

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Farming must adapt to climate change

Our food security, farmers' survival are at stake

It is a proven fact that climate change is severely affecting agriculture in Bangladesh. Temperatures are consistently rising along with decreased rainfalls, leading to increased salinity, and thus changing our once-fertile lands into dust bowls or lands with poor yields. Its implications for our food security cannot be more profound. Take rice, our main staple. Varieties that need expensive fertilisers and pesticides have replaced many indigenous, high-yielding varieties of paddy that were nutritious and required no chemicals to grow. While we commend the efforts of the agricultural agencies in developing climate-resilient crops, future efforts must reflect the urgency and innovation necessitated by the intensifying climate change.

A report from Koyra, Khulna tells a positive story about how vast lands left barren by increasing salinity are being turned fertile with farmers planting paddy, vegetables and fruits, while also engaging in fish farming. This has been possible through various government bodies, such as the Department of Agricultural Extension and the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), which support farmers by providing them with salinity-resistant seeds, advice, training and fertilisers. By adapting to cultivation of salinity-tolerant crops and going into fish farming, these farmers are becoming more solvent and do not have to leave their homes to seek employment elsewhere. Therefore, the community as a whole has benefitted.

The Koyra model must be replicated all over the country, especially in districts like Patuakhali where many farmers have had to abandon their ancestral profession for low-paying jobs in the cities, because the lands they grew crops in have become barren. A report in this paper quotes an official of the Meteorological Department of Patuakhali stating that over the last six years, the average temperature in the district has increased by at least 4.5 degrees Celsius. Rains start much later than before and for shorter periods of time. The high temperatures destroy many of the paddy saplings, and lack of rain leads to low-quality yields, only fit for poultry feed. The number of people engaged in agriculture has thus significantly dropped in the last 10 years.

The government must focus on these districts—once major producers of crops but now left with vast areas of fallow lands. We urge the government to mobilise its relevant agricultural bodies and collaborate with private organisations to invest in research of climate-resilient crops specific to these districts. The government should incentivise farmers to return to their farmlands and grow crops again.

Someone must answer for rising fires

Statistics reveal continual decline in fire safety standards

Ever since the Bailey Road tragedy struck, we've been bombarded with one sobering revelation after another with reports on more fires, government drives, arrests, closures, and damning surveys coming in quick succession. It is a testimony to the heightened public awareness that comes after any catastrophic tragedy, but also to the progressively deteriorating fire situation in Bangladesh. As per latest reports, citing data from the Fire Service and Civil Defence, things have been particularly bad over the last four years. In 2023, the number of fire incidents was 27,624. It was 24,102 in 2022, 21,601 in 2021, and 21,073 in 2020. In fact, over the past seven years, a whopping 1,73,709 incidents occurred across the country, killing 2,884 people.

These findings are consistent with a growing consensus that arbitrary government drives—triggered by the outcry over lack of safety measures precipitating a tragedy—cannot prevent fire incidents. These special operations are conducted in a half-hearted manner without any central plan or coordination among the participating agencies. And they fizzle out as soon as the initial ripples subside. Beyond that, according to an expert, the agencies only issue notices to the violators of building/fire safety regulations without any follow-up legal action, allowing violations to continue. While lack of institutional accountability is obviously a factor for the agencies not doing their job properly or throughout the year, we must acknowledge that they, too, are hamstrung by certain systemic issues.

At the fire service, for example, officers often do not sue violators because they "do not want to attend court hearings throughout the lengthy trial proceedings," says an official. Besides, many building owners are politically connected and powerful, and can harass inspectors. The fire service also doesn't have its own executive magistrates to run mobile courts. Unchecked political influence and corruption are also a deterring factor for the other agencies, including Rajuk and city corporations. That said, we cannot allow these issues to continue to come in the way of strict enforcement of safety regulations. The authorities must remove all roadblocks for relevant agencies and ensure that no one gets away with unplanned construction and poor safety practices.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Ensure fire safety in malls

After the deadly fire in Baily Road, we've seen, like always, some drives to monitor fire safety in premises similar to that of the recent accident—restaurants and food courts. However, we are yet to see any meaningful action to address the core issues, mainly ensuring fire safety protocols in all infrastructures, especially in public spaces. For instance, this Eid season has brought thousands of people into shopping malls—which also contain highly flammable materials. But there has been no drive to ensure these places are abiding by fire department regulations. Are the authorities waiting for another tragic incident, and more lives before they start doing their jobs? I urge the relevant authorities to be proactive in ensuring fire safety in public spaces and save the public from this avoidable danger.

Ishrat Jahan, Kolabagan, Dhaka

Delay in oil-gas exploration a testament to short-sightedness

Dr Badrul Imam, energy expert and retired professor of Dhaka University's Department of Geology speaks to Golam Mertoza of The Daily Star about the overall procedure of oil-gas exploration in Bangladesh, its reserve situation, and export opportunities.

You have always opined that we should give more focus to oil-gas exploration on both land and sea. After almost a decade, it seems the matter is getting some importance. What is your view in this regard?

I think we are already too late. If you look at the last 10 years, since 2012, we haven't done much regarding the ocean. Our huge and resourceful sea has a lot of potential. Both Myanmar and India have discovered gas there. We stayed mostly idle. I always find this decision illogical. One of our biggest weaknesses in the gas sector is that we have not utilised our vast sea.

Finally, we are taking some

Bangladesh's gas cannot be exported—this must be a properly documented red-line condition. No matter what the circumstances, there should never be a scope for exporting this gas. However, in the tender document, it has been mentioned that if the extracted gas is not bought or used by Bangladesh, it can be exported. It is better not to write this.

initiatives. It's better late than never. Now that we have started, we should move forward properly. If we could have started this initiative five years ago, then by now we would have gotten some gas supply. The exploration just started; it will take a long time before we get the gas from the sea.

International organisations have been asked to submit their tenders. How long do you think the entire process might take for us to get gas?

It will take at least five years to get it. Tender seeking, acceptance, and initiation of the process—all that will take at least one and a half years. The bid-winning firm will take another year for the initial preparations. After that, they would eventually head towards the sea. Two more years will be needed to do the survey, exploration, and excavation. After these steps, we can start talking about getting gas. Even when the gas is identified, we will have to set up pipelines to bring it in. That will take some more time.

This is why I keep asking, why did we sit idle for 10 years? We marked our sea borders in 2021. Myanmar and India finished their work in 2014. Now we have to pay for sitting idle for a decade.



Badrul Imam

What could be the reasons for sitting idle like that?

There's no reason. It is just another example of short-sightedness and ineptitude.

Both Myanmar and India identified huge amounts of gas underwater. We might also get a similar amount. Foreign firms usually extract and sell the gas quickly and leave with the proceeds. Sometimes they sell it to other countries, in which case, how useful will it be for Bangladesh?

Bangladesh's gas cannot be exported—this must be a properly documented red-line condition. No matter what the circumstances, there should never be a scope for exporting this gas. However, in the tender document, it has been mentioned that if the extracted gas is not bought or used by Bangladesh, it can be exported. It is better not to write this. However, the oil-gas extracting organisations put pressure to include it. Because, when they go for bank loans, the bank demands to keep an option for export in the organisation's working plan.

However, our reality is different, because we do not have anything else. As long as Bangladesh needs it, we have to use this source. The demand is rising exponentially and the supply is dwindling. Thus, even if we increase the supply, it will never be able to match the demand. Thus, a certain amount of LNG import must continue.

The amount of gas that we are expecting to extract may not be needed immediately. We may be able to use it for years. However, the foreign firm might want to get it extracted as fast as possible so that it can maximise its profits.

We have to keep the production low. We don't have to extract it all in one go. If needed, we will take 10 years to extract the amount of gas that could

have been extracted in a year.

Would the foreign firm agree to this condition?

It's a logical question. However, we have to strike a balance here. If the foreign firm is given the liberty to extract and sell as much as it wants, that's one thing. However, to uphold the nation's interests, the contract can specify that gas extraction should be as per the nation's demand levels. They will conduct business, but the pace will be slower. Such contracts are signed across the globe and international firms are also aware of the logic behind it. However, whether we can make them agree to it or not solely depends on our negotiation skills.

We made the right call by focusing on gas extraction. However, it will not be wise to quickly extract and deplete this source. Extraction should be as per demand, and the extracted gas should not be exported under any circumstances.

Will Bangladesh buy gas from foreign firms as per the international market value set in dollars?

Yes, the gas price will be determined per the international crude oil price. Currently, the crude oil price is \$80. Thus, each unit of gas will be sold at \$8. The gas price will go up and down as per the crude oil price.

Was there a survey done to determine the amount of gas reserves in the different blocks of Bangladesh's sea borders?

Some general surveys were conducted, but no information was available regarding the specific amount. However, as a whole, it can be said that compared to the western blocks, the eastern blocks may contain a higher amount of gas. Thus, foreign firms are more interested in the eastern blocks.

These blocks are adjacent to Myanmar. As Myanmar explored a huge amount of gas, it is being assumed that we will also find a large amount in our blocks.

Is there an opportunity to only allow extraction from a few blocks instead of all of them?

Yes, we can permit extraction from only a few blocks. It depends on the government's decision.

The government keeps on stressing that foreign firms will not show interest unless they are allowed to export.

This depends on the negotiations completely. Bangladesh needs a lot of gas, so why can't the government explain this to the foreign firm? No matter how much gas they extract, it

will not meet our demand. We don't have any other form of fuel. We run everything on gas. Thus, the foreign firm should not be afraid of the fact that we might not buy the gas they extract and they will need to export to make a profit.

Did Myanmar and India only get gas from their blocks, or did they get oil as well?

They mainly discovered gas. A small amount of oil exists here, but it is inadequate.

Foreign firms surveyed our blocks. Do you know about their findings?

TGS did some surveys. Bangladesh commissioned a survey work where TGS jointly worked with another US-based firm. They will now sell this survey report to other firms so that they can quickly go for gas exploration. This report would be handed over to Bangladesh and sold to other foreign firms.

So, Bangladesh doesn't know yet the exact amount of gas contained within the blocks?

No, we don't. Such a survey has not been conducted. TGS's survey is a basic one. Until the excavation starts, it cannot be said what amount of gas exists. The initial survey gave us a possibility. Now we have to get the precise information by excavating.

You have placed a similar emphasis on land-based sources. Recently we found gas in the third well in Sundalpur. Is the current pace of land-based gas extraction satisfactory?

It is not being emphasised enough. We have been saying for a long time that the Chittagong hill tracts have a lot of potential, but not enough development is taking place. In a way, we can say that it is getting focused—there's a plan to excavate a well within three years. Previously, there were no plans to excavate so many wells. Now it is going on in a big way.

Now we must see whether all the plans get implemented or not, because there was another plan in 2015-16 for excavating 100 wells, but the plan got scrapped after only a few wells were excavated.

BAPEX can excavate wells and extract gas for much cheaper. Still, while excavating wells, Gazprom or other firms get priority over it. Are we still following this policy?

Yes, this policy has not been changed. BAPEX does not get priority. BAPEX has a lot of potential. We have to firmly support it, as it can do a lot.

Translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan

Unlocking the potential of health corners for a healthier future

Semonty Jahan is a research associate at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.

SEMONTY JAHAN

Recalling Fotik from the Chuti short story vividly brings to light the turbulent nature of adolescence, a phase where understanding is scarce, and a sense of belonging seems elusive. Engaging in discussions about sensitive topics such as sexual reproductive health, pregnancy, drug abuse, and eve teasing during this period can be a daunting task. Adolescents often find it challenging to trust adults with their experiences, and likewise, adults may feel uncomfortable broaching these subjects. Consequently, these crucial conversations often occur among peers, resulting in misguided

decisions and potential pitfalls.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of Bangladesh has offered a commendable solution to address the challenges faced by the adolescent population. By establishing adolescent-friendly health corners in upazila health complexes across

different districts, the ministry has created dedicated spaces exclusively for adolescents. These corners,



READERS' VOICE

Despite the effectiveness of these adolescent-friendly health corners, a significant challenge remains—the lack of awareness among the target audience. To fully realise the potential of this initiative, it requires increased publicity.

staffed by Sub-Assistant Community Medical Officers (SACMOs), are adorned with informative materials, including books and posters. Here, adolescents, both boys, and girls, can comfortably spend time reading, engaging in discussions, and seeking guidance from SACMOs on various issues such as menstruation, early marriage, pregnancy, contraceptives, family planning, RTI/STI prevention, gender-based violence, puberty, and substance abuse. The initiative ensures privacy and proper guidance

for adolescents during this critical stage of life.

Despite the effectiveness of these adolescent-friendly health corners, a significant challenge remains—the lack of awareness among the target audience. To fully realise the potential of this initiative, it requires increased publicity. In a country where 36 million adolescents make up one-fifth of the total population, guiding this substantial demographic is crucial for building a healthier nation in the future. Creating awareness, establishing safe spaces for discussions, and informing adolescents about their rights regarding sexual reproductive health, early marriages, and other sensitive topics will not only educate them but also empower them to become confident individuals ready to navigate the complexities of adulthood.