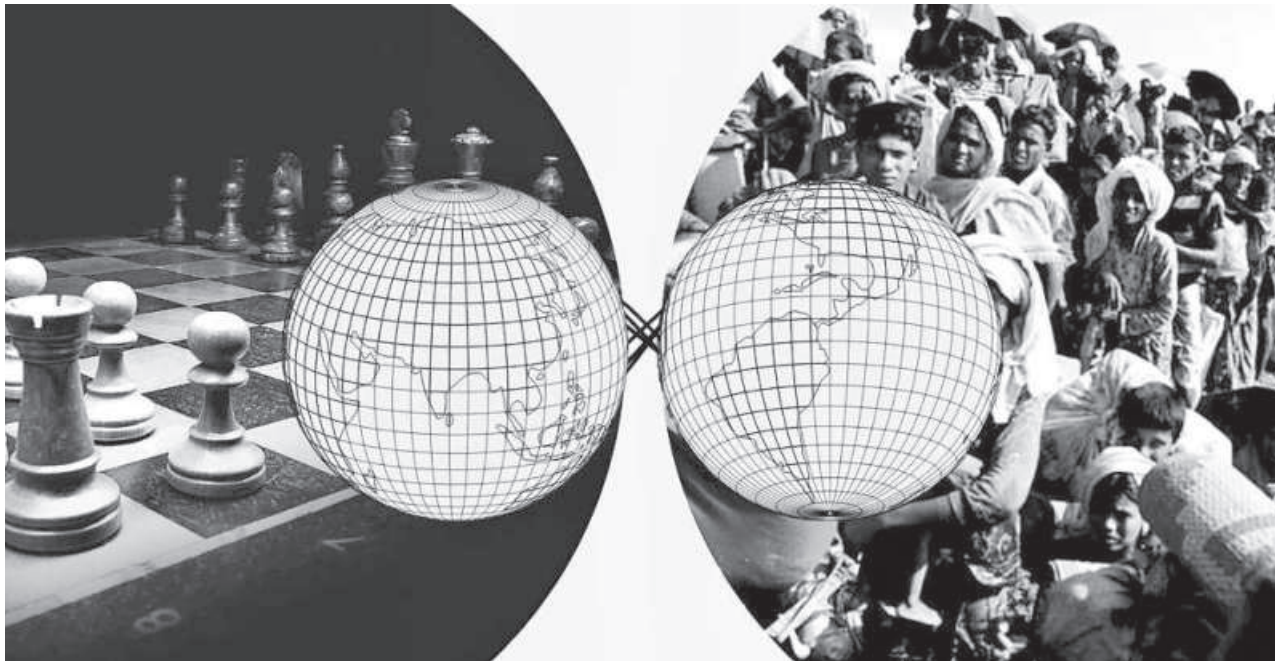
On April 24, 2023, Bangladesh formally announced its "Indo-Pacific Outlook" (IPO) to the world. Together with almost all other Indo-Pacific foreign policy doctrines of the US, UK, Japan, Australia, India, and other developed nations, Bangladesh now openly shares a "vision" of "a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all."

The timely release came right before the prime minister began her three-nation diplomatic visit to Japan, the US, and the UK, and right before the World Bank inked a \$2.25 billion loan for five new megaprojects to be implemented over the next five years.

A primary analysis of the outlook confirms the various speculations that Bangladesh would not be tilting West and would remain adamant about its foreign policy ideal of non-alignment. In this regard, the outlook primarily emphasises the necessity of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and wishes for military de-escalation and a boost in regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Even the term "outlook" showcases Bangladesh's hesitancy to fully commit to the concept of the Indo-Pacific and openly declare substantive foreign policy positions.

This is to be expected as Bangladesh is still attempting to maintain a careful balance in the tripolar regional power struggle among the Western allies, India, and China. To fully commit to the notion of the Indo-Pacific would also acknowledge the anti-China dimension of the various Indo-Pacific Strategies (IPS) drafted by the US and its allies. Therefore, certain careful omissions have been made in the IPO, as compared to various other IPS, thus enabling sufficient strategic and rhetorical ambiguity to maintain relations with both superpowers.

Often, what is the most impactful in a statement are the words that are not said. Regretfully, some of the omissions made in the IPO paint a bleak picture of the government's direction for our country. Unlike almost all other IPS, Bangladesh's IPO does not include a single mention of terms such as "commitment to promoting democracy" and "collaborating to fight corruption." There is also no direct mention of the Rohingya refugee crisis, arguably the biggest security and environmental threat Bangladesh faces right now. There is a mention



VISUAL: STAR

in the outlook's guiding principles of cooperating to ensure fundamental rights and freedoms. However, this point reads hollow as Bangladesh continues to ignore all international chagrin regarding its abuse of laws, such as the Digital Security Act (DSA), to persecute and harass journalists and opposition politicians.

There is speculation that this IPO is merely an attempt to appeal to Bangladesh's Western development partners, who are growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of cooperation and the increasingly hostile rhetoric of the ruling party leadership, especially against the US. However, the IPO's glaring omission of the very issues that are causing friction between the parties might cause the gesture to feel too little too late.

We simply have to look at what the priorities are for the three nations the prime minister approached right after approving the IPO to see the difference in priorities.

In Japan's published foreign policy paper on its Indo-Pacific strategy titled "Priority Policy for Development Cooperation," it is stated that "stable growth and a sound society in countries that share such universal values as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law – notably ASEAN countries – are important factors for a more stable

White House titled "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," it is outlined in detail how the US plans to make investments in democratic institutions, free press, and a vibrant civil society in Indo-Pacific nations. "The United States will bolster freedom of information and expression and combat foreign interference by supporting investigative journalism, promoting media literacy and pluralistic and independent media, and increasing collaboration to address threats from information manipulation," the paper reads. It also outlines the need to improve fiscal transparency in the Indo-Pacific to expose corruption and drive reform. The paper goes on to state, "Through our diplomatic engagement, foreign assistance, and work with regional organisations, the United States will be a partner in strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and accountable democratic governance."

Regarding the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly gave a speech at the Milken Institute Asia Summit, where he stated, "The UK and many Indo-Pacific countries are committed to shared values. Our commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity, and freedom from economic coercion. Our shared beliefs in the value of democracy and

be more aligned with Bangladesh's core foreign policy values, its official position still emphasises its commitments by stating, "To strengthen our international assistance, Canada will... support efforts toward democracy, inclusivity, accountable governance and sustained economic growth, helping key countries in the region."

As it stands now, it seems unclear whom this Indo-Pacific Outlook is meant to reassure, if that was the point of it in the first place. It may very well have been that the current iteration of Bangladesh's IPO was wrung out due to mounting pressure from the Western power bloc, and thus the rhetoric was intentionally left non-committal. Or perhaps it was simply a half-hearted attempt on the part of Bangladesh to appease development partners by adopting the slogan of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." However, not only does the IPO not take a strong position in the great power rivalry between the US and China, it also does not provide any action plan to ensure that democratic values will be fostered by Bangladesh, which is undoubtedly one of the key pillars of all the various IPS. Needless to say, it is quite doubtful that this iteration of the IPO will serve as the golden ticket for Bangladesh to finally get included in the next democracy summit.

Cox's Bazar: Buried in waste



A CLOSER LOOK
Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @tasneem_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

Cox's Bazar's struggle with waste mismanagement seems to have no end in sight. The tourist city, extremely popular with tourists from home and abroad, is mired nose-deep in all sorts of waste, including human effluent, aquaculture waste, plastic waste, and transboundary plastic waste.

What makes the situation worse is that it is not a new problem. This issue has been so vehemently persistent that even the High Court had to intervene in this matter in 2019 and question the inability of the government to address it, in response to a writ petition filed by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA).

The daily *Prothom Alo* recently reported on the unhealthy, unhygienic and irresponsible sewage management (or the lack thereof) of the city. Of the 538 hotels, motels, resorts, and cottages built in the Kalatali area next to the sea beach, 532 do not have any sewage treatment plants (STPs). The report further states that the mandatory rule of incorporating an STP system in the construction of a hotel, motel or guest house is not followed at all, as a result of which the majority of these hotels are using septic tanks to manage human waste. During peak tourist

seasons as well as the monsoon, the tanks are not able to take the load of the sewage and it is spilled into the rivers and the sea, putting marine lives and local ecological balance at risk. Although the hotel, motel, and guesthouse owners are willing to contribute financially to construct a central STP system, little measure has been taken so far by the authorities to install one.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. It has been reported earlier in the media that around 124 tonnes of waste, including plastic, are removed from Cox's Bazar city every day. In a report published in April last year, this daily pointed out the non-functional waste management system in Cox's Bazar city. While garbage keeps piling at Kasturighat landfill, there is little the authorities can do to dispose of plastic waste, as it is non-biodegradable, and it cannot be burnt either as doing so will release toxic fumes. So, without a proper waste management system, plastic keeps filling up the landfills.

Moreover, the rivers and the sea are getting clogged up by ill-managed plastic waste. Take the case of Bakkhali River, which is gasping for fresh air being choked by unwanted and

irresponsible plastic waste dumping.

Then there is the problem of transboundary plastic waste coming all the way from Nepal, China, India, Myanmar, and Bhutan through the rivers, being dumped into the Bay of Bengal. Our three major rivers – Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna – carry 73,000 tonnes of plastic waste, most of which is transboundary, to the Bay of Bengal daily. Given the main arteries of our riverine system are carrying this burden, its tributaries and offshoots, including those in Cox's Bazar, have to shoulder the load.

Apart from these significant waste management challenges, there is another kind of pollutant: waste from shrimp hatcheries. Only a handful of the hatcheries there have proper STPs; the others release untreated water – full of excrement, unconsumed feed, and moulted exoskeletons shed by the fries – directly into the sea. It is understandable that investing in an ETP or STP is difficult for many small hatcheries, but a central STP system can be used by them to treat the water before releasing them into the sea. Biofiltration can also be considered as an alternative to treat polluted water from hatcheries, since most of the waste is organic.

Cox's Bazar is already ecologically vulnerable, especially in the aftermath of the clearing of more than 8,000 acres of reserved forest land to accommodate and provide for the Rohingya refugees. According to a 2019 report by the environment ministry, the damage is estimated to be around Tk 2,420 crore. While attempts are ongoing to revive the greenery of the area, the damage

cannot be fully reversed, and the ecological risks will remain.

It is high time the authorities concerned took the rampant pollution and subsequent environmental disintegration of Cox's Bazar seriously. The government should strictly ban single-use plastic in the tourism hub, and fine tourists for littering and irresponsible dumping of any kind of waste. In 2021, the government had launched a three-year project to prevent the use of single-use plastic in 12 coastal districts of the country, but with little headway in actually implementing it. The project could perhaps be revived to bring about meaningful change in how plastic waste is managed in the city.

A robust communication campaign could also be run to drive behavioural change among the public. At the same time, the authorities should raise the issue of transboundary plastic pollution in various bilateral and regional forums, to address this problem at the earliest and with the cooperation of all.

A centralised STP should be set up at the earliest, with financial support from hotel, motel, restaurant owners. The authorities should also help the shrimp hatcheries in setting up a similar central water treatment facility.

While the order is tall, we cannot turn a blind eye to the rotting situation in Cox's Bazar. This city is our pride, a significant highlight of our nation's branding activities. The authorities, and we as responsible citizens, must do all we can to address this nasty menace and reclaim our pristine prize.