

Reduce overreliance on groundwater

Govt must explore alternative fresh water sources

We are alarmed by the rapid decline in groundwater levels across the country, particularly in Dhaka, Gazipur, and the Barind region, due to excessive extraction. According to reports, residents on the city's outskirts are facing acute shortages of fresh water, primarily due to WASA's ineffective management of groundwater. The crisis is particularly severe in areas like Vakurta, Baherchar, Battoli Bazar, Balughata, and Bauta, where numerous pumps installed by WASA about a decade ago have contributed to the depletion of groundwater. As a result, around 20,000 hand-operated tube wells have dried up entirely. Residents of these areas now struggle to access water, with their tube wells yielding water only during the rainy season and remaining dry throughout the rest of the year.

The rapid decline in groundwater levels, however, is not confined to the above-mentioned areas—it has impacted numerous other regions across the country, making crop cultivation increasingly challenging. Clearly, this situation has arisen due to our excessive reliance on groundwater and the lack of attention to alternative water sources. A 2022 study analysed 40 years of data from 465 shallow groundwater monitoring wells of the Bangladesh Water Development Board. It examined groundwater usage and levels during the dry season and revealed that due to extensive water usage, the groundwater level in two-thirds of the country is declining. In many areas, including Dhaka, the groundwater levels have fallen by an average of one to three meters.

For instance, groundwater levels in Godagari, Rajshahi, which were previously recharged to 16-18 meters during the rainy season in the 1980s, have not surpassed 16 meters since 2010. Due to a lack of water, the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) has limited Boro rice cultivation this year in eight upazilas across three districts of the Barind region—Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, and Naogaon. In Kaliganj, Gazipur, the groundwater recharge levels have dropped from 6 meters in 1990 to 3 meters since 2015. In Dohar, Dhaka, recharge decreased from 4 meters to 3 meters by 2015.

The question is, what can the government do now to recharge the groundwater levels across the country, especially in the capital, where 70 percent of the water supply comes from underground sources? Our water experts provided solutions long ago: minimise groundwater extraction and utilise water from nearby rivers instead. Unfortunately, two crucial projects—the Sayedabad Water Treatment Plant (Phase 3) and the Meghna River Protection Master Plan—aimed at reducing the city's excessive dependence on groundwater, have been stalled for nearly a decade. The government must prioritise and expedite their implementation. Furthermore, it should consider various other methods, suggested by experts, for artificial groundwater recharging. Without immediate action, groundwater levels in Dhaka's densely populated areas could plummet to 100 meters by 2050. Therefore, the government needs to take urgent action to address the issue.

Stop the genocide in Gaza

International community must enforce a new ceasefire deal

Our hearts are with the people of Gaza, many of whom have lost their children, loved ones, homes, and the dignity and right to live as human beings due to Israel's brutal and relentless massacre. Throughout Friday, March 21, protests against Israel's genocide in Gaza were held in streets across the world, and Dhaka's streets were no different. After the Jumma prayers, the four-coloured Palestinian flag flooded the premises of the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque. Ordinary people under the banner of "Aam Janata," as well as other groups, brought out processions demanding an end to Israel's onslaught in Gaza. There have been calls for the government to take diplomatic initiatives through the United Nations and others to stop this genocide.

Since Israel resumed its war against Hamas on March 18, more than 600 Palestinians have been killed, the majority of whom are women and children, according to reports by Al Jazeera. Children were killed across so-called "safe zones." Even hospitals have not been spared. The total death toll since Israel launched its war in October 2023, has risen to more than 61,700, according to Gaza's government media office. Meanwhile, the Israeli defence minister has threatened to annex parts of the Gaza Strip unless Hamas releases all Israeli hostages—whether living or dead. In fact, according to reports by the BBC and CNN, the Israeli minister said they would intensify nonstop strikes from the air, sea, and land and employ civilian and military pressure, including "evacuating the Gaza population to the south and implementing US President Trump's voluntary transfer plan for Gaza residents." Earlier in February, Trump had proposed to build a US-owned "Riviera of the Middle East" in Gaza by expelling 2.1 million Palestinians from the war-ravaged land.

There appears to be little hope for Gazans because Israel is carrying out the genocide with the full support of the Trump administration. While many world leaders, including US allies, have condemned Israel's actions, the Trump administration squarely blames Hamas for breaking the ceasefire deal that had brought relative calm to the Gaza Strip between January 19 and March 18. Unless a new ceasefire deal is agreed upon by Israel and Hamas, Gazans may not see an end to the massacre. Thankfully, mediators Egypt and Qatar have reportedly proposed to Hamas the re-establishment of a truce, an exchange of hostages, and the re-entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, which has been blocked by Israel since March 2. It is urgent and crucial that a new ceasefire agreement be reached to stop the relentless killing in Gaza. We urge the international community to take urgent measures to make that happen.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Bangalees hoist the red-green-gold flag

On this day in 1971, Bangalees hoisted the green and red flag with the map of Bangladesh in gold inside the red disc almost everywhere. This was done in defiance of Pakistan's celebration of Republic Day on March 23.

Will the construction of roads paved with gold continue?



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A common feature of mega infrastructure projects undertaken by the previous government was the extremely high construction costs. Due to planning flaws, irregularities, corruption, etc, Bangladesh had one of the highest highway construction costs in the world.

The White Paper on the State of the Bangladesh Economy, commissioned by the interim government, also highlighted the huge expenditure on highway construction. According to it, during the previous government's tenure, the construction cost of four-lane highways in Bangladesh averaged \$6.35 million per kilometre, which was 4.4 times higher than in India, 2.15 times higher than in Pakistan, 1.6 times higher than in China, and 3.7 times higher than in Turkey.

It was expected that things would change under the interim government, which came to power through a popular uprising. But in reality, the construction of "roads paved with gold" has not stopped even during this government's tenure. A recent *Prothom Alo* report shows that the construction of the Cox's Bazar-Matarbari two-lane road will cost Tk 476 crore per km.

The most expensive highway in the country so far was the expressway from Dhaka to Bhanga in Faridpur via the Padma Bridge. The 55-kilometer-long, four-lane highway cost Tk 11,440 crore to build. That is, the cost of constructing the expressway per kilometre was about Tk 201 crore, which was widely criticised.

It appears that the cost of the two-lane Cox's Bazar-Matarbari road, to be built during the interim government's tenure, will be more than double that of the most expensive four-lane Dhaka-Bhanga Expressway, built during the Awami League era. Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, an adviser to the interim government, has also raised questions about this huge expenditure. At a seminar in Dhaka on February 25, while informing the audience that he had to approve the highway being implemented with a foreign loan, he also raised the question: "will this road be paved with gold or diamonds?"

What could be the reason for such a huge cost in constructing the road? According to *Prothom Alo*'s report, this huge cost cannot be

explained by the increase in the price of construction materials alone. One of the reasons for such a high cost could be non-competitive bidding and the conflict of interest of the lending agency.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is providing the loan for the Matarbari coal power plant and deep-sea port project in Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar. The road will be constructed under this project. The consultant hired to design the project is from Japan, the project financier. The conditions for



The cost of the two-lane Cox's Bazar-Matarbari road is likely to be more than double the cost of the country's most expensive highway from Dhaka to Bhanga in Faridpur via the Padma Bridge.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

the construction tender were prepared in such a way that contractors from countries other than Japan could not compete effectively. The estimated cost for constructing the 27.2 km long road was Tk 7,382 crore (which is also very high, at Tk 271 crore per km). However, the combined bid of the Japanese contractors stood at Tk 11,500 crore, which is 58 percent more than the estimated cost.

Normally, if a bid exceeds the estimated cost by more than 15 percent, re-tendering can be done. But that could not be accomplished due to JICA's objections. JICA stated that re-tendering just to reduce costs or select the lowest bidder is not in line with their procurement policy. As a result, just like during the Awami League era, roads are being built at costs per kilometre that are several times higher

than in India, China, or Europe.

Meanwhile, the interim government's Task Force Report on Re-strategizing the Economy and Mobilizing Resources for Equitable and Sustainable Development recommended avoiding such conflicts of interest. The report mentioned that Bangladesh secures infrastructure project financing from JICA, China, India, etc, under government-to-government (G2G) bilateral frameworks with limited tendering, which results in high project costs. Particularly, projects where feasibility studies, detailed designs, construction, and supervision are all managed by the lending country create conflicts of interest and tend to drive up construction costs.

A few examples of such projects include the railway bridge on the Jamuna River (JICA-funded, with detailed design, supervision consultancy, and contractors from



Japan), the third terminal (JICA-funded, with detailed design, supervision consultancy, and contractors from Japan), and the Karnaphuli Tunnel (China-funded, with detailed design, supervision consultancy, and contractors from China). The task force recommended that no project should be implemented with foreign loans where the terms of the loan contradict competitive bidding, requiring the project's consultants, contractors, and materials to be sourced from the lending country.

It is true that the loan agreement for the Matarbari project was signed during the previous government's tenure. However, the present government could have followed the recommendations and tried to address these disparities in the loan agreement.

What will we do for the people of Gaza?



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As the world observes the holy month of Ramadan, Gaza continues to suffer endless bloodshed under Netanyahu. More than 50,000 lives have been lost, with women, children, and the elderly among them, while over 100,000 have been wounded. Most of them lost a part of their body, an eye, a hand or two, a leg or both, suffering permanent disabilities that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Homes have been flattened with people still sleeping in their beds, hospitals have been removed from the face of the earth along with their patients, and mosques have been levelled with worshippers still praying inside. Even animals have not been spared by the most aggressive military force in modern history. The people of Gaza have been robbed of daily essentials such as food, water, medicine, and electricity. They have been systematically denied and deprived, robbing them of their dignity, peace of mind, and humanity.

The Israeli government under Netanyahu was not satisfied with the catastrophic devastation inflicted over 15 months. Contrary to what Israel and some others claim, the recent 57-day pause was not a humanitarian respite. Rather, it was a strategic reprieve for Netanyahu's exhausted military force

that was tired of endlessly killing innocent Gazans but has now returned with even greater ferocity, rejuvenated and ready to kill more innocent women and children. Netanyahu himself confirmed this with alarming impudence: "We resumed the war with all our strength, and this is just the beginning"—as if he was threatening a great power and not a tiny strip of land with the majority of its population being women and children.

Then comes his minister of defence, who is even more racist, parroting his master, saying: "Oh people of Gaza, the destruction that the air force has caused is just the beginning, and what is coming will be worse, and you alone will pay the price. You must return all the hostages and expel Hamas from Gaza, and then we will allow everyone to leave Gaza to any place in the world, for whoever wants to." This demand is both unrealistic and revealing, it acknowledges that after more than a year of warfare, Israel has failed to achieve its own objectives despite committing the most heinous massacre in the twenty-first century. Instead, it now seeks to coerce the Gazan population into achieving what its own military could not. The implication is clear—displacement

remains their ultimate goal. They offer the people of Gaza permission to leave their own land and disperse themselves across the world as if it is a reward, as if the indigenous people of the land would abandon their homes.

This moment raises urgent questions, not just for Palestinians, but for the world. If the massacre of Palestinians is met with silence

The blood of our children forces us to call things by their actual names. A genocide continues in front of our eyes and we have normalised it, just as our enemy wanted. History will show us no mercy, nor will future generations, and most importantly, God will not forgive us for our silence.

today, then who will be next? The paralysis of the United Nations and the Security Council in the face of a single veto from the US sheds light on a troubling reality. International law is simply a tool to be discarded if its implementation is contrary to US interests.

The US, through its military and political support, has made itself complicit in Israel's actions. This is not merely an issue of Palestinian suffering, it is an indictment of a world order where one country gets to unilaterally decide who lives or dies, where power dictates justice,

The government could have told JICA—just because you are lending money for the road, we are not bound to agree to unfair conditions. Since the people of Bangladesh will have to repay the loan with interest, the government must have the authority to determine how the loan money is spent. Otherwise, if necessary, Bangladesh could construct the 27 km of road with its own funds, but it should not adhere to unfair conditions.

Similar initiatives need to be taken regarding ongoing projects under the Indian Line of Credit (LoC) as well. Several infrastructure construction projects in Bangladesh are being funded by Indian loans to facilitate transit with India. According to the terms of the Indian loan, 75 percent of the raw materials required for these projects must be purchased from India, and contractors must be hired from there. Moreover, there is a question about how essential these hugely expensive infrastructure projects are for Bangladesh at this time.

For example, as reported by *Samakal*, a 50-kilometre-long, four-lane highway is being constructed from Ashuganj River Port through Sarail, Kasba, and Dharkhar in Brahmanbaria to Akhaura Land Port under the Indian LoC. This road, which is being constructed at a cost of Tk 5,791 crore, will connect Agartala in Tripura, India, with Ashuganj River Port. Additionally, the road from Mainamati in Cumilla to Dharkhar will be upgraded to four lanes with Indian LoC funding at a cost of Tk 7,188 crore. This will make it easier to transport goods unloaded at Chittagong Port to Tripura and Assam. Although India will benefit from these two roads worth Tk 12,979 crore, there is a question as to what benefit Bangladesh will receive.

Bangladesh will also have to bear the cost of regular maintenance of the roads after construction. There is a question as to whether the huge expenditure being made to increase connectivity between Sylhet, Cumilla, and Chattogram will be recovered merely by transporting Indian goods.

One piece of good news is that the two countries have agreed to scrutinise projects under the Indian LoC that are still in the process of appointing consultants and contractors or preparing project proposals. However, it is not just the project list that needs reevaluation—the terms of the project loans must also be reviewed.

If the interim government could genuinely reform the unfair terms of loans from various foreign lenders in accordance with the task force recommendations, its commitment and sincerity towards reform would be more evident to the people.

and where the suffering of millions is reduced to a geopolitical calculation.

In this holy month, for nearly two billion Muslims and for conscientious people across the globe, this is a test of principle. If a collective voice is not raised now, what does that say about the mighty values we claim to uphold? The demand is not for war or violence, it is for moral clarity, for a loud and unequivocal rejection of a system that enables war crimes under the guise of security. We are tired of coded rhetoric. The blood of our children forces us to call things by their actual names. A genocide continues in front of our eyes and we have normalised it, just as our enemy wanted. History will show us no mercy, nor will future generations, and most importantly, God will not forgive us for our silence.

The support for Israel by the US, especially under the Trump administration constitutes not just an insult to Palestinians but explicit hostility to humanity itself. Diplomatic statements and carefully worded condemnations are no longer sufficient—history will judge our response, and future generations will ask whether we remained silent in the face of such undeniable injustice.

In closing, I extend my deep gratitude to the National Citizens Party for their statement of solidarity. Their support gives hope to the Palestinian people and strengthens their resolve in the struggle for freedom. It also reaffirms that advocacy for Palestine is not bound by borders and that Bangladesh continues to stand on the right side of history, generation after generation.