

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Our rivers are being robbed

Why is the law to stop illegal sand extraction not enforced?

It is a tragedy that, as another World Rivers Day goes by, instead of celebrating our abundance of rivers, we must actually mourn the death of many and the slow demise of others – all due to human greed. The River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC), a research institute, has found that around 77 rivers face the onslaught of aggressive extraction of sand. Violating the law, individuals connected to power have been extracting sand from innumerable areas of rivers and seashores across the country, with detrimental effects on the biodiversity and ecosystems of these water bodies.

According to a report published in this daily, there are 707 government announced sand extracting sites, called "Balumahal," out of which 382 have been leased out to different individuals. But apart from these official sites, at least 265 individuals are illegally extracting sand from 132 sites of these 77 rivers. The illegal sites are in all major rivers such as the Padma, Jamuna, Meghna, Brahmaputra, Surma, Sangu, Ichhamoti and Teesta. There are at least seven sites in the Bay of Bengal where sand is being unlawfully extracted. A good number of these people, to the shock of none, are public representatives.

The Bangladesh Balumahal and Soil Management Act, 2023 (an amended law of 2010) was meant to regulate sand extraction activities. Obviously, it is a law merely on paper and little has been done to enforce it. It is frustrating that in spite of endless media reports on illegal extraction of various rivers over the years, as well as the experts' views on the irreversible damage to rivers caused by this insatiable appetite for sand, little has been done to stop the robbing of rivers.

We urge the government to make sincere efforts to stop this human corrosion of our rivers by holding the people or organisations involved accountable. These include some unscrupulous public officials and government agencies that have been carrying out their illegal activities under the nose of the administration. As environmentalists have urged, sand extraction has to be done in a scientific and planned way by conducting proper surveys before dredging the river. Sand extraction sites, moreover, must be monitored closely and law enforcers deployed to make sure sand is not taken away illegally. The government must show its political will to save the country's rivers, not only from sand extraction but other threats such as encroachment and pollution. To do so, it must clamp down on all the culprits, no matter what their political affiliation may be.

Chattogram's Achilles' heel

Poor drainage system failing to prevent waterlogging

Every year, high tides and downpours submerge Chattogram city for days on end, and this year is no different. Like the city's 5.2 million residents, we too are once again disappointed at the authorities' sheer negligence in addressing a longstanding issue – waterlogging.

Over the decades, urbanisation has slowly strangled the city's once abundant waterways. As per a report in this daily, in the past 50 years, 70 percent of the water bodies have been filled up, and due to illegal occupation, many of the canals have just vanished. Even though the city once had 72 canals, Chattogram Wasa's drainage master plan now only shows 56. Looking at the situation, is it a surprise that people have to wade through knee-to-waist-deep water every monsoon?

Since 2017, Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) has been implementing a Tk 5,617-crore mega project, which was supposed to greatly improve the city's drainage. Clearly, that improvement is yet to materialise, as just recently, water rushed into the city's many homes and shops, disrupting lives and harming businesses. The project's revised deadline was June 2023, but as is tradition, it has been crossed with 76 percent of the work being completed.

Despite its duty to fix drainage, CDA itself seems to be complicit in promoting careless urbanisation and filling water bodies. The authority is developing land in low-lying areas, which are integral to retaining rainwater, and has approved the filling up of water bodies between 15 and 30 katha by taking permission from the Department of Environment, ignoring the Natural Water Reservoir Conservation Act 2000.

Regarding its land projects, CDA's explanation is that such development is for the sake of people, as it allows residents to own plots. If the authority indeed works for the sake of people, wouldn't it be wiser to resolve the drainage crisis for the betterment of everyone, instead of serving a few?

Along with CDA, Chattogram City Corporation and Water Development Board are also implementing relevant projects, with their deadlines approaching fast. Ideally, these government bodies are supposed to coordinate to meet their shared goal, but what we keep seeing is one blaming the other for their collective failure.

To put an end to this dysfunction, we urge the government to form an umbrella organisation, comprising all relevant bodies, to ensure accountability and efficiency. While reviving the drains and canals, authorities must also put a stop to illegal occupation and filling of water bodies. If proper measures are taken, the people of Chattogram will certainly see a monsoon that will not bring misery.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Find a solution to VIP movement-induced suffering

The ordeals of VIP movement through Dhaka roads have become a regular problem, adding to the already frustrating traffic jams. Often, entire roads are cleared, and even passers-by are restricted from crossing streets for long durations. This is a waste of people's valuable time, money, and fuel; and also a grotesque example of how a powerful minority is causing problems for the majority.

Towhid Islam
Dhaka

What's at stake with a politicised bureaucracy



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In 1996, as the Awami League's crippling Dhaka *oborodh* campaign went on in full swing against the BNP government, a platform of government officials dubbed as "Jonotar Moncho" also gained traction. This platform, led by the likes of Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, echoing AL's demands with unabashed partisanship, was perhaps the first concerted move to politicise the country's bureaucracy. Although a controversial move, it was not questioned at that time since, similar to other instances of legal impropriety, it was acceptable. The people actually wanted a fair election and, as is the case now, it was proven that it would not be possible under the stewardship of the ruling government. AL, who is seeking office for the fourth consecutive time this election, has reportedly exhibited partisanship in recruitment at all levels of the republic during its tenures. And now the servants of the republic appear to be confused as to where their allegiance must lie. They appear to be torn between the state and the party, which poses a challenge for the Election Commission (EC) in conducting a free and fair election come January.

The EC has reiterated its commitment to hold a free and fair election, but for that it needs assistance from all stakeholders – political parties, the administration, law enforcement agencies, and obviously the voters. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal has said on several occasions that deputy commissioners (DCs) and superintendents of police (SPs) – chiefs of district administrations and district police forces, respectively – should perform their duties as government employees during elections, not as party workers. "You should not behave in such a way that the general public may think you are biased, that you are not neutral. You must act impartially. You as a public servant should understand the difference between the government and the political party," he said last year.

This issue came to the fore again on September 13 when the now former Jamalpur DC Md Imran Ahmed urged people to re-elect the AL government to continue the country's development work, in the presence of local AL MP Mirza Azam. Imran was transferred



Former Jamalpur DC Md Imran Ahmed was transferred for urging people to re-elect the Awami League, in the presence of AL lawmaker Mirza Azam.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

as the EC sent a letter to the cabinet secretary to take action against him. A video clip of Imran's speech went viral on social media, and the state minister for public administration remarked that a DC cannot make such a comment.

This type of statements by government officials in the run-up to the election is not new. On August 15, the officer in charge of Dewanganj model police station in Jamalpur, Shyamal Chandra Dhar, drew flak after he termed the ruling Awami League his "own party" and sought votes for its symbol, the boat. He was withdrawn from his station later. In July, a senior secretary of the government named Khaja Miah was made OSD after he reportedly said he wanted to contest the election from his constituency in Narail. We can also recall when the OC of Nangalkot police station in Cumilla, Faruk Hossain, "earnestly requested" people last month to re-elect Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal in the polls, following which he was withdrawn from the police station.

The EC has said the election schedule will be announced in November, and the election will take place in early January. In this circumstance, such

always alleged that the government has politicised the administration and law enforcement agencies to stay in power or to repress the opposition. And none of the political parties can deny it. Even ordinary citizens have come to accept this practice. The administration's neutrality seems to be lost, and a number of bureaucrats and police officials seem to have become desperate for personal gains.

When trust deficit over the election is high among the political parties and voters, such comments surely widen the gap and make it challenging for the Election Commission to hold a free and fair election. But this "culture" did not develop in a day. The role of police and civil administration in the last two elections was controversial. There were media reports that police aided ballot stuffing at the polling centres in the 2018 polls.

There is another factor pertinent to this partisan attitude: many of these bureaucrats and police officials were engaged in politics in their student lives and are alumni of the ruling party. Perhaps they could not forget their affiliation or were reminded of that allegiance through lucrative

In the national elections, DCs, SPs and OCs will play a crucial role. They will be involved directly in the election affairs. If they are found to be campaigning for the ruling party publicly, how can the EC be expected to hold a free and fair election with the assistance of these very officials? Yes, it is easy to identify those who seek votes for the ruling party publicly and keep them away from the field come election day. But there are hundreds more who harbour the same partisan feelings and would go out of their way to favour the ruling party without being vocal about their political inclination. The challenge lies in identifying those officials.

It would not have been such a headache, had this EC shown more resilience and resolve towards holding a free and fair election. It would not have been such a huge problem if the ruling party had not blatantly sought partisanship among the bureaucrats. Now that people's trust wavers, the EC is burdened with this additional challenge to allay doubts in the public's minds that it is indeed going to make sure that the field-level officials are neutral and committed to ensuring a just outcome of the election.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Down on the Biden economy



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JAMES K GALBRAITH

In a recent CNN interview, Paul Krugman of *The New York Times* finds it hard to understand why ordinary American voters do not share his euphoric view of US President Joe Biden's goldilocks economy – which appears to be neither hot nor cold. Inflation is falling, unemployment remains low, the economy is growing, and stock market valuations are high. So why, Krugman asks, do voters give Biden's economy a lousy 36 percent approval rating?

Journalist Glenn Greenwald sees class bias in Krugman's wonderment: as though Krugman were just another pampered rentier with ample cash, real estate, stocks, and bonds. But this is most unfair. Though I have not been to Krugman's home, I have seen his ultra-modest office at the City University of New York. He's certainly done well, but I suspect his plebeian tastes have changed little since his junior faculty days at Yale, when I was a graduate student there.

No, Krugman's problem is not too much money. It's the obsolescence of his ideas. He and I came of age, professionally, during Jimmy Carter's

presidency. Republicans, gunning for Carter, availed themselves of the "misery index," a measure comprising the sum of the unemployment and inflation rates in a given month or year. As a polemical device, the index was devastating, especially in 1980, when Carter's credit controls caused a short recession, just after the Iranian Revolution's shock to oil prices. Ronald Reagan rode to the presidency on that horse.

Today, with inflation and unemployment both running between three and four percent, the misery index is low. Back in the 1970s, those in power would have been thrilled. Mainstream economists would have been perplexed, and that hasn't changed. They were in thrall to something called the Phillips curve – or worse, the Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment. To this day, some of them still can't figure out why low unemployment doesn't cause high inflation. That is why they marvel when the misery index is low – as Krugman does today.

The misery index was never more than a headline number. Dig beneath the surface, and one finds that its two

components are not as relevant to ordinary people as the pundits appear to think. Even when the unemployment rate is relatively high, it has never – apart from the Great Depression or the pandemic shock – directly affected more than a small share of the workforce at any given time. People don't like recessions, but even in bad times, most people keep their jobs. Unlike unemployment, inflation does affect everyone. But what matters to working people is not the monthly or yearly price change taken alone. What matters is the effect on purchasing power and living standards over time. Whether these are rising or falling depends on the relationship of prices to wages. When wage growth exceeds price increases, times are generally good. When it doesn't, they aren't.

It is here that Biden has a problem. During his presidency, living standards have not risen. From early 2021 to mid-2023, prices have increased more than wages, implying that real (inflation-adjusted) hourly wages and real weekly earnings have fallen, on average. Not by much, but they have fallen. Worse, the average figure probably masks a larger fall, in real terms, for families that started out below the average. And given how income distributions work, there are always many more families earning less than the average than there are who earn more.

American households used to be able to offset stagnant real earnings by adding workers and jobs per household. Although those extra jobs usually were not very good, the process of extending work to women and young people

helped families maintain their living standards despite the vast decline in high-wage manufacturing jobs. That was true, to a large degree, in the late 1980s and in the 1990s when many women, young people, and minorities entered the workforce.

But this process has petered out. Though the employment-to-population ratio is up a bit since early 2021, it is still below where it was in 2019. Meanwhile, with the end of pandemic relief policies, the US savings rate has dropped from a robust 20.4 percent of earnings in early 2021 to an anaemic 3.5 percent. Krugman sees that number as an indication that people are spending confidently, but it is much more likely a sign of stress.

No wonder Biden's economic approval rating is so low. It will likely remain there until American voters start to see better results in their own pockets. Most people are not moved by pundits babbling about how great things are. Krugman and cable news are not going to change people's perceptions, especially if they suspect – rightly – that many rich Americans are doing much better than they are.

In this context, and with another election coming up, it seems unwise to tell American workers that they have never had it so good. In fact, as a political matter, such arguments have never worked. Perhaps Krugman, who went to work for Reagan back in 1983, has forgotten the devastating question that his old boss posed during a 1980 debate against Carter: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?"