

## More buses cannot ensure better service

*Holistic approach needed to improve public transport system*

The plan to expand Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation's (BRTC) service in Dhaka, Chattogram and other inter-district routes by adding about 1,000 buses to its fleet does have some merit. Reportedly, a project to acquire 340 CNG-run AC buses has already been passed, while three more projects for buying 600 buses are pending approval. Additionally, the BRTC plans to undertake separate projects to prepare 1.75 lakh drivers to meet the growing demand.

These initiatives sound good from an expansion perspective, but it is essential to define the ultimate goal that these projects are meant to achieve. Is the objective to create a systematic efficient and affordable public transport system that can cater to the needs of residents in Dhaka and other major cities? If that is the case, then adding more buses is only a part of what is required. Bringing road discipline by making sure that there are proper bus stops is another one. The bus routes should also be planned in such a way that they connect various parts of the city to metro stations and other modes of transport in order to create an efficient and complete transportation network.

Rationalising bus lines and bringing about systemic changes to bus services to make them more passenger-friendly have to be the next step. In addition, ensuring road safety by enforcing compliance of all traffic and road safety rules is another key factor. To that end, we welcome the BRTC's plan to prepare 1.75 lakh drivers. Alongside that, regular bus maintenance must also be carried out, and old, run-down buses have to be removed from the streets. Unfortunately, even though the government has pledged to do so in the past, we continue to see unfit buses plying our roads and endangering lives.

For far too long, we have seen the government take isolated initiatives, such as purchasing expensive buses, without a proper implementation plan or without considering how they fit into the bigger picture of how our overall transport system is running and what needs to change for it to improve significantly. It is time the government came up with a holistic plan to improve our public transport system. While adding more buses is a good move, doing so without taking the other steps necessary for a safer and better service will not achieve the benefits desired by citizens.

## How long must rivers suffer our neglect?

*Plight of Karatoya reveals a worrisome picture*

It appears no amount of coverage or warning is enough to stop the onslaughts on our rivers. Rivers are suffocating to death and, through our actions or inactions, we are all complicit in that. This was once again highlighted by a photo published by this daily revealing the ever-worsening state of the Karatoya River in Bogura. The river, from the picture, looks almost indistinguishable from a canal thanks to encroachment and pollution. Its water has been blackened by the waste and sewage regularly discharged into it, giving it an unnatural colour. The river thus is dying—shrinking, as per a 2018 survey, by a fifth of its total width at some points—but no one seems to care.

How is it that a country known for its rivers is so adamant on seeing their destruction? From unregulated waste disposal to grabbing of land to lifting sand, the mechanisms of destruction are many but preventive measures are scarce, if any. Only last Friday, we wrote in this column about how multiple rivers—Louhajang in Tangail, Mayur in Khulna, and Sonai in Sylhet—are struggling to breathe due to unabated encroachment and pollution. For this, the greed and neglect of both individuals and institutions—including those run by the government—are equally responsible.

The woes plaguing Karatoya in particular have been traced back to, among other factors, the construction of a three-vent regulator in Khalshi village in 1996. While the structure has reportedly served its initial purpose of saving the village from flooding, it has also caused it to remain dry for most of the year, resulting in obstruction of fish migration, pollution, and water stagnation which, in turn, helps with the breeding of mosquitoes and other disease-carrying organisms. This again shows lack of planning and care that is facing our rivers.

This has to stop. The relevant authorities—including the National River Conservation Commission—must put a stop to the rivercide being committed across the country. Rivers are national assets, and they must be protected for our own sake.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Upgrade bus service to bring relief to commuters

As Bangladesh embraces development and strives to improve amenities for its citizens, its public transport systems must join the momentum and embark on significant reforms. The introduction of Dhaka metro rail has served as a shining example of quality passenger service, offering cleaner stations and vehicles, organised operations, enhanced safety, and skilled operators. Majority of commuters are saying how much of a boon this new service is for those who had to wait in traffic hours on end. This sets a high bar for other modes of public transport, particularly buses, which urgently need to shed their current practices and adopt a global standard of service. Currently, buses provide the bear minimum and are a major cause of the lack of discipline on roads. So, it is time for the authorities to focus on how to make our bus service truly serve the country's people.

Afrid Jaman, Bosila, Dhaka



Since the Three Brotherhood Alliance—comprising Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA), the Arakan Army (AA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)—launched Operation 1027 on October 27, 2023, and took the fight to the despotic ruling military junta, Myanmar is being torn apart by the two unstoppable forces.

While the military is leaving no stones unturned to suppress the resistance fighters—including indiscriminate shelling of occupied civilian townships, cities and villages, resulting in collective punishment and killings of unarmed civilians—the Three Brotherhood Alliance is making short work of routing the junta, capturing strategic regions and towns, including Chin State's Paletwa, northern Shan State and Rakhine State, bordering Bangladesh's Chattogram division in the northwest and the Bay of Bengal to the west.

Bangladesh is already feeling the heat of escalating clashes in the bordering regions, with the sound of gunfights keeping the locals in bordering areas awake at nights. In the last five days, fighting between the Arakan Army and the military junta flared once again. As a result, mortal shells are falling inside the Bangladeshi territory and has caused at least two deaths and multiple injuries. Some 264 members of Myanmar's border and security forces have entered the Bangladesh side illegally to escape fighting, according to Border Guard Bangladesh (as of 3:45 pm Tuesday). Some of them have bullet injuries.

Overall, with civil order rapidly deteriorating in Myanmar, things are not looking good for its three neighbours: China, India and Bangladesh.

The recent violent fighting in Rakhine has created panic among the Bangladeshi population living in the bordering areas in Bandarban's Naikhongchhari upazila. Residents of Thumbru village in the upazila's Ghumdum union are fleeing their homes to escape stray bullets. Academic activities in five primary schools and a madrasa had to be suspended amid the growing security concerns. Vehicular movement has been somewhat restricted and people are being advised to stay indoors.

Bangladesh has done the right thing by engaging with China and asking for its intervention to diffuse the tensions as a key party with influence with the ruling Myanmar

## CIVIL WAR IN MYANMAR

# Bangladesh should beef up border security

### A CLOSER LOOK

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Members of Myanmar's Border Guard Police take shelter at a Border Guard Bangladesh outpost in Ghumdum, Bandarban on February 5, 2024.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

junta. But it is high time the country beefed up surveillance and security in the bordering areas with Myanmar.

In response to the growing concerns after Myanmar's border and security force members infiltrated Bangladeshi territory, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal has said that security has been strengthened in the bordering areas with Myanmar and local police and coast guard have also been put on alert. Perhaps the government should also consider keeping the armed forces ready and the navy on heightened alert, should things go beyond control on the other side of the border, while also making sure that they are being cautious in their actions. The parliament is in session; now could be a good time to discuss this national security concern to raise consensus about the potential course of actions in the coming months, if not weeks.

For Bangladesh, the spillover effect of this conflict will be multipronged: national security, socioeconomic, and geopolitical. The border areas with Myanmar, even before the recent wave of conflict, have been vulnerable. The two countries share a 271-kilometre porous border, which has been used by refugees, resistance fighters and smugglers for their own means. In the face of escalations, where Myanmar border guards themselves are fleeing

into Bangladesh from Myanmar, for both local sales and cross-border transshipment, is no new information for our intelligence agencies either. These non-state, rogue actors will be on the lookout to make the most of the tensions along the borders to make gains.

At the same time, as Myanmar military shells civilian towns and villages, displacing thousands, there is a high risk of them turning towards Bangladesh for shelter.

Bangladesh is already feeling the pinch of halted trade and commerce with Myanmar—for instance, due to a trade halt at Teknaf land port since November 14 last year, the Bangladesh government is losing about Tk 3 crore each day in revenue alone—while also having to provide for more than a million Rohingya refugees with foreign aid dwindling fast. On top of these existing challenges, a new influx of refugees from Myanmar would add to Bangladesh's economic burdens.

At the same time, the Bangladesh government should proceed with caution in sending back Myanmar's border and security force members and warning the border guards to demonstrate highest restraint, as it should not look like we are taking a side in this conflict of others. So far, Bangladesh has made the

the return of so many to Myanmar.

At this point, Bangladesh could consider forming a joint coordination cell with representatives from home, foreign affairs and defence ministries, and national security and foreign policy experts to closely monitor the fast-evolving situation in Rakhine and recommend coordinated measures to protect our national interests.

On the one hand, we need to secure our borders, and on the other, we need to create enough diplomatic pressure on Myanmar military junta to pave the way for inclusive democracy in the war-ravaged country. Only through restoration of democracy and the rights of its people would Myanmar be able to heal from the wounds of decades past. Given China and India are also facing similar challenges, Bangladesh should initiate tripartite discussions on how best to help diffuse the tensions in Myanmar. If this tension is allowed to fester and spill over into other countries unchecked, it will create regional instability and major national security threats for all of Myanmar's neighbours.

While the government is acting calm—and it should be commended on how it has handled the delicate situation so far—it is time we also weighed all possibilities unfolding in the coming weeks and take concerted measures to tackle them.

# Forest Department must lead conservation



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Currently, the responsibility of conserving Bangladesh's biodiversity falls on two agencies under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC): the Forest Department and the Department of Environment (DoE). But I believe the government needs to give the leadership only to the Forest Department. Here's why.

First of all, the Forest Department is legally responsible for biodiversity, forests and wildlife conservation in Bangladesh, as per the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012 and its previous editions. In terms of strategic planning, this department, with the help of IUCN, finally drafted the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) in 2016, which was pending for almost 30 years. The MoEFCC made the NCS (2021-2036) public last year. Under the Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Wildlife Protection (SRCWP) project (2011-2016), consultants and implementing agencies drafted the Bangladesh Wildlife Conservation Master Plan (2015-2035) and conservation and management plans for vultures (2016-2025), gharials (2016-2025), and elephants (2018-2027).

Other initiatives around the same time resulted in conservation plans for tigers (2018-2027) and dolphins (2020-2030) as well.

Along with the policy instruments, the Forest Department has the necessary organisational structure through its Wildlife and Nature Conservation Circle. The department is currently managing 53 protected areas including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, marine protected areas (MPA), and eco-parks. Since 2012, the Wildlife Crime Control Unit (WCCU) has become an important part of the department.

At the ecosystem level, since 2003, the department has been a part of the USAID-funded co-management projects, namely the Nishorgo Support Project (2003-2008), the Integrated Protected Area Co-management (2008-2013), the Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (2013-2018), and the ongoing Ecosystems/Protibesh Activity (2021-2026). All these brought in people's participation in protected area management, which was further strengthened by the Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 enacted by the MoEFCC under

the Wildlife Act.

If we now look into international biodiversity-related conventions, the Forest Department is the national focal point of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Ramsar Convention's Programme on communication, capacity-building, education, participation and awareness (CEPA), and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

But for some reasons, the DoE is the focal point of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the most important international agreement on biodiversity. As a result, the DoE formulated the last National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2016-2021), but apparently failed to contribute to its effective implementation. This department also prepares and submits Bangladesh's national reports to the CBD secretariat by engaging consultants and experts to collate required information.

One of the legal bases for the DoE to work on biodiversity conservation is the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 and its latest amendment in 2010. This act talks about declaring and managing ecologically critical areas (ECAs). This also resulted in the formulation of Ecologically Critical Area Management Rules, 2016. Nevertheless, these allow overlapping jurisdictions for conservation actions in biodiversity-rich areas, such as Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Peninsula (an ECA carrying several protected areas), Saint Martin's Island (an ECA and an MPA), and Tanguar

Haor (an ECA and a Ramsar Site).

To streamline the MoEFCC's biodiversity conservation efforts, three urgent steps could be taken. First, in light of the latest Allocation of Business concerning the MoEFCC (March 2023), a new office order needs to be issued making the Forest Department the focal point of CBD. After being assigned, the department's first task should be formulation of a new NBSAP, preferably by 2024, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. In the same vein, the Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017 needs to be amended.

Second, the ongoing biodiversity conservation projects of the DoE should actively involve the Forest Department as a means of programmatic transition. Any pipeline project needs to be implemented by the Forest Department in association with the DoE. Building the capacity of the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Circle and expanding its geographical and technical coverage is crucial to adopt such a programmatic shift.

Finally, the Forest Department should further strengthen its leadership in biodiversity conservation by working on "conservation finance." By collaborating with relevant ministries and agencies, it should play a strong role in establishing the Biodiversity Conservation Fund, a provision created seven years back in the Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017. I wonder if the MoEFCC along with the Forest Department would take urgent steps to create this new fund as the government prepares for the next national budget.