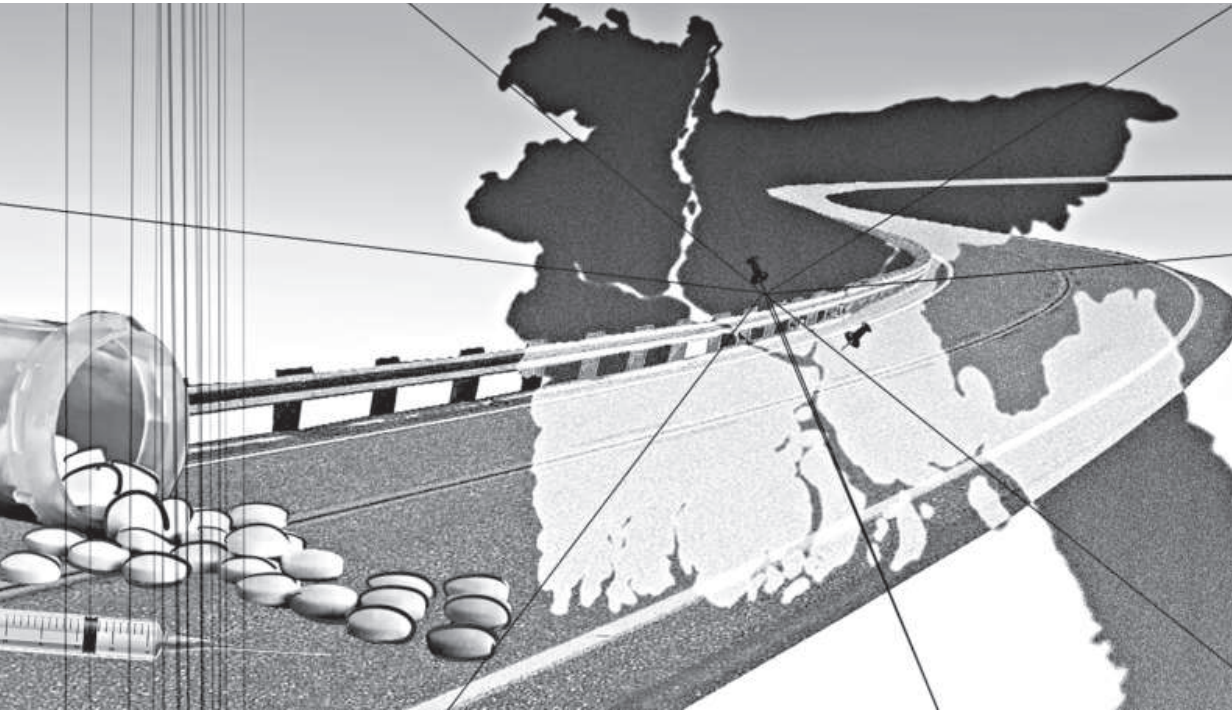




VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Bangladesh tops the wrong ranking, again

Insufficient law enforcement, money laundering opportunities make the country an easy target for drug trafficking rings



A CLOSER LOOK
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TASNEEM TAYEB

Bangladesh turning into a hotbed for drug trafficking comes as no surprise given the country's geographic positioning that puts it at the centre of three major Asian drug trafficking routes: the Golden Wedge, the Golden Triangle, and the Golden Crescent. Add to that the incompetence of its authorities to bust well-connected and strategically-networked transnational trafficking rings as well as money laundering mechanisms that allow easy flow of illicit money abroad. The result: more than Tk 5,000 crore is laundered annually through drug trade out of the country, putting it at the top of the list of drug money laundering nations in Asia. Globally, Bangladesh ranks fifth, according to a report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The UNCTAD estimates account for trafficking of drugs including methamphetamine tablets (yaba), heroin, buprenorphine, and phensedyl.

The staggering increase in the seizure of yaba alone – from 800,000 pills in 2010 to 45 million pills in 2022 – is an alarming manifestation of the incredible growth of illicit drug trade in the country over the past decade. Little has been done to really dismantle the system that allows this business to thrive. If we focus on yaba alone, in a country where more than seven million pills are sold every day (a 2021 estimate by police), worth a whopping Tk 210 crore, the 45 million pills seized in 2022 account for only six and a half days of trade.

Not that the authorities are doing nothing: they set up checkpoints, conduct regular drives, catch small shipments and recover drugs, catch drug peddlers, and ever since the launch of the War on Drugs, alleged drug dealers are also frequently “killed” in “gunfights” with law enforcement members. However, in terms of results, law enforcers have only so much to show.

The problem perhaps lies in our approach to the issue, which on the surface seems to target the consignments, users and dealers. Where we fail is in going deeper to the roots and dismantling the system at the core. The system we are talking about is one that allows rampant corruption, nepotism, favouritism and self-interest to permeate every level of the state, from policymaking to enforcement.

There are many reasons why drug lords are going about with their business scot-free. For one, the Narcotics Control Act seems to be a major obstacle in apprehending the drug lords as it stipulates that to

bring a drug dealer or addict to book, drugs have to be confiscated in their possession. Practically speaking, it is always difficult to catch drug lords in possession of drugs; as a result, it is the dealers and peddlers who get caught during the drives.

In addition to this, we cannot rule out the possibility that due to the political affiliation and muscle of the big players, they are often deliberately left out of the drives. Take the case of the drug traffickers in Narayanganj – a transit point for drugs entering Dhaka and other nearby cities – who, despite being known and identified as drug bosses, are roaming out in the open. A *Prothom Alo* report details the identities of some of the 500-plus drug traders in Dhaka, many of

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whom are allegedly connected and affiliated with ruling party associate bodies such as Jubo League, Chhatra League and Swechchhasebak League, as well as the Awami League itself, along with Jubo Dal and Jatiya Party.

For instance, the report states that while Mir Hossain, general secretary of Swechchhasebak League's Kutubpur unit, tops the police list of narcotic traders in Fatullah, Narayanganj, and has been implicated in nine cases under various laws including the Narcotics Control Act, he has not been arrested as he has been holding a party post for a long time and also maintains his own force to manage drug trade.

And then there are known drug traders who have not even been named on the police list. Shakhawat Islam, former general secretary of Swechchhasebak League's Narayanganj city unit, for example, is a known drug trader, but he was not named on the list. Similarly, Jahangir Alam and his wife, known drug dealers facing lawsuits, have not been identified in the police list, apparently due to his good relations

with the law enforcers.

Unfortunately, the Narayanganj landscape is pretty much a reflection of the overall drug trading scenario in Bangladesh. Even the ones killed across the country in drug-related “gunfights,” “encounters,” and “infighting” are not above controversy as instances of extrajudicial killings and suppression of political opposition.

Then there is the problem of the long-pending narcotic cases. Although the Department of Narcotics Control appointed 68 prosecutors across the country in 2019 to expedite disposal of long-pending cases and improve the conviction rate, and the parliament passed the Narcotics Control (Amendment) Bill, 2020, empowering any court with appropriate jurisdiction to try narcotic cases, a report by this daily last year found 73,312 cases still pending with the court. Conviction rates in narcotics cases have witnessed a constant fall since 2014, when it was 64 percent, to 40 percent in 2021, according to DNC's Annual Drug Report 2021.

At this point in time, it is important to take a closer look at our intention, appetite and approach regarding this issue. While the government has launched a war on drugs, does it really have the political will to catch the drug lords, kingpins and mafia bosses who are pulling the strings and running the business behind the scenes?

Drug lords are finding innovative ways – including manipulating the desperate Rohingya refugees – and new routes to bring drugs into the country. Without a well-planned strategy and comprehensive measures in collaboration with all relevant authorities, intelligence bodies and law enforcers, this well-oiled machine cannot be stopped. We need a holistic approach to bring down drug trafficking rings, despite their identities and affiliations. The deadly combination of a land offering ripe opportunities for drug trafficking and a lax system that provides enough loopholes for easy money laundering makes Bangladesh an easy target for international drug trafficking rings. It is high time we aimed at dismantling the system that enables criminals to line up their pockets at the cost of the nation, rather than focusing on small players.

On June 18, the High Court asked the DNC to submit within a month the names of top drug dealers, while directing the Anti-Corruption Commission, Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit and Criminal Investigation Department to investigate within two months the allegations of drug money being laundered abroad. Previously in 2021, as many as 14 government bodies flouted a similar High Court directive asking to submit names of persons and entities who stash money in foreign banks. Are the authorities concerned going to adhere to the High Court directive this time?

The power of renewables



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MADIHA ATHAR KHAN

Everyone is worried about the future. Whether it's personal, political, social, technological or environmental, there is a point where it all becomes quite blurred. However, the sense of dread surrounding the future of the planet has only increased, effectively resulting in a feeling of suffocation not unlike what Dhaka city's overcrowdedness can induce. There are some initiatives that have already been taken by the government and people of Bangladesh to address the climate crisis, and to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG 7) – Affordable and Clean Energy. There is also immense potential in Bangladesh yet to be explored, such as virtual power plants.

Bangladesh has access to one invaluable natural resource in abundance: sunlight. But are we doing enough to harness its power? Across Dhaka city, one sees most buildings having solar panels installed on their rooftops. This is mainly due to a building code that requires a small percentage of electricity generated by renewable resources in order to attain a gas connection. Unfortunately, in most cases, the solar panels are only used as far as to power security lights. Were they instead connected to

solar panels could lead to generating as much as the electricity required to power 10-12 ACs daily. As a result, electricity bills as well as the load on the national grid would be reduced.

In the industrial sector, many RMG factories are turning to solar power as their main source of electricity. Under the net-metering policy, these factories with solar rooftop projects installed are not only able to meet most of their electricity needs through solar power, but they are also able to feed surplus solar energy into the national grid. This would result in the company's utility bill to be reduced by the amount being fed to the national grid. The government requires that up to 70 percent of the sanctioned load be powered by solar.

Theoretically, this could be implemented in residential homes as well, where there are solar panels already installed on the rooftops. It would have to be ensured that these homes are constructed in a three-phase power supply system with a rating of 440 volts. Additionally, regulatory permission would be needed to adopt net metering at a residence.

As far as renewable energy is concerned, Bangladesh has another vast area of opportunity in the nearly 2.5 million three-

other power station. A whitepaper published by SOLshare proposes that there is around 30 percent of the battery's charge remaining when the vehicles return after completing the day's trips. Provided the government's provision is obtained, the power from these batteries could be sold to the national grid during hours of peak demand, easing the grid's strain. Later into the night, with the help of cloud technology, the batteries would automatically charge from the grid at a lower tariff rate (low demand). The benefits of renewable technology can also increase if solar panels are installed on the rooftops of the garages.

It has just been announced that Bangladesh is going to start producing its own lithium ion batteries. An ambitious project, Bangladesh Lithium Battery Ltd, with an investment of Tk 600 crore, has already built its factory to produce these batteries and aims to be operational by 2024. Terming this a milestone development, the Dhaka Electric Supply Company Ltd (Desco) Managing Director Md Kausar Ameer Ali recently said three to four million three-wheeler electric vehicles in the country, which currently run on lead acid batteries, could soon be running on lithium ion batteries. He also expressed interest in constructing accessible charging stations for electric vehicles across the nation. This is emblematic of the kind of government support needed to further the cause of developing sustainable environmental solutions. Moreover, this takes us a step closer to making VPPs a reality.

In the Western developed nations, electric vehicles have become yet



Bangladesh has access to one natural resource in abundance, which is sunlight, and we need to do more to harness its power.
FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

the house circuit, there could be significant benefits to the residents.

Dr Sebastian Groh, CEO of SOLshare (a climate tech start-up) and lecturer at Brac University, says, “Let us say you have 20kWp (kilowatt peak) on your roof, which will require a space of 150sq-m and it will, on a yearly average, produce roughly 80kWh (kilowatt hour) per day, or 2.30MWh (megawatt hour) per month. For comparison, a 1.5-tonne AC consumes, depending on its level of energy efficiency, approximately between 2.0kW and 2.5kW. Hence, if you run your AC for three hours a day, this comes to 6.0kWh to 7.5kWh.” This means that proper utilisation of the available

wheeler electric vehicles used in the transport of goods and passengers nationwide. These are powered by lead acid batteries, which are energy-hungry and have maintenance and operational challenges. Increased adoption of lithium ion batteries would show improvements in performance and income abilities of the drivers.

These batteries would also play a key role in the implementation of a virtual power plant (VPP), the market for which is growing globally. VPPs make use of distributed assets – such as solar panels and batteries of electric vehicles – and aggregates the available energy to serve the wider population, just like any

another symbol of wealth and elevated class. It is aspirational to be able to afford and drive EVs. In a way, this is preventing us from building a sustainable future by keeping innovative solutions restricted within a minority. But the case is completely the opposite for a country like Bangladesh. The use of EVs here is a means to meet the needs of the drivers and garage owners from low- and middle-income backgrounds. Ultimately, this is exactly what makes lithium ion batteries, virtual power plants and renewable energy such a rich opportunity to pave the way towards a future that takes into account the needs of the masses.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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