

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Why do policymakers care so little about pollution?

Each day of inaction translates to more lives lost

That pollution is killing us is no news. What is shocking, however, is the harrowing extent of the environmental crisis gripping our country. According to the recently published Bangladesh Country Environment Analysis of World Bank, alarming levels of air pollution, unsafe water, poor sanitation, and exposure to lead caused over 2.72 lakh premature deaths in Bangladesh in 2019. The economic burden of environmental degradation amounted to Tk 92,081 crore, a staggering 17.6 percent of the GDP of that year. These figures are not mere statistics; they represent the profound suffering inflicted upon our people, particularly the most vulnerable among us—the poor, children under five, the elderly, and women.

The World Bank highlighted the devastating health impacts of air pollution, especially from household and outdoor sources. Levels of PM2.5, fine particles known to cause respiratory illnesses and premature deaths, far exceed WHO standards, posing a grave threat to public health. Moreover, lead poisoning, primarily affecting children, is robbing our future generations of their potential, with an estimated loss of 20 million IQ points annually. Our rivers, once lifelines of our nation, are now choked with industrial waste and untreated sewage, jeopardising both human health and ecosystem stability.

What is even more alarming than these statistics is the apathy of our policymakers to reverse the current trend, leaving us wondering if they truly grasp the magnitude of the situation. Time and time again, we have seen government agencies either turn a blind eye towards pollution or actively participate in the process of environmental degradation, prioritising ruthless development and their own personal benefit over the future of the nation. Despite repeated appeals, in this column and elsewhere, our rivers continue to be killed, our air remains thick with pollutants and our land saturated with toxins. Industrial regulations exist in theory alone, and promises of clean energy remain unmet, with the government still insisting on investing in dirty energy that is not only unsustainable but also expensive.

We are glad to hear from Saber Hossain Chowdhury, minister of environment, that combating environmental degradation is a main agenda of the government and that he has undertaken a 100 day programme to address the most crucial environmental issues. Sadly, we have heard such promises before, only to be proven ineffective. We fervently hope that the government's actions match the rhetoric this time around. Ad hoc solutions cannot save the country—we need an all-out effort and the declaration of a public health emergency—to address the loss of valuable years of our lives to preventable pollution. Our policymakers need to change their priorities and align them with those of the people. Each day of inaction translates to more lives lost, more ecosystems irreversibly damaged, and more economic potential squandered.

### The concerning rise of C-sections

Government must not ignore this growing health crisis

In 2011, the rate of Caesarean section (C-section) deliveries in our country was just 11 percent. Now, more than half (50.7 percent) of infants are born through C-sections. This is a matter of great concern, as the procedure brings with it a slew of health complications, burdening countless lives and our healthcare system. So, why is it that the government, throughout a whole decade, has failed to rein in this rampant practice?

From 2022 to 2023, C-section deliveries jumped by more than nine percent, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. If that's not alarming enough, up to 80 percent of births happen through C-sections in Kustia, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Jhenaidah, and several other districts. The reasons are multifold: demands and requests of patients and relatives, not wanting to endure labour pain, lack of trained midwives, workforce and equipment in health services and doctors' prescribing C-sections even when they are not necessary.

Patients and their families suffer from a host of issues brought on by C-section deliveries. Most importantly, when done unnecessarily, the procedure puts both the mother and newborn at health risk, to say nothing of the financial burden on lower- and middle-income families. For corrupt doctors who encourage patients to have C-sections, however, this burden translates to massive financial gains, which is quite evident by the fact that the procedure usually takes place at unregulated private healthcare facilities. A Save the Children Bangladesh report in 2018 found that Bangladesh parents paid Tk 48.3 crore in out-of-pocket expenses for medically unnecessary C-sections, an average of Tk 51,905 per case. The average cost of a C-section was Tk 40,000, while the cost of a normal delivery was Tk 3,565.

It is quite clear the rise of C-sections is not due to necessity but a failure of the healthcare system, as the international healthcare community considers the "ideal rate" for C-sections to be between 10 and 15 percent. To tackle this crisis, the government must take robust actions. First, it must increase the national budget allocation for health from a measly 2.63 percent and effectively spend it to address the workforce and equipment shortage, improve public healthcare facilities, and reduce out-of-pocket expenditure. It must invest in trained midwives, strengthen maternal and neonatal care at the upazila healthcare facilities and initiate awareness campaigns about the benefits of natural birth. Next, it has to strictly regulate the sector, so that unscrupulous facilities cannot prey on unsuspecting patients. The government has to keep in mind that unregulated C-sections are putting the lives of countless mothers and newborns at risk, and must act accordingly.

# Why open-pit coal mining in Phulbari will be disastrous



Kallol Mustafa is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, environment and development economics. He can be reached at kallol.mustafa@yahoo.com

KALLOL MUSTAFA

A plan to extract coal through open-pit mining in Phulbari and the northern part of Barapukuria coal mine area is being revived by the government, despite strong opposition by locals and environmentalists due to its devastating impact on agriculture, environment, and livelihoods. According to BBC Bangla, the ministry of power and energy will submit a proposal in this regard shortly at the highest level of the government for approval.

In fact, when coal power plants were being built one after another in the country, we expressed our concern that even though the carrot of cheap electricity generation using imported coal was shown to justify the projects, once the power plants are commissioned, it would be said that importing coal from abroad requires a lot of dollars, so local coal needs to be extracted. Unfortunately, this concern has now proved to be valid.

The interests of the private coal power plants, jointly owned by local and Chinese companies, in buying the locally mined coal is evident in a recent press release of GCM Plc (formerly Asia Energy), which has been trying to extract coal from Phulbari by open-pit mining since 2004 without any valid license. According to the GCM press release issued on March 11, the company has received Expressions of Interest (EOI) to purchase Phulbari's coal from two of Bangladesh's current independent power producers. One is SS Power Limited which operates the 1,320MW Banskhalhi coal power plant and the other is Barisal Electric Power Company which operates a 350MW unit at Barisal. It is noteworthy that a Chinese state owned company named Power Construction Corporation of China, Ltd. ("PowerChina") has a stake in both of the two power plants and GCM has signed a contract with PowerChina covering mine development works of approximately \$1 billion necessary to "facilitate coal extraction" at Phulbari.

But the people of Phulbari region already rejected open-pit mining in the mass protests of August 2006. The government also signed an agreement with the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources and Ports mentioning that Asia Energy will be ousted from Bangladesh and no open-pit mining will be allowed in the country. The independent experts have written extensively about its potential disastrous impact, and even reports of various expert committees formed by the government have highlighted the dangers of open-pit mining.

First, the coal beds in the Phulbari-Barapukuria region are overlain by an

80-120 m thick Dupi Tila aquifer. To maintain dry working conditions in an open-pit mine, this aquifer will need to be dewatered. Due to mine dewatering activities, the water level will decline in varying depths in a large area, up to about 20 km radial distance from the centre of the mine, according to the expert committee report formed by the government in 2005 headed by professor Nurul Islam (Nurul Islam Committee Report, 2006, page 122). According to another expert committee report formed by the government in 2012 headed by Mosharrar Hossain, former chairman of Petrobangla, local tube-wells, shallow machines, and deep tube-wells will not get ground water for agriculture and domestic purposes within a radial distance up to 27 km from the centre of the mine (Mosharrar

in Phulbari, at least 6,688 hectares (66.88 sq km) of land will be acquired, of which 5,428 hectares or 54.28 sq km of land will be used as mine footprint (EIA of Phulbari Coal Project, Chapter 7 of Volume 1, Page 49). As a result, a large number of people will have to be displaced and resettled. Asia Energy claimed in 2005 that in total 54,074 people from 12,312 households would have to be displaced and resettled. In reality, the number will be much higher and is estimated to be around 1 million in the 2012 Mosharrar Committee Report (Mosharrar Committee Report, 2012, page 30). Proper resettlement of this large number of displaced people in a densely populated country like Bangladesh is an almost impossible task.

Thirdly, out of the 66.88 sq km land to be acquired for the open-pit mining project, 42.34 sq km is agricultural land (EIA of Phulbari Coal Project, Chapter 7 of Volume 1, page 51). Once the topsoil of this vast amount of three-crop land is removed, the fertility built up over thousands of years will be lost. Of this, 1,946 hectares will be used for overburden dumping and another 696 hectares for reservoirs. So, in total, 2,642 hectares (26.4 sq km) of agricultural land will be permanently

unavailable for crop production. Referring to this data, the Nurul Islam Committee Report commented that: "The damaged area of 26.4 square km is equal to the area of Dinaipur town. Such misuse of land is not desirable in a densely populated country like Bangladesh" (Nurul Islam Committee Report, 2006, pages 127-128). The report of the Mosharrar Committee said, 3,000 hectares of land will be taken out of cultivation for the next 50 years (30 years for mining period plus 20 years reclamation, if it happens at all). As a consequence of destruction of agricultural land, fish, vegetables and fruits, Bangladesh will lose at least Tk 25,000 crore in the next 50 years (Mosharrar Committee report, 2012, page 50).

Fourthly, Phulbari coal mine project while destroying at least 1 lakh agricultural jobs (Mosharrar Committee report, 2012, page 50), will create employment for only 2,100 people during the mine construction period, and for 1,200 people in the long term of which very few will be available for the project affected people because coal mining requires specialised technical skills (EIA report, Chapter 9 of Volume 1, page 6). Fifthly, laboratory testing of coal and overburden materials of Phulbari area indicates that there is a high risk for Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) formation in exposed Lower Dupi Tila Formation, weathered Permian waste rock, and coal seam material of Phulbari area (EIA, Chapter 7 of Volume 1, page 47). AMD occurs when the iron sulphides unearthed by mining activity interact with water and air and produce sulfuric acid, which can cause toxic metals to enter and eventually dissolve into the water. According to the EIA report, contamination of groundwater by AMD will have an impact upon terrestrial flora and any aquatic biota residing in water bodies connected to the aquifer; for example, the Little Jamuna River of Phulbari (EIA, Chapter 7 of Volume 1, page 33).

Although, as per the EIA, there will be mitigation measures to minimise



A procession brought out by local women during the Phulbari movement in 2006.

PHOTO: MUNEM WASIF

Committee report, 2012, page 51).

The coal bed of Bangladesh differs from that of many other places in the world, where the water table is found usually below the coal bed, not above as in Bangladesh. As a result, there is no need to dewater the entire area for coal extraction in other countries. The Mosharrar Committee Report states in this respect that, "It is a fact that water is being controlled in other open-pit mines elsewhere in the world. But the geological condition could be different, the glaring example being that the Nayali lignite in India is being worked by open-pit mining since long. But the water bearing strata there is below the lignite bed and not over the coal bed which is different condition than that of Bangladesh" (Mosharrar Committee report, 2012, page 40).

Secondly, for open-pit coal mining

the risk of AMD formation, the Nurul Islam committee expressed doubt about the effectiveness of such measures mentioning that, despite the presence of institutional and technical measures at the federal and state levels in a developed country like the USA, the impact of AMD could not be prevented there. Thousands of miles of rivers in various states of the USA have been polluted due to AMD (Nurul Islam Committee Report, 2006, page 123).

Therefore, there is no scope for doubt that open-pit coal mining in Phulbari and Barapukuria areas will cause serious social, economic, and environmental disasters. That's why it is important to ban open-pit coal mining in Bangladesh permanently and thus kill all kinds of lobbying activities in favour of it, once and for all.

# Bangladesh needs an animal rescue system

Sayere Nazabi Sayem is an LLB graduate and a cat mom who advocates for animal rights.

SAYERE NAZABI SAYEM

On December 21, a member of the 13-year old animal rescue platform named "Robinhood: the Animal Rescue Society" was electrocuted while rescuing a parrot. Volunteers of Robinhood went to the rooftop of a three-storey building to rescue the trapped bird. It is upsetting how the volunteer, Tashfan Atif had to lose his life due to electrocution in the process, as he lacked adequate safety equipment. As of today, the court has not delivered a judgement regarding this case but an interim order. Likewise, as you are reading the paper today, there exists no formal institution in Bangladesh that can rescue trapped animals since December 2023. Despite the existence of the Animal Welfare Act 2019, there is an absence of proper guidelines, recruitment and training processes for rescuers, or even an enforcement authority that can be relied on. This is a gross violation of animal rights that cannot be curtailed under the pretext of human rights because as they say, "two wrongs don't

make a right."

As much as Atif's devotion to animal rescuing is commendable, he perhaps would not have had to lose his life if there were proper state sanctioned trainings, equipment and a formal institution in the first place. Robinhood—who were once the only option for nation-wide 999 hotline emergencies involving animal rescues—has been discharged of their self-driven humane duties since December 2023. Of course, being the only option did not necessarily mean they were faultless. However, the

awaiting bigger accidents. Individuals are vulnerably stepping in rather than watching animals suffer, self-educating themselves to help animals avoid suffering when it is a national duty instead. A civilised country is recognised by the wellbeing of its inhabitants, which cannot be limited to humans.



READERS' VOICE

**It is high time for comprehensive legislation to protect the voiceless animals than forcibly stopping institutions trying to initiate change, before having a better alternative at hand.**

tragedy now is that with their absence, there are no options remaining to rescue precariously trapped animals. Unless, of course, individuals step in, again, without any formal training to take matters into their own hands—

It is high time for comprehensive legislation to protect the voiceless animals than forcibly stopping institutions trying to initiate change, before having a better alternative at hand. First and foremost, it is imperative that there is a state sanctioned solution for the time being to deal with emergencies during this period of vacuum. What would happen to the animals that are harmed today? Or perhaps were harmed already since last year? Who would be held accountable for their misery? By banning an institution without looking at the bigger picture or creating better enforcement measures, we are neglecting the main

problem at hand.

Countries like the United States of America and India have firefighters working successfully as animal rescuers. This, however, may be an impractical solution for Bangladesh. However, it is better than not having a trained group of rescuers incapable of carrying out risky rescues. Another option could be training the existing freelance animal rescue groups or individuals. The state of Minnesota is widely known for ensuring classes of Basic Animal Rescue Training (BART), providing hands-on skills in the areas of animal restraint and handling, patient assessment, first aid, and CPR. The free of cost, two-hour training course also provides interested groups with an emergency medical equipped kit containing the necessary supplies to help effectively rescue, resuscitate, and support the medical needs of animals, upon its completion.

If our law-making bodies dealt with animal rights at the right time, human rights would not have to have been questioned. Atif would not have had to lose his life. The countless birds, cats and dogs who add diversity to your community would not have had to be sacrificed to prove a point. If there was a formal institution in the first place, this would not have happened.