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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Time for prompt, sensible diplomacy

Bangladesh must cover all bases in dealing with the Myanmar crisis

As the situation in Myanmar continues to escalate, Bangladesh faces a number of challenges including that of national security. Against this backdrop, noted foreign affairs and security experts recently stressed that it is high time the government changed how it has been dealing with the situation so far. In a roundtable discussion organised by this daily on February 13, they said Bangladesh must engage in smart diplomacy and go for a multipronged approach to prevent any spillover into its territory, not to mention protect its own interests in the region.

As we have been seeing over the past few weeks, the renewed conflict between ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in Myanmar and the military junta has been gaining momentum, with the latter increasingly losing ground. While any event of national interest in a neighbouring country deserves attention, what worries and frustrates us is Bangladesh's response to the conflict's spillover effects so far. People in the areas along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border have been living in constant fear as stray bullets and mortar shells routinely land on our side. Last week, two individuals were killed by a stray mortar shell in Bandarban. Over the past several days, at least 330 Myanmar troops and their families have fled into Bangladesh. There are legitimate concerns that we face risks of another large-scale influx of people displaced by the conflict.

In this situation, passive and reactive diplomatic efforts are no longer effective. As speakers at the roundtable have said, we must be proactive and smart. The government must engage with experts on national security, foreign policy, regional history and geopolitics who can analyse the situation in Myanmar as it unfolds, and recommend actions. The government should also engage with all stakeholders—from the EAOs, to the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile to the central government in Naypyidaw, to regional powers like China and India who have their own interests to protect in Myanmar.

Our interests should be conveyed to all parties involved, and we must be careful not to get involved in the play of other global and regional actors. At the same time, we must also be prepared to deal with potential armed offensives. As we have said before, our national interests and security must not be compromised under any circumstances. Smart diplomacy will help us achieve that.

A critical loss of river navigability

Govt must take meaningful actions to restore rivers

Is it really surprising—after decades of rampant encroachment and pollution—that about a third of our rivers are on their deathbed? This is the estimate given by our state minister for shipping, who on Tuesday said that 308 rivers in Bangladesh, out of around a thousand, have lost their navigability. Dhaka division emerged as one of the worst sufferers in this case, with an astounding 85 of its rivers meeting this fate, while Khulna topped the list with 87. The number of rivers deemed to have normal flow or lost it over time may be debatable, but for the government to go on record with this admission is appreciable.

The question is, what is the government going to do about it? Restoring the navigability of these rivers will take a monumental undertaking involving careful handling of various challenges such as pollution, encroachment, and sand lifting, as well as navigating various barriers, both legal and political. It will require a sustained administrative pushback against problems created by government departments themselves. As another report from Tuesday shows, the construction of an unplanned bridge by one such department is choking the Ichhamati River in Pabna. It is because of such incursions and constructions that the river has shrunk to a width of barely about 120 feet.

And not just rivers, a vast number of canals and ponds in the country have also been ravaged. In Dhaka, for example, 95 canals have been lost or reduced to less than half of their original length over the past 80 years, as a recent study has shown. The list of water bodies to be restored or recovered is long, and the government cannot pick and choose from them—it has to save all. That we haven't been able to take even baby steps in that regard, despite impassioned urgings by the PM, is alarming indeed. Therefore, we urge all respective government agencies and ministries to rise to the challenge, take drastic steps to address the deeply entrenched systemic issues, and save our rivers.

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AI in Bangladesh's public policy



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Artificial intelligence has generated a general buzz globally and cast its shadow on industries, prompting both wonder and wariness in all fields, including intellect, security and intelligence, diplomacy, and even religion. Bangladesh, as a developing nation, is not an exception to this phenomenon.

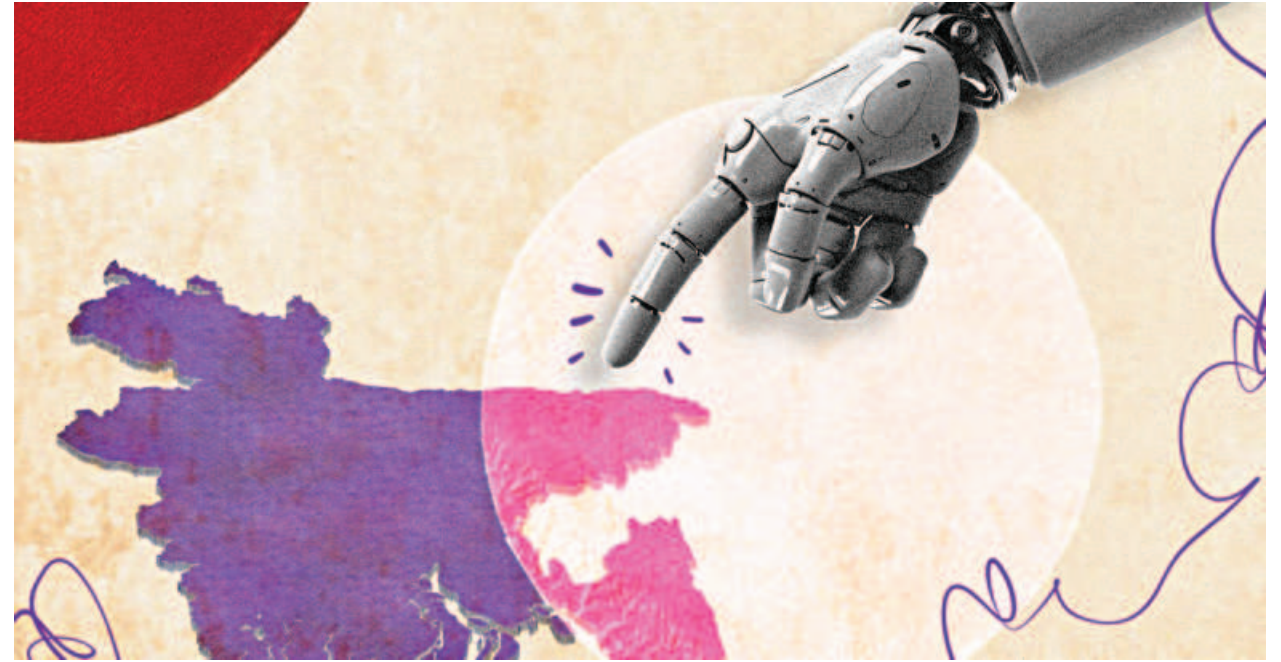
While discussions often centre on productivity and employability, public policy, a crucial component of governance, has not received as much focus. Will AI have a significant impact on its progress, or will it lead to worse things in Bangladesh when used as a tool for public policy?

In the realm of public policy, AI has the potential to revolutionise governance and address societal issues by analysing large amounts of data and finding connections and patterns that a human eye misses, allowing for more evidence-based and effective policy decisions, evaluation, and monitoring. Large machine learning (ML) algorithms can evaluate outcomes and trends, and natural language processing (NLP) algorithms can even figure out public sentiment from social media. The richness of information, both qualitative and quantitative, shapes social needs and concerns, guiding public policy with unmatched accuracy and shaping interventions that address complex policy needs.

We know that the Global North and Global South differ significantly in terms of policy efficiency, owing to factors such as strong institutions, stable governments, well-functioning governance, highly qualified workforces, and research expenditures that keep the Global North ahead of the curve in terms of policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Meanwhile, in the Global South, where Bangladesh is, weak institutions and authoritarian political regimes, combined with limited resources and insufficient data, lead to the failure of public policies as intuition, hegemony, and guesswork-based policy decisions frequently fall short of expectations, wasting public funds and leaving the general public to bear the consequences.

For Bangladesh, AI represents a pathway to overcome present

limitations and drive meaningful progress in policymaking process, monitoring, evaluation, and management with limited resources. While Bangladesh lacks the required efficient policy resource personnel, to make real progress, it can use AI as a catalyst to completely rethink public policy regimes for realistic and long-



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term advancement. The solution lies in AI's localisation and strategic uses to address the complex public policy issues particular to the country, rather than a replication of the Silicon Valley AI strategy. Bangladesh needs customised AI solutions rather than pre-made formulas.

Ahead of us, we have a lot of proven examples of using AI to liberalise public policy regimes both in developed and developing countries. For instance, AI is used to optimise, but not be limited to, the distribution of healthcare resources, forecast weather and disease outbreaks, prevent deforestation, monitor air quality and criminal activities, and automate cross-border trade.

Bangladesh has digitised its social safety net programmes to streamline them and guarantee that government payments are accepted at the last mile. Still, there is a long way to go. AI could

be used in Bangladesh to optimise the distribution of government resources efficiently, predict disease outbreaks, conduct law enforcement, further improve efficiency of social safety net programmes, and reduce the burden of lengthy legal procedures. More prominently, AI can be employed in early disaster warning systems, in the finance, international trade and logistics sectors, and in addressing environmental challenges.

Aside from government initiatives, the private sector, which provides the most revenue to the public sector, can use AI to have a significant impact from big data. Today, multinational organisations are increasingly using AI to support their policy objectives in a variety of areas, including detecting changes in behavioural

digital public services remains a difficult task in some circumstances, and AI tools can help the country enforce digital public service delivery more prudently.

It should be mentioned that the adoption of AI and automation, which is hailed as a productivity boost, poses a risk to transparency, accountability, and ethical issues related to algorithmic biases. Now, Bangladesh is at a crossroads where it must make responsible decisions to ensure that AI supports public policy without exacerbating existing inequities. This transformation must be gradual and responsible, with the development of localised AI capability. The country must invest in education and training to raise a new generation of politicians, public administrators,

patterns, for market research, and to devise prototypes. Corporations can use AI to evaluate data and find patterns, which not only helps steer their compliance operations by complying with complicated laws across domains, but also aids in policy advocacy. The private sector can also use AI to analyse their environmental impact and implement environment-friendly practices that comply with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) legislation. However, the country's policy regime should ensure that AI does not widen the digital divide, in order to defend domestic private sector interests.

Bangladesh adopted the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (2019-2024) and created a roadmap that highlighted the effective and efficient delivery of public services. Though the country has made progress in many measures, accessing

and entrepreneurs, and engage diverse stakeholders with AI tools to streamline commonalities for better outcomes and prudent amendment procedures.

AI could transform public policy in Bangladesh by helping to address societal issues and promote development. However, the adoption of AI in public policy comes with its own set of challenges and considerations, including algorithmic biases and data privacy concerns. By navigating these challenges responsibly and incorporating ethical considerations robustly, Bangladesh as a developing nation can harness the power of AI in its policy regimes to pave the way for a future in which AI is a boon rather than a burden. Over time, adopting a legal framework for the use of artificial intelligence is also necessary, as this can ensure the greater well-being of the country.

The importance of crying

And how films and TV shows help



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MADIHA ATHAR KHAN

I began rewatching *Grey's Anatomy* from its first season as a way to unwind after work. As I watched, it made sense to me that the show had regularly featured in the list of most watched shows ever since its first airing. The medical drama has long been dismissed as an unrealistic portrayal of the actual medical world, but it would be safe to assume that the viewers responsible for the show's success are not searching for medical accuracy. After all, the show is fictional, and one isn't meant to refer to it for accuracy.

"There is a button for coffee, button for your car, a button for everything. But there is no button for crying—you are our button for crying." This is a quote from a German lady who is a fan of Shahrukh Khan's films. At first, it may seem like a bizarre statement. To some, it may sound downright ridiculous: why would we want to cry? Isn't there enough about life that makes us sad? Entertainment should be, well, entertaining.

But there are numerous benefits

of crying. Dr Catherine Leaf, author of *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, describes crying as the brain and body's continuous attempt at restoring balance. Emotional build-up can be broken down into simpler parts. We go through experiences or events that function as factual information for the brain. These give way to associated emotions and thoughts, which include our different interpretations of the events. Finally, there is a build-up of emotionally charged events which stimulate crying as a way of relieving pressure. Crying is a neurophysiological response, meaning there is a neurological, emotional, chemical, and electromagnetic change happening in the body.

Grey's Anatomy, for instance, is popular for (aside from steamy romances and dramatic medical cases) the tragic storylines of its main characters. It is also not uncommon to see new side characters being involved in a plotline that is quick to make the viewers form an emotional

attachment to them, only to result in them being killed off in that very episode. Nearly every episode packs an emotional punch. A case can be made that the show's cathartic value is the reason for its steady, high viewership.

Shows and movies that stimulate crying can help us process complex events we may have gone through but have not yet to come to terms with. They allow us to have vicarious experiences, mirroring much of the emotions associated with the fictional events, as though they were occurring in our real lives—without any of the repercussions. As a result, viewers are able to feel safe and reassured enough to express themselves authentically.

As a society, we are underdeveloped in terms of dispersing knowledge, skills, and plans that are effective in healing us after the inevitable traumatic and difficult situations of life. These traumas are known to be passed on across generations, despite claims from earlier generations that they had to go through worse circumstances, yet were able to survive them relatively unscathed. With the rise in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues in younger generations, a common rhetoric wrongfully describes the youth as being weaker than their predecessors. There are many reasons contributing to the increase in observed mental illnesses. One reason is an increased awareness in the world about psychological problems. It is

possible that many mental illnesses were simply not diagnosed back in the day. However, the repressed feelings of difficult experiences cannot disappear, as much as we may wish that to be true.

Media certainly does not contain all the answers, though it can be a small but significant contributor to the resources at our disposal that help us express emotions healthily. When we have a good cry, and have oxytocin and endorphins run through our body—the stress-relieving and mood-enhancing hormones. It is important to be able to release an emotional build-up and to allow tears to flow when they are stimulated, instead of repressing our feelings.

Simply put, dealing with life is hard. Acknowledging what is making us feel bad naturally induces further negative feelings like shame and guilt. Sometimes, in order to even carry on with the daily expectations of our lives, we may feel forced to shove aside the events that weigh heavy on our chest. So, if once in a while you need to put on your favorite show or movie to shed a few tears, don't be afraid to do so.

It is important to note that crying uncontrollably and/or without reason can be harmful and symptomatic of deeper issues which require professional attention. In general, every person can benefit from seeking mental health counselling when encountering difficult situations.