The Daily Star
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Quake defences delayed by red tape

Govt must urgently open the quake safety assessment facility

When the ground shook violently on November 21, the city's seismic assessment system was, quite literally, locked. For 16 months, the Urban Safety and Resilience Institute (USRI) in Mohakhali has stood as a 10-storey monument to waste. Completed in June 2024 and funded by the World Bank, the Tk 250 crore facility was meant to be the capital's seismic sentinel. Yet, while the fault lines have been active, the bureaucracy has remained comatose.

The problem is not a lack of expertise, but the absence of paperwork. Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), the capital's development authority, claims it has been waiting for ministry approval to operationalise a "deed of trust." Only after last weekend's triple shock did Rajuk hurriedly send the necessary files to the housing and public works ministry, as this newspaper reports. It is a classic case of administrative reflex: a flurry of paper-pushing that begins only after the crisis has arrived.

In geology, stasis is usually reassuring. In governance, it is dangerous. Dhaka's residents were reminded of this on Friday, when a magnitude 5.7 earthquake struck Madhabdi, just outside the teeming capital. It was the strongest tremor in decades—cracking walls, claiming at least 10 lives, and sending lakhs into the streets. But the earth had more to say. Over the next 32 hours, two additional tremors followed, including a magnitude 3.7 jolt in Badda, a dense neighbourhood at the city's core.

Nerves are frayed. Yet, the nation's earthquake preparedness remains stuck in the shivering inaction that paralyses USRI, the very institution designed to safeguard the public. Inside the building sits a laboratory stocked with European gadgetry—terrestrial laser scanners, ground-penetrating radar, tri-axial testing systems. These machines can peer into concrete beams and count rebar without scratching the paint. They are the difference between knowing a building will stand and simply hoping it will. The timing makes the negligence even starker. Dhaka's sprawling periphery rests on soft alluvial soil that amplifies seismic waves; it is a vertical city built on hope and, too often, dubious concrete. A pilot assessment under the project examined some 3,250 schools and hospitals, identifying 42 buildings needing immediate demolition and 200 requiring retrofitting. Extrapolate that across a metropolis of over two crore people—where rapid urbanisation has easily outpaced regulation—and the scale of vulnerability becomes painfully clear. Leaving these diagnostic tools unused at USRI while the ground moves beneath us is both negligent and dangerous.

High-tech equipment atrophies when idle. The sensors and scanners at USRI have already missed a year of maintenance. Still, the Rajuk chairman insists he is "very positive" that the institute will launch now that the paperwork is moving. One hopes so. But earthquakes do not wait for bureaucrats to approve deeds of trust. If we want to survive the "big one," we must understand that resilience requires more than constructing a building or purchasing expensive equipment; it demands that the equipment is switched on.

Ensure regular water supply to Ctg residents

CWasa must urgently replace its old pipelines

We are concerned by the severe water shortages faced by nearly 40,000 consumers in Chattogram as CWasa's decades-old pipelines continue to collapse. A report published in this daily reveals that thousands of residents in the city are forced to wait late into the night just to collect enough water for basic daily use. Many must stay awake for hours to fill their reservoirs during short, irregular supply windows. Others, despite having official connections, have not received a single drop of water for years.

Reportedly, the root of the crisis lies in the outdated uPVC and cement pipelines installed 35 to 40 years ago. These brittle lines can no longer withstand the pressure required for uninterrupted supply. CWasa has divided the city network into six sectors, and five of them still rely on 375 kilometres of old pipelines spanning Barik Building to Patenga, Khulshi to AK Khan, Amin Jute Mill to Oxygen, Bahaddarhat to Mohra, and Khaja Road to Chaktai. These five sectors serve nearly 40,000 customers, almost half of CWasa's 90,846 billable connections. The worst-hit Barik Building to Patenga sector alone affects around 15,000 people. For many affected residents and businesses, the only alternative is to buy water at high prices from private sellers, deepening their financial burden. That some households continue to pay minimum monthly bills despite never receiving any water at all is particularly concerning.

It is most unfortunate that CWasa has not been able to modernise its infrastructure in line with the growing demands of a rapidly expanding city. Over the past decade and a half, it reportedly implemented eight small and large water supply projects at a cost of Tk 8,800 crore. Yet, no pipeline connections have been installed in more than a hundred areas, leaving at least 12 lakh people facing an acute water crisis. What is surprising is that even after six decades of operation, CWasa still does not have a master plan, which is essential for its effective functioning.

We urge the CWasa authorities to urgently replace its crumbling pipelines and ensure smooth and regular water supply for all its consumers. While CWasa officials have acknowledged the degraded state of the infrastructure and stated that a project to replace all outdated lines by 2029 is underway, this timeline offers little comfort to consumers currently living without proper access to water. The agency, therefore, must accelerate the replacement process, prioritising the most severely affected sectors. Interim measures, such as alternative supply arrangements and billing waivers for consumers not receiving water, are equally essential.

Global South to write the 21st century's growth story

MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

As the impacts of climate change become more severe with deadly heatwaves, eroding coastlines, rising food prices, and increasing social and economic instability, affected countries, particularly poor ones, are getting concerned about having to slow their development while addressing climate change. However, climate change economist Nicholas Stern's new book, *The Growth Story of the 21st Century: The Economics and Opportunity of Climate Action,* offers a compelling and optimistic perspective that growth and climate action can be aligned, and that this approach is especially promising for developing countries. In the preface, Stern states, "There is no horse race between climate action on the one hand and economic development and poverty reduction on the other. They go hand-in-hand."

The book presents a new development narrative centred on cleaner technologies, smarter systems, greater resilience, and unmatched global opportunities. This comes at a time when traditional paths to industrialisation are closing, fossil fuels are becoming less cost-effective, and climate risks are increasing at a pace that threatens to undo decades of economic progress. The book's messages—some discussed here—are relevant to climate-vulnerable countries like Bangladesh.

For example, Stern argues that the world is undergoing a profound shift in defining growth. The 20th-century model built on fossil fuels, resource-intensive industries, deforestation, and sprawling cities generates more risk than prosperity. In its place, a new growth story is emerging, powered not by extraction and pollution but by investment, innovation, and efficiency. Stern identifies six powerful forces—rapid technological advances, falling costs of clean energy, improvements in system-wide productivity, healthier populations, smarter use of resources, and rising investment in future industries—which form the backbone of a more dynamic and resilient economic model. This transformation is most visible in how technology is reshaping opportunities: solar power has become the cheapest energy source in history; batteries and electric vehicles are transforming transport; artificial intelligence is revolutionising agriculture and energy management; and low-carbon steel, green hydrogen, and carbon-neutral building materials are moving from laboratories to markets. As firms invest in these new technologies, they learn by doing, driving costs down and accelerating innovation. Smarter planning of cities, transport, land, and water further boosts productivity and human well-being. Meanwhile, cleaner air and healthier people strengthen economies from within. For Stern, this technological revolution is the centre of a new development model that promises cleaner, more resilient, and more competitive growth for the decades ahead.

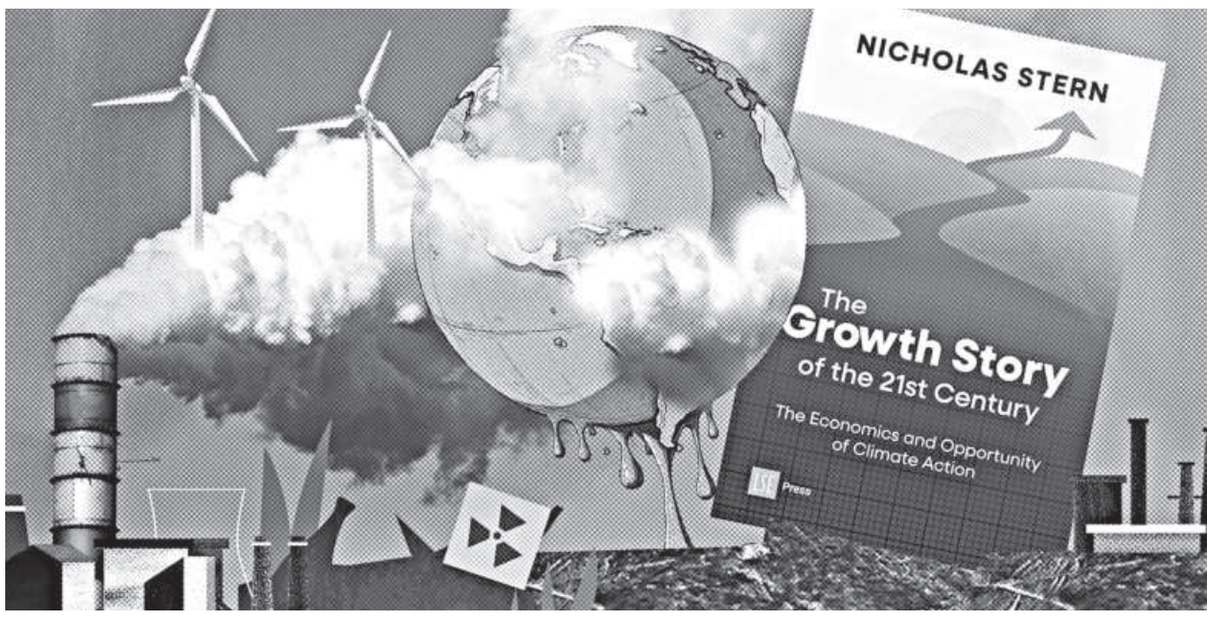
Interestingly, Stern argues that countries shaping this decisive moment of structural transformation will not be the traditional industrial powers but the emerging economies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He lays out how rapid technological change, cleaner energy systems, and new industrial opportunities can drive a profound shift in development strategies. For these regions, where most of the world's future infrastructure and urban expansion will occur, the transition to low-carbon systems is essential for both climate stability and the pathway to growth, jobs, and competitiveness. Since much of the infrastructure is yet to be built, developing economies have the rare opportunity to leapfrog past high-polluting models and adopt cleaner, more efficient technologies from the outset. If they seize this moment, they can build modern, resilient cities, diversify their economies, and unlock new sources of productivity.

Stern extends this argument to the global level, showing how climate action and clean technology are redrawing the world's economic geography. Renewable energy, critical minerals, artificial intelligence, and new supply chains are shifting power and opportunities toward the Global South. Countries such as Kenya, Morocco, Ethiopia, Nepal, Paraguay, and Vietnam are already demonstrating how renewables can support development, while India, Brazil, South Africa, and others are emerging as major players in clean industries, critical minerals, and green innovation. Simultaneously, climate impacts, resource distributions, and capital flows are forcing a rethinking of global economic interdependence. The world will have to adjust to a more multipolar economy where emerging markets become central drivers of global production, investment, and innovation, if they are supported by affordable finance and fair international cooperation.

However, capital is most expensive for the countries that need it most. Risk perceptions are high. Financial markets are shallow. Interest rates are prohibitive. The result is a tragic and costly paradox. Many clean projects in developing countries are profitable in principle but unaffordable in practice.

This is why Stern emphasises reforming the international financial architecture. He argues that multilateral development banks must expand their balance sheets, while rich countries must not only meet but exceed their climate finance commitments. Concessional finance windows must be scaled up dramatically so that developing countries can make the necessary long-term investments. At the same time, blended finance should be used more effectively to reduce risks for private capital. Meanwhile, "country platforms" should coherently coordinate public and private investment. Stressing that global trade and investment rules must support the green transition, Stern writes, "A new approach to growth and development must emphasise partnership and offer and facilitate funding that is structured to support and empower, rather than burden, developing nations."

He also highlights an important geopolitical shift: the industrialised West dominated climate negotiations for decades, often with limited success, but now, emerging economies are stepping forward. Four consecutive G20 presidencies, including Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024), and South Africa (2025), have placed sustainable development, green growth, and climate finance at the centre of the global economic agenda. However, the underlying problem of unequal influence in global decision-making, which leaves the majority of countries out of the decision-making process, remains unresolved. As Stern describes, "The problem may have changed shape and, to some extent, diminished with the increasing role of the G20, but it has not gone away."



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Stern, however, recognises the disruptions that will come with the shift as economies develop, some jobs disappear, while many new ones are created. Workers in traditional industries will face uncertainty. Consumers, especially those on low incomes, might see rising costs during the transition. Therefore, he argues that protecting vulnerable households, investing in new skills, and ensuring fairness in policy creation are crucial not only for justice but also for maintaining public support. Transition policies should involve not only technocrats and investors but also workers, communities, and civil society.

The strongest message of Stern's book is one of possibilities. The 21st century's growth story is waiting to be written. It is the Global South's moment of opportunity and whether it is materialised and becomes a story of shared progress or irreversible loss now depends on the choices policymakers, investors, and global institutions make.

University dormitories must be part of the earthquake conversation

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The earthquake of November 21 once again exposed the serious weaknesses in Bangladesh's built environment. At least 10 people lost their lives, including in Dhaka, where many buildings tilted dangerously, developed cracks, and some of their parts collapsed. Panic and chaos were triggered in all major cities. Predictably, the immediate national debate focused on unplanned urbanisation, inadequate monitoring, and the vulnerability of structures. However, public discussion is incomplete if it leaves out one vital area: the condition of university residential halls.

While citizens, policymakers, and experts debate the dangers of faulty urban buildings, thousands of students sleep every night in structures that are just as unsafe—if not more. The dormitories of public universities represent a silent crisis in Bangladesh's earthquake preparedness. While some of the halls have stood for many decades, some date back to even the British era. These buildings were constructed at a time when seismic awareness, engineering technology, and safety regulations were far less advanced. Over the decades, they have suffered from deterioration, ageing materials, inconsistent maintenance, and continuous overcrowding. Despite these risks, the halls remain packed with students because no safer alternative exists.

This situation is the product of prolonged administrative and governmental indifference. University infrastructures have long been viewed as permanent and unchangeable, rather than dynamic structures that require inspection, reinforcement, or reconstruction. Small cracks and other hazards, including electrical ones, are often dismissed instead of being viewed as early warnings of a catastrophe. Bureaucratic inefficiency delays even the most basic repairs. Budgets for renovation move slowly, and political influence affects construction decisions. Such complacency is dangerous, especially when these structures house thousands of young people in tightly packed spaces.

Students are, in fact, among the most vulnerable groups in the country when it comes to earthquake risks. Spaces designed for two people now hold four or more. Exit routes are often unplanned, and evacuation training is almost nonexistent. Students have limited time and power to demand renovations or structural assessments, while the authorities show little urgency in addressing these dangers.

Bangladesh lies in a seismically active zone, and experts have repeatedly warned that a major quake could strike at any time. If structures in Dhaka can fail during a moderate quake, the condition of decades-old university residential halls should alarm everyone. Ignoring them because they are not located in busy commercial zones is a grave mistake. A collapse in a university hall can cause mass casualties in minutes, overwhelming emergency services and leaving the nation shaken by a tragedy that could have been prevented.

However, that requires decisive and immediate action. Bangladesh urgently needs a nationwide, independent structural audit of all public university dormitories by qualified engineers. The results must be made publicly available for accountability. Buildings found to be unsafe must undergo retrofitting using modern reinforcement techniques, including steel bracing, column strengthening, and the introduction of seismic-resistant features. Some older structures may be beyond repair; in those cases, new earthquake-resistant halls must be built as replacements.

At the same time, universities must also implement proper evacuation systems. Clearly marked exit routes, regular earthquake drills, trained hall staff, and designated assembly points can significantly reduce casualties even in the case of structural damage. Safety education should be mandatory for students living in residential halls, ensuring that they know how to act during emergencies.

Most importantly, university campuses must be fully integrated into the national framework of disaster preparedness. Earthquake resilience cannot be viewed as an urban-only issue. Campuses are densely populated communities, and their buildings must follow the Bangladesh National Building Code and relevant safety guidelines. The Ministry of Education, the University Grants Commission, and university administrations must work together for an accountability system that includes annual inspections, penalties for negligence, and strict oversight of construction and repair work.

The November 21 earthquake points out that students, who represent the country's future, should not be living in structures that could turn into death traps during a major seismic event. A nation committed to resilience, safety, and progress must prioritise the protection of its young population.

Earthquake safety in university dormitories is not a matter of luxury—it is a matter of urgency. Bangladesh can no longer afford to look away.

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