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Why the reluctance to pursue renewables?

Govt must overhaul existing energy strategy, prioritise clean energy

Despite Bangladesh's professed commitments towards the environment and its role as a climate champion on the global stage, it is deplorable that the government has continued to focus heavily on fossil fuels, ignoring much needed investments in renewables. The renewable energy capacity target for 2030 was set at 6,000MW-16,000MW in the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041, submitted at COP26, but the country has only added about 462MW of renewable energy to the national grid since 2017, when the first solar power plant was established. There are currently only 10 solar plants in operation, while two wind power plants have started trial runs. According to a report in this daily, another 15 plants are expected to go into production within the next year. But even then, their combined capacity will constitute only four per cent of the total power mix in 2025. This is woefully inadequate.

In 2016, the government aimed to meet 10 per cent of its energy needs through renewables by 2021. But since then, it has not taken any visible steps to address the glaring gap in its clean energy target, beyond revising it multiple times in different policies and plans. Multiple studies have busted a myth often touted by government officials—that there is land scarcity in the country—and shown that there is more than adequate *khas* land to generate at least 2,15,011MW of solar energy.

We are at a loss to understand why our policymakers were so reluctant to pursue the obvious path of sustainable, cheap and clean energy when the whole world, including two of its trusted regional partners—India and China—have taken dramatic leaps towards that end. While China is now the global leader in renewables, India has targeted to achieve half of its energy from renewables by 2030. The two giants have provided various incentives, such as cash grants and tax credits, but in Bangladesh, businesses have to pay 37-56 per cent tax to set up renewable plants, according to experts.

The country's prolonged energy crisis over the past two years—brought about by its overdependence on expensive imported fossil fuel—should have been a wake-up call for the government to explore more sustainable options. Yet, we continue to see the same short-sighted policies being pursued by our policymakers, with little concern about the long-term implications of failing to invest in renewables, which are not only sustainable but also cost-effective. It is imperative that the government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, overhaul its existing energy strategy if it is to meet its target of achieving 40 per cent clean energy by 2040. We need to encourage investments in renewables, formulate relevant policies and develop local capacity to apply renewable technologies. We also need transparent and competitive bids while awarding contracts, so that we don't continue to pay Tk 16-17 per kilowatt of solar electricity when the global average is Tk 5.

We can't let women workers fall behind

Govt must address key issues affecting the job market

While unemployment seems to be a perennial issue in the country, attached to this is another worry: more women are jobless when compared with unemployed men. Such inequality has far-reaching consequences, because for our nation to prosper economically and socially, so must our women. Therefore, it is imperative to ask where the system has faltered and find ways to tackle this growing crisis.

According to the quarterly survey of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, between October and December last year, the number of unemployed male workers decreased by 80,000, to 15.7 lakh, while unemployed female workers increased by 1.2 lakh, to 7.8 lakh. This begs the question: why are men getting recruited to the point that their unemployment rate has actually gone down, while women are finding it increasingly harder to get a job?

Women comprise 57 per cent of the garment sector workforce, but this rate is gradually decreasing, as they are losing jobs to rising levels of automation, says an expert. To put matters into perspective, the rate was 80 per cent earlier, meaning women have heavily relied on this sector for long. Mechanisation is eating into jobs in the agriculture sector as well, which means women who return to villages, and do not have the necessary skills to operate machinery, are finding it harder to get employed.

Meanwhile, despite the rising number of women graduating from universities, they continue to have the highest unemployment rate among graduates. In 2022, the unemployment rate among female graduates was 18.88 per cent, higher than the overall rate of 12 per cent. Experts have pointed to inadequate job opportunities, an un conducive work environment, and adverse social attitudes for this situation.

It is apparent that we, as a nation, are failing to ensure enough, and appropriate, jobs for women. While automation cannot be stopped, the government must see to it that there are alternative opportunities for those who are falling behind. The authorities must ensure relevant education and training with the aim to upskill women workers. Moreover, workplaces must cater to the needs of female employees, and social awareness is imperative to eliminate stigmas. We must remember that a nation cannot prosper if half of it is left behind.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Where are the street-side dustbins?

Overflowing garbage has become a defining blight on Dhaka. Though Dhaka South City Corporation's admirable bin placement initiative offered a glimmer of hope, it ultimately died out. Dhaka's cleanliness demands a comprehensive waste management overhaul, starting with ubiquitous street bins and fostering a culture of responsible trash disposal.

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Tackling the bad apples of police



Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP of Bangladesh Police.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

News of a number of police personnel allegedly being involved in criminal activities in recent times are indeed distressing. Quite clearly, if legally mandated protectors become violators, there is a cause for concern. Additionally, there is a premonition that the criminal actions of such delinquent police personnel have not been adequately dealt with by the authorities concerned, and such deficits have eroded the trust of a vital regulatory organ of the state to the detriment of public interest. The need, according to some observers, is firm for adequate action against the defaulting personnel and establishment of an independent institutional mechanism to discipline and punish the gross deviators.

Ground realities will indicate the existence of laws, rules and regulations that should be sufficient to effectively take care of the criminally disposed lawmen. The Police Regulations, Bengal, 1943, the Police Officers (Special Provisions) Ordinance, 1976 (as amended from time to time), and the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985, in addition to actions under the substantive penal law—that is the Bangladesh Penal Code—can be resorted to for sorting out the delinquent police personnel.

In a situation as above, if appropriate measures have not been undertaken to rein in the deviant lawmen, then the fault primarily lies with the suspected laxity of the supervising complement of officials, and by extension on the political executives who have not displayed the required will to facilitate the appropriate nurturing of a professional body. Surely the criminal activity of sworn lawmen is an unpardonable assault on the ethos of public service. There is reason to suspect a deficit of stewardship—both at the official and political levels.

It is perhaps worthwhile to appreciate that statistics is not the determining factor in gauging the pernicious ramifications of criminal behaviour in law enforcement. One lone instance of criminal activity by



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

a policeman is sufficient enough to smear the good name of the entire organisation and set at naught the commendable services of countless others. It will be relevant to recollect that in the recent past, a grave offence by one officer was instrumental in the voluntary resignation of the commissioner of London Metropolitan Police.

Insofar as crime by a policeman is concerned, a pertinent issue would be the correctness of the recruitment process. Has there been extraneous or extra-departmental intervention in the intake? Since there is apprehension about the integrity of the recruitment venture, one needs to know of the steps taken to effectively sanitise the process.

Experienced practitioners of law

enforcement are of the considered view that some bad hats with criminal propensity would still be there no matter how rigorous the recruitment and training motivation are. The question is: how should they be dealt with? This writer is of the view that regular criminal proceedings should commence, that is lodging of the first information report (FIR)

adequately trained and well-equipped professional officers at the managerial levels.

The onus of ensuring malpractice-free management of the police force—including recruitment, promotions, postings and transfers—squarely rests with the police hierarchy. Quality human resource management, efficient use of financial resources,

and simultaneous suspension from public service when a police personnel commits serious crime. The personnel should be arrested and a charge sheet that will strengthen the accusation should be expedited in all appropriate cases. If a conviction follows, it would be a simple formality to get rid of the delinquents. If no conviction comes, there is no bar to departmental action on the same charges. In fact, no quarter should be given to a criminal law enforcer.

About restructuring the police force to regain the alleged lack of public trust, the shortfall in supervisory competence needs to be addressed by bringing about essential qualitative and quantitative improvements in the existing disproportionate officer-to-lower-ranks ratio. The goal is to have

and adoption of modern technologies are some of the other areas that need initiatives from police leadership as well.

The most important prerequisite is enough political will to transform police units into 21st century service delivery organisations based on established best practices. The way forward is to proactively give up long-held powers of "superintendents" over the police in favour of apolitical public safety commissions charged with the responsibility of ensuring professional police operations. The realisation has to dawn on all concerned that improving the quality of law enforcement is a permanent and integral part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Has the 'polycrisis' overwhelmed us?



Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of 'The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict.'

MARK LEONARD

This year's World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos was even more exhausting and bewildering than usual. Politicians love to say that you should never let a crisis go to waste, but even they seemed overwhelmed by a conference agenda that aimed to capture the full sweep of today's "polycrisis."

The issue is not just that individual problems become more difficult to solve when there are many of them at once. It is that today's crises are increasingly feeding one another and competing with one another for attention. Against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions and the escalating conflict in the Middle East, Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea have become a source of unease across the global economy. Making matters worse, drought conditions in Central America—a byproduct of both cyclical weather patterns and the longer-run effects of climate change—have simultaneously curtailed shipping through the Panama Canal.

In Gaza, the humanitarian consequences of the war have worsened by the day, with the Palestinian death toll now exceeding 25,000. On panel after panel at Davos, US officials and

assorted European and Arab diplomats outlined their visions for stopping the war through regional integration and a two-state solution.

At a time of waning American and European support for Ukraine's defence, all this attention on the Middle East has left Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky desperately trying to put his country back on the strategic map. Just ahead of the conference, Zelensky organised a meeting of national security advisers, to whom he delivered an impassioned keynote speech. Ukrainian officials were then dispatched to participate in discussions on everything from artificial intelligence to global trade, always finding ways to tie the issue back to the war in Ukraine.

Ultimately, there was widespread agreement about what it would take to address the crises in both Ukraine and the Middle East. With respect to Gaza, the five key ingredients are: a deal to free the remaining Israeli hostages; progress towards regional normalisation between Israel and its Arab neighbours; a realistic pathway towards a two-state solution; a regional effort to revitalise the Palestinian Authority; and a suspension of open hostility on Israel's northern border

with Lebanon.

As for Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a conversation with journalist Thomas Friedman, argued that the country would need to maintain a sense of perspective regarding EU and Nato membership. But Blinken also thinks that the West has a responsibility to put Ukraine on a sound military, economic, and democratic footing. That all sounds eminently reasonable, but the biggest challenge is reconciling aspirations with political realities in this year of high-stakes elections. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin seem determined to stick around forever, the reality is that Blinken himself could be a private citizen a year from now.

Weighing heavily on the audience's mind was the crisis of American democracy. Donald Trump may not have been physically present in Davos, but that did not stop him from looming over the proceedings. Many questioned whether the Biden administration had enough political capital to pursue the solutions proposed by Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. And even if they can pursue their policy preferences, what would happen to them if Trump wins?

Of all the competing crises, however, the one that stole the show was artificial intelligence. All the biggest names in the industry were there, including Sam Altman of OpenAI, Satya Nadella of Microsoft, former Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt, and DeepMind co-founder Mustafa Suleyman—among many others. In weighing the opportunities

and risks involved, everyone present agreed that AI represents an entirely new—and, indeed, unprecedented—challenge.

There was no shortage of serious discussions about AI regulation, the appropriate role of the state, and what advancements to expect next. But I was most struck by the level of disagreement on how important AI will prove to be. While Suleyman and his fellow technologists believe that it is as consequential as fire or electricity, historian Niall Ferguson has argued that AI—like crypto—has been completely overhyped.

Just as social media competes for individuals' attention, so do global crises. As new, unexpected variables interact with one another in unpredictable ways, a sense of overload complicates the search for solutions. The fact that 2024 is an election super-year—with four billion people eligible to vote in more than 70 jurisdictions—adds even more uncertainty.

It is no surprise that people are anxious. A major new poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations shows that the five big crises of the past 15 years (the post-2008 global recession, the 2015 migration crisis, Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, and climate change) have split Europeans into "crisis tribes." In the process, they have forged new, frequently competing political identities.

We often complain that the politicians, business leaders, and diplomats who huddle annually in Davos are out of touch with everyday people. But in today's attention economy, they are just as confused as the people they are meant to represent.