

The Daily Star

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Debt servicing becoming costlier

Be careful with future external borrowing

The government needs to pay closer attention to the management of external sovereign debt, as in the upcoming budget, allocation to repay foreign debts may reach Tk 57,000 crore, a 53 percent rise from the current year. This will put further pressure on our dwindling foreign currency reserves, which also needs to be monitored closely. According to the finance ministry, allocation for foreign debt repayment has been Tk 37,076 crore in the current fiscal year. However, interest payments for increasing levels of foreign loans in recent years and the rapid devaluation of the taka against the US dollar have forced the government to set aside a greater amount for debt servicing.

Bangladesh's foreign debt service requirement has increased over the years, with the amount crossing the \$1 billion mark for the first time in 2012-13. In 2021-22, the amount went past \$2 billion, and in the year after that, Bangladesh paid \$2.67 billion in debt servicing. In the current fiscal year, it is going to cross the \$3 billion mark. Interest payments alone reached \$1.05 billion in the first nine months of the fiscal year—crossing the \$1 billion mark for the first time. Given that Bangladesh's access to cheap loans is decreasing and foreign borrowing is also becoming costlier with its rising per capita income, debt servicing could become an issue in the coming years, unless the government takes a cautious approach.

According to the Economic Relations Division (ERD), Bangladesh is now having to borrow at the costlier market-based rates to cover its development spending. As the debt portfolio becomes increasingly dominated by market-based rates—and the volume of the payment becomes more dependent on the unpredictability of the global economy—the interest rate risk goes up. We have seen that happen recently, with the cost of foreign loans going up as interest rates shot up globally. With Bangladesh set to graduate from the group of least developed countries, its share of concessional loans has drastically fallen. Alongside this, the grace period—when a borrower pays only the interest, rather than both interest and principal amounts—of some of its major loans will come to an end over the next few years. Therefore, the government needs to do some careful analysis of what the debt repayment situation will be in the near future.

The government will be well advised to accept any further loans based on careful calculations, as well as ensure the development projects it undertakes using foreign loans are truly beneficial. In that regard, the government has to do better in ensuring timely completion of development projects, as time extensions often lead to massive cost overruns. Additionally, it needs to ramp up its negotiation capacity and try to opt for more concessional loans over costlier options. And finally, it has to devise effective strategies to boost its foreign currency reserves via increased exports and remittance inflow.

Have we forgotten about our polythene ban?

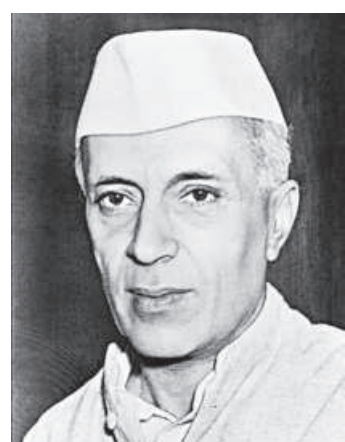
Authorities must not turn a blind eye to its rampant use

Bangladesh may have been the first country in the world to ban the production, marketing, and use of polythene on March 1, 2002, but frustratingly, its pioneering attempts to curb polythene use seem to have fallen by the wayside over the past two decades. Polythene use is back with a vengeance in shops and markets around the country, making us wonder: why has the government completely given up on implementing the ban, when it has taken multiple laudable initiatives over the years to curb polythene usage and promote eco-friendly alternatives?

For instance, the government enacted the Jute Packaging Mandatory Use Act in 2010, which prohibits the use of plastic or polythene packaging for 11 specific products and outlines severe penalties for individuals who violate the polythene ban. Offenders face up to 10 years in prison, a fine of Tk 10 lakh or both. In addition to legal measures, the government has also taken various steps to promote the use of jute as a sustainable alternative to polythene. Yet, all the laws, initiatives, directives and High Court orders over the decades seem to have had no impact on reducing the rampant use of polythene and plastic in the country. A recent study conducted by Environment and Social Development Organisation (Esdo) found that more than 2.5 crore polythene bags are thrown away after being used only once in Dhaka city every day. This deluge of plastic waste clogs drains, canals, ponds, and other waterways, obstructing water flow and leading to frequent flooding even during light rainfall, to say nothing of the irreparable damage to the environment.

We urge the Ministry of Environment to take urgent steps to reverse the disturbing trend. What's the point of having so many progressive laws, policies and directives if no one is bothered about implementing them? It is imperative that the government accepts responsibility for its failure to follow through on its commendable initiatives. The persistent use of polythene highlights the need for stricter enforcement of existing laws, comprehensive public awareness campaigns, and the development of sustainable and affordable alternatives to polythene and plastic packaging.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Jawaharlal Nehru dies

Former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, a leader of the Indian independence movement of the 1930s and 1940s, died in New Delhi on May 27, 1964.

Children must be protected from abuse and torture



A CLOSER LOOK

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her X handle is @tasneem_tayeb

TASNEEM TAYEB

A 15-year-old worker at a local shop in Feni was returning to work after saying Zuhr prayers, when a man sought his help to lift up a bag. Unsuspecting, the boy followed him to a nearby shopping centre, where the stranger and another man subjected him to unspeakable, bestial acts of sexual abuse and torture. Injured and bleeding, the boy was rescued by his employer some two hours later and taken to the hospital where a surgery was required to remove the bathroom cleaning brush handle that the criminals had shoved up his back.

This reminds one of the 12-year-old mill worker in Bogura, who was killed by his co-worker in 2019 by pumping air into his body. Similar incidents of physical torture and sexual abuse of children have taken place before, with many of the victims succumbing to the injuries. Child abuse reports have become a regular feature in our newspapers and newsfeeds, portraying the picture of a society with a festering rot at its core. Unfortunately, we are doing little to remove the rot.

According to a recent *Prothom Alo* report in 2023 the Child Helpline 1098—operated by the Department of Social Services under the Child Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh (CSPB) project—received 15,785 calls, which is almost double of the 8,021 calls received in 2022. While the increasing number of calls mean that more people are now aware of this helpline and are overcoming their fears of stigma and uncertainty to seek help when required, the staggering number of such reported incidents reveal a grim picture of its widespread prevalence. We do not have enough research to understand the actual scope and scale of this social malady.

Between January and April 2024, according to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), 226 children have been subjected to violence and abuse in the country, 176 children have been killed. Of them 37 were below the age of six. From being tortured at domestic sphere and outside, to abduction and rape, children—innocent, helpless, unsuspecting—are highly vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse. In 2023, 1,013 children were subjected to violence, 485 had been killed, of whom 116 were below the age of six.

As per the ASK data, cases were filed in about 60 percent of these incidents. One major reason why people do not seek legal redress is the power enjoyed and exercised by the perpetrators, who coerce the victims and their families into silence. Then there is the fear of social stigma that the victims and their family would have to endure for the rest of their lives if word got around. Even if the victims and their families

wonder then that the traumatised families often shy away from seeking legal recourse.

We have become a society in which innocent, vulnerable children have become a tool to satiate the filthy desires of the stronger—in various forms, from subjugation to sexual gratification—be it within the security of one's own home, school or outside. Unfortunately, we have become so desensitised that when they are tortured and abused even in front of us, we merely take out our phones to make TikTok videos or Facebook lives, instead of rushing to the rescue of the child victims.

These incidents leave lasting mental and emotional scars on children. Their self-respect and dignity are compromised forever and they often fail to recuperate from these horrors.

fear of being victim blamed. Most importantly, the families, especially the parents, should prioritise social and family values in their conduct so that they can spread the same values among their children.

Schools should have separate curriculum on child rights and safe conduct. The government should partner with the INGOs for technical assistance and resources to train teachers in primary and secondary schools on child psychology and institute effective sexual harassment complaints committee in each educational institution.

The government and judiciary should look into the perennial issue of case backlog—which stood at around four million in all types of courts as of June 2023—and expedite delivery of justice. Perpetrators should be



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

overcome such fears and reach out to the law enforcers to file cases, often the latter side with the perpetrators in exchange for money or leverage.

To top it all off, the delay in delivering justice in such cases are a major discouraging factor. A 2022 report by the *Financial Express* reveals that 43,114 cases related to women's repression were pending for over five years in 99 women and children repression prevention courts across Bangladesh as of June 30, 2022. From filing cases and conducting investigation, including DNA tests, to presenting the case in the court, every stage is mired in bureaucratic red tape and a frustrating lack of progress. No

They often demonstrate a lack of empathy, failing to create emotional bond with others. They grow into adults who lack self-confidence and often suffer from inferiority complex. Many children develop psychological issues like schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder and chronic depression.

Families have to be more watchful and protective of their children. They should have frank conversations with their children explaining to them good touch and bad touch, their basic rights as children, and the realities in which we live. The home environment should make children feel safe and comfortable to talk and share their thoughts and nightmares without

slapped with the highest, exemplary punishment for child abuse and torture. Law enforcers should be held accountable where evidence of their collaboration with the perpetrators is found. There should be adequate counselling opportunities for children who have been victimised. Families should overcome their fears and seek justice for their children. People in general should immediately intervene if they see children getting abused in public.

Child abuse and torture need to be completely eliminated from the society to ensure a safe and comfortable space for our children where they can grow and realise their potential to the fullest.

We must abandon our ecocidal mindset

Umme Humayra is a development trainee for Oxfam in Bangladesh.

UMME HUMAYRA

In March this year, while visiting Sugandha Residential Area, Chattogram, I was alarmed to see that numerous trees had been felled along the roadside. Shocked, I took photographs and asked why they were cut down. The woodcutters said the decision had come from the residential authority. I filed a complaint with the Department of Environment (DoE) through its online platform, providing evidence of the illegal activity. However, five days later, my grievance was rejected without any explanation.

Seeking further clarification, I reached out to the Forest Department, which conducted an investigation into the matter. Their findings revealed that more than 100 trees had been cut down on both sides of the road in Sugandha Residential Area by the contractor in charge of widening the road. While the local councillor supervised the tree-cutting, neither the councillor nor the contractor took responsibility for their actions.

This is just one example of the relentless deforestation happening across Bangladesh which persists unchecked, as authorities largely turn a blind eye to its destructive impact on the environment. Existing forest and environmental laws are often ignored, leaving them only on paper without proper enforcement. Individuals and organisations recklessly clear out trees to serve their own agendas, without any repercussions.

This systemic negligence jeopardises Bangladesh's commitment to preserving its environment and natural resources. This issue is further compounded by frequent violations of environmental laws by governmental institutions themselves, often influenced by corruption or vested interests. For example, agencies have been accused of approving projects that involve the destruction of protected areas, cutting of trees, and disruption of natural habitats, all in violation of established laws and regulations meant to safeguard the environment.

The Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) is one such agency that recently suspended its plan of cutting trees to construct a ramp for the elevated expressway from Tigerpass to Pologround in the city in the face of public pressure. The initial decision followed significant opposition from local residents and environmentalists, who protested the proposed construction. Ironically, the original plan had received permissions from the Forest Department that authorised felling 46 trees, many of which were 100 years old and culturally significant.

According to our constitution, the state has a responsibility to protect and improve the environment and biodiversity for current and future citizens. Despite this, the government continues to sanction ecocidal projects and allow the destruction of natural resources and biodiversity.

For instance, the decision to clear 52 lakh trees in the Mirsharai mangrove forest for an economic zone left 7,000 deer and other species without a home overnight, demonstrating an ecocidal mindset. The approval of a

102-km tourist railway line through three protected forests further led to the destruction of 670,000 trees and the blocking of 16 critical elephant corridors.

In June 2023, the Chattogram district administration cut down a mangrove forest in Kattali to create a sanctuary for birds. Supervised by the Forest Department, it involved the removal of many trees along the shores of the Bay of Bengal, raising concerns about the lack of oversight and the prioritisation of development over conservation.

Sometimes, despite the best intentions of the Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment, their efforts fall short due to power dynamics within the government. The recent killing of a forest officer by owners of illegal quarries has highlighted the waning power of authorities to enforce environmental laws. A study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found that the Forest Department is facing several challenges. They don't have enough resources, which makes it difficult for them to do their job effectively.

Centralisation of administrative power prevents agencies outside specific domains from effectively implementing decisions, which hinders proper enforcement and accountability. As a result, the checks and balances to safeguard the environment are weakened, leading to continued violations and further damage to natural resources.

In the face of this crisis, urgent action is needed. The government's pledge to halt deforestation by 2030, made during COP26, must be translated into meaningful policies at

home. Strict enforcement of existing laws, coupled with enhanced authority and resources for environmental agencies, is imperative.

Enhancing collaboration between the Forest Department, local administration, and law enforcement agencies is crucial. Establishing clear protocols and mechanisms for cooperation will streamline communication and facilitate swift action against environmental offenders. For instance, joint task forces could be formed to investigate and prosecute illegal quarrying operations or deforestation activities. Additionally, providing specialised training to law enforcement personnel on environmental law enforcement techniques can enhance their effectiveness in supporting the efforts of Forest Department.

Decentralising administrative power to empower forest and environmental officers at the grassroots level entails a fundamental shift in governance structure aimed at placing decision-making authority and resources directly into the hands of those closest to the environmental challenges. This process involves devolving responsibilities traditionally held by centralised authorities to frontline officers stationed in local communities. These officers, intimately familiar with the local ecosystems and environmental dynamics, are strategically positioned to swiftly respond to emerging environmental issues. With decision-making authority at their disposal, they can assess the situation, enforce regulations, and implement tailored conservation measures best suited to the specific needs of their surroundings.