

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Is the Bailey Road fire at all shocking?

Violation of building and fire safety codes cannot be the norm

In a grave reminder of the precarity of our urban lives, a night out with family and friends turned into an unimaginable tragedy for those visiting the restaurants at the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall building on February 29. As of writing this editorial, 46 people, including three children, have already died in the fire that broke out around 9.50 pm on Thursday at the Bailey Road building, and at least 20 others have been critically injured. Fire service officials say there were cooking gas tanks on almost every floor of the building. Meanwhile, there were only two elevators and a staircase in the building, with no emergency exit, forcing some to resort to desperate measures such as jumping out of windows to evade the flames. Those who couldn't, asphyxiated to death.

Anyone who has visited the building in question—or for that matter, any such building in Dhaka housing restaurants and cafes perilously perched on top of one another—knows these establishments, flouting a host of building and fire safety codes, are always a flicker away from disaster. As we mourn the untimely and avoidable death of the victims, we must ask ourselves, can we really be surprised that such an incident happened? An overwhelming majority of commercial establishments and high-rise buildings in Dhaka and other cities of the country are built without following fire safety and building codes, with our authorities ignoring or, in most cases, enabling such violations in exchange of hefty bribes. For how long will we continue to ignore the structural flaws and failures which make such incidents not accidents but structural killings?

The Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) requires high-rise owners to obtain No Objection Certificates (NOC) from the Fire Service contingent upon ensuring heat, flame, and smoke detectors, hydrants, sprinklers, fire fighting equipment, emergency evacuation protocol, and more before completing construction work. Following the deadly FR Tower fire on Kemal Ataturk Avenue in 2019, the Housing and Public Works minister admitted that at least 66 percent of the buildings in Dhaka were built in violation of the codes; Rajuk officials stated that the number in reality was much higher. But since then, what have the authorities done to ensure compliance? Despite repeated and avoidable fires in the capital alone over the past decade, we have not seen any noteworthy initiatives to ensure even a modicum of good governance in public works, much less an acknowledgement of authorities' own complicity in these killings. We deserve an answer from the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and the city authorities about their deadly reluctance to perform their duties.

Every time a fire breaks out, we go through the same motions: we register our shock, spend a few days dissecting the flaws of the building in question, form a probe committee, file a case against the building owners at most, and then conveniently forget to hold anyone accountable for the systemic failures. Will this time be any different?

Development and conservation must go hand in hand

Make preservation of nature a national priority

The felling of over 50 trees on the banks of the Shitalakkhya River for a development project by the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has once again brought to the fore our national failure to strike a balance between development and environmental conservation. The authorities have gone ahead with the development work, ignoring widespread concern among locals and environment activists, and seemingly unaware of the dire consequences of the depletion of our precious forest resources.

The felling of these trees, predominantly rain trees and banyans, in Narayanganj for a development project not only undermines ecological balance but has also stripped the local community of its natural heritage and social spaces. These trees, which have been part of the landscape for decades, served as crucial green spaces for residents, offering a refuge from the urban sprawl and serving as a gathering place which fostered community interaction and well-being. The felling of the trees—which could lead to longer-term health implications for the local population due to reduced air quality and increased urban heat—reflects a short-sighted approach to development from concerned authorities.

The removal of these trees of various sizes in such a significant number also directly impacts the area's biodiversity. The Shitalakkhya riverbank, identified as one of the 13 Ecologically Critical Areas (ECAs) in the country, is home to numerous bird species and wildlife. Moreover, trees play a vital role in stabilising the riverbank, preventing erosion, and maintaining water quality by filtering out pollutants. Their removal exacerbates the vulnerability of the riverbank to environmental degradation, affecting not only the immediate area but also the broader riverine ecosystem.

In light of these considerations, it becomes even more imperative for authorities to adopt a holistic view of development, one that includes rigorous environmental impact assessments, public consultations, and a genuine commitment to sustainable practices. The preservation of natural resources and the well-being of communities must be at the heart of development policies to ensure that progress does not come at an unacceptable cost to the environment and society.

New Message

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Why not to privatise fuel oil refinery



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

The cost of importing refined fuel oil like diesel and octane is higher than that of importing crude oil. If crude oil is imported and refined within the country to produce diesel, octane, etc, the cost would be much lower. But as the capacity of the country's only state-owned fuel oil refinery Eastern Refinery Limited (ERL) is inadequate, a large amount of refined fuel oil needs to be imported at a higher cost. Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) imports around 6.5 million tonnes of fuel oil per year, of which refined oil is the majority as ERL has a refining capacity of only 1.5 million tonnes. As a result, a huge amount of foreign exchange is spent annually on the import of refined fuel oil.

ERL, a subsidiary of BPC, was established in 1968. More than half a century has passed after independence, the country's demand for fuel oil has increased year by year, but the capacity of the country's only state-owned oil refinery has not been increased from 1.5 million tons. An initiative to increase oil refining capacity by three million tonnes was taken by ERL in 2012, but it has not been implemented due to a lack of funding. Now, the government has decided to implement this long-planned second unit of ERL in partnership with a private company. According to reports, the development comes after the group, in October last year, sent a proposal to the Prime Minister's Office to build the refinery on an 80-20 equity basis on the land owned by ERL in Chattogram.

No doubt, building the second unit of ERL is very important, but it is not clear why this strategically important and assuredly profitable project should be privatised. Why is the government itself not investing? Initially, an investment of Tk 13,000 crore was required for this project, but due to non-provision of funds on time by the government and multiple revisions of the Development Project Proposal (DPP), the cost increased to Tk 23,736 crore. According to the latest DPP, the finance division had agreed to spend Tk 16,142 crore and the BPC agreed to spend Tk 7,100 crore. There was a funding gap of only Tk 493 crore. Although ERL's original plan has not been cancelled officially, the government is moving forward to implement the new proposal of



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building the second unit of ERL under the joint venture.

The question is, while the government is able to spend thousands of crore on various infrastructure development projects and pay capacity charges of more than Tk 1,00,000 crore to rental power plants over just 14 years, can it not invest in the construction of an oil refinery? This project is not like the government's usual white elephant projects as the investment here would be quite worth it and will help save our foreign currency reserves.

Moreover, the huge profits that BPC makes every year by selling oil at higher prices than the international market could also be used to increase the capacity of its subsidiary ERL. BPC's net profit after tax from 2014-15 to 2020-21 was Tk 46,858 crore. BPC also has made a profit of Tk 4,586 crore in the 2022-23 financial year. Apart from this, the government earns tens of thousands of crore worth of revenue annually from fuel oil duties.

If only a part of this money is used for enhancing the capacity of the ERL, a lot of foreign currency could

be saved and customers could get fuel oil at cheaper rates. In fact, around \$11 per barrel can be saved if imported crude oil is refined locally to produce diesel. As a result, the capacity enhancement of state-owned ERL will save about \$240 million annually. It is mentioned in the original proposal that the investment will be recovered within four years and nine months. So,

99 percent of the LPG market is dominated by private companies which sell LPG at a rate higher than the one fixed by the energy regulator. What is the guarantee that the same will not happen in the case of fuel oil? Who will ensure that private companies will not sell fuel oil at higher prices, as we see being done in the cases of edible oil or sugar?

there is no justification for handing over such a profitable and cost-saving project to a private company.

Of course, this is not an isolated incident, but rather part of a bigger plan. In November 2023, the government introduced a policy titled "Establishment of Refineries at Private Level, Storage, Processing, Transportation and Marketing of Crude Oil Imported Policy 2023." According to this policy, local and foreign private companies will be allowed to set up refineries after acquiring a licence from the government and, after selling a specified portion of the refined fuel oil to BPC, they are to sell the remaining portion through their own marketing network.

There is a concern that the consequence of privatising this strategically important sector will be the same as that of granting permission to generate electricity through rental, quick rental, and independent power producers, which has become a burden for the country. The experience of importing and marketing liquid petroleum gas (LPG) through the private sector has also been unpleasant. Currently, around

There is also no guarantee that private companies will actually sell the specified portion of their oil production to BPC and maintain the quality standard. A relevant example is the country's experience of refining condensate from gas wells through private refineries. According to that agreement, the responsibility of the private gas condensate refineries was to sell the petrol and octane, produced by refining the condensate, to BPC. But there were allegations that most of the private refineries did not supply petrol and octane to BPC in proportion to the amount of gas condensate they took. Rather, they sold it directly to petrol pumps and the quality of petrol and octane they produced was also not up to the mark. Due to these allegations, the government stopped supplying condensate to almost all private refineries in 2020, save for two.

It seems that the government is creating a new threat of the quality and price of refined fuel oil being manipulated by permitting private companies to import and refine crude oil instead of enhancing the existing capacity of state-owned ERL.

Acknowledge negativity, but don't ignore the positive



Debra Efroymsen is executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

On the bookshelf in my sitting room is a painted green box from India. Inside the box is a World War II medal that was awarded to my maternal grandfather. He did not give it to me personally; he had misplaced it decades before his death. But one day, several years ago, I got an email from a Canadian man, a stranger, who said that, as a hobby, he purchases military items on eBay and then tries to reunite them with the families of the owners. He does not charge for the service. A brief flutter of emails ensued, and then he sent me the medal. I felt a reconnection with my grandfather, and the stranger enjoyed the sensation of performing a good deed.

More recently, while visiting people in the United States, I witnessed a snowstorm—and for the first time ever, tried to shovel snow. The person I was staying with had just moved and couldn't locate her snow shovel. I went next door, rang the bell, and borrowed one from a woman I'd never met. The path from the house to the street was

steep and slippery, and I was moving cautiously (not to mention clumsily). The man across the street (whom I'd also never met) suddenly appeared in front of me, holding a snow shovel. "Do you need help?" he asked, and proceeded to shovel for me. A few days later, the doorbell rang; another neighbour dropped by to proffer some helpful advice on the important topic of how to feed one's pet snake. For those couple of days, the city I was staying in felt like a small town.

I once heard of a man who was walking along a village road and suddenly found himself in a pond; before he was aware of what was happening, he had jumped into the water to rescue a drowning child he'd glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. His most basic instinct was to save the child he hadn't even properly seen.

Random acts of kindness are not limited to rural areas and small towns. Surely my readers have seen people shouting at women on rickshaws, making them aware of when the

ends of their clothing are in danger of getting caught in the wheel of the vehicle. Here in Dhaka, I once watched a rickshaw puller leap off his rickshaw to save a colleague of mine, a young woman who was learning to cycle. His rickshaw got smashed up in the process, but his sole focus was on helping the woman. (We paid for the repairs to his rickshaw.)

lifting a heavy box, or exchanged a friendly greeting with me. Their selflessness sometimes stuns me. One day, I watched as two children looked with commiseration at a street dog. The boy asked his sister if she had any money; when she replied that she had Tk 10, he told her to go buy a small packet of biscuits, while he hunted around for a discarded container in

We talk a lot about stranger danger, about the bad things that people do to each other. It is easy to feel discouraged when confronted with endless negative news stories. Those news stories are real. People do many bad things. But that shouldn't cause us to forget about all the good that people quietly do, day in and day out, with no expectation of a reward.

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People assign varying weights to their experiences, and so some of us focus on the positive: acts of kindness, friendliness, selfless concern for others. I think of strangers who have taken the time to guide me when I'm lost in their city, offered me help with

which to give the dog water to wash down the snack. Another day, as I was about to enter a restaurant, a young boy begging on the footpath approached me. "You feed the dogs at the cricket field?" he asked. I nodded in assent. He smiled approvingly. "Enjoy your meal," he replied, and wandered off.

Yes, it's important to acknowledge the negativity around us so that we can seek and implement solutions to it. But let us never forget to notice the goodness that is also all around us, and that gives us hope in the possibility of working together towards a better society, a better nation, a better world.