

## Shun all flawed development plans

### Govt must reassess move to expand Ctg-Cox’s Bazar highway through wildlife sanctuary

The ongoing conflict over the expansion of the Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar highway through the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary reveals a deep-seated disconnect within the government agencies. The Roads and Highways Department (RHD) is reportedly pushing a plan that, in the name of development, would inflict irreversible damage on one of the country’s most vital ecosystems. This short-sighted approach must be re-evaluated.

The RHD’s proposal to widen a 63km section of the highway into a six-lane behemoth is a direct threat to the sanctuary, which is home to 372 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, including several endangered species. It also serves as a crucial elephant corridor. Forest officials and environmentalists rightly warn that a wider road will make it “nearly impossible” for wild animals to cross, leading to a surge in roadkill and permanent habitat fragmentation. The existing two-lane highway, along with the recently constructed Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar railway line, already poses a mortal danger to wildlife. An expanded highway will amplify this peril.

While we recognise the project’s aim to accommodate rising traffic and leverage the Matarbari Deep Sea Port, this also embodies the fallacy of choice that prioritises economic progress at the expense of ecological integrity. Such pursuits cannot be used as an excuse to neglect critical conservation needs. The Forest Department’s recommendation to build a 10km flyover over the sanctuary, along with additional overpasses and underpasses, is seemingly a responsible path forward. While RHD officials deem this financially unviable, their alternative—a mere 700 metre flyover and a few scattered underpasses—is a woefully inadequate compromise that will do little to mitigate the harm the project would cause.

The government’s previous actions, such as revoking the protected status of forestland for the railway line and felling 240,000 trees as part of that undertaking, already set a dangerous precedent. The promise of “sufficient” underpasses for the railway was broken, with only three structures built, one of which remains unusable. This record of negligence and unfulfilled promises shows a tendency to place infrastructure projects above the protection of natural heritage. The RHD must not be allowed to repeat this mistake.

The delay in a survey by the Japan International Cooperation Agency due to a lack of consensus provides a useful window of opportunity. Rather than simply haggling over the length of a flyover, all stakeholders—RHD, the Forest Department, and international partners—must re-evaluate the project in its entirety. An alternative route or plan of action should be seriously considered as a way to achieve connectivity goals without sacrificing the sanctuary.

The government must make genuine efforts to protect the Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary. The survival of Asian elephants and other endangered species in this region depends on the government making the right choice. True progress is not measured by the number of lanes on a highway, but by our ability to coexist with nature. This is not just a plea for elephants, though that is vital; it is a call to preserve the ecological foundation upon which our future depends.

## Reopen Osmani Udyan to the public

### Complete the remaining work as soon as possible

It is deeply disappointing to witness the fate of Dhaka’s Osmani Udyan that has remained inaccessible to the public for nearly eight years. Once a refuge for residents seeking relief from the city’s chaos, this vital green space has been caught in a cycle of mismanagement and inefficiency with the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) missing numerous deadlines to complete its renovation. Although 92 percent of the work is said to be done, construction has remained stalled since June 30 last year, when the latest deadline expired. The question is: why is there no urgency to complete the remaining work? In a city where parks and green spaces are becoming scarce, depriving residents like this is totally unacceptable.

Reportedly, the DSCC began the renovation work of the 29-acre park in 2017. Originally slated for completion in 2018, the project was halted for nearly two years after the first contractor was removed for allegedly breaching contract terms. Since then, the DSCC has repeatedly extended deadlines—to June 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022—without delivering results. Even after new contractors were appointed in September 2023 and an additional Tk 61 crore was added to the already hefty budget of Tk 86 crore, the finishing work is still pending. According to one urban planner, the park could have been reopened long ago if the city corporation had real accountability.

Dhaka is already starved of public spaces with its parks, playgrounds, and green spaces fast disappearing due to neglect and unplanned urban expansion. The protracted closure of Shishu Park, a recreational hub for children in the capital, is another example of inefficiency and mismanagement. This park has remained closed since January 2019, and the authorities have yet to provide clear updates on the renovation progress. Both the Osmani Udyan and Shishu Park are meant to serve as affordable, accessible breathing spaces for families and children, yet they remain unusable. The destruction of Panthakunja Park by the Dhaka Elevated Expressway Authority is yet another example of how the city’s green spaces are being sacrificed for one reason or another.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to take immediate measures to complete the remaining work of Osmani Udyan and open it to the public. At the same time, the government must investigate the causes of repeated delays in the work and hold those responsible to account, so that such failures are not repeated in future projects. Going forward, all urban development initiatives must adhere to clear timelines, effective supervision, and prioritise public welfare.

### HC RULING ON HATIRJHEEL-PANTHAKUNJA

# Time to restore Dhaka’s green spaces

Amirul Rajiv and Naim Ul Hasan  
are coordinators at the Bangladesh  
Tree Protection Movement.

AMIRUL RAJIV and  
NAIM UL HASAN

One of the defining features of the previous developmental regime was its pursuit of unnecessary or ill conceived projects that risked becoming burdens in the future. There are numerous examples of such projects. A number of them were highlighted in the white paper on the state of Bangladesh’s economy prepared by the interim government earlier in its tenure. But sadly, it has failed to take any initiative to address this issue. On the contrary, instead of reviewing the projects or exposing any shady contracts with foreign governments, it has kept doubling down on them. One such case saw the government resume work on the FDC-to-Palashi extension of the Dhaka elevated expressway through the Hatirjheel Lake and Panthakunja Park, despite warnings from experts, widespread public outcry, numerous letters, and 168 days of sit-ins by members of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement.

Against this backdrop, the High Court on September 10, following a writ petition, issued a stay order restraining the government from carrying out any construction work at Panthakunja Park and Hatirjheel Lake. It also directed the relevant authorities to open the park for public use and restore Hatirjheel’s original waterbody from Moghbazar to the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC) premises. Later, on September 16, the Supreme Court chamber judge upheld the High Court’s order for the time being and asked the government to file a leave-to-appeal petition if it wished to challenge the decision.

This being the situation, let us take a look at some aspects of the project to understand how things came to this point.

The Awami League government initiated the elevated expressway project in 2011, and its deadline has since been pushed back repeatedly. The main design has also undergone several changes due to poor coordination among various government agencies, including the

two Dhaka city corporations, RAJUK, and the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority. In 2021, the FDC-to-Palashi ramp was added under the Support to Dhaka Elevated Expressway PPP Project. The main idea behind the expressway was to allow commuters to bypass Dhaka’s notoriously congested traffic through a circular route. But repeated design changes resulted in several ramps being placed inside the city itself, including the FDC-to-Palashi one, making things worse for the city dwellers.

Between 2023 and 2024, more than 10 acres of Hatirjheel Lake were filled to construct the ramp, according to a report published in October last

Division of the Supreme Court had already ruled any construction on Hatirjheel waterbody illegal while ruling against the BGMEA building in 2017. The expressway extension project also violates several laws and guidelines, including the Detailed Area Plan finalised in 2022, which prohibited filling any waterbody in the metropolitan region, and the Playground, Open Space, Park, and Natural Water Reservoir Conservation Act, 2000, which forbids altering the nature of waterbodies. The government entities responsible for protecting these spaces and waterbodies were unable to act due to the direct involvement of the Prime

institutions. Having an exit for high-speed vehicles from the expressway on such a sensitive, narrow road raises a serious safety question, and the impact on the environment of those institutions could be significant. Experts frequently highlight Dhaka’s earthquake risks and lack of preparedness in this regard. Building a flyover on these narrow roads will undoubtedly increase the danger in the event of fire, earthquake, or any other disaster for the residents of Kathalbag and Kalabagan areas.

There is another legal issue with Panthakunja Park. In 2015, after the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) filed a writ petition challenging the construction of a Secondary Transfer Station (for waste management) at Panthakunja Park, a division bench of the High Court ruled in BELA’s favour, declaring the STS construction illegal. It also directed that the park be protected and maintained as an “open space,” in accordance with the city’s master plan. Despite these clear instructions, the interim authorities destroyed the lush green park and continued work on the extension. No environmental clearance certificate was taken for this construction work either, according to a letter from the Department of Environment, issued after an RTI request filed by the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement.

This tendency to overlook court directives, legal prohibitions, or public concerns was understandable under an autocratic regime. But following the bloody uprising of July 2024, there was hope that the rule of law would be upheld and that the interim government would break the cycle of disrespect shown towards the courts by the previous regime. Yet, to our surprise, this government seems to be following the same path. The government must remember that its duty is to listen to the people, not the other way round. We sincerely hope it will respect the court orders, and immediately halt construction of the elevated expressway from FDC to Palashi. The restoration work for Panthakunja and Hatirjheel should also start immediately to protect the local biodiversity, bird nesting areas, and the city’s ever-diminishing green spaces.



The government has already cut down nearly 2,000 trees of 40 different species in Panthakunja Park.

PHOTO: TANJIMUL TUHIN

year. The report also cited locals who claimed that waterlogging problems had worsened as a result. While reviewing the project documents, an astonishing detail came to light—the originally planned route for the expressway ran just behind the Pan Pacific Sonargaon hotel and the surrounding commercial area; but then the design was changed, shifting it from the commercial zone to a highly dense residential area that also houses several schools and colleges. And the consultant responsible for this change was also the consultant for the Sonargaon hotel extension project. This is a clear case of conflict of interest, and a blatant attempt to put the interests of private commercial entities over those of the public.

It can be recalled that the Appellate

Minister’s Office (PMO) under the previous autocratic regime. But what’s stopping the present administration from suspending this work?

The damage has already been substantial. In December 2024, the government cut down nearly 2,000 trees of 40 different species in Panthakunja Park, one of the few remaining green open spaces in one of the busiest parts of the city. The plan was to build a ramp at the already overburdened Karwan Bazar intersection and a flyover along the narrow roads of Hatirpool, Katabon, and Nilkhet, which would land at the Palashi intersection. If we consider the exit point of the flyover, on one side is Dhaka University, directly ahead is BUET, and on the other side are Eden College and several other educational

# At 80, the UN is fighting for relevance



Daniel Warner  
is the author of *An Ethic of Responsibility  
in International Relations* (Lynne Rienner).  
He lives in Geneva.

DANIEL WARNER

Amid the furore over Charlie Kirk’s assassination, Russia’s threatening drones in Poland, and Israel’s now-confirmed genocide in Gaza and aggression against its neighbours, is it worth marking the United Nations’ 80th anniversary? Counterintuitively, this may be precisely the right moment. Calls for ceasefires and peaceful solutions to inter-state conflicts echo US calls for depolarisation and dialogue. The UN’s failures to secure international peace and security mirror US domestic failures to nurture civilised dialogue and uphold full human rights for all. At best, the UN’s 80th anniversary serves as a reminder of values beyond misplaced nationalism, tribal fidelity and wanton violence. The organisation should take pride in having outlasted the League of Nations—only 26 years—but also recognise that, as turning 80 is critical for individuals, this anniversary is critical for the UN’s continuing relevance.

The UN’s 80th anniversary has prompted efforts to revitalise the organisation. The UN80 Initiative, launched in early 2025, is less a triumphal celebration of reaching 80 than a serious attempt to overhaul an organisation seemingly in intensive care. Institutions, like individuals, require constant re-energising, and 80 is a pivotal moment. Officially, according to a March 2025 UN press release, “the UN80 Initiative builds on ongoing efforts, including the Pact for the Future and UN 2.0, which aim to update the UN’s structures, priorities, and operations for the 21st century.” The initiative “seeks to

develop proposals in three key areas,” Secretary-General António Guterres stated, “identifying efficiencies and improvements, reviewing the implementation of mandates from Member States, and a strategic review of deeper, more structural changes and programme realignment.”

As with any enterprise, public or private, the UN’s reworking begins with finances. The organisation faces a mounting liquidity crisis. “For at least the past seven years, the UN has faced a liquidity crisis because not all Member States pay in full, and many also do not pay on time,” Guterres explained. As of March 11, 2025, the press release noted, “only 75 of the 193 Member States have paid their assessed contributions in full towards the \$3.72 billion 2025 budget for the Organisation.”

Short of funds and struggling to deliver on its primary function of securing peace and security in the Middle East and Ukraine, why should the UN not go the way of its short-lived predecessor, the League of Nations?

**A premature announcement of the UN’s death**

Not everything about turning 80 is negative. In an interview, Georges Abi-Saab—eminent legal scholar, former professor and judge, and confidant of UN secretaries general—offered three optimistic insights:

First, the UN remains the only universal forum for the collective will of the international community. “The United Nations is the only universal forum which can express and legitimise the collective will of the international community,” Abi-Saab

observed. For instance, the veto-bound Security Council (SC) nevertheless managed to condemn the recent strike on Qatar’s capital, Doha—even if it did not mention Israel. All 15 SC members agreed. Workarounds to SC deadlock exist, Abi-Saab noted, citing the General Assembly’s “Uniting for Peace” Resolution as described by Richard Falk in an interview with Daniel Falcone. Under that precedent, Israel has until September 18, 2025, to comply with the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion to withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territory, dismantle settlements and evacuate settlers. Should Israel fail to comply—as seems likely—the General Assembly could implement several measures based on historical precedent. It could, for example, deploy a UN peacekeeping or civilian protection force. The organisation currently deploys some 60,000 peacekeepers worldwide.

Second, the UN successes extend beyond peace and security. “Discussion of the United Nations’ successes and failures should not be confined to peace and security,” Abi-Saab emphasised. “Attention should also be given to its lateral, specialised agencies, such as those dealing with the environment.” Recently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) celebrated the entry into force of a trade deal curbing subsidies for harmful fishing. At least two-thirds of member states had to ratify the deal for it to take effect—an important victory for environmental protection and multilateralism. (Abi-Saab is a former president of the WTO Appellate Body’s Dispute Settlement Organ.)

Third, the resistance to anti-multilateralism exists. “There are signs of resistance to Donald Trump’s anti-multilateralism—evidence of a coalition of the willing to counter him,” Abi-Saab explained. He added that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is not an alternative multilateral structure to the UN. China seeks smooth external

state relations within the UN system while resisting domestic criticisms from bodies like the UN Human Rights Council. According to Abi-Saab, the SCO’s goal is to create an alternative multilateral payment system outside the dollar, not to supplant the United Nations itself.

**UN and US renewal?**

Is the UN’s inability to implement many of its guiding principles akin to failures within the United States itself? Where is the sense of community or common good—*erga omnes*—internationally and domestically? While renewed populism, nationalism and isolationism hamper international cooperation, the assassination of Charlie Kirk reflects a parallel lack of serious dialogue across the US political spectrum. The similarities between blocked international cooperation and US political polarisation are hard to miss. Negotiation and compromise are as essential between states as they are between individuals.

Speaking at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1863, following one of the American Civil War’s bloodiest battles, President Abraham Lincoln envisioned US renewal. “Four score and seven years” after the country’s founding, Lincoln referred to a “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” The Preamble of the United Nations Charter begins, “We the Peoples of the United Nations.” Lincoln emphasised people; the UN begins with people. If Lincoln could speak of “a new birth of freedom” some 80 years after the nation was “brought forth” by the Founding Fathers, the UN80 Initiative seeks a similar rebirth for the only universal intergovernmental organisation. When Lincoln declared that “the government...shall not perish from the earth,” could the same be said of the United Nations? In only 57 countries and regions worldwide do people enjoy a life expectancy above 80. Will the UN achieve such longevity, as well as relevance, beyond its 80th year?