

Let journalists do their job

Persecution by govt officials deeply concerning

It is deeply disturbing to see how the rights of journalists to freely perform their duties, without fearing threats and violence, are repeatedly violated by departments of the state itself. For instance, in Lalmonirhat on Thursday, government employees confined five journalists to the office of an assistant commissioner (land) for about 40 minutes. The officials took this brutish measure because they did not want anyone to record videos of a hearing inside the premises. Earlier this month, a journalist was jailed in Sherpur through a mobile court for seeking information from the upazila nirbahi officer about the purchasing of computers and laptops. Thankfully, he was later freed and action was taken against the offending officer, but the fact remains that he was harassed for trying to hold state mechanisms to account.

And let's not forget that at least 18 journalists were assaulted or harassed while covering irregularities and violence during the January 7 general election, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. There is arguably no other group of professionals that is persecuted for just doing their job.

Several questions emerge out of such events. Is this how government employees are instructed to act in these situations? Or are they so drunk on power that the state cannot control them? More importantly, why are these officials so insecure about providing information for public welfare? These questions, regardless of the answers, do not bode well for the country's journalists—or its democracy. They point to the administration's unwillingness to remain accountable to the people and put the government's celebrated narrative of free press and media under fire.

It's clear that this professed freedom—touted by state officials who point to the proliferation of media houses to back their arguments—is disconnected from reality. If such liberty existed, would journalists repeatedly face such attacks? Time and again, we have seen how laws are twisted to threaten journalists or take revenge. In the Sherpur incident, the Mobile Court Act was abused to put a journalist in jail, giving him no scope to defend himself. And at this point, the country is well aware of how the Digital Security Act, now rebranded as the Cyber Security Act, has become a weapon against the free press.

Indeed, if journalists truly enjoyed a safe and free environment, Bangladesh would not have slipped another notch in the World Press Freedom Index 2023. The country is now ranked 163rd out of 180 countries. The statistics, the countless incidents, the prevailing atmosphere of self-censorship—all point to the fact that journalism is slowly being killed in this country. And no rhetoric, however eloquent it may be, will be able to cover this reality. Therefore, the government must stop being in denial and work towards protecting this profession, for the sake of accountability and people's rights.

No industrial zones at the cost of rivers

Save the Shitalakkhya River from extreme pollution

The Shitalakkhya River—once the lifeline of historic cities, vibrant industries, bustling trade routes, and a major source of food and livelihood of countless communities—is now on the verge of death. It's a disgrace that we are letting our rivers, the most important element of this land and the core identity of this nation, die one by one at the hands of encroachers and polluting factories.

A recent report by this daily paints a horrifying picture of the rapid and devastating deterioration of Shitalakkhya. Even five years ago, different species of fish, such as rui, katla, kalbaush, gutum, boal, puti, shrimp, shail, chapila and baira, were plentiful in the river, and fishermen could sustain their ancestral occupation. However, with the majority of 350 dyeing and washing factories and hundreds of RMG factories in Gazipur, and many more in Narsingdi, Narayanganj and Dhaka, polluting its 114 km stretch over time, there is not enough fish stock left in the water.

A study published last year found that all 56 rivers surveyed in the country were found extremely polluted. The major source and concentration of river pollution seems to be in urban and industrial areas. City and town authorities continue to dump wastewater directly into the rivers, and factories, even with ETPs, do not bother to process highly toxic pollutants before dumping them into water bodies. This information is nothing new, and outcries to save rivers like the Shitalakkhya have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears.

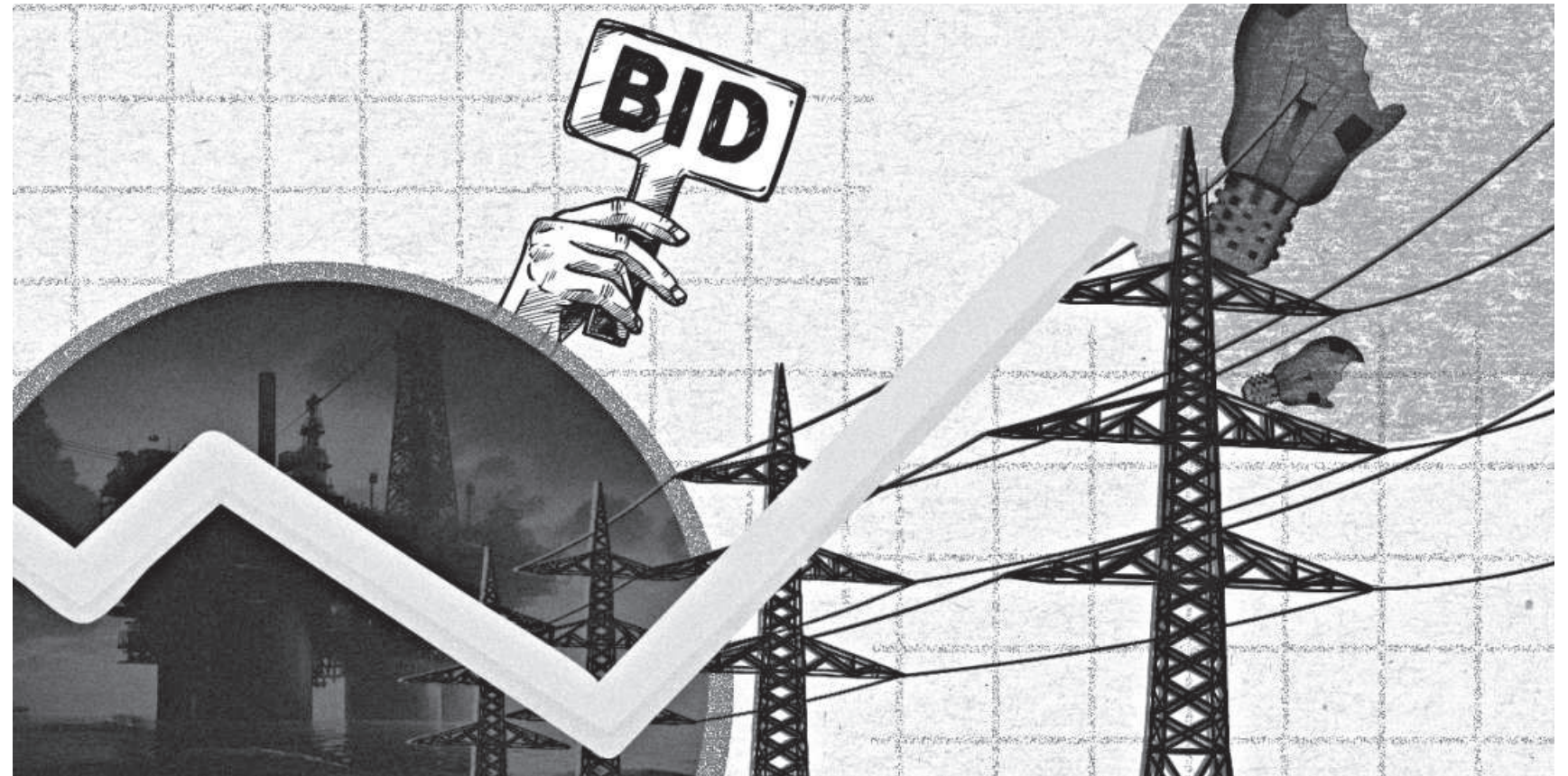
The National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) is severely understaffed, underfunded, and lacks significant executive power. There is no meaningful monitoring, strict enforcement of regulations, or a unified approach from different parts of the system—local district administration, NRCC, shipping, industries and environment ministries, and the like—to stop the cataclysmic destruction of our rivers and their ecological diversity. Unless the authorities understand the immense importance of river conservation and take decisive action, temporary drives to reclaim river lands or fining factories will remain mere eyewash, and our rivers will continue to die. We must demand answers to why our current approach to development costs rivers their vitality, ecological diversity, and natural course of flow.

New Message

Subject

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VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Will we ever see smart policymaking in the energy sector?



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MOSHAHIDA SULTANA RITU

Smart politicians often project an image of strength and competence. When something goes wrong, they either blame fate or external shocks. The capacity to shift blame onto factors seemingly beyond their control is viewed by these politicians as a display of smartness. The government's justification behind increasing electricity prices is an example of this "smart blaming." I term this tactic "smart blaming" because it allows the government to once again reveal its selective vulnerability to external shocks without assuming any accountability for its actions.

Why this selective vulnerability, though, when Bangladesh appears to be shining with the glow of development everywhere? Even one year had not elapsed since the prime minister's announcement of universal electricity coverage in 2022 when load-shedding and a surge in electricity prices began to strain the economy. The electricity price increased again in March 2024—another step in the ongoing price adjustment intended to last over the next few years. The state minister repeatedly defended price hikes as a necessary measure for these price adjustments due to escalating costs attributed to the increase in the prices of coal, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and US dollar. The tone of defence appears to exude helplessness. Is the government really so helpless?

The people of the country are smart, too. They habitually discern that the government isn't truly powerless; rather, it's a strategy it employs to use people's money to favour private electricity suppliers. Much has been written and discussed as to why price increase is projected as a necessary measure, when in reality it is a conscious policy choice to shift the burden on the consumers and invite an inevitable crisis. Some of the domestic policies contributing to today's crisis include: i) electricity liberalisation through allowing independent power producers;

ii) selection of rental and quick rental options without competitive bidding; iii) excessive capacity payment requirements at peaking power plants; iv) inadequate coordination in balancing energy supply and demand among existing power plants; and v) escalating energy import dependence.

In this column, I aim to shed light on some overlooked truths that have recently escaped widespread discussion. Two news items recently caught my attention, both highlighting new uncertainties in the LNG market. One concerns Japan's surplus LNG and its quest to find new markets in Southeast Asia for resale. The other is on the US's approval to limit LNG exports. How do these developments affect Bangladesh?

Firstly, it's worth noting that the construction of two LNG terminals in Bangladesh received technical assistance from the US-based company Exxcelerate Energy. One of these terminals is owned by Bangladeshi company Summit Power, which has ties to Japan—it sold a portion of its shares to a Japanese company called JERA Co Inc. Could this connection veer to the realm of conspiracy theories? It may seem so without delving into history. The connections of US and Japanese companies with the LNG infrastructure in Bangladesh are actually incomplete without understanding how the LNG market expansion began.

With the surge in shale gas exploration in the US during the 2010s, the potential for LNG export expanded significantly. Concurrently, when Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) formulated Bangladesh's power system master plan (PSMP) in 2010, it anticipated the necessity of adopting LNG under the pretext of the country's depleting gas resources. This period also witnessed international oil companies expressing interest in exploring deep-sea gas reserves in the Bay of Bengal. However, strong opposition from Bangladeshi civil society against gas

exports compelled the government to eliminate the export provision clause in the model production-sharing contract (PSC).

Meanwhile, the US grew increasingly interested in bolstering global reliance on LNG, partly motivated by the European Union's escalating dependence on relatively inexpensive Russian piped gas. Russia's dominance in the gas market posed geopolitical concerns for the US. Hence, establishing new markets for LNG and enhancing global reliance on LNG infrastructure technology emerged as a deliberate geopolitical strategy for the US.

Due to the global expansion of LNG, we witnessed South Asian countries constructing LNG terminals to import LNG during the 2010s. An intriguing case is Myanmar which, despite its abundant gas resources, started to import LNG while simultaneously exporting its own gas to China. During my last visit to Myanmar in 2014, I observed residents of Yangon grappling with power outages and cooking gas shortages. This discrepancy left me pondering, and it also reaffirmed my belief that Bangladesh likely made the right decision by abstaining from allowing gas export provisions at that time.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh's reliance on LNG has increased. The government's failure to explore new gas fields during this time suggests intentional neglect, likely aimed at creating opportunities to import LNG. Encouraging long-term LNG demand became a strategy to promote greater dependency on LNG. LNG contracts typically involve long-term commitments, and breaching these contracts midway can result in severe penalties.

While Bangladesh grapples with importing expensive LNG to meet domestic demand, Japan has transitioned into an LNG surplus nation due to declining demand attributed to the increased utilisation of renewable and nuclear energy sources. Now, in a bid to avert financial losses, Japan is seeking new markets to resell its LNG at elevated prices. Notably, last year Bangladesh procured LNG from the spot market through JERA. Although initially sourced from Qatar, Bangladesh also commenced LNG imports from the US in 2023. This underscores the country's emergence as an LNG market for both the US and

Japan. US firms have provided LNG technology, while Jica, through making the 2010 PSMP, has paved the way for LNG dependence by incorporating LNG imports as an option to meet Bangladesh's demand.

This begs the question: why did Bangladesh need to develop its master plan with Jica's assistance? Did we lack the capacity to devise our own plans? Were we unaware of the contents of the master plan? Can the government absolve itself of accountability by denying that the master plan itself foresaw an increase in LNG prices? Can it refute the 2005 PSMP, which explicitly recommended the country to update its own plan, citing that the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB) and Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) have the capability to do so? (PSMP 2005, Pp 1-29) Presently, think tanks and NGOs are scrutinising the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) 2023, likely fuelled by increased funding availability.

The National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (NCPMP) has been diligently reading the PSCs and plans and warning the policymakers without any consultancy fee. They have been the public voice for a long time now. Recently, the government invited international tender for offshore bidding to extract gas. This time, the PSC has the export provision. Now, that Bangladesh has signed long-term contracts to import LNG from abroad, will it be able to get its gas at a cheaper price under the new PSC? Or will it have to export LNG at a future cheaper price while importing at the current higher price? If that happens, how ironic it would be!

Who should be blamed for it, then? Have we not been asking the government to build our own capacity for offshore gas exploration? The smart policymakers would probably say they were helpless or didn't know it before. The blame could potentially be shifted to future low LNG prices (when exporting) instead of the current high LNG prices (when importing). As more countries embrace renewable energy, the demand for LNG may decrease, leading to price declines. The smart politicians of a "smart" country might argue that they cannot be faulted for other countries adopting renewables when Bangladesh did not.

How long will this blame-shifting game go on?

The Age of AI Is Bangladesh missing an opportunity?

After OpenAI, Google and Microsoft also launched their own AI LLM tools. These AI tools have become proficient in text-to-text, image-to-text, text-to-image tasks, and day by day, their level of accuracy keeps getting better.

If you look at Boston Dynamics' robots, you will see how perfectly their AI-based robots can imitate any animal. See how realistic the movements of these robots are. It is certain that soon the use of AI technology will increase across the world. How long it will take Bangladesh to realise that the next technology revolution has begun? On March 7, India approved a \$1.25 billion investment in AI projects, which includes developing computing infrastructure and supporting the development of LLMs, as reported by Reuters. The money will also be used to fund AI startups, as well as

develop AI applications for the public sector. India's AI market is projected to reach \$17 billion by 2027, growing at an annualised rate of 25-35 percent between 2024 and 2027, according to IT industry body Nasscom.

Will Bangladesh continue to import technology as usual, or will it take a leaf out of its neighbour's book and invest in developing its own comprehensive AI strategy?

A long-term plan is needed to tackle this new technology frontier, and for that, the relevant authorities in Bangladesh should get to preparations urgently. The first step is creating special allocations for research in universities and to promote research in higher education. A recent article by Prof Rokonzaman of North South University (NSU) sheds light on technology innovation and its growth.

He believes that AI technology will open a very promising door for the world. Though AI research began in the 20th century, it faced a period of slow progress at the beginning of the 21st century before experiencing a surge in interest around the 2020s. At this point, AI has passed its chasm period, a chasm being the first stagnant phase in a technology's growing period when there is a lack of innovation. When any technology is in the chaos stage, it has no market value on a large scale. This period has to be passed by generating innovative ideas through extensive research. And after this period, any technology is made for the consumer market. It is evident at this point that AI technology will reach the consumer level very soon, and the sooner Bangladesh can capture this market, the more it will reap benefits from it.

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MD NURNOBI ISLAM

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the world, and Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. Will the nation embrace this revolution and reap its benefits, or will it be left behind?

Technology policymakers, investors and executives around the world have started rethinking the future of the AI industry after OpenAI launched a large language model (LLM) named ChatGPT in November 2022. ChatGPT displayed how advanced AI tools can think like a human to a certain extent.