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Dhaka's air is getting too toxic

Urgent, coordinated action vital to reduce air pollution

Living in Dhaka has become a severe health concern for residents, and one major reason is the deteriorating air pollution situation. While the air in Dhaka has consistently ranked among the worst in the world, a recent report points out how in 2023 it earned the dubious honour of being the worst in eight years. If this trend continues, residents are likely to see more suffering in 2024. We wonder why, despite the government having sufficient data to measure air pollution and invested thousands of crores of taka in reducing it, there has been no progress at all.

According to a study by the Stamford University's Center for Atmospheric Pollution Studies (CAPS), AQI soared from 163 in 2022 to 171 in 2023, and on the first day of 2024, Dhaka again had the most toxic air globally, with an AQI score of 281. These numbers translate to dreadful levels of PM2.5, toxic metals, and chemical pollution, fuelling a surge in respiratory diseases like asthma, pneumonia, and bronchitis. It means people will see increased medical costs, premature births, premature deaths, and shortened lifespans. A World Bank study estimates 78,000-88,000 air pollution-related deaths annually in Bangladesh. All this is despite the fact that massive resources have been spent to curb air pollution over the years.

According to a study by Clean Air Fund (CAF), between 2017 and 2021, Bangladesh received \$2.3 billion to curb air pollution. Where did this funding go? Instead of delivering results through effective projects, reports have revealed how funds were often misused by the Department of Environment (DoE) on new buildings, cars, foreign trips, etc. One visible work by the DoE has been constructing 31 air monitoring stations across Bangladesh. But what's the point of having such centres if the data is not used for an immediate response, such as alerting citizens when the air is too toxic, or long-term responses like systematic regulation of major pollution sources? Major pollutants like construction dust, traffic fumes, factory emissions, and brick kilns continue to be unchecked. Even separate budgets for environmental protection and compliance in some megaprojects haven't been properly used to address construction-related pollution.

Air pollution's increasing severity in Dhaka and elsewhere demands a serious response. We urge the government to prioritise a coordinated action plan with a robust implementation policy before this silent killer claims more lives.

2023 in CHT was a year to dread

PCJSS report on CHT peace accord paints a grim picture

Not long ago, the 26th anniversary of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord saw the familiar peddling of political rhetoric about its success, but the truth, as reports from the ground show, lies somewhere far away. Twenty-six years ago, the treaty was signed between the Parbatya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) and the then Awami League government. On Tuesday, PCJSS released its annual report revealing that not only did the government fail to implement most of the clauses of the accord, but that this has exacerbated an already fragile situation in the region.

The report highlights a disturbing pattern of repression including arrests, jail sentences, killings, disappearances, false cases, land grabbing, eviction from homelands, infiltration, minorisation of the Juma people, communal attacks, violence against women, etc. It also cites 240 reported incidents of rights violations, affecting about 1,933 individuals. All this again shows how a cycle of injustice has taken hold of the region, adding to the distrust among affected communities. The PCJSS also challenges the government claim that 65 out of the 72 clauses of the CHT accord has been implemented. In reality, it says, only 25 clauses have seen any form of implementation, with the remaining 47 either completely ignored or partially addressed.

Over the years, we have come across various reports of repression, subjugation and discrimination in the hills, and the PCJSS annual report further validates these concerns. As citizens, indigenous communities deserve the same rights that others do, and the CHT accord was meant to ensure that their distinct identity and customs are preserved. The question is, why are the authorities making false claims about the accord when it is evident that most of its fundamental clauses remain unimplemented? Far from making genuine efforts to ensure progress, the government has instead allegedly resorted to criminalising Juma activists advocating for the accord's implementation. This has to stop. We urge the government to take stern action against those exploiting the vulnerability of indigenous communities, and fully implement all clauses of the treaty without delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stand with Gaza

Israel has killed over twenty-two thousand Palestinians including more than eight thousand children. The Israeli PM has made it clear that they are pursuing an ethnic cleansing plan. The Biden administration has decided to sell arms to help Israel in its murderous rampage. The Western countries, particularly the US, are complicit in this genocide. We condemn the atrocities being committed by Israel in Palestine. We also condemn the duality and the hypocrisy of the Western countries who preach the importance of protecting human rights but fall short of showing it in their actions.

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Setting a repugnant precedent



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KAMAL AHMED

Bangladesh has once again set a new record by convicting a Nobel laureate for alleged violations of the country's law. The only other Nobel laureate punished after winning the prize is Myanmar's deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose conviction was purely political and the consequence of a military takeover. There is a host of Nobel laureates who won this prestigious accolade while they were in prison. But imprisoning a Nobel laureate is an occurrence rarer than rare. Rather, in a recent incident, we saw the exoneration of the Philippines' celebrated journalist Maria Ressa in a tax avoidance case after she won the award.

In Bangladesh's case, it is ironic that the apprehension expressed by 176 world leaders and Nobel laureates that Professor Muhammad Yunus has been targeted with "continuous judicial harassment" has become a reality over a period of four months. The conviction of 83-year-old Dr Yunus and three of his colleagues, in many ways, sets a new example. The frequent vilification of Dr Yunus by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

After taming the opposition by imprisoning BNP chief Khaleda Zia, this conviction of a global icon (who has brought about innovative social reforms) is meant to send a chilling message to others: activism doesn't have to be anti-government to be punished; it can even be something that the ruling party simply doesn't approve of.

and a number of senior Awami League members, as well as the sustained media trial by pro-government news channels and newspapers, have led many people to believe the whole process was an orchestrated persecution. The Nobel laureate has been called blood-sucker, tax evader, anti-state individual, and someone who deserves to be thrown into Padma River—as if the rest of the world was mistaken in respecting him as a novel thinker and social reformer.

Professor Yunus and three other executives of Grameen Telecom were

convicted and each sentenced to six months in prison and a financial penalty of Tk 30,000 for labour law violations. These sentences remain pending, allowing them to appeal within a month. After the conviction was delivered, Yunus told the media that he was punished for a crime which he didn't commit. His lawyers said they did not get justice and the case was "meritless, false, and ill-motivated."

Md Shahjahan Saju, a former judge who presided over trials of hundreds of cases on the first labour court in Dhaka for nearly three years, told me that prosecutions by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) were so rare that their share would be less than five percent. It is the agency entrusted with overseeing working conditions and law abidance by employers. But it is no wonder that legal practitioners are unable to cite any example of a similar prosecution to Dr Yunus' for identical offences allegedly committed by others. The former judge also said that he could not remember a single verdict that had awarded a jail term in cases similar to Prof Yunus'.

This is easy to verify by ourselves, too. Has anyone ever heard of any garment factory owner being prosecuted for violations of the same labour law? Such violations have been going on

Environment (OSHE) Foundation, as many as 1,432 workers were killed and 502 were injured in their workplaces across the country in 2023. Could some of these accidental deaths have been prevented if the DIFE had been sincere in implementing its inspection regime and in prosecuting offending employees?

There is no doubt that Grameen Telecom has all the necessary authorisation of the government under the law as a non-profit company, and that the Companies Act, 1994 bars it from the distribution of any profit it makes. Due to lack of harmonisation among various existing legislations, some conflicts between different pieces of laws do exist. In this case, theoretically, it was possible that distribution of any profit could have resulted in another prosecution for a violation of the Companies Act, 1994. Therefore, before prosecuting Dr Yunus, the government should have amended either of these two laws and allowed companies to take corrective measures. So, when abiding by one rule means violating another, how can such prosecution render justice? It only strengthens the argument that the government would have punished the Nobel laureate one way or the other, using whatever tool it could.

Much of Western media have

the ruling party is so hostile towards Dr Yunus. After taming the opposition by imprisoning BNP chief Khaleda Zia, this conviction of a global icon (who has brought about innovative social reforms) is meant to send a chilling message to others: activism doesn't have to be anti-government to be punished; it can even be something that the ruling party simply doesn't approve of.

Dr Yunus' ordeal all began with the government's refusal to make any exception in banking rules and with removing him unceremoniously from Grameen Bank. Curiously enough, the government amended the banking rules a decade later anyway to keep the central bank governor at his job for two more years. Then came the allegations of workers exploitation. Now, Dr Yunus faces over 100 cases arising from a single issue of alleged labour law violation, which was already settled once between the employees' union and the company management. Attempts were also made to implicate him in money laundering and corruption cases. All these actions establish a pattern which is so disturbing that none can be blamed for concluding it as a "judicial harassment." These actions against Bangladesh's only Nobel laureate should end, and end now.

How parents can help children navigate depression



Zareen Tasneem Zahra is an undergraduate student at North South University.

ZAREEN TASNEEM ZAHRA

The convergence of cultural dynamics and mental health can present a distinctive picture of young adults in Bangladesh. Mental illness is quite stigmatised in our culture, and is sometimes seen as a sign of personal failure or weakness. Thus, young adults often feel discouraged from getting the help we require due to fear of judgement or embarrassment in front of families and friends.

This stigma surrounding mental health worsens the symptoms and makes recovery more difficult because it fosters a sense of isolation. But being seen and heard is all we seek. According to the National Mental Health Survey 2019, 18.7 percent of the Bangladeshi population aged 18 years and above suffers from mental disorders. Another 2021 study found that the percentage of individuals with depression was 57.9 percent, those suffering from stress was 59.7 percent, and the percentage of people with anxiety came out to be 33.7 percent.

In our homes, where walls stand tall and roofs shield us from harsh storms, all we want is our families' unwavering embrace of safety. We just want to take off the masks that we

wear for the outside world and unveil our actual selves; we want to feel free of expectations and criticism. We seek comfort in the eyes of our parents.

Young people go through all types of mental health issues such as depression, eating disorders, social anxiety, borderline personality disorder (BPD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disruptive behaviour, dissociative disorders, and more. And one shouldn't hold someone accountable for having a mental health issue, just like one wouldn't blame someone for having diabetes or heart disease. A complex interplay of factors, including brain chemistry, gender, and life experiences, causes mental illness. It's important to remember that mental illness is not a sign of weakness or personal failure. In fact, those who suffer from mental illnesses are frequently among the most resilient.

To acknowledge and address mental health issues takes courage, resiliency, and self-awareness. Having been diagnosed with a mental illness, I initially found discussing it with my parents to be challenging. However, summoning the courage to have that conversation was worthwhile

because they showed me that they were always there for me. My parents were so supportive that they went out of their way to go to the doctor with me, which was a big start in the right direction in terms of comprehending and taking care of my mental health. As I started to follow my doctor's instructions and take the prescribed medications, I started to feel better in

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the days that followed. A sensation of renewed well-being replaced the haze of hopelessness.

Equally poignant is my friend's story, as his emotions were expressed through his art. Knowing that his artworks were a way for him to express his feelings, his parents had always respected his privacy. But they were still concerned. When his despair and depression became unbearable, my friend plucked up the courage and chose to speak with them. He talked

about his unceasing anxiety that would never go away. His parents listened to him and reassured him that they would be by his side at every turn. He, with the support of his parents, sought professional help and was diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, a mental health disorder that causes excessive, persistent, and unrealistic worry about everyday things. Though it was daunting, the diagnosis was a relief. He felt that a burden had been taken off his chest. With the support of his parents and therapist, he learned coping mechanisms, developed strategies to manage his anxiety, and gained a deeper understanding of his mental health. Every now and then, his parents check up on him when they spot something concerning in his art.

So, how can parents help their children? They just need to be there for them. We want our parents to understand us and listen to our innermost voices. A safe and supportive environment is all we want. We want our parents to educate themselves about mental health, understand the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses, their prevalence, and know about available treatment options. This can empower them to recognise and address our struggles.

In the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, it's easy to forget that others around us may be fighting similar battles. Our parents, siblings, and friends are all dealing with their own issues the way we are. It's important to remember this and to treat them with the same kindness and encouragement we expect from them.