

## Time is of the essence in climate fight

World, local leaders must come up with a better response

With the COP28 summit running into extra time on Tuesday after disagreements over a call for "phasing out" fossil fuels—the main driver of climate change—hopes to end the event on a high have all but ended. By now, we are aware of both its highlights and lowlights, which will no doubt be discussed in length in the coming days. While the agreement to operationalise the Loss and Damage Fund has been an encouraging development, so far only \$700 million has been pledged, which is less than 0.2 percent of the annual losses developing countries suffer due to global warming. Moreover, the bill for loss and damage will only increase if adaptation is not sufficiently funded and emissions are not urgently cut, both targets proving difficult to achieve.

This again underscores the importance of major polluters fulfilling their financial and emission commitments. For Bangladesh, the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change despite contributing only 0.47 percent of global emissions, 2023 has been a testing year as it grappled with multiple extreme weather events: sweltering heatwaves in summer, poor rainfall during monsoon, sudden temperature drops in winter, etc. Heatwave in particular has been a major concern, with it sweeping the country for a total of 62 days. This year saw the capital Dhaka record its highest temperature in 58 years, with 40.6 degrees Celsius. There have also been four cyclones so far.

All these can be attributed to a combination of natural and anthropogenic factors. These were also in line with global trends with the April heatwave in Southeast Asia reported to be a once-in-200 years event. Experts say anthropogenic factors, including rising greenhouse gas emissions, are primarily influencing the overall climate system, leading to alterations in temperature and precipitation patterns. But local factors can also play a significant part, with one expert highlighting the role of land transformations, air pollution, and geographic features. Particularly, land-use changes at the local level can have a significant impact on land-atmosphere interactions, resulting in unusual weather patterns.

This shows how important it is that Bangladesh, while calling for global efforts to cut down emissions and fund adaptation measures in vulnerable countries, also looks inwards to address factors contributing to the climate change. This is a crisis that we cannot tackle alone, but nor can we absolve ourselves of all responsibility for it, however little our contributions may be in the big scheme of things.

## Who controls the onion market?

Govt must punish those triggering abnormal price hike

As we have rightly anticipated, a report by the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission (BTTC) has revealed that the recent abnormal hike in local onion prices has actually been engineered by a section of dishonest traders, ensuring that there is adequate supply in the market. Earlier this week, a sudden price surge—the price is still high—took consumers by surprise. As unbelievable as it may sound, the price of one kg of onion increased from Tk 140 on Friday to Tk 240-250 on Saturday. This came as a big blow to the ordinary people who are already overburdened with an astronomical cost of living, including spiraling prices of essential commodities.

The near-doubling of onion prices overnight has again exposed the incompetence and failure of the relevant authorities to control the kitchen market. It was evident as soon as India declared a restriction on onion export to Bangladesh till March next year, leading to the syndicate of market manipulators playing their "supply shortage" card and increasing prices instantly. We must ask: who shall we hold responsible for such manipulations that have been happening with alarming regularity? How can the traders inflate prices even after the government put price caps on some essentials only a few months ago?

According to the BTTC, there can actually be an oversupply of onions in the market at present. As of November 30, the country has received 30.8 lakh tonnes of onions from local and foreign sources, while our annual demand for onion is 27.28 lakh tonnes. There should be no reason for any shortage of supply then. Any shortage is an artificially created one, and for that dishonest traders must be punished.

We urge the government to take stern actions to stop this tendency and restore normalcy in the onion market through rigorous monitoring and drives. The BTTC has also recommended withdrawing the import duty on onion until March and relaxing the interest rates and letters of credit margins for importers to further rein in prices, which should be seriously considered by the government.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Confusing announcement on metro rail

The Dhaka metro rail has proven itself a blessing. However, the current wording used when announcing inoperative stations (where the train does not stop) can be confusing. For example, one announcement made at the Agargaon stoppage states that the train will not stop at the "next station," but is followed by announcing that the "next station is Farmgate." To clarify, the next station after Agargaon is Bijoy Shoroni (where the train does not stop), which is followed by the Farmgate station where the train does stop. This ambiguous wording causes many passengers, including myself, to be unsure of where to disembark. I hope metro rail authorities will take notice of this issue and resolve it soon.

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# How to make dissenters out of citizens



OF MAGIC  
& MADNESS

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By the time the next election comes, it will be nearly 18 years since a political party not named Awami League was in power. That is almost as long a time as it takes an infant to be eligible to vote, or marry, or obtain a driving licence—basically getting the bragging rights of being among adults. But if there were a fair and competitive election come January, and a significant number of people, young or old, voted against Awami League, it would be neither because of their incumbency fatigue nor because of the popularity of the BNP. It would be because of what I call the "accidental art" of making enemies out of ordinary citizens.

Let's illustrate this point through an example. Consider Khadijatul Kubra, the Jagannath University student who was recently released from jail after over 14 months of pre-trial detention. Her crime? She had hosted a webinar on campus politics where a guest made comments critical of the government. At 17 then, still officially a minor and unlikely to have developed a strong political opinion like most students her age, she was accused of attempting to "deteriorate law and order" and "defaming" the prime minister. The next chapter of her story would be written in tears. While incarcerated and being denied multiple bail petitions, she allegedly developed kidney issues and was even transferred to a "condemned cell" reserved for death-row convicts, as if she had committed a grave crime. She had only asked a question.

Now she says she is afraid to even post on Facebook—like the 71.5 percent of the youth who, as per a recent survey, feel hesitant to share their thoughts on social media, fearing consequences. Having arrived at voting age and been rudely catapulted into political maturity by undeserved incarceration, imagine who she would vote against if she had the chance. Imagine what that muted but silently seething group of young people—or those who were similarly subjected to or are perturbed by the unending cycle of spurious cases, arbitrary arrests, long pre-trial detentions, custodial torture, enforced disappearances, and other legal or extralegal instances of oppression—would do, if given the chance.

This is how you make enemies out of ordinary citizens.



The government is inadvertently turning many disaffected citizens into de facto adversaries, who can adopt roles akin to political rivals.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Before we proceed any further, it's important to distinguish between *voting for* and *voting against*. The latter is a protest rooted not so much in political ideology as in disillusionment and a quest for justice and fairness. It's also important to recognise that being anti-AL is not necessarily the same as being pro-BNP. This would be clearer if Bangladesh still had the option of a negative or "no" vote, which was scrapped mere months after the 2008 election. It robbed voters of options that could otherwise increase their participation and partly resolve the low turnout crisis. "Enemies" may seem like a strong word to use to describe how some of them are feeling, but it is one that the political class understands and responds to.

Awami League, for example, has always found justification in the Nietzschean theory of cultivating or "inventing" enemies. Long before it kicked off its farcical campaign of choosing its own rivals for the 2024 election, it kept BNP on its toes by bashing it at every opportunity even though the latter hasn't been on the opposition bench for 10 years. It knew its enemies, real or manufactured, and

do in the event of a fair election.

The rights to question, criticise, debate, publish, or politically organise are fundamental prerequisites for democracy. But in all fairness, denial of these rights, in a less advanced society, does not form a "common cause" strong enough to galvanise or unite the entire population. If we consider Maslow's "hierarchy of needs"—which arranges five tiers of human needs in order of priority—as baseline, what ordinary citizens really care about in the end is the fulfilment of their basic needs such as food, safety, quality of living, etc. The new age of anger in Bangladesh has more to do with these needs getting harder to satisfy for most people.

Awami League, to its credit, has accomplished a lot over the last 15 years. To its discredit, it has done all it could to undo its effects and besmirch its own name, with the spoils of development mostly grabbed by the better-off. While the beneficiaries of the corrupt political patronage system secured undue concessions and privileges, more and more people desperately flocked to the OMS trucks, thanks to the skyrocketing prices of essentials. While the per capita income

were harassed even for small loans. While factory owners turned in record profits, workers were killed or laid off for seeking living wages—the list goes on. The story of the last 15 years has really been a story of development negating development.

So when an administration favours specific demographics or interest groups while neglecting others, it is bound to fuel a sense of injustice and exclusion among those left behind. This is how you create resentment cutting across ideological lines, creating foes (read: dissenting voters) where foes didn't exist. The government seems to underestimate just how many people are hanging on by a thread. Through its continued indifference to crimes, corruption, public sufferings or the calls for accountability, it has inadvertently turned many disaffected citizens into de facto adversaries, who can adopt roles akin to party rivals, regardless of their initial political allegiance.

In other words, in a fair contest, the only thing perhaps standing between Awami League and a consecutive three-peat of electoral victories in 2024 is Awami League itself.

# Israel's endgame in Gaza is complete depopulation



A CLOSER LOOK

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The belligerence with which the Israeli occupation regime is pressing ahead with the attacks on Gaza, despite multiple red flags raised about the disproportionate civilian casualties and indiscriminate bombardment of key civilian infrastructures based on fake claims, suggests that Israel is not targeting Hamas resistance fighters. Rather, the real targets are the civilians, with the depopulation of Gaza being the endgame of this atrocious, bloody war.

A recent analysis by Yagil Levy, a sociology professor at the Open University of Israel—published by the *Haaretz* newspaper—revealed that the occupation state's carpet bombing of the Gaza Strip has killed a significantly greater proportion of civilians compared to the average civilian death tally in 20th century global conflicts. In the first three weeks of the ongoing war alone, civilian deaths constituted 61 percent of all those killed. Since October 7, nearly 18,000 Palestinian people—70 percent of them women and children—have been killed in the densely-populated, besieged strip, including at least 6,600 children, UN staff members, medical professionals,

journalists, and intellectuals.

Israel has been trying to push the Palestinian civilians into various pockets of the Gaza Strip. First, they forced them to abandon their homes in the north saying it is concentrated with Hamas fighters. Then they proceeded to coerce the civilians to rush towards the Rafah crossing only to be bombed by Israel. Now, even those who took shelter in Khan Younis in southern Gaza—the strip's second largest city—are being pushed into a so-called "safe zone" in a part of the coastal Bedouin town of al-Mawasi. Anyone familiar with the topography of Gaza would know that this 6.5 sq km piece of land is barren, sandy, and not conducive for human habitation of this scale.

The World Food Programme (WFP) says nine out of 10 people in Gaza are not eating every day. The World Health Organization (WHO) has called the situation catastrophic and beyond improvement. The UN fears that the humanitarian situation has collapsed in the besieged strip under bombardment.

An obvious question arises: if Israel's target is Hamas resistance fighters, then why is it punishing the

civilians in Gaza, and forcing them further towards the sea, in a barren land, where they will probably die of starvation?

Israel is also arresting civilian Palestinian men—as seen in a footage verified by the BBC—stripping them of clothes and subjecting them to physical torture and abuse, which again is indicative that Israel's ambitions in Gaza is not limited to Hamas alone.

It is evident that Israel is using the October 7 Hamas assault to expedite the genocide of the Gaza population. It continues to threaten and brand everyone who rightfully condemns the appalling atrocities being committed in Gaza as anti-Semitic. But does anti-Semitism include, within its scope, the colonisation, subjugation and genocide of innocent people?

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is well-versed in regional geopolitics to know that the complete destruction of Hamas is not possible in a month or two—or even in years. But his unwillingness to extend the truce with Hamas and secure the release of all Israeli civilians being held hostage, despite Hamas' cooperation, suggests that the Israeli leader is willing to even sacrifice his own people to achieve the total annihilation of Gaza and the Palestinian people.

And there is a reason for Netanyahu for continuing the war in Gaza: it is his last ditch attempt to hold on to power. For years, Netanyahu had been fighting corruption charges and internal unrest over his erratic actions, including the curtailing of the Supreme Court's powers that led to widespread

protests demanding his resignation from office. Netanyahu knows that the moment this war comes to an end, and his war cabinet is dissolved, he might be driven out of office by his political opponents. His trial on corruption charges has already resumed.

At this point, Netanyahu is perhaps eyeing the depopulation and complete takeover of Gaza Strip for Israel as his political salvation—an achievement that he perceives will turn him into a national hero.

The explicit blessing of the Biden Administration has made it easier for Israel to spur on its genocidal actions in Gaza. As recently as on December 10, the United States has bypassed Congress—invoking emergency authority—to provide Israel with tank shells worth \$106.5 million to be delivered on an urgent basis. Larger packages of arms, ammunitions and military aid are also expected to be delivered to Israel in phases, arming the already-armed occupation state to carry out the genocide in Gaza.

There is no doubt that the war in Gaza is going to be a costly one in terms of monetary value, time and human lives, including the Israelis'. But, backed by the US, Netanyahu is ready and willing to pay the price. It remains to be seen how much longer the Israeli people will allow Netanyahu to drag the war, and how much longer the US—who vetoed a recent UN Security Council resolution calling for ceasefire in Gaza—can sustain the pressure from the international community in enabling this genocide.