

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Govt inaction on plastic is alarming

Plastic will be the end of our environment if drastic measures are not taken

It is unacceptable that despite repeated warnings about the grave dangers posed by plastic pollution to the environment, the government has failed miserably to address it. That didn't change even after the High Court in 2020 ordered the government to impose a ban on single-use plastic products by 2021. Even after three years, we see no active measures or willingness to comply with that directive. This lack of implementation has, unfortunately, become the hallmark of our environment authorities, a trend that stretches as far back as 2002 when Bangladesh became the first country in the world to ban polythene bags, albeit to little effect on the ground.

The use of polythene bags was banned through an amendment to the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995. Section 6(A) of the amended act imposed the ban on the manufacture, import, marketing, sale, demonstration, stock, distribution, commercial carriage, and commercial use of all kinds of polythene shopping bags, including polyethylene and polypropylene bags. Even a three-year action plan was reportedly submitted to the environment ministry. But no effective action has been taken ever since.

According to a study by the Environment and Social Development Organization (ESDO), only 10-15 percent of polythene and plastic bags are properly disposed of or recycled after use. Most of them end up in drains, sewage pipes, and open areas, which is responsible for up to 80 percent of Dhaka's waterlogging problem. A World Bank study, unveiled in December 2021, found that plastic use was increasing rapidly in Bangladesh. It said that 69 percent of disposable plastic products were left uncollected, and only 31 percent were being recycled. Between 2005 and 2021, our per capita plastic use tripled to 9kg from 3kg. And it is far worse in Dhaka, where the amount rose to 24kg, almost three times higher than that in other urban areas. This is really alarming.

The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has recently called upon the government to ensure strict enforcement of law to control plastic pollution, including through the imposition of a "pollution tax" as well as its effective implementation. Without such strict measures, plastic will continue to destroy our environment. We urge the government to take this menace seriously, and also ramp up efforts to recycle plastic products and promote the use of healthier alternatives such as jute products.

Bring closed schools back to life

These non-government primary schools need assistance to reopen

We are alarmed to learn of the number of non-government primary schools that have been closed in the last two years. Reportedly, some 18,465 schools closed their doors for good in 2021 and 2022 because their owners could not bear the cost of running them. With the shutting down of these institutions, thousands of teachers lost their jobs, while lakhs of students had to drop out or go through other challenges. Data from the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) shows that a total of 1,14,429 teachers of non-government primary schools left the profession since 2020, while a staggering 14.5 lakh students left primary schools – a large number of them privately run – between 2020 and 2021. This needs urgent attention from the authorities.

While educationists have long been asking the government to take remedial actions and invest more in education to recover from the pandemic-induced learning loss – which has affected an entire generation of students – there has been little indication that it took those suggestions seriously. Its education budgets of the last few fiscal years made it very clear. And it has disappointed us again this year by proposing a record-low allocation of Tk 88,000 crore for education, which is only 1.76 percent of the GDP.

At a time when the government should have made desperate attempts to bring the missing students back to schools – by providing them stipends, mid-day meals, financial incentives for poorer households, etc. – we have not seen much effort in this regard. Moreover, struggling non-government primary schools also didn't get the help they deserved. Reportedly, the owners of these schools – NGO-run, kindergartens, etc. – sought financial assistance, soft loans, and waiver of utility charges during the pandemic, which they were denied.

Needless to say, such schools have been playing a significant role in ensuring education at the primary level. The government, therefore, must come up with proper incentives and plans to help them reopen and also to bring their teachers – many of whom may have remained unemployed till now – and students back to the classrooms.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improve your museums!

During my visit to Bangladesh, I visited a couple of its museums. With most items, I saw a date only. Sometimes it was in English and Bangla, sometimes only in the local language. There were no stories describing why that item was of national importance.

For a tourist visiting Bangladesh, that is extremely disappointing. How are people from other land, and perhaps your future generations also, supposed to know why these items are precious to this land? If they are valuable enough to preserve, their stories should be written in both Bangla and English.

Museums are great tourist attraction spots. It seems the museums in Bangladesh have been prepared without much thought from its authorities. Bangladesh deserves better!

Rabbani, Singapore

Lead-up to the elections just got interesting



Tanim Ahmed is a dropout journalist who thinks, freely, comments a lot and writes a little.

TANIM AHMED

While loyalists and stalwarts are bending over backwards to explain how people made a free choice between two shades of the ruling Awami League, opposition activists and leaders are seizing every opportunity to say that the outcome owes everything to the new US visa policy announced on the eve of Gazipur city elections.

The mayoral race for Azmat Ullah Khan, Awami League's nominee, was all but won. Voting was expected to be a mere formality, with the only serious challenger – Zahangir Alam – disqualified by the Election Commission for loan defaults. A former mayor of Gazipur, Zahangir was expelled from his party, Awami League, and seemed to have expected his bid to fall through one way or another. As backup, he had a proxy in the form of his sexagenarian mother Zaida Khatun. She won. If BNP, the main opposition camp, had not boycotted the polls, it would have been interesting to see which way the voters would go amid the unexpectedly free voting environment.

The secretary of state (read foreign minister) of the United States, Antony Blinken, on May 24 invoked a provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which states, "An alien whose entry or proposed activities in the United States the Secretary of State has reasonable ground to believe would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States is inadmissible."

His statement read, "Under this policy, the United States will be able to restrict the issuance of visas for any Bangladeshi individual, believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh." He said this would apply to current and former Bangladeshi officials, members of pro-government and opposition political parties, and members of law enforcement, the judiciary, and security services.

Insiders and close observers say his announcement was a game changer. The same officials who would otherwise have been rather enthusiastic to see the ruling party emerge victorious, suddenly lost their energy for enterprise and, allegedly, remained neutral.



Following the new US visa policy, the city corporation elections have become quite the draw.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

This new political equation, at least on the surface, does not seem to be enough of an assurance for the BNP to get back into the race for the series of city elections scheduled throughout June. But thus far it has refrained, probably afraid that joining the elections might end up countering its own demand for a neutral caretaker government to conduct the general elections, more so if they end up winning. Still, with the possibility of a few independent or rebel candidates from either party, the mundane voting exercise has much promise to deliver rather exciting – if not nail biting – showdowns.

Although this new US visa policy is proving expedient, it would not be wise to believe that the country is intent on fostering democracy in Bangladesh. Indeed, it is very unlikely that the US would stray from its unblemished record of serving its own geopolitical interests regardless of the nature of regimes that it bolsters. This Western power has thwarted democracy, deposed democratic leaders like

endorsed throughout history would fill up entire volumes of this newspaper. Suffice it to say, the Awami League has not been able to serve US interests – whatever they may be.

The corollary, then, must be that the US is willing to do business with another regime, with the obvious proviso that the new regime would be more pliable, whether that is the incumbent, the BNP – winning on the coattails of its noxious ally, Jamaat-e-Islami – or any other amalgamation of opposition camps that come together for an electoral alliance. And that opens up possibilities for the Awami League, too, as it does for other parties.

The situation is not as grim for the Awami League as it appears to be on the surface, with regards to the new visa policy, especially because the US has a proven track record of being quite promiscuous about choosing whom it does business with. All the Awami League has to do is find out how it could satisfy US interests and agree to provide the necessary concessions

the time to consider its strategy and actually find out what would make the US look the other way. The other tactic that is already making its rounds is that the ruling party will manage to have a faction of the BNP join the elections, which would allow them to claim the polls to be inclusive. But the winners and losers will have been negotiated beforehand so as not to allow any inconvenient surprises that pesky voters tend to present so often.

And of course, the incumbent could resort to a more novel and rather radical tactic of trying to win people's hearts with (among other things) good governance, meaningful and effective measures towards development, and, most importantly, punishment of those guilty of corruption and other crimes. There is a slight problem that the voters might not be convinced with so little so late and rightly see it for what it is – cheap stratagem.

For now, though, the city corporation elections will all of a sudden become quite the draw.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Double standards of Western industrial policy



Joseph E Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate in economics, is professor at Columbia University and a member of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation.

JOSEPH E STIGLITZ

With the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) last year, the United States fully joined the rest of the world's advanced economies in combating climate change. The IRA authorises a major increase in spending to support renewable energy, research and development, and other priorities.

True, the design of the law is not ideal. Any economist could have drafted a bill that would deliver much more bang for the buck. But US politics is messy, and success must be measured against what is possible. Despite the IRA's imperfections, it is far better than nothing.

Together with last year's CHIPS and Science Act – which aims to support investment, domestic manufacturing, and innovation in semiconductors and a range of other cutting-edge technologies – the IRA has pointed the US in the right direction. It moves beyond finance to focus on the real economy, where it should help to reinvigorate lagging sectors.

Those who focus solely on the IRA's imperfections are doing us all a disservice. By refusing to put the issue in perspective, they are aiding and abetting the vested interests that would prefer for us to remain dependent on fossil fuels.

Chief among the naysayers are defenders of neoliberalism and

unfettered markets. We can thank that ideology for the past 40 years of weak growth, rising inequality, and inaction against the climate crisis. Its proponents have always argued vehemently against industrial policies like the IRA, even after new developments in economic theory explained why such policies have been necessary to promote innovation and technological change.

It was partly owing to industrial policies, after all, that the East Asian economies achieved their economic "miracle" in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, the US itself has long benefited from such policies – though these were typically hidden in the Department of Defense, which helped develop the internet and even the first browser. Likewise, America's world-leading pharmaceutical sector rests on a foundation of government-funded basic research.

US President Joe Biden's administration should be commended for its open rejection of two core neoliberal assumptions. As Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, recently put it, these assumptions are "that markets always allocate capital productively and efficiently," and that "the type of growth [does] not matter."

But many of the biggest issues today are global and thus will require

international cooperation. Even if the US and the European Union achieve net zero emissions by 2050, that alone will not solve climate change – the rest of the world must do the same.

Unfortunately, recent policymaking in advanced economies has not been conducive to fostering global cooperation. Consider the vaccine nationalism that we saw during the pandemic, when rich Western countries hoarded both vaccines and the intellectual property (IP) for making them, favouring pharmaceutical companies' profits over the needs of billions of people in developing countries and emerging markets. Then came Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which led to soaring energy and food prices in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, with virtually no help from the West.

Worse, the US raised interest rates, which strengthened the dollar against other currencies and exacerbated debt crises across the developing world. Again, the West offered little real help. Though the G20 had previously agreed on a framework to suspend debt servicing by the world's poorest countries temporarily, debt restructuring is what was really needed.

Against this backdrop, the IRA and the CHIPS Act may well reinforce the idea that the developing world is subject to a double standard – that the rule of law applies only to the poor and weak, whereas the rich and powerful can do as they please. For decades, developing countries have chafed against global rules that prevented them from subsidising their nascent industries, on the grounds that to do so would tilt the playing field. But they

always knew there was no level playing field. The West had all the knowledge and IP, and it did not hesitate to hoard as much of it as possible.

Now, the US is being much more open about tilting the field, and Europe is poised to do the same. Though the Biden administration claims to remain committed to the World Trade Organization "and the shared values upon which it is based: fair competition, openness, transparency, and the rule of law," such talk rings hollow. The US still has not allowed new judges to be appointed to the WTO's dispute-settlement body, thus ensuring that it cannot take action against violations of international trade rules.

To be sure, the WTO has plenty of problems. But it was the US that did the most to shape the current rules during the heyday of neoliberalism. What does it mean when the country that wrote the rules turns its back on them when it becomes convenient to do so? What kind of a "rule of law" is that? If developing countries and emerging markets had ignored IP rules in a similarly flagrant way, tens of thousands of lives would have been saved during the pandemic. But they did not cross that line, because they had learnt to fear the consequences.

By adopting industrial policies, the US and Europe are openly acknowledging that the rules need to be rewritten. But that will take time. To ensure that low and middle-income countries do not grow increasingly (and justifiably) embittered in the meantime, Western governments should create a technology fund to help others match their spending at home. That would at least level the playing field somewhat.