

A genocide being allowed to happen

Israel’s merciless bombardment of Gaza violates international law

As we witness the unrelenting and brutal bombardment of Gaza by Israeli airstrikes, which continue to take Palestinian lives, the world should be reminded that the present war is between an organisation and a state. Hamas – which has carried out deadly attacks, killed more than 1,300 people in Israel, and has taken around 150 hostages – does not represent the totality of Palestine. Thus, the merciless pulverisation of the densely populated Gaza strip that has taken over 2,000 Palestinian lives, over 700 of whom are children (at the time of writing this editorial, at 6pm on Saturday, October 14, 2023) along with cutting of water, electricity, and food supply, and humanitarian aid, as retaliation against these attacks, are unconscionable acts and violations of international law. An AFP report says that Israeli artillery goes into action against the Gaza strip every 30 seconds.

Giving a 24-hour ultimatum to Palestinians living in the north to evacuate before a ground offensive was nothing short of a death sentence. Tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians have fled the area while many others decided to remain because they had nowhere else to go. Health officials report that Israeli air raids on convoys attempting to leave Gaza city have resulted in the deaths of at least 320 Palestinians, including women and children. How can such blatant brutality be tolerated by the world?

Most Western powers have demonised Hamas for its horrific attacks. But why is Israel not even criticised for what can only be described as a vengeful retribution on civilians, many of them children? It is eerily similar to the consequences of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, during which the Nazis killed around 13,000 Jews to “teach them a lesson” through excessive violence and death, for their resistance effort. Why have Western powers unhesitatingly condemned the attacks of the Hamas, but willfully ignored the ongoing massacre of civilians in Gaza by Israel, right before their eyes? In fact, the US is boosting military aid to Israel.

This never-ending cycle of violence will only lead to more desperation, deaths, and destruction. Can the Western world forgive itself for standing by while a state unleashes its wrath on civilians? Can it erase the fact of Palestinians being under siege, deprived of their land and basic rights, for over seven decades? Under international law, is it justifiable for a state to carry out a campaign of killing civilians, displacing the already displaced, and demolishing all structures in the name of protecting its own citizens? By allowing these atrocities to happen with no consequences, the West has exposed its moral bankruptcy. The US, the EU, the UK, and Canada must join others to call for immediate ceasefire, safe entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and concerted efforts to bring about a two-state solution – starting with an end to the illegal occupation of Palestinian land.

Why can’t children reach school?

Flooded institutions paint grim picture of our students’ situation

We are disheartened to see that children, even today, are struggling to attend classes in the country’s low-lying regions. According to a report by this daily, three schools in Pabna’s Gaznar Beel remain inundated for half the year, starting from monsoon, forcing students to miss classes or resort to unsafe means of commute.

To reach their institutions, many students get on boats and row themselves, which is both risky and burdensome. Others must pay hefty amounts of fare to boatmen in order to get to school. Half the students stop attempting to reach school, and naturally, attendance plummets around this time. Headteachers, meanwhile, are asking for the bare minimum: proper, permanent boat facilities. But that request has remained unfulfilled.

Worse, this is far from an isolated case. Just a month ago, the academic activities of 60 schools and madrasas were suspended as Gaibandha was flooded, disrupting the education of scores of children. In Sirajganj, river erosion is devouring one school building after another, leaving students to study either under the open sky or inside makeshift structures. One thing is common in all these cases: many of the students do not return to school. This is a deeply worrying trend. The government has ambitious goals such as overcoming illiteracy and bringing dropout rates to near zero at primary and secondary levels. But how will it ever achieve such targets if the scenario is such in areas where the natural environment is volatile and nothing is done to adapt to this effectively? Why don’t local administrations – which should be most attuned to an area’s geography and community – take urgent steps to address such situations as and when they occur? If a school building becomes inaccessible or is lost to natural calamities, they must find suitable alternatives, prioritising the education of children over regular development projects.

In the meantime, virtual modes of education, despite their many limitations, could facilitate learning alongside in-person classes. Such an initiative may require huge amounts of resources but it is essential if we want to build a truly Smart Bangladesh. Another option would be floating schools. In the country’s northern region, hundreds of students attend classes in boats-turned-schools run by individuals and NGOs. This arrangement, intended to facilitate the education of children who face regular flooding, is seen in many other countries including Cambodia, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

If the government is truly committed to making Bangladesh a higher-middle-income country by 2030 and a developed one by 2041, it must ensure that our young ones can at least reach school without trouble, as they are the ones who will take us to those milestones.

Only breaths of polluted air



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I can’t remember the last time I inhaled fresh air in this city. Every day, as soon as I step out the door, I am exposed to severe dust pollution from the never-ending construction activities in the area. During my commute to any part of the capital from my home in Mirpur, I am forced to inhale the black smoke emanating from countless vehicles, particularly from unfit buses. I have been trying to survive this toxic air only by wearing a mask for the past few years. Like millions of people living in this city, I too do not know what I should be doing to save myself from such polluted air, as there are still no guidelines for us on how to deal with this severe health hazard that we are being exposed to day in and day out.

When taking my son to his school in Dhanmondi the other day, I was already feeling unwell because of the construction dust. But as soon as we got onto Mirpur Road, I felt suddenly unable to breathe properly. I tried to take deep breaths, desperate to get some more oxygen into my lungs, but the strong smell of the fumes from the vehicles around us was suffocating me. I was at a loss as to what to do when our CNG-run autorickshaw finally crossed the busy road and entered Road 27 in Dhanmondi, where the air seemed somewhat more tolerable.

Going through the newspapers later on, I learned that Dhaka had the fifth worst air in the world that day. The next day, the newspapers reported that air pollution has increased by around 13 percent in the capital since 2020, according to a study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), despite the fact that the country received a staggering amount of funding to improve its air quality.

Since the beginning of this year, we have come across several alarming reports on our air quality. While one report found that poor air quality is contributing to a rise in premature births and babies being born with low birth weight in Dhaka, another report revealed that air pollution was causing about 20 percent of all premature deaths in the country. Yet another study has found that the average life expectancy of people in Bangladesh is being cut short by 6.8 years due to their continuous exposure to polluted air.

The CPD study has revealed some crucial facts about how air pollution is affecting the public. It has found that seven out of 10 people in the city suffer breathing problems, coughing, runny noses, sore throats, chest pains, and



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

eye irritation due to air pollution, and that, on average, each Dhaka resident spends Tk 4,000 a year for diagnosis and treatment of symptoms thought to have been caused by polluted air. The economic and health loss from this preventable cause is unbelievable.

Sadly, all these concerning revelations have been met with scant response from the authorities. The Department of Environment (DoE), which is the responsible authority in this regard, could neither make the various city authorities coordinate their construction work and development projects, nor could it make the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) withdraw vehicles from the roads whose economic lives have long expired. The DoE could not even hold construction firms accountable for not covering their construction materials or for exacerbating dust pollution in the city. Is it any wonder that Dhaka’s air quality index (AQI) score has remained in the “very unhealthy” category throughout the year?

Even some years ago, Dhaka’s air quality would turn unhealthy in the winter and improve during the monsoon. But this is not the case anymore. Dhaka’s air now remains

was surprised to see an almost empty office on a weekday and at around 3pm in the afternoon. There was hardly anyone in the air quality department, except for the person I had gone there to meet. Reportedly, this new building was built using foreign funds to “curb air pollution.”

Reportedly, a lot of the money that the DoE received over the last decade has been wasted on building construction, buying cars, sending its officials on foreign trips, and more while the actual work which the fund was meant for was neglected. A total of 296 officials went abroad for training in 10 years under the Clean Air and Sustainable Environment (CASE) project that was inaugurated in 2009. One official, who went abroad 10 times for training, does not even work with the DoE anymore. After the project was implemented, Dhaka’s air quality actually deteriorated further. The parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) also raised concerns about the way in which the project funds for curbing air pollution were wasted. But the question is: was anyone held accountable for this sheer waste of

vehicular inspection centres, where all vehicles will have to pass the emission test before being allowed to hit the roads.

But what will they do *after* receiving air quality reports from across the country? Will they take steps against the powerful quarters who are reportedly polluting our air, such as the brick kilns, transport owners, factories, and construction firms? How confident is the environment ministry that it can actually make transport owners put their vehicles through the emission tests?

Like myself, the people of the capital are tired of hearing the empty promises of authorities year after year. All we want to see is an improvement in our air quality. As an affected citizen of Dhaka, I will be more than happy to not have to see any unfit vehicles emitting black smoke throughout any and every road. I will be elated if I do not have to pass through the thick layers of dust emanating from the countless construction sites, including the government’s megaprojects, on my way to work. Ensuring this much does not require any foreign funds. It only requires a strong will from those in charge. Is that too much to ask for?

Local government for effective disaster management



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In Bangladesh, frequent natural disasters have disrupted the foundation of the poor’s economy. To decrease the impact of such catastrophes, adequate planning and integration of disaster management operations with local and national development goals is necessary.

The government has taken a few significant steps in recent years to establish institutional frameworks for efficient and organised disaster management, decreasing the suffering of victims. It has developed a series of mechanisms from the national to local levels to maintain proper coordination between the concerned ministries, departments, line agencies, local government bodies, and community members, as well as to ensure their proper functioning. Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) serve as a manual for these mechanisms and provide instructions on how to use them.

Despite the fact that Bangladesh hasn’t seen any large earthquakes recently, historical records suggest that Dhaka, the country’s capital, is at a high risk for earthquakes. According to Unicef, there are four

million people living in Dhaka’s slums. Three out of four slum households are in one-room dwellings that frequently lack access to clean water, sanitary facilities, and proper waste disposal. Due to their residence in low-lying locations, slum residents also run the risk of being evicted and of experiencing disasters. The Ward Disaster Management Committee’s (WDMC) existence is essential for efficient disaster management, and to ensure greater community knowledge and engagement. As per the SOD, ward councillors now oversee disaster management committees at the city corporation level. The WDMC has been given the authority to operate as an urban disaster management organisation, and it is expected to contribute to emergency planning, disaster mitigation, emergency response, and post-disaster recovery. It must make sure that the local population is continuously aware and equipped to take effective precautions for the reduction of risk at the household and community levels.

The WDMC must also conduct a ward-level hazard, vulnerability, and

risk analysis, and create a risk reduction action plan (RRAP) and an emergency plan for hazards such as earthquakes. Through quarterly coordination meetings, the committee is tasked with fostering collaboration between service providers and development organisations. It also makes decisions regarding the execution of risk reduction action plans and evaluates how well they are progressing. Additionally, it strives to raise money locally so that the risk reduction action plan may be put into effect.

Unfortunately, those who live in wards, especially those who are members of vulnerable groups, have very little access to the discussions and decisions made at WDMC meetings. This implies that the vulnerable know very little about the responsibilities and operations of the disaster management committee.

According to community-level consultation results, disaster risk management is still viewed as having low priority and is not effectively incorporated in the many programmes being carried out by city corporations. Although the people who manage and oversee disaster management committees are not experts, the SOD gives them the power to plan and direct disaster management operations. Because local political leadership is not involved in crisis management, public concern and a sense of responsibility are not taken into account.

The WDMC, on the other hand, functions less effectively because its chairman and other members have

not received adequate training in how to administer the group. There also appears to be a lack of coordination between the district administration (particularly the District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer) and the urban local government representative, which hinders the effectiveness of the ward-level disaster management committee because both government officers are responsible for managing the resources allocated for disaster management. Disaster management committees at the ward level (the smallest administrative unit of the city corporation) are necessary to coordinate mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery activities at the local level. This committee can serve as a venue for bringing together those who are wish to lend a hand and those who are actively working for the community.

In order to swiftly determine the magnitude of disasters and address any gaps in the government’s ability to respond, it is important to cooperate with the Department of Disaster Management to publish accurate information about these events. This should also emphasise releasing information promptly. It should also be outlined how to kick off coordination with urban local government organisations, especially with ward councillors. The international humanitarian community must ensure that their efforts are sustained with additional community-focused initiatives that directly address readiness.