

## Has Dhaka's fate become sealed?

### Govt cannot keep ignoring the city's woes

Every year, we are reminded that Dhaka is one of the worst cities to live in, and this year is just slightly different, as the metropolis has reportedly gotten worse. In the Economist Group's Global Liveability Index 2024, Dhaka has slipped two notches, from last year's 166th to 168th. To illustrate just how abysmal that is, Kyiv, the war-torn capital of Ukraine, ranks three places higher. Like before, experts and citizens have expressed their grievances, but successive rankings show that these concerns have fallen on deaf ears. This means the government has not done what it can to build a liveable Dhaka, and for the umpteenth time, we ask: why?

The annual global survey assessed the liveability of 173 cities based on stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure. A cursory glance at newspapers will reveal how we are failing at these sectors. Take the environment, for instance: Dhaka continuously ranks among the cities with the worst air quality. The situation is so terrible that air pollution has become the leading cause of death in the country, even surpassing high blood pressure, poor diet, and tobacco use. Meanwhile, heatwaves have taken the city hostage, in absence of any semblance of greenery. And yet, government agencies cut down over seven lakh trees across the country last year in the name of development work, Dhaka being among the victims. All this has happened amid dwindling playgrounds, from 150 to only 24 over the last 22 years.

In fact, Dhaka has garnered many other "unliveable" attributes. Indexes report that the city is extremely expensive, for both locals and foreigners. But we don't need to look at rankings for that; the sky-high inflation, 9.89 percent as of May 2024, is evidence enough. It's also the slowest in the world in terms of vehicular movement, while still somehow achieving high numbers of road fatalities. And let's not forget that Dhaka is one of the biggest hotspots for Aedes mosquitoes, which took 1,705 lives in the country last year, breaking all records and crippling our healthcare system.

In many instances, the government has either ignored or even aggravated all these perennial issues, while many ill-thought initiatives have failed. While the metro rail is certainly a step towards creating a liveable city, the authorities have forgotten the basics: bringing discipline to the roads and improving public transport. Instead of addressing these structural issues, they opted for shortcuts, like banning battery-run rickshaws. Regarding air pollution, it achieved very little to tackle the sources: construction dust, traffic fumes, factory emissions, and illegal brick kilns. Meanwhile, the new budget reportedly lacks concrete measures to address economic concerns, which means Dhaka will continue to be just as expensive or even more. Therefore, it's time for the government to admit its failures and prepare plans that can truly resolve this city's woes to make it liveable.

## Alarming trade of Indigenous women

### We need to address the root cause of trafficking

It is concerning that Indigenous women are falling victim to trafficking gangs who smuggle them to China under the pretext of marriage, lucrative jobs or education opportunities. A report published in this daily mentioned several cases filed with police about gangs who forced women to marry Chinese nationals and then trafficked them to China. According to the report, these local gangs, some of which are operative in the capital's Uttara area, sell the women for Tk 10-20 lakh.

While Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked mostly to India and the Middle East, human trafficking to China came to focus six years ago when three women were rescued and brought back home. China's decades-long one child policy has created an imbalance in the country's sex ratio, which has driven the illicit trade of foreign women, mostly from Southeast Asia. In recent times, it appears that traffickers are also targeting Indigenous Bangladeshi women.

In an email responding to the most recent trafficking cases, the Chinese government reiterated its stance against human trafficking to protect the rights of women and children, which is undoubtedly a positive sign. However, law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh, too, should increase their vigilance against local trafficking gangs that are arranging these fake, coerced or exploitative marriages. We need to address the low rate of conviction and inadequate sentencing of perpetrators of human trafficking. In addition to revamping the legal process, the government as well as organisations working to curb human trafficking must run awareness campaigns on social media and in targeted areas where Indigenous women from marginalised communities might fall into traffickers' traps.

Finally, the government must address the root causes of trafficking in person: poverty, inequality, and education. Given the historical and political reality of our country's Indigenous communities, young women especially from the Chittagong Hill Tracts are vulnerable to exploitative practices. Historically, sexual violence and abuse have been used against CHT women to dispossess the community of their resources. It is not surprising that in the absence of justice for those crimes, the false promise of a better life elsewhere would interest CHT women and thus increase their vulnerability to human trafficking. To establish a sense of security among Indigenous women, the government needs to truly empower the communities and fulfil the promises of the CHT Peace Accord.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### The first iPhone goes on sale

On this day in 2007, Apple Inc's first mobile "smartphone," the iPhone, went on sale, and it revolutionised the industry.

## COSTS OF HIGH-LEVEL CORRUPTION Further down the kleptocratic route



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IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

Mahatma Gandhi's quote that there is enough in this world to meet everyone's need but not for anyone's greed is aptly illustrated by the ongoing media and other credible exposures of evidence of corruption in Bangladesh. Confirming that sky is the limit, these revelations of high-level abuse of power, known as grand corruption, though nothing new except the procession of disclosures, have shocked and awed the nation.

Several key institutions, apparently sanctuaries of high-level corruption and related criminalities, have been exposed to risks of kleptocratic capture. These include the army, police, Rab, National Board of Revenue (NBR) and, not the least, the country's major political parties. A former army chief and his immediate family have been slapped with sanctions for "significant corruption," including assistance in evasion of accountability for criminal activity, facilitating improper awarding of military contracts, and acceptance of bribes. His actions have been assessed to have "contributed to undermining Bangladesh's democratic institutions and the public faith in public institutions and processes."

Having retired after gaining the dubious distinction of topping the list of kingpins behind sanctions against Rab for gross human rights violations, the former police chief has managed to flee the country with questionable ease, arguably as part of a suspected sinister deal. This at a time when he has been publicised to be under the Anti-Corruption Commission's (ACC) radar for amassing unbelievable amounts of income and wealth acquired across the country by ruthlessly violating entrusted institutional power coupled with political blessing, fraud and criminal extortion. In so doing, he applied the skills acquired over the years as a crime control professional and transformed himself from his mandated position of protector of law to a role model of lawbreaking. As widely expected, he was not the only instance of such brazenly normalised corruption in the police force as many other similar exposures followed, including that of the former Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner.

A member of NBR and president

of its Customs, Excise and VAT Appellate Tribunal came to the spotlight, catalysed by his son's goat scandal and subsequent exposure of grotesque details of his and his family's accumulation of income and properties. He did so abusing his oversight role of revenue generation



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

for the state, which he converted into that of the tax evasion guru as an illegitimate source of income. It is again obvious that he is not the sole X person in the NBR, nor is it possible that he operated in isolation without collusion and protection of many others.

No less troubling is the case of the brutal killing of an MP allegedly as an example of fighting of political power abusers over the share of booties of gold smuggling and the related illicit business facilitated and protected over the years by those mandated to control such criminalisation of politics. Again, this is no isolated case of political corruption, as symbolised by the case of an MP serving prison term in Kuwait for transnational crimes, including money laundering and human trafficking. Nor is criminalisation of politics a monopoly of the current ruling party, as its arch-rival left behind a legacy of no less grand corruption, arms smuggling and ruthless political criminalisation, including several attempts at the life of the top leader of their rival political party, causing multiple deaths.

As scandalous as these examples are, it is no surprise at all because successive regimes have driven the state to this level through their desperate bids to ensure partisan capture of the institutions to facilitate, promote and protect power abuse and thereby grant impunity to high-level perpetrators.

Implications of such grand corruption are destabilising for the state. Their money value can be concretely measured only by the government and relevant agencies, only if done with integrity, free from conflict of interest. For some general idea, one may consider the value of compromise of the least cost, best quality principle in procurements and other public expenditures in

all these cases is also among the reasons why nothing has happened to the perpetrators. The former NBR member, for instance, conveniently outsmarted several initiatives for departmental procedure in response to allegations over the years, nor could the ACC proceed with concrete action. It's also no secret that he has been enjoying the patronage and protection of the business politics bureaucracy power structure, which also helped invincibility of the overall illegal tax evasion system.

Non-monetary costs of corruption are no less ominous for the state, the worst victim of which are the institutions in general and particularly those at the centre of recent focus. None of them has yet shown the courage to come up with any action or concrete pledge against those within their own ranks, who have pushed the respective institutions to severe reputational damage. None of them seem to care that it is time to face the mirror and undertake strategies to ensure accountability and justice in the short term, and overhaul themselves in the medium and long terms, which is indispensable to restore their credibility and uphold the spirit and values of Bangladesh's independence.

What has happened instead has only added to the already existing atmosphere of intimidation to the media, as demonstrated by the infamous statement by the BPSA, which has been viewed as nothing but an effort to grossly curtail media freedom guaranteed by the constitution. Aggrieved by the disclosures and with an apparent sense of insecurity as birds of the same feather, the association adopted the "shoot the messenger" tactic and blamed media reports as motivated, while in fact the statement itself was a motivated act to suppress disclosure of corruption information. It is also no coincidence that the home ministry reached out quickly to the information ministry with a note that practically endorsed the BPSA position.

Coming as all these do simultaneously with the creation (once again) of the provision in the national budget for an unconstitutional, discriminatory and corruption-friendly reward system for black money, the key message given to the people is that corruption enjoys systemic guarantee of impunity. Little do the power holders seem to care that by converting the commitment of zero tolerance against corruption in election manifestos and other public pronouncements into useless rhetoric, floodgates are being opened to further kleptocratic disorder of the state.

## Why we need a landscape design ministry



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A little over a week ago, more than 16 lakh people in Bangladesh's Sylhet and Sunamganj districts found themselves marooned by escalating floodwaters. Despite the strikingly similar climates of Bangladesh and Miami in Florida, US, where I work as a landscape architect, the outcomes of heavy rainfall in these two regions are starkly different. Miami's approach harnesses nature's inherent mechanisms through creative and proactive solutions, turning challenges into opportunities. Meanwhile, the Sylhet region endured devastation due to flash floods, prompting the urgent question: why does Bangladesh still face such situations in 2024?

Bangladesh is a treasure trove of untapped landscape potential. It can transform its current challenges into opportunities by leveraging its natural assets. This requires a shift from reactive disaster management to proactive landscape design and management. Flood prevention is only one aspect; optimising the terrain and balancing human settlement with nature are equally crucial.

For Bangladesh, establishing a dedicated ministry for landscape design and management is not just visionary, but necessary. This ministry would oversee the comprehensive planning, development, and maintenance of the country's diverse landscapes, addressing long-standing challenges.

For one, the country's extensive network of rivers could be harnessed for transportation, irrigation, and flood management. Currently neglected and polluted, these rivers need strategic rejuvenation. Drawing inspiration from the Netherlands, where river systems are integral to national infrastructure, the Bangladesh government could revitalise the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta.

Properly managed natural resources could drive tourism, agriculture, and cultural activities, fuelling economic growth. The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, exemplifies this potential. As a biodiversity hotspot and potential ecotourism destination, its proper management and promotion could attract global tourists, generate revenue, and create jobs. Costa Rica's ecotourism success through sustainable practices serves as a model for Bangladesh.

Urbanisation and climate change threaten Bangladesh's rich biodiversity and natural habitats. Sustainable practices are essential to conserving and protecting these areas. For example, conserving the Chittagong Hill Tracts, known for their unique flora and fauna, could preserve biodiversity while supporting local communities through eco-friendly tourism and sustainable agriculture.

Effective water resource

management is critical in a flood-prone country like Bangladesh. Designing and maintaining infrastructure for efficient water management could also promote water-based tourism and recreational activities. Italy's Venice showcases how waterways can become major tourist attractions while managing complex water infrastructure.

Promoting landscape innovation and modern agricultural practices can

**Landscape architects can guide the nation's landscape policies and projects with their expertise. Singapore's green, sustainable urban environments highlight the benefits of skilled landscape architects. They can design resilient cities that harmonise with natural systems, ensuring urban development does not come at the expense of environmental degradation.**

boost productivity and sustainability. Integrating vertical farming and aquaponics into urban areas can combat food insecurity and reduce pressure on rural lands. Singapore's advancements in urban farming illustrate how Bangladesh could innovate in agriculture.

Raising awareness about landscape management's importance and engaging citizens in conservation efforts is vital. Educational initiatives

can foster a culture of stewardship, where every citizen feels responsible for the environment. Programmes modelled after Japan's Satoyama Initiative, which promotes sustainable rural-urban linkages through community participation, could be effective.

To realise this vision, Bangladesh must recognise the critical role of landscape architecture. Landscape architects can guide the nation's landscape policies and projects with their expertise. Singapore's green, sustainable urban environments highlight the benefits of skilled landscape architects. They can design resilient cities that harmonise with natural systems, ensuring urban development does not come at the expense of environmental degradation. They can lead projects that integrate green infrastructure, enhance biodiversity, and create public spaces that improve quality of life.

Establishing a ministry for landscape design and management symbolises a collective commitment to transforming Bangladesh's landscape. It heralds a new era where design and nature work in harmony, elevating the quality of life and dignity of every citizen. This vision transcends flood prevention and resource management—it's about creating a nation where every individual feels a sense of pride and responsibility towards their environment. A specialised ministry would help realise this vision, emphasising the optimal use and preservation of the country's natural resources. By adopting this perspective, design can significantly enhance the quality of life and sense of dignity for the people. It's time for Bangladesh to build a future where development and conservation of nature take place simultaneously.