

## The heat is here to stay

But what are we doing about it?

Yesterday marked a record-setting weather phenomenon in the country: including yesterday, at least 24 days of this month were heatwave days. This is the highest number of heatwave days in a year in Bangladesh in 76 years. It will only get hotter in the coming days as we trudge down the path of reckless consumption, with global policymakers and businesses still refusing to prioritise the environment and sustainable development over capitalist expansion. How do we prepare for the impending apocalypse?

Bangladesh is ranked eighth among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, according to a recent scientific synthesis by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet). The report highlights that, though the country has played a pioneering role in global efforts for adaptation and resilience, there has been a noticeable lack of good governance when it comes to implementing climate change projects. Additionally, indigenous knowledge has not been integrated into project interventions, leading to a gap between the top-down initiatives and local community needs.

While Bangladesh has been a leader of climate-vulnerable countries, its track record is abysmal, with rampant industrialisation and urbanisation destroying forests, rivers, and entire ecosystems. If the government is truly committed to its fight against climate change, it must begin by challenging and reimagining its ideas of development and progress.

In the short run, the government must seriously assess public health risks of extreme heat, and develop heat mitigation and emergency response plans. Already, specialised hospitals have seen an influx of patients suffering from heart and kidney conditions, among others. Extreme heat exposure can cause heat rash, cramps, heat exhaustion, or heat stroke, and the authorities' failure to respond effectively to heat waves can have fatal consequences, particularly for already vulnerable populations. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented that heat affects certain communities far more than others, such as those often doing low-paying work outdoors, or in hot kitchens and warehouses, or those living in poverty with unequal access to electricity, housing, water, and healthcare services. We are already seeing how rural communities are having to bear the brunt of load shedding in this unbearable heat. The government must ensure access to energy and water to poor and marginal communities to ease their suffering. When and where possible, it should increase access to cooling or shaded areas, and limit or change work hours for those exposed to extreme heat.

Moving forward, we must declare a public health emergency and come up with a holistic disaster management plan with a particular focus on low-income communities and workers. Bangladesh has always managed to rise above disasters; may its planning and implementation prove to be as successful in the latest denomination of disasters facing the country.

## Plan better to reduce rural power outage

Why must our rural population always bear the brunt of it?

It is a matter of great disappointment that, even though every citizen of Bangladesh is entitled to fair and equal treatment and service, in reality, that does not always seem to be the case. Take power outages, for example. As load-shedding is becoming a regular feature in our lives, our fellow citizens living in the rural parts of the country are bearing the brunt of it, enduring hours of power outages.

Data from the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB) reveals that a majority of its 3.58 crore subscribers are suffering from long spells of power outages. The worst-hit districts include Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Kishoreganj, Netrakona, Cox's Bazar, Narsingdi and Rangpur. That this is happening when the nation is sizzling under an insufferable spell of heatwave makes it even worse. Besides making the oppressive heat intolerable, these outages are also affecting people's livelihoods. A fish farmer in Mymensingh said she was struggling to keep her business running because of long periods of load-shedding.

Increased power outages during the warmer months are not an unexpected phenomenon, especially since we have been struggling with a fuel crisis in the wake of a dollar crunch, not to mention global political and economic turmoil over the past couple of years. But given that this situation has been our reality for some time now, we cannot help but ask: did the power authorities not anticipate this crisis? Did they not plan accordingly so that people living in the rural areas would not have to be the worst victims of load-shedding—as they always are?

In the meantime, the country is burdened with the overcapacity of power generation. We have more power plants than needed, for which we are paying hefty sums in capacity charges. This situation, in our view, is the result of poor, shortsighted policymaking. We urge the government to take stock of the situation and figure out ways to meet the rising electricity demand fairly and equitably, especially in the coming months. For that, some urgent steps must be taken, such as exploring domestic sources of fuel on a priority basis, repurposing the existing resources to generate more power, etc. Our rural population is vital for the smooth operation of the economy; their lives must not be unfairly disrupted by excessive power outages.

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# The pitfalls of neutrality



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

One of the grey areas in my professional life involves the debate surrounding the teaching of political consciousness in the classroom and the resistance to student activism. As a student of literature and culture, I believe that teaching students about political consciousness is essential to creating informed and engaged citizens. However, I have consistently avoided exposing my personal political ideologies in a classroom context, as I worry that my stated stance could result in the teaching of biased viewpoints. Ideally, as a teacher, I strive to act as a facilitator, promoting the discussion that the text demands. But there comes a moment when you have to identify what you think is just and fair. This may vary depending on the position of an organised political entity controlled by its attached strings, or that of a radical thinker who comes with macho-zealous baggage.

While I was doing my PhD at Birkbeck College at the University of

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London, I remember seeing a yellow sticky note left on the classroom door by my professor on April 10, 2003. It read, "Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. No class today." My professor was going to the anti-war march to protest the attack on Iraq. We all joined. The ongoing campus protests in the US and other parts of the world have prompted me to reflect on the extraordinary roles that students are playing. It made me think of a novel that I sometimes teach: Don DeLillo's *White Noise*.

The novel, set in 1968, begins with



Protesters continue to maintain the encampment on the Columbia University campus after a tense night of negotiations in New York City, US on April 24, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

students returning to campus after their spring break. The caravan of cars in which parents bring their children to College-on-the-Hill symbolises a tradition that defines a nation. The fun-loving students who come to pursue degrees remain oblivious to the 1968 protests that sparked a counterculture against the Vietnam War and a demand for civil rights. Hitler Studies is one of the College-in-the-Hill's signature academic programmes. The sham of academia is critiqued by DeLillo, who exposes the forgery of the most celebrated Hitler professor, who does not even know German, yet nobody can talk of Hitler without citing him. DeLillo's criticism pervades my consciousness like white noise, a constant background noise that drowns out other sounds. The inability to practise what we teach adds to the ambivalence.

Seeing the encampments spreading like wildfire in US universities has made me rekindle my passion. These students are occupying significant campus locations or setting up blockades, calling for universities to separate themselves from companies that advance Israel's military efforts in Gaza and, in some cases, Israel itself.

career and their future. Why? They feel that their government is aiding Israel in committing genocide in Palestine.

The students are advocating for the divestment of investments in companies and funds allegedly benefiting from Israel's actions in Gaza and the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories. Companies like Google, which reportedly holds significant contracts with the Israeli government, and Airbnb, known for permitting property listings in Israeli settlements located in the Occupied West Bank, are among the targets. Then there is the issue of having the university's branch campus in Tel Aviv.

Emory University in Atlanta dismantled a camp on Thursday morning, with at least 17 people detained. Police used rubber bullets and tear gas to quell pro-Palestinian protests. The heavy-handedness led students in Atlanta to shout, "Stop Cop City." The situation turned brutal at the University of Texas, where police and state troopers made dozens of arrests and forced hundreds of students off the main lawn. The University of Texas at Austin aggressively detained dozens of protesters, making 34 arrests. The university's president, Jay Hartzell,

PROJECT SYNDICATE

## Cancelling Palestine



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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

It is only April, but we already have a good candidate for photo of the year. On April 12, German police shut down a Palestine Congress that was set to take place in Berlin, and among those arrested was Udi Raz, a devout Jew with a red yarmulke. In photos and videos of the incident, one can clearly see the smirking aggression on the faces of the policemen—reminiscent of their forebears in the 1930s—as they drag away a Jew.

Among those swept up in the ongoing struggle against anti-Semitism in Germany, many are Jews. The Palestine Congress itself was a joint initiative of the Berlin-based organisation Jüdische Stimme für Gerechten Frieden in Nahost (Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East) and the pan-European political movement and party DiEM25, whose top figure is Yanis Varoufakis. Yet, the German Ministry of the Interior has now banned Varoufakis not only from entering the country but even from online participation in any political activities there.

Varoufakis is fully justified in claiming that, with this ban, the German government has crossed the line into authoritarian behaviour. Worse, the German political establishment—including even the Greens and Die Linke (The Left)—have supported the move, reflecting the breadth of the new anti-anti-

Semitic cancel culture. To be sure, similar incidents are occurring in the US, where, for example, Hobart and William Smith Colleges recently placed political theorist Jodi Dean on leave, after she published an essay discerning an emancipatory potential in Hamas's October 7 attack. But Germany represents an extreme case of how the establishment has appropriated cancel culture.

On April 13, CNN reported, "Hundreds of Israeli settlers surrounded Palestinian villages and attacked residents across the occupied West Bank... after an Israeli boy who had gone missing from a settlement was found dead." Let's call these attacks by their proper name: mob lynchings. Far from a normal police investigation, the Israel Defense Forces have simply allowed vigilantism to prevail. One can only imagine how the enlightened West would react if it had been hundreds of Palestinians attacking Israeli settlements after a Palestinian boy went missing.

Or consider another case: On January 18, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the idea of a Palestinian state and promised that Israel would control the entire region it currently occupies, "And therefore I clarify that in any other arrangement, in the future, the state of Israel has to control the entire area from the river to the sea." Netanyahu's

use of "from the river to the sea" has come under particular scrutiny, and for good reason. When Palestinians or anyone on the left have used the same phrase to demand a free Palestine, those on the right have disingenuously argued that they are calling for the death of all Jewish people in Israel. In short, a phrase that is denounced as genocidal when Palestinians use it is now being used by Netanyahu.

**Given this situation, the oft-repeated argument that Israel cannot really eliminate Hamas misses the point. For Israel, the true goal of the war is to absorb Gaza and the West Bank: a Greater Israel, from the river to the sea. Until then, Israel needs to be able to claim that Hamas remains a threat, to justify continued military intervention.**

I could go on with these examples. On April 2, Netanyahu called the airstrike that killed seven aid workers in Gaza a "tragic case of our forces unintentionally hitting innocent people." How, then, would he describe the deaths of thousands of Palestinian children at the hands of Israel's forces?

The house of cards is falling. Previously, Israel at least pretended to follow two rules: criticism of Israeli policies is permissible, but anti-Semitism is not; and the bombing of Gaza is directed at Hamas, which itself terrorises ordinary Palestinians, not at Gaza's entire population.

vowed, "Our rules matter, and we will enforce them. Our university will not be occupied." Northwestern University hastily changed its student code of conduct to bar tents on its suburban Chicago campus, as anti-war student activists set up an encampment similar to pro-Palestinian demonstrations at colleges nationwide. The university enacted an interim addendum to its student code to bar tents, and warning of disciplinary actions including suspension, expulsion, and criminal charges.

Earlier, the University of Southern California cancelled its main stage graduation ceremony amid protests. The university faced criticism over its decision to axe a graduation speech by valedictorian Asna Tabassum after pro-Israel groups labelled her anti-Semitic for her social media posts supporting Palestinians.

While many pro-Israeli lobbyists have tried to thwart what they believe is rising anti-Semitism, many Jewish individuals have come to aid the pro-Palestine student groups. They believe that the extreme Zionists are libelling their culture. "Not in my name" is a popular slogan among the Jewish supporters of Palestine. Award-winning author and activist Naomi Klein, for instance, spoke at one gathering in New York recently, where she said, "Too many of our people are worshipping a false idol. They are enraptured by it. They are drunk on it. They are profaned by it. Zionism is a false idol."

Now, one may wonder why the noise is getting louder on the margin, outside the whale, where mainstream media harps on Biblical myth: to protect the promised land of one of the most persecuted races in history. But do the Jewish people have the moral height to preach about suffering once it has killed more than 40,000 people in a narrow strip of land, pounding it with thousands of 2,000-pound bombs—the extent that the world has not seen since Vietnam? The International Court of Justice has already taken the case of plausible genocide into cognisance. The veto power of the superpower makes the federal government out of sync with the people.

As the clamour of dissent grows louder, we stand on the precipice of historical reckoning. The student protests of 1968 heralded a paradigm shift in global consciousness, challenging entrenched power structures and reshaping the trajectory of history. Are we on the cusp of a similar watershed moment, where the voices of dissent converge to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy? Only time will tell.

Lately, however, these distinctions have collapsed. Netanyahu has openly stated in interviews that in cases where direct anti-Semitism is not allowed, criticism of Israel has taken its place. Likewise, many senior Israeli officials have become increasingly open in equating Gaza with Hamas.

According to Israel's headline finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, over 70 percent of Israelis support the idea of "encouraging voluntary immigration," because "two million people [in Gaza] wake up every morning with the desire to destroy the State of Israel." (If this is the case, perhaps it has something to do with the indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Gaza.) The implication is that all Gazans are legitimate targets—and it is clear that the West Bank is next.

Given this situation, the oft-repeated argument that Israel cannot really eliminate Hamas misses the point. For Israel, the true goal of the war is to absorb Gaza and the West Bank: a Greater Israel, from the river to the sea. Until then, Israel needs to be able to claim that Hamas remains a threat, to justify continued military intervention.

The gap between elite and popular opinion in Western developed countries, as well as in some Arab countries (such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco), has grown too wide to be papered over. While governments support Israel, their citizens can only protest—and, increasingly, be cancelled, threatened, and even arrested for it. The danger I see is that if popular dissatisfaction explodes, it will take the form of anti-Semitism. That is why acts like Germany's cancellation of the Palestine Congress should be recognised for what they are: a new perverted chapter in the history of anti-Semitism.