

Lead pollution is killing us

Where is the action plan to stop this poisoning?

Lead poisoning has been a global problem for decades, having devastating effects on people's health, especially that of children. Bangladesh happens to be the fourth most affected country in terms of the number of children affected, according to a report launched in 2020 by Unicef and Pure Earth. Last Tuesday, the Lancet Planetary Health journal published the World Bank's study on the health and economic burden of lead poisoning around the world.

The harm caused by lead exposure has turned out to be far worse than previous estimations. The report has found that lead poisoning causes cognitive deficiency in children and fatal cardiovascular diseases among adults. In specific terms, children below five years of age lose around 20 million IQ points and the economic cost is estimated at \$10,897 million or 3.6 percent of the country's GDP. Lead damages the brains of children below five, causing lifelong neurological, cognitive, and physical impairment. It also causes heart diseases and strokes in adults. Exposure to lead damages the foetuses of pregnant women. In Bangladesh, the sources are ubiquitous: used lead acid battery recycling, lead in paints, aluminium cookware, ceramic crockery, spices, toys, cosmetics, food, electronic waste, fertilisers, and cultured fish feed. Around 35.5 million children are affected.

Despite local and international studies with such frightening findings, there does not seem to be any comprehensive plan of action to address this silent killer that is practically everywhere. Has the government, for instance, made any effort to stop children from working in informal battery recycling plants and factories where they are directly exposed to lead and other toxins? Why are we still using lead paint to paint our walls? Why have we not devised safe waste disposal of batteries and electronics? Why is there lead in turmeric powder? The questions are endless.

It is a gross understatement to say that we are far behind in addressing such a debilitating health crisis that has huge implications for the nation's future. The study has recommended a 10-point plan to reduce lead pollution. This includes analysing the sources of lead, designing specific interventions, developing an efficient blood lead level surveillance, reviewing existing policies and enforcing laws and regulations, identifying and cleaning toxic sites as well as raising public awareness about the issue. It is mind-boggling that previous studies and expert recommendations have not had any impact in terms of provoking the government to take immediate steps to reduce lead pollution and exposure. Given that the situation has worsened markedly, it is high time that the government gives this issue the greatest priority and implements an action plan.

Bay of Bengal drowning in plastic

When will authorities implement policies to stop plastic pollution?

It is extremely distressing that, despite repeated warnings about the grave dangers of plastic pollution in the Bay of Bengal, unsustainable waste management continues to wreak havoc in our nation's most treasured natural resource. According to a recent study conducted by Enhanced Coastal Fisheries in Bangladesh (ECOFISHBD) – an initiative funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – around 15 tonnes of non-biodegradable waste are dumped into the sea by fishermen alone. The waste includes plastic bags, bottles, and polythene bags, all of which are disastrous for the environment, wildlife, and human health. The latest study undoubtedly serves as yet another reminder of the dangerous and persisting lack of awareness resulting from the lacklustre implementation of environmentally sustainable policies.

Just last year, another study by ECOFISHBD found that around 22.77kg of non-biodegradable waste is dumped daily on the Kuakata sea beach by tourists and locals. Experts have warned that the large-scale plastic pollution and proliferation of harmful bacteria are likely to make the Bay of Bengal unusable in the next 30-50 years. It goes without saying that the nation would not have descended to this situation had authorities implemented the bold steps taken to protect our environment since 2002, when Bangladesh became the first country in the world to ban polythene bags. Furthermore, in 2010, the country adopted the Jute Packaging Act to promote alternative packaging – with little effect 13 years later. In 2020, the High Court ordered the government to impose a ban on single-use plastic products by 2021, yet no effective measures have been taken to promote multi-sectoral change.

As destruction from plastic pollution continues to plague the environment, all the strides in policy and legislative arrangements have only served as mere rhetoric. It's time we put the jute packaging law into effect to replace the widespread use of plastic. Authorities should also diligently conduct regular drives to stop the indiscriminate use and illegal production of polythene bags and single-use plastics. Measures should also include multi-ministerial monitoring divisions to rigorously prevent the dumping of non-biodegradable waste into water bodies. It is of utmost importance to protect the Bay of Bengal against environmental degradation.

New Message

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Odhikar duo's convictions are regrettable



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KAMAL AHMED

Most recently, Bangladesh again found a place in global media headlines. Sadly, it was for convicting and imprisoning two of its most prominent human rights defenders, Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan of Odhikar. This is the first awarding of jail term to any human rights defender in Bangladesh since independence. Adilur founded human rights organisation Odhikar in 1994. With an initial slow start, it soon became a leading independent rights monitoring group. Since then, it has been diligently documenting all kinds of violations of human rights by both state agencies and non-state actors.

Odhikar's annual reports on rights dating back to 2004 are still available on the organisation's website. These reports contain well-sourced data about custodial deaths, crossfires, extrajudicial killings, detentions without trial, use of force to break up political and union protests, violence against minorities and women, border killings, and most other violations of citizens' rights. It also monitored the two national elections held in 2001 and 2008, and documented post-poll violence particularly targeted at members of minority communities. In its 2001 election monitoring report, Odhikar mentioned that poll-related violence had caused 52 people to die and 867 to be injured, which I quoted in one of my columns in *Prothom Alo* when Adilur was first arrested in 2013.

In its 2004 annual report, Odhikar stated, "The year 2004 witnessed an alarming escalation in human rights violations. From 01 January to 31 December 526 people were killed, 6235 injured, 2918 arrested and 28 abducted in incidents concerning political violence. 240 people were killed at the hands of law enforcers. Of them, 149 were killed in crossfire." Can anyone cite a better compilation of rights' violation data dating back to those years, when the BNP-Jamaat alliance was in power?

Adilur, despite being the secretary of Odhikar, was then working as one of the deputy attorney generals. A former student activist belonging to the student wing of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), led by Hasanul Haq Inu, Adilur has never been a member either of the BNP or Jamaat. But in the era of alternative truths, ministers and leaders of the ruling Awami League have relentlessly been trying to delegitimise his role as a human rights defender, claiming Adilur's service to the state under a different regime as proof that his work was politically motivated. Perhaps this reflects the workings of their own minds, as they have long ago erased the fine line that



PHOTO: COLLECTED

It is no wonder that 72 global human rights organisations have termed the duo's conviction as a punishment for their work.

should exist between the state and the party in power by capturing all the state institutions using loyalists.

Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan have been convicted of criminal offences for allegedly harming the nation's image by falsely claiming that 61 people died in the mayhem following Hefazat-e-Islam's Dhaka siege on May 5, 2013. This figure is almost five times higher than the government's official count of 11. But there were other tallies that also showed huge variations and, till now, there has been no attempt to establish the full facts of one of the most unsettling incidents in Bangladesh's history.

On May 7, Amnesty International said that unofficial figures from hospitals obtained by them confirmed 22 deaths in Dhaka and 22 more in places outside of Dhaka. In total, Amnesty International claimed that it was able to confirm the protest-related deaths of at least 41 civilians and three police or security force personnel across the country on May 5-6.

US-based global rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW), in its August 2013 report titled "Blood on the Streets," said, "Based on hospital logs, eyewitness accounts, and well-sourced media reports, Human Rights Watch believes that at least 58 people died on May 5 and 6, seven of whom were members of the security forces. However it is likely the death toll was even higher."

Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, an advocacy group closely

linked with the ruling party and campaigning for trials of suspected war criminals of the Liberation War, in its white paper published on November 8, 2013, claimed that 39 people had been killed during the rally and sit-in programmes of Hefazat-e-Islam. Of them, it added, 24 were killed between morning and 8pm on May 5 in Hefazat activists' clashes with law enforcers

Odhikar's defence team and many national and foreign observers of the trial have alleged that the trial did not follow due process. In this regard, they have pointed out that they weren't afforded full and timely access to discoveries made by the prosecution. They've also alleged that, in an unusual and rare move, the judge allowed the prosecution to reinvestigate the

and Awami League activists. And, according to the group, another nine people were killed on the morning of May 6 during clashes between Hefazat and Jamaat activists and law enforcers at Kanchpur on Chittagong Road, Madanipur, and Narayanganj.

All these figures are much higher than the officially admitted numbers. Yet, the government sued only the two executives of Odhikar. In July 2013, the information ministry asked Odhikar for the addresses and names of the relatives/family members of the deceased persons that it had listed. Odhikar declined that request, claiming that doing so could jeopardise the family members' safety. This wasn't unreasonable as we have heard of such allegations of intimidation and harassment by members of the security forces from the families of enforced disappearance victims. Odhikar, however, said if the government formed an independent inquiry commission, it would hand over the names and addresses to the commission.

Though Odhikar did not publish the list of victims, ruling party activists and a section of the media claimed that they had traced some victims listed by Odhikar to be alive and commenced a smear campaign against Adilur, Odhikar, and the fact-finding report. Some ruling party supporters are now arguing that Adilur had 10 years to clear his name, but have conveniently forgotten that the latter's computers and server were taken away by police, making them inaccessible.

case after the completion of witness testimonies. The lead prosecutor, Nazrul Islam, responding to a post-verdict query, told *Prothom Alo* that the supplementary investigation (after 10 years) was necessary for the conviction.

The verdict under the ICT Act, a law which has already been replaced twice and is still being criticised as unfair and repressive, is another reason for it to be seen as unfair. Besides, the ruling party's policies of appeasing Hefazat in the years following makes one wonder whether their aggravement towards Odhikar can be justified any longer.

It is no wonder that 72 organisations working across the globe to defend human rights have termed the Odhikar duo's conviction as a punishment for their work. The organisations stated that the hearings had been accelerated following the designation of US sanctions against Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and its officials in December 2021, and that this acceleration was based on allegations that Odhikar was behind these sanctions.

The European Parliament's resolution, and concerns expressed by at least four Western governments – namely the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – should not be taken lightly. The regret expressed in the France-Germany joint statement for convicting the Odhikar duo may prove regrettable for us sooner than the government may believe.

Rich countries can gain a lot by helping Bangladesh



RMG NOTES
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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Did you know that nearly 60 percent of Bangladesh's population is exposed to high risk of floods, much higher than any other country except the Netherlands? Climate change is worsening the situation and the financial and humanitarian costs brought by this calamity are racking up.

This is one of the headline findings of a new report by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, part of the prestigious London School of Economics.

The report is timely and arrives on the back of a sustained period of extreme weather patterns. It also comes just before a major conference, Bangladesh Climate Action Forum, which will analyse climate change in context of the global fashion industry – an industry critical to the country's economic prospects.

According to the findings, Bangladesh is highly prone to flooding because of its location in the Bengal Delta and its low-lying, flat topography. Meanwhile, several

factors linked to climate change are increasing the country's flood risk, including the increasing frequency of extreme precipitation and more erratic rainfall. Therefore, effective flood policies are ever more important to increase resilience and adaptation and reduce the likelihood of cascading humanitarian and economic impacts.

While the report focuses on Bangladesh, anybody with business ties to our country should sit up and take notice. The fact is that climate change is an existential threat that transcends borders and affects every corner of our planet. However, it disproportionately burdens the poorest and most vulnerable nations.

I will argue that rich countries, with their historical contributions to greenhouse gas emissions and greater economic capacity, have a moral and practical obligation to assist developing countries such as Bangladesh in addressing the adverse impacts of climate change. Fashion retailers can play an integral role in this.

One of the most compelling

arguments for this is historical responsibility. The majority of the emissions causing climate change have originated from developed nations during their industrialisation. These emissions have led to the current global crisis, which impacts poor countries disproportionately. Thus, rich nations bear a significant moral responsibility; they must take proactive steps to help rectify the situation.

Moreover, climate change is not constrained by national borders. The effects of greenhouse gas emissions in one part of the world can have far-reaching consequences globally. Hurricanes, droughts, rising sea levels, and other climate-related disasters do not respect geopolitical boundaries. Rich countries should recognise that they too are vulnerable to the spillover effects of climate change, so by helping developing countries adapt and build resilience, rich countries ultimately protect their own citizens from the consequences of a warming planet.

Assisting developing countries in addressing climate impacts can also yield economic benefits for rich nations. Climate change can disrupt global supply chains, affect agricultural production, and lead to increased market volatility. By helping developing countries, rich nations can stabilise the global economy and safeguard their own economic interests. Moreover, investing in clean technologies – in garment production,

for example – and green infrastructure in poor countries can open up new markets for rich nations' products and services, creating economic opportunities for both sides.

Climate change has a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations within poor countries, exacerbating existing inequalities and causing significant human suffering. Rich nations, guided by principles of empathy and humanitarianism, should assist those who are most affected.

Addressing climate change is a collective endeavour that requires global cooperation. The Paris Agreement, signed by nearly every nation, emphasises the need for wealthy countries to provide financial support to developing nations to help them reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts. Fulfilling these commitments is essential for achieving international climate goals. Rich nations should not only meet their financial obligations but also go beyond them, as this is crucial for the success of global climate efforts.

By working collaboratively to combat climate change and reduce its disproportionate impact on poor countries, the global community can move closer to a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient future for all. It is not only a matter of ethical duty but also a strategic investment in the well-being and prosperity of our shared planet.