

A recurring calamity in Chattogram

City authorities must prevent waterlogging and associated risks

Once again, residents of Chattogram find themselves grappling with an old foe: waterlogging. This is hardly news anymore, though; by now it has become business – or suffering – as usual, a recurring calamity that simply refuses to go away, monsoon or no monsoon. On Sunday, waterlogging caused by overnight downpour reportedly disrupted the lives of residents across the city, and even forced the delaying of HSC exams by an hour, with students seen wading through knee-deep water to reach their exam centres. The fact that such adjustments have become routine over the years hints at the normalisation of waterlogging in the city's narrative – a narrative that must shift from enduring to eradicating.

Sunday also witnessed what has emerged as the most disturbing consequence of waterlogging of late: death by falling into uncovered drains. Reportedly, an 18-month-old toddler went missing after he fell into a drain at the Halishahar thana before his dead body was recovered 17 hours later, on Monday morning. We have often talked about the danger of drains and canals getting clogged because of indiscriminate dumping of waste and lack of clearing, leading to the overflowing of drains which make them indistinguishable from flooded roads. Earlier this month, a college student also died after falling into an open drain. This Friday marked the two years of the death of a vegetable vendor who similarly fell to his death.

The question is, why do such tragedies keep occurring? Why are so many drains, and connected canals, still uncovered and dangerously exposed? Getting swept away into one of them, especially when it rains and the roads get invariably waterlogged, is a real possibility. Chattogram reportedly has 56 canals as well as 765 km of drains. A 2021 survey by the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) identified a total of 5,527 dangerous spots connected to these canals and drains. Evidently, the authorities know about them but preventive actions have been few and far between. Instead, responsible officials, including the mayor, seemed more interested in blaming residents for waterlogging and associated risks.

The fact is, this is no longer just a civic issue; it is a matter of life and death. Any negligence leading to the sustenance of this problem should be considered criminal. We urge the CCC and the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) to work collaboratively to eradicate waterlogging urgently, including by clearing and covering all drains.

Address the plight of stone crushers

Authorities must consider their demand for fair wages

We are concerned to learn about the dire straits of stone crushers in Lalmonirhat, who work exceedingly hard to advance our economy only to remain deprived of its benefits, including a fair wage. According to a report by this daily, there are about 40,000 labourers at the region's two land ports involved in stone crushing, loading and unloading, who earn about Tk 400 a day. This is a physically demanding job that involves quite a few risks, including the exposure to silica dust which puts them at constant risk of “silicosis” – a debilitating lung disease. But the wages they earn are far from sufficient considering the costs of treatment as well as the high prices of practically everything in today's market. On days when there is no work, there are no wages for them, meaning their families either have to starve or borrow from others to survive. The situation is extremely disheartening.

Against this backdrop, it is only fair that their demand for a daily wage of Tk 700 is given a serious consideration. It is also vital that those who are putting their lives at jeopardy for the nation's development have access to humane work conditions. In 2015, around 65 workers reportedly died from silicosis at the Burimari port. It is no secret that on top of low wages, workers in our informal sector also suffer from another layer of vulnerability: minimal job security and non-existent social benefits – such as healthcare packages and compensation schemes – which can be expected from the formal sector.

The result of the disturbing current status quo is a miserable living standard for the majority of the employed population, approximately 85.1 percent of whom work in the informal sector. Unfortunately, these workers are not even recognised as “workers” under the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. Needless to say, to achieve holistic economic growth in the country, minimal protection must be provided to workers in the informal sector. We urge the authorities to properly recognise them, including stone crushers, and undertake measures to improve their living and working conditions.

New Message

To

Subject

Have things to say? Want your thoughts about current events to be published in The Daily Star? Send us a letter (100 - 300 words) with your name and area!

Write to us: letters@thedailystar.net

Should the BRICS exclusion disappoint Bangladesh?



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun
is executive director at the
Centre for Policy Dialogue and
non-resident senior fellow of the
Atlantic Council.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

The recently concluded 15th BRICS Summit has generated a lot of discussion in Bangladesh, as the country had expected to be a member of this bloc. The foreign minister, too, had said in June that Bangladesh was likely to become a member in August. However, it turned out that the country was not to join the bloc at the summit held in Johannesburg, South Africa during August 22-24. The leaders of the BRICS countries accepted only six new countries this time around: Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia. Their membership will be effective from January 1, 2024.

Inclusion of new members in BRICS is considered to be a win-win situation in the current geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances. Initially, the formation of BRICS was seen as a balancing force in the geo-economic landscape, which is dominated by the Western economies. Emerging economies require trade, investment, finance, and technology to continue their growth momentum and light challenges. As multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund failed to respond to the needs of countries in the Global South and reform their governance, BRICS member countries established the New Development Bank (NDB) with a contribution of \$50 billion by each BRICS member. Later, Bangladesh, the UAE, Egypt, and Uruguay were invited to be members of the NDB. Recently, BRICS members have also been exploring the possibility of new international currency arrangements for trading among themselves and reducing the dominance of the US dollar.

Indeed, the multilateral system has become ineffective to a large extent due to the rigid position of powerful Western countries. The multilateral trading system, multilateral development banks, and climate negotiations are some instances where the richer Northern countries have played a leading role in shaping the global agenda. In light of this, the focus of this year's BRICS summit was “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism.” Member countries expressed concern over unilateral coercive measures used by certain countries and highlighted their commitment to inclusive multilateralism. They want to see improved global governance through a more efficient, representative,



The influence of BRICS in global governance is still limited.

PHOTO: REUTERS

democratic, and accountable multilateral system. The members are also for a reform of the UN Security Council to have higher representation of developing countries.

At the summit, BRICS members called for a constructive role of multilateral financial institutions and international organisations in designing economic policies to regain the momentum of the global economy. As such, they committed to employment generation, including gender-responsive employment and social protection policies for sustainable development. In terms of climate actions, BRICS members highlighted the need for developing countries to access low-emission technologies and solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance climate adaptation actions. BRICS countries feel that meeting the development goals of countries and reconstructing post-conflict countries require support from the international community.

However, the influence of BRICS in global governance is still limited. Its motivation behind expanding its membership is to gain more strength and challenge the existing geo-economic and geopolitical order. Though the geopolitical aspect was not a declared objective, the BRICS is gradually evolving into a geopolitical group. Though Brazil and India were

expected to be on a path of growth at the time of its establishment, the three countries besides China and India could not meet expectations as their economies slowed down despite their per capita income being higher than India. The newest six member countries also have varying economic backgrounds. Argentina is facing serious economic challenges while Ethiopia is a low-income country. And the UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are oil-rich countries. The per capita incomes of these eleven countries range from about \$1,000 to over \$50,000.

Bangladesh's interest in BRICS arises from various factors. Currently, Bangladesh is under tremendous pressure from Western countries to hold a free, fair, and inclusive national election. The country is also under pressure on account of human rights issues. On May 24, the US announced a new visa policy for Bangladeshi citizens, with the aim of pushing for a fair election. Under this policy, the US can restrict the issuance of visas for any Bangladeshi citizen who has undermined the democratic election process in the country. The recent visits of US high officials and EU delegations are also manifestations of Western pressure on the Bangladesh government. There is no doubt that the current political party in power needs allies. Inclusion in BRICS could

it has potential to dominate the global economy if it moves strategically. The group, with its original five members, already accounts for about 24 percent of global GDP in nominal terms, and about 31.6 percent in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. This is higher than the G7 countries (France, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Canada), whose GDP in PPP terms is about 30.3 percent. The BRICS also occupies 16 percent of global trade and includes 41 percent of the world's population. Hence, the new members will only enhance the bloc's strength.

Even though it is hardly a homogeneous group, BRICS member countries can gain from each other's strength on common issues such as economic progress. If the economic agenda gains momentum, Bangladesh could also benefit by joining the grouping of the Global South. However, the ambit of economic cooperation has to expand beyond financial cooperation. Bangladesh's participation in such blocs can be meaningful if it can improve its trade balance with its trading partners, particularly with China and India. Bangladesh also needs more foreign direct investment, technology, and capacity development. Bangladesh stand to benefit substantially through the bloc only if these issues are on the BRICS agenda.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to letters@thedailystar.net

Do we have a vision for Dhaka?

Cities are not merely places to make money. They help create memories, retain heritage, build culture, civility and trust, and ensure social cohesion – all of which require the right spaces and communities.

But marginal communities in Dhaka are increasingly struggling to align their aspirations with the ever-changing capital. And the changes are a surprising intrusion into city life – intrusive enough that they are seemingly killing the city's soul. We don't understand what the master plans mean, but one thing is for sure, ordinary people need social and spatial facilities to thrive, not fancy ideas concocted by using up millions of taxpayers' money.

Dhaka has become a place for economic transactions amid the mayhem. But the city can use some retrofitting to keep up with the standards that everyday life requires; all that is needed are some well-thought-out plans and good intentions.

Chaotic movement in the roads and alleys leads to frustrated people and environmental damage. Last



FILE PHOTO: STAR

What are we heading towards? City expansion or high density?

month, I visited Dhaka and noticed random vehicles using emergency lights to wedge through tailgated traffic, ignoring the rights of others to be on the street. Using unauthorised sirens doesn't indicate a crisis – other than the crisis of mobility! What's

more, the city's many flyovers actually draw in more cars (proven by many cities worldwide).

What are we heading towards? City expansion or high density? Even though neither of them are trustworthy solutions, planners and

government officials don't even confront this fundamental question.

Of my 60 years, half were spent in Dhaka, and I've been witnessing how the city has gradually compromised on essential living standards. The effects of experimental plans, coupled with urban agonies, are seemingly invisible to professional and civil authorities. Dhaka is now a black hole: a city consuming millions of residents but has no sense of quality life.

In this mission to save the city, Dhaka needs relevant professionals and stakeholders to unfold and repair the damages development inflicted on it. Besides, new talents and experts on specific issues must be welcomed to generate a workable and pragmatic vision.

If nothing is done, the new generation will slowly be devoured by the concrete. So, let's work together to get Dhaka out of this development trap.

Dr Quazi Mahtab Zaman
Robert Gordon University
Scotland