

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Are we preparing for heatwave impacts?

Destruction of nature is only worsening the situation

Given the intensity of the ongoing heatwave, we remain concerned about the health and wellbeing of the people. According to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, a very severe heatwave is sweeping over Jashore and Chuadanga, while a severe one is occurring in Dhaka division, parts of Khulna division, and Rajshahi and Pabna districts. As per a report in this daily, Jashore overtook Chuadanga with the highest temperatures in the country, recorded at 42.6 degrees Celsius at 4:00pm on Saturday. Chuadanga, of course, was not far behind at 42.3 degrees Celsius recorded around the same time.

With scorching heat disrupting life all across the country, the Met issued a 72-hour nationwide heat alert, which has been extended till April 22. Meanwhile, all primary and secondary schools as well as National University-affiliated colleges are thankfully to remain closed till April 27 due to the heatwave. As we can imagine, those who must be outside for the sake of their livelihoods even during this intense weather, such as farmers, rickshaw pullers, traffic police, are getting the worst of it. And the impacts of the heatwave on people in general are already visible as more patients are reportedly going into hospitals with issues such as diarrhoea, headache, sore throat, shortness of breath, etc.

By now it is obvious that extreme weather events such as untimely heatwaves may become the new norm the world over. Therefore, it is essential that our policies and future planning be framed according to this new reality. Our cities in particular should be designed to provide plenty of shade to those working outside. We need to expand green spaces, cover heat-producing pavements and build roofs with green canopies. Unfortunately, however, we continue to see trees being mindlessly cut down all across the country, when it is trees that can provide us the best shelter from these events. The prime minister herself has repeatedly urged citizens to plant more trees to shield the country from the varied impacts of climate change. Yet, at the same time, we see the authorities failing to prevent the felling of trees, as well as fell trees themselves in the name of development.

We must keep in mind that the severe discomfort being faced by people due to the ongoing heatwave could have been better mitigated. Regions like Sylhet, for example, are facing a milder heatwave and experiencing rain daily because of having wider tree cover overall than, say, Dhaka. This should serve as an important lesson for the authorities, and bring an end to mindless environmental destruction that simply adds to the severity of extreme weather events and their overall damage. Moving forward, we must prepare for such weather conditions and plan our cities accordingly to shelter people from the heat, not bare them further to extreme elements. Additionally, rehydration facilities for people should be set up wherever possible.

Threats, attacks on journalists must stop

Govt has to provide better protection to media workers

Yet another journalist has become a victim of violence and intimidation, reinforcing the fact that the authorities are still failing to ensure a safe environment for them to perform their duties. On Friday night, unidentified miscreants attacked a crime reporter of Bangla daily *Jugantor* with some sort of powdery substance that stung, leading to his hospitalisation. Attacks on journalists are, unfortunately, nothing new; it's a textbook scare tactic. But how is it that after countless such incidents over the years, the government is still failing to ensure the safety of media workers?

Before spraying him with the powder, the two masked miscreants mentioned the name of a local public representative and threatened to kill the journalist and his family. This trend of attackers claiming to be doing the dirty work for influential is also quite common. Earlier this month, a journalist filed a case against an Awami League leader after the latter's men allegedly attacked him in Kurigram. Last month, supporters of a local ward councillor allegedly assaulted a journalist from Jamalpur. These incidents, which aim to deter journalists from doing their job, prove that threatening and injuring journalists have little repercussions.

Bringing the point further home is a report of Manabdhikar Shongskriti Foundation (MSF), which said that at least 40 journalists were subjected to various forms of attacks, intimidation, threats, and harassment in 15 incidents in the last month. Of the 15 incidents, ruling party members were involved in four, UP chairmen in three, government officials in two, university authorities in one, land grabbers in one, and local influential in four. This shows a worrying trend of individuals with power—including those entrusted to ensure people's welfare—attempting to suppress the work of the free press, and oftentimes getting away with it. There's a reason why Bangladesh is ranked 163rd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2023, and if the government wants to truly ensure a safe environment for journalists, it must stop turning a blind eye to such incidents. The culture of impunity for attacking and intimidating journalists must end. And the perpetrators of such attacks must be brought to book.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Facilitate public drinking water stations

We are currently experiencing a severe heatwave, and unfortunately, it appears that this won't be the last one. However, for the majority of citizens in Dhaka, access to drinking water and shade is extremely limited within the city. Consider the plight of rickshaw pullers and day labourers during this extreme heat. The city must prioritise providing relief from the heat to all its residents. To achieve this, I strongly urge the city corporations to promptly plan and implement public drinking water stations and shaded areas.

Progga Roy
Pallabi, Dhaka

BAN ON STUDENT POLITICS

Will the Buet protesters' campaign see success?



Tanim Ahmed
is a freelance journalist based in Dhaka.

TANIM AHMED

One cannot help but note the irony of a united campaign protesting against student politics when it is obvious that student politics is very much alive on the campus of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet). Whether by design or not, the united stance of Buet students against "student politics," as they term it, is actually quite an organised political campaign itself. It could not be simply a matter of coincidence that hundreds of students came together with placards and posters and decided to articulate their demands in a single voice. It is in fact heartening to see that students have the ability to organise with any formal structure underneath the surface of an apparently apolitical campus where student politics—one should perhaps qualify that as partisan politics—has been banned for several years now. University campuses



The current campaign in Buet is not quite against student politics, but against partisan politics.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

The current campaign is not quite against student politics in Buet. It is against partisan politics, essentially to remain free from BCL clutches. Because the ruling party's student wing has proven to be unruly and predatory, removing any semblance of opposition from the university campuses and residential halls.

in the country have traditionally been fertile grounds for political thought and popular campaigns. They have spawned scores of politicians who have then been at the forefront of movements against injustice and tyranny from even before Bangladesh was born.

Hence, the fundamental right to assemble and organise, the right to association and movement should

be sacred to the students. And yet, they are willing to forego this right—demanding, in fact, that it be taken away. The recent wave of protests was triggered by a Buet student taking part in a procession of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the ruling Awami League's student wing. Buet students mounted a united campaign boycotting classes and exams, demanding that the university authorities expel the student, who is also a Chhatra League leader, and keep the campus "free of politics."

Given the obvious contradiction with the letter of the law, the High Court stayed the ban on politics in the country's premier engineering university in response to a petition. Despite the patently undemocratic nature of the campaign, for every citizen and party should have the right to take part in politics, it has gained much currency among commentators. In reaction, the Awami League has resorted to its typical scare-mongering tactics, saying that the Buet campus has actually become a den of religious extremists, that it has become a hub of Shibir activists, which is the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest fundamentalist

party in the country. Former students have commented on how peaceful and harmonious campus life has been over the last four and half years that the campus has been free of politics. Former and current students say residential halls have become habitable where general students are not preyed upon, standard of food has improved,

the opposition, and its student wing having established itself as the dominant organisation across university campuses, has not faced such a campaign in recent memory. Even the government appears to be treading with caution, especially since it was with the verbal endorsement of the prime minister that partisan politics was banned in Buet.

This campaign, refreshing though it might be to see some form of challenge to BCL, will almost certainly be crushed, whether from inside or by brute force, since the ruling party and its student cadres have become rather unaccustomed to such vocal opposition. Also, the longer such a menace is allowed to fester, the higher the chances of such ideas spilling over to other campuses. If the Buet students have their way, then it would set up an inspiring example for others to emulate. That would not bode well for BCL, especially because many would venture to say that the current campaign, in the interest of student welfare, is what student politics should revolve around. Student politics should not be about furthering the agenda of political parties.

Resumption of partisan politics is only an impending eventuality in Buet. The first step was most likely the petition with the High Court, which quite predictably stayed the ban, since it contradicts with the fundamental rights. But mere resumption of partisan politics in itself will not be sufficient. The student cadres will want to return with furious vengeance. Those perceived to be leading the current campaign—those demanding the expulsion of a BCL leader, no less—will have to be made into examples to demonstrate what becomes of challengers. That would trigger caution among the general students to tread more carefully, and not just at the engineering university.

For all anyone knew, none of the political parties were active on Buet campus. There was no formal structure of student government at the university. And yet, students have rallied to a common cause with resolve and most likely around a core group that is stewarding this campaign. It serves as yet another example of how popular, and apparently apolitical, opposition can crystallise almost out of thin air. History is replete with such examples of dictatorial regimes crushing all forms of opposition for decades only to find out suddenly, to their dismay, that the people have risen up in opposition.

We need to know more about Shein's \$9 jeans



RMG NOTES

Mostafiz Uddin
is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Chinese fast fashion brand Shein has been the talk of the town, and understandably so. The company has made deep inroads into the global fast fashion market in a relatively short time. It is now the world's largest fast fashion retailer based on revenue volume, according to the Financial Times. Recently, I visited Shein's much talked-about website for the first time. And I have to say, I was taken aback by how low some of the prices of its products were.

We have all heard about the cheap dresses and blouses, but what about denim? As a denim producer, this was my area of interest. The cheapest pair of denim jeans I saw was priced at \$9. Only \$9 for a pair of denim jeans! If I spent \$10 on a pair, they would throw in free delivery!

The website also boasts many offers, which gave me an idea about how young, impressionable shoppers could become addicted to shopping with Shein. Besides employing points system and rewards, Shein also uses flash sales and time-bound deals, accompanied by countdown timers, pressuring users to make swift decisions to avoid

missing out on considerable savings. In addition, Shein employs strategies of instant gratification, similar to slot machines, through its "Lucky Draw" feature. This function allows users daily opportunities to win discounts, points or gifts.

I was left with two burning questions: first, is any of this even ethical? Second, how is Shein retailing clothing so cheaply? How is it retailing denim jeans at a price many manufacturers would struggle to sell them?

For the first question, I think that, at the very least, Shein's website does raise some ethical issues around the nature of consumerism, and whether we want to be so blatantly encouraging rampant consumerism as we face an ecological disaster.

But what about pricing? Well, Shein's denim jeans—to my knowledge—are produced in China, where minimum wages vary by region. For textile workers specifically, a quick Google search told me that the average gross salary is about \$9,207 per year.

In Bangladesh, where my own factory produces jeans, the monthly

minimum wage for garment workers was increased to Tk 12,500 (approximately \$113) as of December 2023. To an international audience, this wage will seem low. In relative terms, it has proven a challenge for manufacturers, especially smaller ones, which lack the economies of scale of some of the major conglomerates.

This begs the question: how is a fast retailer that produces its denim jeans in China managing to undercut rival retailers that are sourcing from Bangladesh, Pakistan and other lower wage textile production hubs?

There are a few possible reasons one may put forward. The first is Shein's business model that relies heavily on data analytics and real-time monitoring of fashion trends. This approach enables the company to produce what is currently in demand quickly, minimising stock levels and reducing waste. Second, Shein employs a direct-to-consumer sales model, cutting out intermediaries and further reducing costs associated with brick-and-mortar stores. This strategy not only lowers operational expenses, but also streamlines the supply chain, enhancing efficiency.

Lastly, Shein's use of an agile supply chain model allows for small batch production, reducing the risk of overproduction and enabling the company to offer a wide variety of items at lower prices. These combined factors could contribute to Shein's ability to sell clothing at such low prices.

Having said all this, I am still

amazed that a company can produce denim jeans in China and deliver them to somebody in Europe or the US for just \$9. How much of this price is for transportation? How much is for raw materials? How much is for wages? How much is for packaging? And how much is for the various processes involved in textile production? Once one strips away these and other costs, it is difficult to see what, if any, margin is being made.

We know that fashion supply chains can be blind spots, but Shein's is more opaque than most. While major brands such as H&M, Asos and Gap have opened themselves to scrutiny by listing their suppliers on their websites in recent years, Shein has yet to take this step. We know very little about the company given its market dominance and popularity among a huge young audience.

Perhaps this needs to change. Shein is a market disruptor. Such companies come along from time to time and completely change the rules of the game. They turn existing assumptions about price points completely on their head, unsettling and confusing the old order in the process. There's no problem with that. But it's also reasonable to ask that Shein plays by the same rules as its competitors. We all want a level playing field, and when one business is being vague about its supply chain while its competitors are opening themselves to public scrutiny, we are entitled to ask why, and demand better. Especially when said company is selling denim jeans for \$9.