



The recent flooding must force us to think afresh about the state of natural balance in the country's hilly regions. PHOTO: MONG SING HAI MARMA

FLOODING IN CHT

When development gives little and takes all



Sulav Chakma is former president of Bangladesh Indigenous Students Action Forum.

SULAV CHAKMA

It is estimated that the Chittagong Hill Tracts, comprising the three districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban, constitute one-tenth of Bangladesh's total land area. The natural beauty, and the linguistic and cultural diversity of this region have always attracted tourists at home and from abroad. For hundreds of years, many water bodies, including Chengi, Meini, Kajlong, Karnaphuli, Reingkhong, Sangu, and Matamuhuri have flown through the thousands of hills to meet the Bay of Bengal by the lowlands of Chattogram.

At one time, the CHT was known for being the only evergreen forest in the country. But the hilly forest is no longer what it used to be. The topography and demographic characteristics of the hilly areas have changed drastically over the last few decades. The biggest concern is the frequency with which natural disasters are occurring in the three hilly districts of the country. Over the past few years, heavy rains in monsoons and extreme heat in summers seem to have become common in the region. Moreover, floods and landslides have also become a regular occurrence.

Flooding was once a foreign phenomenon in the hilly areas. But recently, the devastating floods in Bandarban have resulted in the suffering of thousands of people, the destruction of roads and communication systems, and extensive damage to infrastructure. All this is forcing us to think afresh about the state of natural balance in this region.

Most of the Sadar upazilas, including Bandarban city, were flooded due to the heavy rainfall between August 2 and 8. Locals say that such a terrible flood situation is unprecedented. According to a Prothom Alo report, 6,569 houses and 132 educational institutions suffered damages. The whole Bandarban district remained without power for quite a few days. The Sangu and Matamuhuri rivers also flowed over the danger level for several days. Bandarban's roads and infrastructure have been severely damaged by the heavy rains and flooding. Reportedly, about one-third of the roads constructed under the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) have become impassable. During this time, the operations of hospitals, fire services, and various public and private emergency service providers were practically at a standstill. About 28,000 books of the District Government Public Library in Bandarban have been lost. For the following week or so, the whole of Bandarban was virtually cut off from other districts of the country. Even now, road networking between Bandarban-Ruma, Bandarban-Thanchi, and Thanchi-Alikadam has not returned to normal. It is safe to say that it will take some time for the situation in the area to improve.

Besides Bandarban, many areas in Rangamati and Khagrachari also experienced flooding like never before. Many upazilas, such as Dighinala and Baghaichari, are reported to have suffered crores of taka worth of damages.

As some may remember, in 2017, hundreds of people lost their lives in a massive landslide in Rangamati district. Now that the recent flood situation in the hill districts is receding, we must think again about the overall balance of the hilly areas. Although many experts have cited landslides (due to the unusually heavy rainfall) as the main cause behind the disastrous flooding in the hill districts, locals claim that there are several other factors, including unplanned development, contributing to such anomalous conditions.

Over the past few decades, the entirety of our mountainous region has undergone massive deforestation in the name of road construction and infrastructure development. Trees were felled indiscriminately. The burden of development has been forced onto the region's pristine natural environment, with no regard for the basic needs and opinions of inhabitants. Various media reports often state how the forests in the hill areas are being destroyed one after another. In keeping a balance in the flow of the rivers passing through these hills, rocks play a crucial role. But despite repeated objections from local victims and environmental activists, stones and rocks have been quarried relentlessly from hill ranges, dams, canals, and rivers in different upazilas of Bandarban over the past few years. Needless to say, these streams are the only source of useable water for the hill dwellers. Due to this loss of drinking water sources, reports frequently emerge of diarrhoea outbreaks and children dying due to lack of treatment from remote areas such as Alikadam, Thanchi, and Naikhongchhari.

The authorities remain oblivious to how incompatible the cultivation of rubber and tobacco and the operation of numerous brick kilns in the hill areas are with the environment. On top of this, there is word that a five-star hotel will be put up in the region to expand tourism. This is despite the fact that locals' experience with existing tourist centres

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On top of this, there is word that a five-star hotel will be put up in the region to expand tourism. This is despite the fact that locals' experience with existing tourist centres in different areas of the mountains, including Sajek, has not been very pleasant. Additionally, many hill dwellers have been displaced due to the tourism and development activities. The rate of environmental pollution in the region has gone up and the geological balance has been disturbed.

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts hold a lot of potential for tourism in Bangladesh. If the natural resources and biodiversity of the region are properly looked after, it can help enhance the overall development of the country. But sustainable development cannot be achieved by destroying life and nature, as the reports of frequent natural disasters in the hill districts have showed us time and again. This downtrodden state of nature only reminds us that, before destroying the natural environment, we need to be aware of the consequences of such actions. The entire world is facing new challenges every day in dealing with the adverse impacts of global warming and climate change. If we still fail to realise the impact our actions have on the environment, we could be faced with even more devastating disasters in the future.

A people sidelined by its politicians



THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The lists of dengue infections and deaths are only getting longer, and nobody can tell if, or when, the situation will get better. The prices of daily essentials continue to skyrocket, with the price of eggs, the go-to protein for the poor, now equal to that of a kilogram of broiler chicken. Meanwhile, more than 50 people were killed in the floods in Chattogram and the Chittagong Hill Tracts area in recent weeks.

In all of this, it is the common people (or in the context of the upcoming national election, the voters) who are the worst sufferers. But the politicians seem to be blissfully oblivious to the plight of their electorate. There is no denying that the country is headed towards its next parliamentary election with the two major political parties harbouring opposite stances regarding the election itself. Of course, a free, fair, and inclusive election is necessary for a better society and stronger democracy. But when people are suffering the most, when they are dying because of poor governance, how can the political parties focus on only the physical exercise of the election and how it

help but wonder who it is that is actually representing me, or has my interests at heart.

Bangladeshi politics is going through a critical phase. The fact is that politicians have lost control over politics in general, which appears to have been hijacked by corporate interests – given the representation of businessmen and former bureaucrats in the parliament. Currently, around 62 percent of lawmakers are from the business sector. The government's dependency on the administration has increased. And none but the politicians have brought this upon themselves, in their pursuit of shortcuts and expediency. When career politicians become weak, so does politics. And when the people are sidelined, politics – so far as it is concerned with maintaining democracy – becomes more fragile.

It is in this context that the exhortations of the diplomatic corps in Dhaka – India, China, the US, and the EU – about the supremacy of the people and how they hope that the people's wishes will be reflected in the outcome of the election, are both ironic and intriguing.

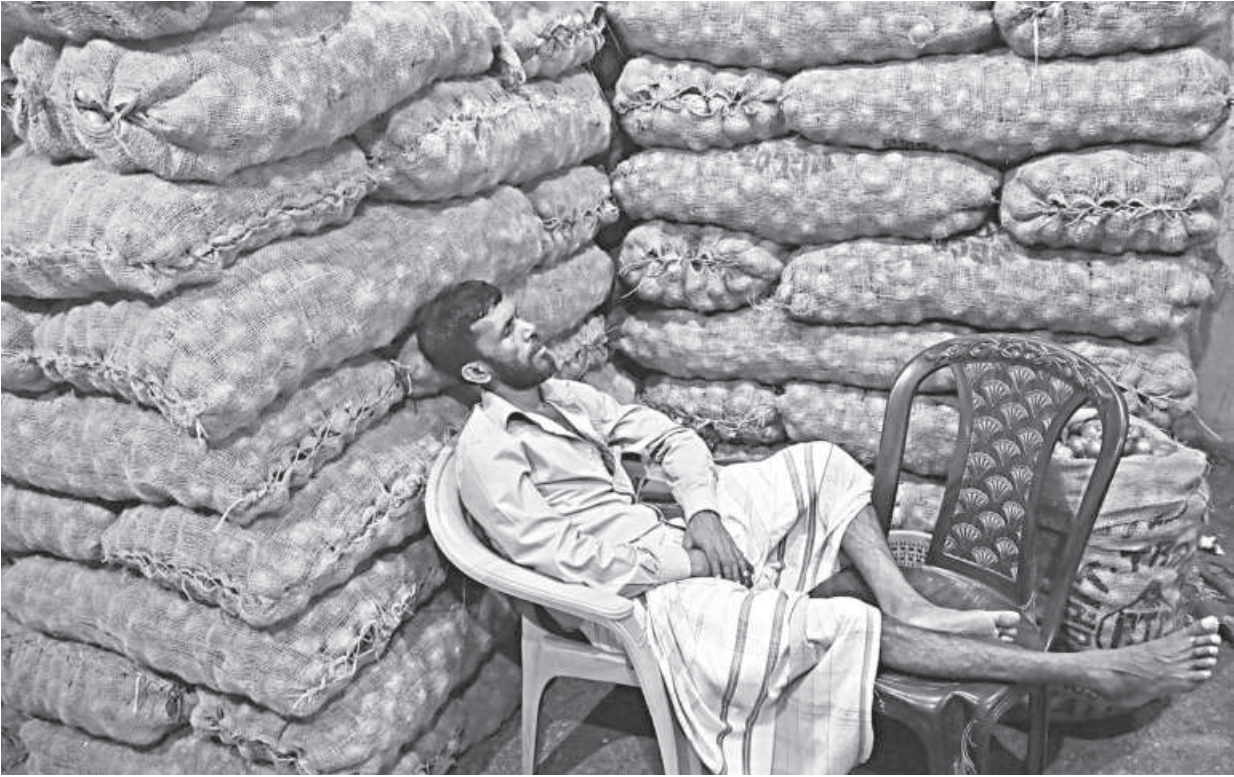
The two previous elections

But now, when a mere nomination all but guarantees victory for a candidate, the exercise of putting in effort to win voters has become all but cosmetic.

On the other hand, while the opposition can do little so far as actual measures are concerned – whether that relates to dengue or

When people are suffering the most, when they are dying because of poor governance, how can the political parties focus on only the physical exercise of the election and how it will play out in about four months? Shouldn't their focus be on how best to serve the people now? Shouldn't they be concerned about the welfare of the poorest of society?

prices – it is their responsibility to hold the government accountable. It falls on the opposition to keep these issues alive so that the government cannot ignore them. One way to do that is in parliament, which has unfortunately lost its purpose since the official opposition is, by and large, an informal extension of the ruling party alliance. Meanwhile, the



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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

will play out in about four months? Shouldn't their focus be on how best to serve the people now? Shouldn't they be concerned about the welfare of the poorest of society? Shouldn't our politicians be working to win the hearts and minds of the people in order to win the elections, instead of engaging in political power play with their archrivals?

Ideally, and historically, people get into politics for the welfare of their people. But it appears from recent political machinations that the people have been conveniently forgotten or even sidelined in the game of politics. When one political party says that the country's people are with it, and the other party claims that it represents the people, I can't

changed the nature of Bangladeshi people's participation in national politics. The 2014 election, which BNP had boycotted and which saw 153 lawmakers being elected uncontested, remains a rare example of a lopsided election. In the 2018 election, many people were denied the right to cast their votes, and allegations emerged of ballot-stuffing on the eve of elections, so much so that it was even mentioned by Awami League's alliance members. When politicians found that they could get elected even without votes, voters ceased to become a factor to consider when trying to win elections. In the past, candidates did have to woo voters, and win their hearts and minds to get their votes.

main opposition camp on the streets, BNP, is too obsessed with its one-point demand for a resignation of the ruling government than with the plight of the voters.

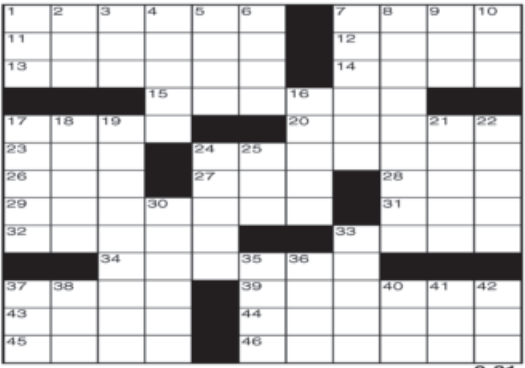
So now, whenever I hear calls for this or that "in the name of the people," and when political parties launch campaigns for the supposed sake of the people, it seems to me that those politicians are merely cementing their political careers using the name of the people. Is anyone actually thinking about the families of those 50 people who died in the floods? Or about the children who are going to bed hungry in Bangladesh even now? That one has to pose such questions in a column is perhaps an even bigger tragedy.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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