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Another deadweight in the energy sector?

Surplus LNG regasification capacity set to emerge as a headache

It is worrying to learn of the widening gap between our LNG imports and regasification capacity, with a UK-based research firm predicting that Bangladesh will end up with surplus regasification capacity by the end of this decade. This, among other things, means incurring hefty capacity charges similar to what we are already having to pay for idle power plants. The burden of these charges, it goes without saying, will inevitably fall on consumers. The question is, why are we allowing another potential albatross around the neck of the energy sector?

The looming surplus comes on the back of Bangladesh's increasing reliance on costly LNG imports as well as a continued decline in natural gas production, which is unlikely to see a substantial reversal despite recent efforts by Petrobangla. Currently, Bangladesh has two Floating Storage and Regasification Units (FSRUs)—which convert LNG, or liquefied natural gas, back to gas before supplying it to the national grid—with a combined annual capacity of 7.6 million tonnes (mtpa). An additional 21 mtpa of regasification capacity will be added if the planned four LNG terminal projects, including additional FSRUs and an onshore terminal, come into existence. However, the government has consistently failed to utilise the existing capacity so far, and even if the expected boost in LNG imports is factored in, Bangladesh will still have "significant" surplus capacity, researchers say.

Like the capacity charges for power plants, the regasification units also have a fixed cost based on their installed capacity, meaning that there will be no getting around the payment regardless of whether we can utilise it or not. So, why are we heading down a path that is certain to incur the same wasteful expenditure? This represents a glaring lack of foresight on the part of policymakers. The priority, instead, should have been addressing concerns surrounding supply and price fluctuations as well as proper utilisation of existing capacity. Moreover, there is a crying need to boost production of natural gas, which experts say should have been prioritised long time ago.

We urge the government to learn from past mistakes and undertake comprehensive feasibility studies and risk assessments before expanding LNG regasification capacity. Given the damage it has already done to the energy sector through various questionable policies, it should urgently engage experts to chart the sector's future trajectory, and boosting gas exploration and production must be a vital part of it. Furthermore, we must enhance energy efficiency and promote renewable energy sources to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and mitigate environmental impact.

Rehabilitate all street children

Govt must ensure their education and quality of life

The latest statistic from Unicef—that over 3.4 million children in Bangladesh are living on the streets without parental care—is both shocking and deeply concerning. It is common knowledge that these children are not only deprived of food, education, healthcare, and shelter, but also vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Without any communal and familial support to lean on, they mostly end up in hazardous jobs such as construction, garbage collection, etc. Many fall prey to begging syndicates or drug traffickers; and some even develop an addiction to drugs. All this casts a long shadow over the future of these children and, by extension, the country.

True, the government has made considerable strides in reducing extreme poverty over the years, but it is clear that much more needs to be done, especially in terms of alleviating the woes of homeless children. One area where urgent attention is required is education as, according to a survey from last year, four out of every 10 street children have never been in school, while over 56.6 percent of those who attend school are unable to finish class 5. The situation for girl children is more precarious. As well as reduced life prospects because of lack of schooling, they also face various health risks and are particularly vulnerable to early marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation. Unless these children are helped off the streets and properly rehabilitated, Bangladesh cannot attain true development, nor can it meet multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Also, the government's dream of building a Smart Bangladesh will remain unfulfilled if this situation persists.

A myriad of factors contribute to so many children being homeless and without parental care. But one common theme connecting them all is their inherent vulnerability. So the authorities must display foresight in their approach to helping them. There must be collaborative efforts among the government, non-government organisations, and community groups to discover sustainable solutions that will ensure the rights and well-being of all street children. We must aim to significantly reduce their number as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Violence in Supreme Court bar election

The recent clashes during the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) election due to political influence and professional degradation among a section of lawyers with political affiliations are extremely frustrating and concerning. This unwarranted violence has severely tarnished the image, prestige, and tradition of the association. Are senior lawyers supposed to be silent spectators to these self-defeating, nefarious activities? This must be stopped in order to restore and maintain the image and dignity of SCBA.

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Will Ankan and Abantika get justice?



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LUCKY AKTER

"It's not suicide, it's murder. Technically murder," declared Fairuz Abantika, a student from the 13th batch of Jagannath University's (JnU) law department, as she tragically ended her life, leaving a haunting note on Facebook. In her note, she pointed fingers at a classmate and the university's assistant proctor for her demise. But the death of Ankan Biswas, a student from the 12th batch of JnU's English department who passed away in 2022, is still shrouded in mystery; whether it was suicide or murder remains unknown.

Abantika's mother took legal action, filing a case of abetment to the suicide of her daughter. Subsequently, the accused were apprehended. However, the question of responsibility for Ankan Biswas' death remains unanswered. Ankan, who excelled academically and showcased talents in debating and dancing, fought for her life in the ICU for nearly two weeks before succumbing to death. Suspicion fell upon Ankan's husband Shakeel, a fellow student at the same university, whom she'd married in secret just months before her passing. Police initiated a case of wrongful death, marked by the hospital's stamp on her admission slip indicating "Police Case." Despite her classmates' pleas, Ankan's family declined to pursue any legal action.

Following Abantika's passing, numerous individuals have come forward to share their experiences of facing sexual harassment within JnU. Kazi Farzana Mim, student at the film and television department, disclosed that both her academic pursuits and personal life were affected by significant threats after she refused an inappropriate proposition from a teacher. Consequently, she allegedly received unfair grades in the subject taught by that teacher. Prof Sadeka Halim, vice-chancellor of JnU, revealed during a media interaction on Monday that she was involved as an external member of the anti-sexual harassment committee in Farzana Mim's case. However, she noted that the committee's report on the case was not considered. She intends to address the issue with the chairperson of Mim's department, seeking clarification regarding her failing grade in the



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PHOTO: STAR

chairperson's subject as well.

Abantika's tragic demise has brought Mim's plight back to the surface, raising hopes for eventual justice, albeit delayed. But what about Ankan Biswas? Will she ever get justice? JnU students have once again raised their voices demanding justice for Ankan. While the university administration promptly responded to Abantika's case, amid the ongoing protest, it would establish a remarkable precedent if it courageously pursued legal proceedings to unveil the truth behind Ankan Biswas' death as well, and also other incidents unreported due to fear. The committees formed to look into such reports often try to process the cases hastily and gloss over them.

From the recent events at JnU, one thing is clear: seeking justice here often leads to further harassment. Mim reported filing her complaint on December 26, 2021, and by February 2022, she found herself alone, holding a placard, demanding justice on the university's Shaheed Minar premises. Subsequently, an inquiry committee was formed, but it has yet to produce an official report. Mim said that even after two years, she is still facing harassment. A similar pattern is

grievances if they were guaranteed fair treatment from the administration. Encouraging students to lodge such complaints would empower them to approach the administration without fear of further harassment.

As I experienced during my student life at JnU, students often refrain from disclosing incidents of harassment to their families. This reluctance stems from the fear that instead of offering support, some families may stop their education. While people's lack of trust in the justice system plays a role, it's not the sole factor. Certain families, influenced by conservative beliefs, may discourage their children from pursuing justice and prefer they avoid the struggle. Moreover, societal norms of patriarchal dominance hinder female students' access to justice. This attitude of patriarchal superiority is conspicuous in cases like Abantika's, and particularly evident in social media commentary.

With the ongoing commercialisation of university education, the dynamics between students and teachers have shifted towards one resembling that of "master" and "servant." Students often feel compelled to maintain favourable relations with teachers through a subservient attitude,

seeking their favour in matters such as class attendance, exam results, and assignments. If a teacher retaliates against a student for any reason, it could jeopardise the student's entire university experience, leading to prolonged mental distress. While there is a psychiatric service centre on campus to address students' mental health concerns, it is equally crucial

to provide mental health care for teachers who view students as mere subordinates. However, addressing this mentality solely within the university structure may prove challenging.

Universities must establish anti-sexual harassment cells, as mandated by a directive issued by the High Court in 2009. It is crucial to ensure that students are informed about the channels available for lodging complaints if they experience any form of harassment or oppression within the university. Regular awareness campaigns should be organised to empower victimised students to approach relevant authorities without fear or hesitation. The recent implementation of such awareness programmes at JnU sets a positive example, and all educational institutions must follow suit by undertaking similar initiatives.

The tragic passing of Abantika has reignited the drive to seek justice for Ankan, Mim, and numerous others. However, the cost of seeking justice is also exceedingly burdensome. In all this, we must confront one question: is it unreasonable to seek justice from a university administration before a student reaches the point of contemplating suicide?

Creating a community for conservation



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Recently, I wrote in *The Daily Star* about the role of the Forest Department (FD) and Department of Environment (DoE) in conservation by managing protected areas (e.g., in the Sundarbans and Lawachhara) and ecologically critical areas (e.g., four rivers around Dhaka city and the Cox's Bazar coast), respectively. Such ecosystem-based efforts could also be seen by other agencies. Let's take the fisheries and livestock ministry and its Department of Fisheries (DoF) as an example. In 2009-2015, the DoF implemented the Wetland Biodiversity Rehabilitation Project (WBRP), funded by German development agency GIZ. When the project realised the need for conserving the Gangetic river dolphins, on December 1, 2013, the environment ministry declared three freshwater dolphin sanctuaries totalling 578.28 hectares in the Pabna region.

The Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012 allows declaration of marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Bay of Bengal. The Swatch of No-Ground MPA (1,738 sq km) was the first one to be declared in 2014. Nijhum Dwip offshore island has been a national park since 2001 under the 1974 edition of the Wildlife Act. In 2018-2019, The WorldFish/USAID's ECOFISH Activity, IUCN, and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) explored the option of declaring an MPA around this island. However in 2019, the fisheries and livestock ministry declared 3,188 sq km of this

island's seascape as a "marine reserve" under the Marine Fisheries Ordinance, 1983. While marine reserves and MPAs seem synonymous, they are not legally and jurisdiction-wise. Nevertheless, the first marine reserve (698 sq km) in the Bay of Bengal was declared in 2000, and the latest Marine Fisheries Act, 2020 (succeeding the 1983 Ordinance) continues to support conservation of marine plants and animals (Article 29).

Of course, we see overlapping jurisdictions in conserving our only bay. For instance, in 2022, the environment ministry declared the surrounding waters of Saint Martin's Island an MPA. This offshore island has been an ECA since 1999 under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (last amended in 2010). But how will this MPA be managed since the environment ministry or its concerned departments don't have in-house capacity to operate on the sea? The ministry issued the Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 to facilitate participatory management of such protected areas. While our country does have long co-management experience regarding land and inland waters, it doesn't have it for the sea. It is therefore important to make a separate rule to manage the MPAs.

Tanguar Haor in Sunamganj, a globally important wetland, tells us an interesting story of participatory management since 2006. Such

collaborative management of this ecosystem was possible only because the land ministry handed it over to the environment ministry in 2001. This landmark step stopped the over-exploitative leasing system the district administration used to manage there, and coincided with the haor being designated as an ECA (1999) and a Ramsar Site (2000).

The land ministry has been an important stakeholder in wetland management in the country. For example, as per the website of Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS), using the provision outlined in the National Fisheries Policy 1998, the land ministry declared more than 200 water bodies as permanent sanctuaries, placing their management with the DoF. While many of those wetlands are now poorly managed, Baikka Beel in Moulvibazar showcases a promising example of wetland restoration and biodiversity conservation with participation from the local people, donors, NGOs, and government offices, specifically the land ministry.

Nevertheless, the way climate action has been mainstreamed into different ministries and departments in recent years, we don't see the same for conservation action. The Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan since 2009, the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund since 2010, climate-relevant budget for ministries/agencies since 2015, and the National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh (2023-2050) since 2022—all underscore climate responsibilities of concerned ministries and agencies. While since 2004, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) are giving similar directions to the government entities, it utterly failed to be effective in absence of able leadership and sufficient finance.

We, however, now see a new opportunity to mainstream biodiversity conservation into the public sector. For example, the ongoing Coastal Town Resilience Project in 22 coastal municipalities, supported by ADB and implemented by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), includes nature-based solutions (NbS). Here, NbS interventions would include protection, conservation, restoration, sustainable management, and creation of diverse ecosystems to tackle negative impacts of disasters and climate change, and produce tangible benefits for the vulnerable urban populations and biodiversity alike.

To ensure that such mainstreaming continues, we need to rethink our collective approach, since producing action plans alone is not helping conservation. We need to establish a vibrant "Community of Interest on NbS" (CoI-NbS) by bringing together government and non-government entities to take NbS, thus conservation, forward in Bangladesh. The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and the University of Oxford accepted that in 2020, which couldn't gain its due momentum. The environment ministry or any relevant NGO/CSO may act as a secretariat of the proposed CoI-NbS. This community would offer space for experience sharing on NbS, provide evidence to the stakeholders on progress, effectiveness, successes and failures in NbS, and identify opportunities to integrate climate and conservation actions through knowledge mobilisation by putting new conservation knowledge into action. As the environment ministry is starting to prepare a new NBSAP, can we capitalise on this policy influencing window to establish the CoI-NbS? Is there any taker?