

The Daily Star

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DNCC's tree-planting budget left unspent!

What can explain such lacklustre attempt at enhancing Dhaka's green cover?

No Dhaka dweller—not even the two city mayors whose vision of the capital often differs drastically from that of its residents—can deny the urgency of enhancing green covers in a city that has fast been reduced to a concrete jungle. Yet, a recent report by this daily reveals that the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has failed tragically to utilise the funds allocated for tree plantation over the past eight years. Of the Tk 20.50 crore allocated to expand greenery, the DNCC's environment wing could spend only Tk 8.64 crore—43 percent of the total allocation. During the current mayor's tenure, the DNCC allocated Tk 14 crore for tree plantation, but could only use Tk 5.25 crore. Such a lacklustre attempt on their part to replenish the lost greenery of Dhaka is shameful, to say the least.

Over the past decades, trees have been struck down with unparalleled zeal to make way for buildings, commercial spaces, and highways. Dhaka has turned into a heat island, which experiences much higher temperatures than outlying areas as a result of ruthless urbanisation. Studies show a drastic decline in Dhaka North's green cover, which dropped from 47 percent in 1992 to a meagre 16 percent in 2022. We are frustrated to note that the passion with which trees are felled are not matched by a passion to replace them.

The DNCC authorities would have us believe that their failure lies in the absence of plantable land in its jurisdiction. While it is true that barren land areas for planting trees in Dhaka North have dropped from around 11 sq-km in 2012 to 2.2 sq-km in 2022, it only highlights the urgency for the city corporation to devise new and innovative ways to expand the green coverage. The DNCC must conduct a thorough assessment of plantable spaces and revise its tree plantation strategies to ensure effective budget utilisation. It needs to explore innovative solutions like vertical forests with vegetation on buildings, green roofs and walls, pocket parks for green havens in dense areas, and urban forests for recreation and carbon capture. It can incorporate nature-based solutions into urban infrastructure, including bioswales (planted channels that filter stormwater), rain gardens (depressions that collect and slowly release rainwater), and green street corridors lined with trees.

We agree wholeheartedly with DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam that there is no point of spending money for spending's sake. However, we cannot accept that the DNCC has exhausted all innovative options for enhancing green cover in its jurisdiction. There is certainly much it can learn and replicate from other global cities that have turned themselves into green oases from industrial hubs; what it needs is political will and vision to use unutilised budgets on creative and sustainable solutions.

Waiting a decade for a bridge

Authorities must complete the bridge on Jhenai River soon

We have reported and commented on the habitual delays and cost overruns of development projects on so many occasions that it seems we are ill-fated to revisit the topic every other day. Recently, this daily reported on an incomplete bridge on Tangail's Jhenai River, where contractors have erected just three pillars since 2020 and then abandoned the Tk 26.59 crore project. Now a Tk 24.50 crore re-tender has been issued for the bridge, which was supposed to be completed last year. As usual, the authorities responsible for the project seem least concerned about the cost overruns that are paid for out of taxpayers' pocket.

Borguna's 21-kilometre regional highway expansion project is another example of lack of foresight and coordination between different government departments. The nearly completed road now has hundreds of electric poles standing in the middle because no one thought about moving them before starting the expansion work. It is not hard to predict that the cost and time to complete this Tk 100 crore highway expansion project will escalate as the recently expanded road will have to be dug again.

This type of mindless cost overruns are not just a waste of the country's scarce financial resources, and thus a burden on taxpayers; the delay in project completion also denies citizens from reaping the benefits of development in time. As we see in the case of Tangail's Basail upazila, people there have been waiting for the Jhenai River bridge since 2014 when the old bridge collapsed allegedly because of poor planning.

Infrastructure development projects that have long-term benefits for taxpayers must be prevented from becoming a money-making feast for unqualified contractors, influential quarters, and corrupt and negligent officials. We urge higher-ups in the government once again to hold the responsible authorities accountable for project delays and cost overruns caused by sheer negligence, mismanagement, poor planning and oversight. The government should also prioritise the quick completion of infrastructure projects to reduce the woes of rural and urban communities across the country.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

The murder of George Floyd

On this day in 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed Black American man, was killed during an arrest in Minnesota, US, setting off massive protests around the country and generating greater support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Police officer Derek Chauvin was later convicted of his murder.



Is the US resetting relations by applying anti-kleptocracy law?



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KAMAL AHMED

The recent designation of Bangladesh's former army chief, Gen (ret'd) Aziz Ahmed, by the United States under its anti-kleptocracy and human rights law has raised significant questions, particularly: why now? This designation, under Section 7031(C), disqualifies him and his immediate family members from obtaining entry visas to the US.

In an interview with this daily, Aziz himself questioned the timing, noting that he could have been banned in 2021 when Al Jazeera aired the investigative documentary *All the Prime Minister's Men*, which alleged gross misuse of power and significant corruption by him. He recalled that despite the controversy, his official visit to Washington proceeded as planned, even though nine NGOs had called for its cancellation. This decision drew strong criticism from activists.

The timing of this measure is particularly puzzling as it follows a visit by US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, aimed at "rebuilding trust" between



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

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the two countries. Lu acknowledged recent tensions over the US push for free, fair, and nonviolent elections in Bangladesh but emphasised a desire to look forward, and reset the relations.

His remarks were seen as a success for the Awami League government's diplomacy, with Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud mocking the opposition, suggesting that Donald Lu's visit had exacerbated their frustrations. Lu has garnered attention due to his perceived role in political developments in Pakistan, where supporters of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan accuse him of orchestrating

the downfall of the PTI government.

The current reactions from the Bangladesh government and ruling party are notably less intense compared to the outrage following the US ban on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and seven of its officials in 2021. This might be because Gen Aziz Ahmed no longer holds office and the political climate is less hostile. The foreign minister's reluctance to engage with reporters on the subject, dismissing it as "an army matter," stands out, as does the fact that the army headquarters issued two denials when Al Jazeera aired its allegations.

Previously, the US sanctioned two law enforcement forces in Bangladesh—Rab and SWAT—and seven top Rab incumbent and former officials, but this time it has targeted someone who was at the top tier of the state hierarchy. Since Aziz is retired, the US move might seem to have no practical effect. However, the allegations date back to his tenure as the military chief making it difficult to argue that the culpability is limited to the individual, instead of the institution. Aziz himself highlighted the broader implications,

noting that his important position during the Awami League government means the ban also indirectly humiliates the government.

The visa ban against Gen Aziz Ahmed and his family differs from the visa policy announced by the US last year ahead of the January 7 parliamentary election, which did not disclose the identities of those affected. The application of Section

report, there were talks of a case against the TV channel, and Aziz mentioned holding a press conference to clear his name, neither of which happened. Instead, Al Jazeera received several international awards for excellence in journalism for the investigative report.

The US action reflects its assessment of three issues in Bangladesh: dysfunctional democratic institutions;

7031(C) allows for the identification of the subject, which in this case is Aziz. This provision of the Foreign Relations and Related Programs Appropriations Act targets foreign officials and their immediate family members involved in significant corruption or gross human rights violations.

The US Department of State said Aziz's actions undermined Bangladesh's democratic institutions and public faith in these institutions. Specifically, it accused him of significant corruption by interfering in public processes and helping his brother evade accountability for criminal activities. Additionally, he allegedly facilitated improper awarding of military contracts and accepted bribes for government appointments. Notably, three of his brothers were convicted in multiple murder cases, with one absconding abroad, and he is accused of having a role in their acquittal.

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prevalent corruption and abuse of power; and ineffective mechanisms for criminal accountability and the rule of law. This situation is seen as resulting from enabling conditions within the power structure.

Undoubtedly, geopolitics is at play in the relations between the two countries, and the US wants to include Bangladesh in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which many analysts believe prevented them from penalising the AL regime for its failure in ensuring a free and fair election. Countering China's possible dominance remains their priority. Hence, this apparently contradictory and delayed action against the former army chief is quite intriguing.

While the ruling party has managed to limit the political impact of the bans against Rab and SWAT, such sanctions are difficult to lift once imposed. This is evident from the long-standing suspension of the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) and the ongoing Leahy Act ban against SWAT. The concern is whether the list of sanctions will grow, and how long their economic and political costs can be sustained.

Open letter on Gaza from scholars, teachers, and researchers in Bangladesh

As we write this, Israel has embarked on the final phase of its genocidal war in Gaza, bombing Rafah where more than a million Palestinians have been driven by repeated evacuations from the rest of the Gaza Strip. Today, they have nowhere left to go.

Nearly 40,000 Palestinians have been killed by the occupier in seven months, most of whom are women and children. Hundreds of thousands more are injured. More than a million people have lost their homes, and the infrastructure of life has been obliterated by the occupation's indiscriminate bombing. Netanyahu's policy of forced starvation has created a famine in Gaza. International organisations are unable to carry out adequate relief operations in the face of Israeli bombings and Zionist mobs preventing the entry of aid trucks. Genocidal actions are being carried out in the West Bank as well. Entire villages have been literally burned down by Zionist settlers backed by soldiers, bulldozers, and tanks.

The people of Gaza are being ethnically cleansed from their ancestral homelands yet again. Driven out by the ethnic cleansing that we know as the Nakba of 1948, the children of those refugees, their children and their children's children, are today being subjected to a vicious and brutal genocidal campaign.

The Nakba never ended, and the occupation's violence has been relentless in the 75 years since, and yet Israel has somehow managed to craft an image of democracy and rights while maintaining a brutal

apartheid system. Today, as the apartheid state reaches its nadir and its inevitable ignominious fate as a pariah state, its actions are being live-streamed onto people's devices.

One of the many heinous war crimes committed by the occupation forces is the crime of scholasticide—the systematic destruction of education infrastructure and personnel. Every university in Gaza has been destroyed by the occupation forces—their libraries, their research, their archives, all reduced to rubble with impunity. Eighty percent of Gaza's schools have been destroyed or damaged. Gaza's Central Archives, housing 150 years of history, have been obliterated. Thousands of students have been murdered, along with teachers, university professors, poets, and artists. Alongside this scholasticide is the systematic decimation of more than 190 heritage sites, 227 mosques, and 3 churches.

This genocidal campaign continues only because the Zionist state receives arms, funding, and diplomatic cover from a handful of Western governments, the United States and Germany in particular.

In the face of a plethora of evidence of war crimes and plausible genocide as per the ICJ ruling, US spokespersons continue to deny any knowledge of war crimes being committed.

Instead of taking immediate steps to stop the war, the US government has taken steps towards criminalising any criticism of Israel. Hundreds of students and faculty have been arrested for speaking out against

genocide, many have been brutally assaulted, in flagrant and despicable violation of academic freedom and freedom of speech and assembly.

We, scholars and researchers in Bangladesh, condemn the US government's continued support for Israel's genocidal war; we see through their attempts at gaslighting the world about Israel's actions; we take note of their double standards on democracy and human rights; and we denounce their crackdown on academic freedom and freedom of speech and assembly on university campuses.

We, scholars and researchers in Bangladesh, demand that the US back a full and permanent ceasefire, stop funding and arming Israel, and put a stop to this genocide.

We salute the students of Columbia University in the US, stand in solidarity with the global student movement for Palestine, and demand an immediate end to the persecution of students and faculty protesters.

We call on all universities and institutions of higher education here in Bangladesh and the rest of the subcontinent to sign on to the academic and cultural boycott of Israel.

Free, Free Palestine!
The academics and researchers who signed the letter online include: Samina Luthfa, associate professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka; Maha Mirza, part-time faculty, Department of Economics, Jahangirnagar University; A Al Mamun, professor, mass communication and journalism, Rajshahi University; Dina Siddiqi,

clinical associate professor, liberal studies, New York University; Swadhin Sen, professor, archaeology, Jahangirnagar University; Rushad Faridi, assistant professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka; Moshahida Sultana, associate professor, accounting and information systems, University of Dhaka; Anu Muhammad, retired professor, economics, Jahangirnagar University; Zobaida Nasreen, professor, anthropology, University of Dhaka; Kajalie Shehreen Islam, associate professor, mass communication and journalism, University of Dhaka; Kaiser Haq, professor, English and humanities, ULAB; Rubana Huq, vice-chancellor, Asian University for Women; Rahnuma Ahmed, Writer and Independent Researcher; Saydia Gulrukh, head of research and public campaign, Drik Picture Library; Shawkat Hussain, professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka; Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem, associate professor, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Worcester State University, US; Khandaker Tanvir Murad, Head of Department, Photography, Pathshala South Asian Media Institute; Nasrin Khandoker, Postdoctoral Researcher, Criminology and Sociology, University College Cork; Azfar Hussain, summer distinguished professor, Department of English and Humanities, ULAB; and Seuty Sabur, associate professor, anthropology, BRAC University.

The full list of the signatories is available on our website.