

The Daily Star

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Why are so many areas in the dark?

Govt must intensify efforts to restore power swiftly

Every time a cyclone strikes in Bangladesh, large swathes of the affected terrain inevitably suffer from power outages, many remaining in the dark for days on end. We have seen this happen multiple times before, and this time was no different. Cyclone Remal, the first in the region this year, made landfall in Bangladesh on Sunday night. Since then, reports have emerged of how about three crore people were left without power and 15,000 telecom towers out of service as a result of the tidal surges and fierce winds that accompanied the cyclone. While the authorities have claimed to have restored most of the power connections by now, many areas are still in the dark.

The importance of electricity in the wake of such calamities cannot be overstated. It serves as a lifeline for the affected people, powering essential services including healthcare facilities, water supply systems, and communication networks. Without it, the ability to deliver aid or maintain law and order is severely compromised. Restoration of power is thus paramount not just for returning to normalcy but also for the well-being and safety of the affected communities. This is precisely what is at stake in the cyclone-hit areas where communications couldn't yet be established.

The sufferings of the people were captured in a report by this paper that focused on five districts of Barishal division—Barguna, Bhola, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, and Barishal—where about 50 percent of power connections remained severed till Thursday. The situation in Barguna's Bamna upazila, for example, where uprooted trees and scattered electric cables have rendered roads impassable and homes powerless, is mirrored among many other affected areas. Another report by *Prothom Alo* highlights the plight of the sixth district of the division, Jhalokati, where angry people held protests demanding power restoration. Without electricity, life almost to a halt for them.

We, therefore, urge the government, utility companies, and other relevant stakeholders to intensify their efforts to undertake necessary repairs and restore communications, both online and offline, in all the areas without further delay. At the same time, we must address the bigger issue of our perennially weak power transmission/distribution system and infrastructure that get rattled every time a disaster strikes. Experts have blamed weak transmission systems, the lack of a smart grid, and an ill-equipped National Load Dispatch Centre for the blackouts and power outages in recent years. This needs to be fixed so that we can better withstand future cyclones, minimising widespread outages.

Curriculum remains a point of concern

Authorities must find a way to properly implement it

That the implementation of the new school curriculum is still in a shambles, even after one and a half years of its launch, is quite disappointing. Equally concerning is the authorities' refusal to acknowledge the issues slowing its execution. A National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) survey on 2.53 lakh teachers in January found that 37.6 percent of teachers "roughly" understood the assessment system, while the rest seemingly understood it well. Educationists say many, due to a lack of training, are still not sure how to deliver lectures and form student groups as per the new curriculum. This, along with preexisting systemic problems in our education system, resulted in frustration and confusion.

Yet, a member of the NCTB has claimed that teachers' training has been adequate. If that were the case, why did the NCTB survey find so many struggling to grasp the assessment system? Over one-third of teachers not being fully aligned with the system is no small matter. Moreover, the reality that students, nearly halfway through the year, still do not know how their mid-year assessment will be done is quite telling. The student evaluation method should have been finalised before classes began. And the responsibility for this failure falls on the shoulders of the authorities.

A most challenging area in education worldwide is fair and reliable assessment of what students have learned in classroom and through their own efforts. To have moved forward with the implementation of a new curriculum without first developing such a system was foolhardy, to say the least. The authorities were warned not to make such a mistake by educationists, but they did not listen. They should own up to that mistake now, instead of doubling down on their rhetoric of success.

Additionally, the NCTB is reportedly considering recalling another textbook after having already recalled two others due to pressure from Islamists. But how will giving into such pressures affect the quality of education? The manner in which the authorities are approaching issues related to the new curriculum and textbooks is deeply troubling. We urge them to heed expert suggestions, now more than ever, and the future of students must be at the top of their priority.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Adolf Eichmann hanged

On this day in 1962, the State of Israel hanged German official Adolf Eichmann, who escaped from a prison camp in 1946 and spent some 14 years in hiding, for his part in the Nazi extermination of Jews during World War II.

'Booming' economy, struggling people



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ANU MUHAMMAD

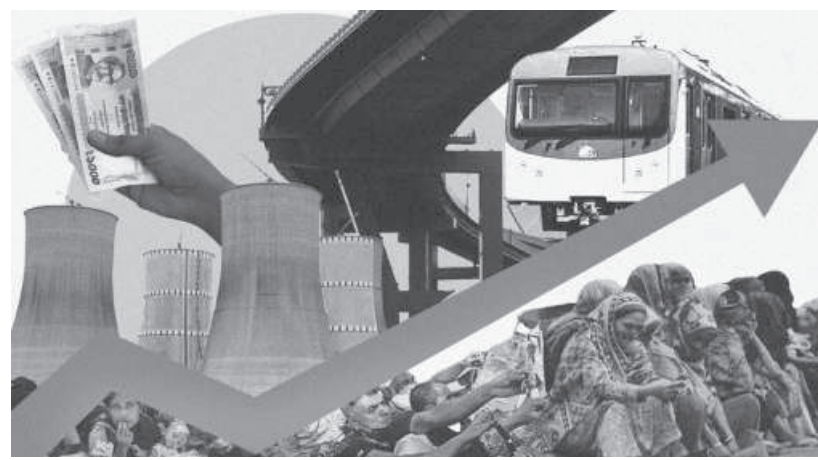
When it comes to the simultaneous existence of growth and crisis, Bangladesh has become a model. There is a growth of per capita income on the one hand, and financial hardship, unemployment, hunger, malnutrition, and financial insecurity suffered by the majority of people on the other. Unprecedented expansion of private banks is happening while the banking sector faces a crisis with rising defaulted loans and big theft of bank money. Over the last decade, we have seen a construction boom on the one hand, and the highest rates of deforestation, air and water pollution, and land- and river-grabbing on the other.

The super active propaganda machine of the government as well as their local and foreign partners consistently try to make us believe that the country is on the highway of development, and they often point to big infrastructure projects—most of which are extremely expensive because of high corruption and inefficiency—as proof. Yes, many megaprojects have been taken up during this government's time. But a good number of these megaprojects will be dangerous and/or big liabilities for Bangladesh in the long term. For example, the Rampal Power Plant, in partnership with the NTPC of India, will harm our precious Sundarbans severely. This plant created the path for many more "red category" projects in the area, which means it will massively damage the environment.

There are more coal based power plants in the coastal areas in collaboration with China and Japan, requiring big loans, which will make these areas more vulnerable to climate change effects. Another project is a combination of both catastrophic risks and immense loans (nearly \$12 billion), which is the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, in partnership with Russia. There are also big import projects of LNG with the US and other countries. All these projects have contributed to a huge amount of foreign debt, which is putting pressure on the already depleting foreign exchange reserves. It is not possible to find any rationale behind these projects when there are much better alternatives, for example,

for energy and power sectors, that are cheaper and environment-friendly.

It is not surprising to find Bangladesh as a country of fast-growing super-rich oligarchy. Government reports (Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2010, 2016 and 2022), too, confirmed that along with the fast growth of affluence among a few, inequality has also risen fast. In 2010, the income ratio between the top five percent of the income groups and the lowest-earning five percent of the population was nearly 30:1. In 2016, this ratio increased 60 times. In 2022, it increased more than 80 times. This does not give the real picture, because we know the declared income of the rich people is only a small part of their real wealth accumulated at home and



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

abroad.

So growth and deprivation, affluence and poverty, propaganda of dazzling growth and the harsh reality all go together. Who sees what depends on their social position. The beneficiaries of the present model are not able to see what people in general experience in their daily lives.

Let's consider the fact that in Bangladesh, the government calculates per capita income exceeding Tk 300,000. This figure averages income across the entire population, including children, unemployed, informal workers, retirees, and the wealthy. It suggests an average monthly income of over Tk 25,000 per person. However, for many families, particularly those with lower

income, the reality is starkly different. They struggle to afford food and shelter for survival, let alone nutritious meals. Their family income is likely far below Tk 30,000 per month, let alone per person.

The top five percent have made their share of GDP increase significantly, while the bottom half's share has shrunk. The small segment of the population consisting of corrupt policymakers and officials, loan defaulters, extortionists and land-river grabbers are significant beneficiaries of the current economic model. Their incomes have skyrocketed due to commissions from projects and contracts, high-cost infrastructure construction, and illegal activities. Nearly 95 percent of people haven't seen a real increase in income and standard of living. Meanwhile, daily necessities have become more costly, so have healthcare and education; utility bills are also rising. This raises the crucial question of what true economic security entails.

Therefore, when we talk about economic growth, we must count the severely negative economic effects on the people and the country. Otherwise,

the way for a more serious economic crisis. The groups profiting from megaprojects, money laundering and extortion, along with those who exploit land and water resources, are contributing to a looming financial crisis. Despite increasing exports and government support for exporters, forex reserves are depleting. International money laundering remains a major trend among the

The present form of Bangladesh's financial growth isn't translating into improved living standards for the majority. It might even be paving the way for a more serious economic crisis. The groups profiting from megaprojects, money laundering and extortion, along with those who exploit land and water resources, are contributing to a looming financial crisis.

wealthy groups, and there seems to be a lack of effective action to prevent it. The current political arrangements appear to shield the corrupt oligarchs from accountability. The official image of growth masks a brewing financial storm. This illusion of economic progress is like quicksand, causing ordinary citizens to feel increasingly trapped under the forever increasing food and daily essential prices.

Government policymakers and those who are benefiting from the current situation seem unconcerned about a potential crisis, as their wealth is often secured overseas. It's almost akin to colonial rule, with a detachment from the nation's future. Their focus seems to be on extracting wealth from the country and its people to build an affluent future elsewhere. When the inevitable economic collapse occurs, they'll likely abandon ship. As such, the privileged few continue to enjoy a political system that safeguards their interests.

Who truly benefits from this growth, and how is it impacting the majority of the population? What are the social and environmental costs of this growth? What could be better alternatives? Addressing these questions is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the country's economic health, potential and risk.

As told to *Monorom Polok of The Daily Star*.

Crushing dissent in Pakistan



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NIAZ MURTAZA

The gory images of a bleeding Raouf Hasan, spokesperson for Imran Khan's party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), from a few days back were again a stark reminder of the autocratic way in which the Pakistani state under the control of its army is crushing political dissent. He was attacked on May 20 outside the office of a private TV channel by a group of four or five people, who have not been identified yet. Yet, PTI itself as well as many neutral observers are suspicious about the involvement of state spy agencies in the attack. Hasan is one of the most high-profile PTI leaders currently who are not in jail, and he is a well-respected civil society activist in his own right.

But the attack is just one of the ways in which the new regime, having the full backing of the army, has attempted to silence and sideline the opposition. Crushing dissent in Pakistan has a long history going right back to the period after its birth in 1947. The most egregious example was the massive atrocities committed in its ex-eastern wing in 1971, which led to the division of the country and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. Since then, this pattern has continued during martial law periods as well as civilian eras with strong army

control. Under PTI's regime, too, such crackdown against the present parties in power was common. It has taken a more ominous tone and higher levels since the new regime came to power in March this year. It has included jailing and disappearing opponents, filing dubious cases against them, blocking social media, passing laws to suppress free speech, and muffling the voices of political opponents on TV, in parliament and in real life.

Hundreds of PTI senior leaders, journalists and workers continue to languish in jail on dubious charges even before conviction. Imran Khan himself has been in jail for over six months, initially without any conviction. Later, he was convicted in three or four dubious cases, some of which have been overturned by higher courts. Appeal of the last two convictions against him are in their final stages and most independent legal observers think that they will be overturned in a few days. But they also think that the state will then arrest him in other cases as they cannot take the risk of releasing him given the political instability he could cause. Other PTI leaders and workers are often released after they are forced into jail to strike a deal with the state

to announce their resignation from PTI in staged press conferences upon release. Dozens of party workers have simply disappeared, either kidnapped by the state agencies or gone into hiding given the fear of being arrested.

The social media platform X (formerly twitter) remains blocked in Pakistan for over two months as the government sees it as a primary vehicle for PTI to mobilise its workers and leaders and share critical information with them. While courts have ordered the government to reinstate X services, government agencies have simply ignored the court order. Laws and policies are being adopted to silence dissent. The provincial government in Punjab passed a defamation law last week which gives sweeping powers to government-appointed tribunals to punish people who criticise government functionaries and makes it difficult to file appeals against their verdicts. Another government circular bans journalists from reporting on court proceedings given the large number of cases against PTI leaders where proceedings are going against the government.

Newspapers and TV channels face pressure from the government and intelligence agencies against giving air time to PTI leaders or including news content favourable to PTI. Many pro-PTI journalists have been forced to leave the country or go underground. The attack on Raouf Hasan was part of this effort. There are increased restrictions on covering the court proceedings being held in jail against Imran Khan, and on his party leaders trying to meet him in jail.

While similar tactics were used by PTI against opposition parties when

it was in power in 2018-22, the scale, speed and intensity of such actions is much higher now. Khan has gone to the extent of claiming that the crackdown against his party is similar to that against the Awami League in 1971 and may lead to the same consequence: division of the country. While the crackdown against PTI is highly condemnable, this comparison may be exaggerated given the scale of the atrocities that happened in 1971, which co-incidentally were committed under the command of a close relative of Imran Khan—the infamous General AK Niazi.

These abuses against PTI are happening in addition to the massive rigging against it in the February 2024 national elections. The situation is likely to get more heated in the coming months as the trials against Imran Khan and other leaders and those related to election-rigging reach their conclusion and the economic situation gets worse. Pakistan is about to enter a new IMF programme which may result in higher inflation, higher utility charges, and increased unemployment. Public discontent against the government as well as PTI's popularity will increase even though its own performance in power was poor. However, even those tactics are unlikely to lead to political instability or economic turnaround.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is also facing increased terrorist attacks from the Afghanistan-based terrorists as well as a heightened insurgency in Balochistan province, which has faced decades of atrocities like ex-East Pakistan did until 1971. Thus, Pakistan's prospects of finding peace and progress remain dim for the foreseeable future.