

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Save Gaza from further bloodshed

#### World leaders cannot avert responsibility for the plight of Palestinians

We condemn the barbaric blast at al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza City on Tuesday, which has killed at least 500 Palestinians and injured many more. Since Hamas' attack on Israeli soil nearly two weeks ago, Israel's violent retaliation has created a most distressing humanitarian crisis for those in Palestine, displacing over one million people and killing at least 4,200 people.

The UN Security Council held a vote on Wednesday calling to condemn all killings of civilians and lift Israel's order for Palestinian civilians to leave the north of the besieged territory. In an attempt to win US support, the draft by Brazilian diplomats reportedly did not call for an explicit ceasefire, but a "humanitarian pause." Twelve out of 15 members voted yes, with Russia and the UK abstaining. But the US wielded its veto power to stop the resolution from being adopted, stating that it does not address Israel's right to defend itself. We know all too well that this stance will only lead to further bloodshed. Are Palestinian lives not even worthy of a humanitarian pause?

Israel's continued military operations have reduced large areas of Gaza Strip into rubble, depriving citizens of the basic needs for water and food — all in strict violation of international human rights law. Yet a sign of holding Israel accountable is concerningly missing. It remains unclear who was behind the mass killings in the hospital where thousands of Palestinians were seeking treatment and shelter from relentless bombings. Palestinian officials blame Israel while Israel says a Palestinian armed group is to blame. Meanwhile, although the US intelligence is still collecting evidence on the hospital massacre, President Biden endorsed the Israeli narrative during his short visit and told Netanyahu that "based on what I've seen, it appears as though it was done by the other team, not you." Such unconditional support may push any prospect for peace further way.

The Biden administration has announced \$100 million in humanitarian aid for Palestinians, while also planning to ask Congress for an "unprecedented support package for Israel's defence." The measures being undertaken by Israel's long-standing allies are far from enough to de-escalate tensions. Air raids continue to kill more Palestinians in Southern Gaza and the occupied West Bank. The blatant injustice on display is totally unacceptable. We, therefore, urge the international community to leave politics out of the equation and urgently ensure a humanitarian pause in Gaza.

### Don't punish bold public officials

#### Sacking of river commission chief sends the wrong message

It is frustrating to learn of the abrupt removal of Dr Manjur Ahmed Chowdhury from his post as chairman of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC). His termination, halfway through his three-year contract and about three weeks after he publicly criticised "a female minister from Chandpur," marks an unceremonious end to a brief but boisterous stint that often saw powerful people being taken to task for their alleged involvement in environmental degradation — an inspiring exception, really, to the pliant former bureaucrats that usually lead these statutory bodies.

Apparently, this was done "in public interest," as the public administration ministry claimed in a gazette, without offering any explanation. It is possible to connect the dots, however, as the minister he had referred to could only be Dipu Moni, also a joint general secretary of Awami League. If the treatment received by other non-compliant public officials is any indication, one could say that Manjur had it coming. Hours before his sacking was made public, he himself admitted to this daily that he expected reprisals for his bold assertions. Before he alluded to the education minister in connection with the unchecked activities of politically-backed river grabbers and sand lifting syndicates, he also derided the Dhaka North City Corporation mayor and Dhaka Wasa managing director, among others. Evidently, he made some powerful enemies, and it would not be surprising if that somehow contributed to his downfall.

The head of an institution like NRCC, tasked with protecting rivers but having no executive power to do so, has a tricky job. They can only make recommendations and wait for cooperation from relevant government agencies. Against this backdrop, we must commend one who is not afraid to try harder and start unpleasant conversations about accountability for assaults on our rivers. However, the government's termination decision, without addressing the critical issues often raised by Manjur Ahmed Chowdhury, puts a question mark on its commitment to saving rivers from pollution and encroachment. We urge the government to empower — and not punish — officials who speak out in public interest.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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#### Control 'corrupt' student politics

Bangladeshi students played a pivotal role during the Language Movement in 1952, the Liberation War in 1971, and the Democracy Movement in 1990. But, on today's university campuses, student political parties no longer reflect the interests of students or of the nation. The leaders of any ruling party's student wing controls the halls and seat distribution, with no regard for the administration, resulting in thousands of students becoming victims of their torture. This is affecting not only the students but even the teachers. The government and universities' administrations must adopt a tough policy against such toxic student politics in order to build a developed nation.

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# Lessons we can learn from the recent Teesta disaster



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On October 4, the perimeter of the Lake Lonak in India's Sikkim burst, releasing a huge amount of water to the Lachen River (upper Teesta). The river's water level increased by 15-20 feet and destroyed the Chungthang Dam, the largest dam in Sikkim, which was meant to produce 1,200MW of electricity. More than 70 people died, while many remain missing. The damage this incident has brought to the environment and ecology is immeasurable.

The increased flow of Teesta River reached the Indian Gajoldoba Barrage, and its operators opened the gates to let the water flow towards Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) officials in turn opened the floodgates of the Dalia Barrage, letting water inundate a large area of the Teesta basin, causing misery for people and destroying their crops, cattle, houses and other belongings.

The collapse of Chungthang Dam was certainly catastrophic. However, it was also expected. India already has five dams in operation in Sikkim and is constructing another 13. This small state has the highest number of dams per square kilometre in India, and aims to produce about 8,000MW of hydroelectricity using the Teesta River and its tributaries. Many in India have argued against this plan, citing Sikkim's fragile and earthquake-prone ecology. However, the private-public consortium pushed ahead and completed the Chungthang Dam in 2017 at a cost of thousands of crores of rupees, overrunning the initial cost estimate by about three times. And all that investment was washed away in a single night.

The lesson for India is clear: it should refrain from its plan of saturating the upper Teesta Valley in Sikkim with dams. A review of the global experience with dams — presented in my recent book *Rivers and Sustainable Development* — shows clearly that treating rivers as commercial resources, while ignoring their ecological function, is not sustainable. It is necessary to switch to an ecological approach, as some developed countries have already begun doing.

Climate change is pushing this switch to be ever more urgent. Climate change also played a direct role in the recent Teesta disaster. Global warming caused the Lonak Glacier — the source of Lake Lonak — to melt at a higher rate than the rate at which water flowed out of the lake, causing the lake's volume of water to rise. A Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) was only waiting to happen, and many experts had warned the authorities about it. Cloudburst rains, the frequency of which is also



Rising water levels of the Teesta River flow along houses at the riverbank during a flood at Teesta Bazaar in Kalimpong District, West Bengal, India on October 4, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

increasing as climate change worsens, are making GLOFs more frequent. Hence, the recent Teesta disaster was completely human-made. The dam was made by the Indian authorities, and the increased glacial melting was caused by humans in general.

Therefore, India should both reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and stop building dams altogether. But the financial incentives for building dams and barrages are so strong that public and ecological concerns get drowned out. It is difficult to hope that the Indian authorities will absorb lessons from the Teesta disaster.

But what lessons can Bangladesh learn from it? It should be noted that the Gajoldoba Barrage, together with dams in the upper Teesta, has become a double jeopardy for Bangladesh. While they deprive Bangladesh from water flow during the dry season, they cause repeated flooding during the wet months. Flooding now occurs in Bangladesh any time the Indian operators of Gajoldoba Barrage decide to open the gates and release inordinate amounts of water. Before this, flooding was usually a once-in-a-year event for Bangladesh.

Bilateral negotiations with India so far have yielded no results in resolving this issue. India continues to hold out

the prospect of a Teesta treaty, while building a dozen dams and barrages in upper Teesta to strengthen its control over the river's flow and reducing the flow to Bangladesh in the dry season. The much-talked-about Teesta treaty seems to have become a mirage as Bangladesh wastes its time and energy on false hope.

Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project, proposed by the BWDB and aimed at a drastic and sudden reduction of the Teesta River's average width from about 2.5km to only about 0.8km. As researchers have shown, such a change will lead to a drastic reduction in the river's capacity to hold water and will be

Bangladesh first needs to sign the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which forbids upper riparian countries from intervening in international rivers without the consent of the lower riparian countries. It also protects the rights to pre-existing and customary uses of rivers by lower riparian countries and ensures the cooperation of upper riparian countries in protecting the ecosystems of a river, including those of its estuary and adjoining marine areas. Signing this convention will allow Bangladesh to negotiate with India from a stronger, UN-backed standpoint. Secondly, instead of conceding all the transit, transshipment, and port facilities to India unilaterally, Bangladesh could make them conditional with reciprocal steps taken by India regarding the shared rivers. Third, in the short run, we should insist on having a say on the operations of the Gajoldoba Barrage, particularly regarding decisions about releasing water if it is likely to cause flooding in our territory.

Bangladesh also has a lot to do at home. First, it needs to abandon the Chinese *moha porikolpona* (or "megaplan"), the Teesta River

unsustainable. Instead, efforts should be directed towards expanding the Teesta's water holding capacity. For this, the river's links with its 12 tributaries and distributaries within Bangladesh need to be revived. In addition, all the ponds, *dighis*, and other wetlands in the Teesta basin need to be resuscitated and reconnected with the rivers, rivulets and *khals*. Once this vast network of water bodies is revived, re-excavated, and regenerated, the Teesta river system within Bangladesh will have a huge capacity to hold water, and be able to cope both with the general increase in precipitation and river flow due to climate change and with the sudden releases of water by the Gajoldoba operators. This will also facilitate surface water irrigation during our dry season.

We do need a Teesta megaplan, but not the one that the BWDB is proposing, which will prove ineffective while adding nearly \$1 billion to the country's debt burden. Instead, the authorities would be better off entrusting local experts with chalking out a plan. Such an indigenous plan will be both effective and less costly.

## Pink tax: The cost of being a woman



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As the world dons pink for Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, it's essential to remember that the fight against breast cancer isn't just about awareness — it's also about equity. Amid the sea of pink ribbons, there's a silent economic burden disproportionately shouldered by women globally and in Bangladesh — the pink tax.

Pink tax often goes unnoticed but holds substantial consequences for women's wallets. It refers to the norm of women being charged more for products and services marketed specifically to them. In Bangladesh, where gender-based discrimination persists in various forms, the pink tax further entrenches economic inequalities.

The issue of gender-based pricing extends beyond everyday products and significantly impacts female hygiene essentials, specifically sanitary pads. The unfortunate reality is that women

in Bangladesh often pay more for sanitary pads than for other, gender-neutral hygiene products. Such price discrimination not only deepens the economic inequality between genders, but also exacerbates the financial hardships faced by women, particularly in the context of menstrual hygiene.

Women in Bangladesh frequently shell out more for sanitary pads simply because they are marketed as gender-specific products. This unjust pricing disparity is a significant concern, as it directly affects the accessibility and affordability of sanitary products for women.

For women, sanitary pads are not a luxury, but a fundamental necessity. The burden of higher prices for these products falls squarely on their shoulders, especially those already facing economic challenges. This can result in women having to make tough choices between purchasing sanitary pads and meeting other essential

needs, further perpetuating gender-based economic disparities.

October, being the Breast Cancer Awareness Month, is a period of unity and action, when communities come together to promote early detection, raise funds for research, and support those facing the challenges of breast cancer. However, the pink tax stealthily infiltrates even these well-intentioned initiatives, undermining their effectiveness. This not only diverts funds away from the cause, but also perpetuates the cycle of gender-based pricing disparities. Women who are battling breast cancer bear a significant financial burden especially when it comes to healthcare expenses. The pink tax artificially inflates the cost of essential medical supplies like mastectomy bras and prosthetics, further straining the resources of these patients.

To address pink tax and its detrimental impact on women's health in Bangladesh, we must champion meaningful solutions that promote gender equity and financial fairness. We must advocate for greater pricing transparency, compelling businesses to disclose the cost breakdown of gender-specific products and services. Transparency empowers consumers to make informed choices and holds companies accountable for discriminatory pricing.

We can also push for legislative

measures that prohibit gender-based pricing disparities. Laws that ensure products and services marketed to both genders are priced equitably are critical in challenging the pink tax.

Launching public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the pink tax, its implications, and their rights is also crucial. Informed consumers can drive demand for change and support businesses that prioritise fairness.

Finally, we must enhance financial support and resources for women battling breast cancer, particularly those grappling with the financial burden of treatment. Financial assistance programmes can help alleviate the economic strain on patients and their families.

As we commemorate Breast Cancer Awareness Month, let's not forget the women in Bangladesh and across the world who face the dual challenges of breast cancer and the pink tax. Economic equality should be a fundamental right, not an elusive goal. We must carry the spirit of awareness and solidarity beyond October. The pink tax, like breast cancer, affects women year-round. By confronting the pink tax head-on and advocating for changes in policies, pricing, and perceptions, we can ensure that women receive equitable treatment and support without the burden of discriminatory pricing practices.