

Poison on the plate?

Implement court directive to phase out harmful pesticides

Consider a winter meal on a typical dining table. It includes beans, tomatoes and cauliflowers—a diet that, on the surface, appears wholesome. Yet, according to a chilling new study, to eat one's greens in Bangladesh is to play Russian roulette with one's health, metaphorically speaking. Recent tests on winter vegetables have revealed that nearly three-quarters exceeded maximum residue limits for pesticides; half of all cauliflowers and over 90 percent of beans were contaminated. Evidently, in its rush to secure food self-sufficiency, Bangladesh has allowed its fields to become a chemical wild west.

The study, funded by the Global Environment Facility, has identified at least 17 "active pesticide ingredients" currently in use that are classified as highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs) by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization. These are not benign additives. As this newspaper has reported, they include chemicals like paraquat, a herbicide banned in the European Union and dozens of other nations for its tendency to damage human lungs and kidneys, and glyphosate, a probable carcinogen. In Bangladesh, however, they are being sprayed with abandon.

The result is a slow-motion poisoning of both the consumer and the farmer. In the countryside, where protective gear is often nothing more than a rag wrapped around a face, farmers are inhaling toxins that cause immediate respiratory distress and long-term neurological risks. A recent review suggests that over a third of farmers suffer acute symptoms after spraying. It is a grim irony that the very people labouring to feed the nation are doing so at grave personal risk.

Regulatory inertia is largely to blame for this. The number of pesticide companies in the country has surged sevenfold since 2010, flooding the market with over 8,000 products. The bureaucracy has failed to keep pace with this. Despite a 2020 High Court directive to phase out glyphosate and other toxins, the government has dragged its feet. The Department of Agricultural Extension's Plant Protection Wing appears toothless, unable to enforce rules or educate a workforce that sprays chemicals with terrifying zeal—sometimes up to 150 times in a single crop cycle.

Some might argue that Bangladesh, a land-scarce delta teeming with people, cannot afford a collapse in crop yields, and that banning efficient pest killers may lead to a food shortage. But this is a false dichotomy. The choice here is not between starvation and poisoning, but between lazy governance and innovation. There are safer, albeit sometimes more expensive, alternatives to HHPs. Integrated pest management and biopesticides exist, but they require an administration capable of policing supply chains and training farmers.

At present, the steady rise in pesticide use—topping 40,000 tonnes last year—suggests that the chemicals lobby is winning. The government must, therefore, decide whose side it is on. A phased ban on the worst offenders is long overdue. Then again, a ban on paper is useless without boots in the muddy fields to enforce it. While the country has made admirable strides in feeding its population, we must remember that a full stomach offers no protection against a poisoned future.

DU dormitories need urgent repair

Neglect and weak maintenance are putting thousands at risk

We are deeply concerned by the vulnerable condition of many Dhaka University residential halls, which were once again exposed by the recent earthquake. For years, experts have warned that these ageing dormitories are structurally weak, yet university authorities have repeatedly ignored the warnings. The 5.7 magnitude quake left fresh cracks in at least 12 halls and plaster peeled off in numerous areas, injuring several students. Thousands now live in constant fear that the next tremor could bring catastrophic collapse. Meanwhile, frustrated by years of inaction by the authorities, students of Mohsin Hall temporarily moved into unused staff flats to protest their unsafe living conditions. This is truly unfortunate.

Reportedly, since 2008, experts, including teams from Buet, have inspected multiple halls and recommended major structural repairs, retrofitting, and even evacuation in some cases. But only emergency fixes were carried out. Mohsin Hall, Surja Sen Hall, Shahidullah Hall, Zahirul Huq Hall, and others remain in the same compromised state identified more than a decade ago. Sir Salimullah Muslim Hall, flagged as the most vulnerable, was recommended for evacuation by Buet in 2021, yet no impactful action has been taken. Instead of being renovated or rebuilt, these halls continue to house thousands of students everyday.

According to DU engineers, at the core of this crisis lies chronic underfunding and longstanding neglect in building maintenance. While money is allocated for development, almost nothing is provided for routine maintenance. Only emergency repairs are undertaken, and expert recommendations for major renovations are left unimplemented. Around Tk 22 crore has been spent on the maintenance of seven to eight halls in the last five fiscal years, when fully renovating a single hall would cost nearly Tk 20 crore. This mismatch in funding makes meaningful repairs impossible.

After the quake, DU announced a two-week vacation to repair the dormitories, and some other universities, including Jagannath University, temporarily suspended classes and exams. But campus closures will not solve the problem; all public universities must ensure that student halls are structurally safe. They must establish proper evacuation systems with clear exit signs, regular drills, trained staff, and designated gathering points. Most importantly, campuses must be integrated into the national disaster preparedness framework. For DU, both immediate and coordinated long-term action are essential. High-risk halls need full structural audits, and unsafe buildings must be evacuated and retrofitted or rebuilt. The government should allocate dedicated maintenance funds, and a joint task force of DU, Buet, and relevant agencies should oversee the implementation. DU must act before a preventable tragedy unfolds.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Nobel Prizes established

On this day in 1895, Alfred Bernhard Nobel—Swedish chemist, engineer, and inventor of dynamite—signed his will establishing the Nobel Prizes.

EDITORIAL

Time to recognise the emotional toll of river erosion



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In the quiet villages along the banks of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, a slow disaster unfolds year after year. Homes vanish overnight, land disappears beneath spinning currents, and families are forced to flee with little more than the clothes on their backs. Yet, amid the visible destruction caused by riverbank erosion, an invisible crisis brews—one that affects the minds and hearts of those left behind.

Riverbank erosion is not new to Bangladesh. It is a recurring disaster that displaces hundreds of thousands annually. But what has remained largely unaddressed is the psychological toll it takes on the affected population. Our paper titled "Effect of riverbank erosion on mental health of the affected people in Bangladesh," published in *PLOS ONE* in 2021, co-authored by Md Jahangir Alam, Md Rezaul Haque and me, explored the mental health consequences of riverbank erosion in two of the most erosion-prone districts of the country: Rajbari and Tangail. The findings were stark and deeply troubling.

We surveyed 611 households, of which 83 percent had been directly exposed to erosion. Using the Depression Anxiety Scales (DASS-21) and statistical tools, we found that 38 percent of respondents showed symptoms of depression, 76 percent suffered from anxiety, and 32 percent experienced stress. In fact, exposed individuals were 8.3 times more likely to suffer from depression, 2.3 times more likely to experience anxiety, and 5.1 times more likely to be stressed compared to their non-exposed counterparts.

The mental health burden was not evenly distributed. Women, particularly housewives, were disproportionately affected. Older individuals, the uneducated, and those with larger families also showed higher rates of psychological distress. The economic dimension was equally critical—respondents with lower monthly incomes were more vulnerable, and those who had lost cultivable land or

livestock faced compounded stress due to financial insecurity.

One of the most revealing aspects of the study was the impact of displacement. People who had been forced to relocate within the past three years were significantly more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress. These individuals often found themselves outside the reach



FILE PHOTO: AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU

of government support systems, struggling to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar environments. The trauma of sudden displacement, coupled with the lack of institutional assistance, created a perfect storm for mental health deterioration.

This crisis is particularly ironic when viewed through the lens of global economic geography. As Jeffrey D'Sachs notes in *The Ages of Globalization: Geography, Technology, and Institutions*, proximity to rivers and coasts has historically been a major advantage for economic development. Waterways have long offered the cheapest and most efficient means of transporting goods, fostering trade, agriculture, and urban growth. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*,

intricate network of rivers and a long coastline. But for many of its citizens, this geographic gift has turned into a curse. Instead of prosperity, proximity to rivers now brings displacement, trauma, and mental illness. The very waterways that once sustained livelihoods are now eroding them—physically and psychologically.

Importantly, riverbank erosion is not solely a natural phenomenon. Anthropogenic activities—particularly indiscriminate sand extraction from riverbeds—have accelerated erosion in many regions. These practices, often driven by short-term economic interests, destabilise riverbanks and increase the vulnerability of nearby communities. Recognising these human-induced factors is essential for crafting effective and just policy

responses.

The emotional wounds of erosion go beyond the loss of property. Families often lose ancestral graveyards—sacred spaces that connect generations and hold deep cultural significance. The disappearance of these sites is not just a physical loss but a spiritual and emotional rupture. For many, it feels like losing a part of their identity.

Another devastating consequence is the sudden collapse of dignity in society. Riverbank erosion can turn well-off families destitute overnight. The psychological shock of losing status, security, and social standing is profound. Unlike some other natural disasters, erosion often strikes without warning, and its victims carry the burden silently.

Despite the gravity of the situation, mental health remains a neglected area in Bangladesh's disaster response framework. The country's mental health infrastructure is underdeveloped, and awareness about psychological disorders is limited. Climate change is expected to exacerbate the frequency and intensity of riverbank erosion. As extreme weather events become more common, the number of displaced individuals will rise, and so will the mental health burden. Without proactive measures, Bangladesh risks facing a silent epidemic of psychological disorders among its most vulnerable populations.

Bangladesh cannot afford to overlook the people who live by its rivers, as they are the backbone of the river economy. The government must act decisively: integrate mental health into disaster response, expand targeted social safety nets, regulate sand extraction, and ensure fair access to reclaimed land for agricultural use. As seen in Tangail, access to land can significantly reduce psychological distress by restoring livelihoods and a sense of stability. Education is key. Families that educate their children adapt far better to crises. Targeted educational support for displaced households should be a priority. European nations have already shown the way, securing vulnerable communities through robust social protection and climate adaptation strategies. Bangladesh must follow suit. Behind every collapsed home is a story of loss, fear, and resilience. As Bangladesh continues to battle the forces of nature, it must also recognise and respond to the emotional wounds left in its wake from lost land to lost legacy.

Populist politics is undermining safety for the vulnerable



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As the 13th national election approaches, political leaders are once again busy flexing their muscles and making promises. Yet amidst this familiar chaos, a compelling question arises: are they genuinely concerned with listening to people and upholding democratic values? Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center's (BYLC) Youth Matters Survey 2025 further deepens my concern and cynicism. The survey reveals that 76 percent of the 2,545 respondents think women do not feel safe in Bangladesh today, and 23.5 percent perceive a lack of communal harmony in the country.

The survey uncovered several other deeply concerning issues related to peace and justice. Before diving in, we must also consider the demographics of the survey to understand the nuances of the data. The survey was conducted among 2,545 individuals aged 18-35, comprising an almost equal ratio of men and women. More than 56 percent of respondents were from rural areas, and almost 30 percent were female homemakers.

While the data presents a paradox between communal harmony and personal safety, the underlying reasons identified are even more troubling. Of the 23.5 percent who deny the presence of harmony, 42.2 percent believe Bangladeshi society is becoming increasingly polarised. This exposes the vulnerability of the nation's once-resilient social fabric. Polarisation, especially in a volatile social and

political landscape like Bangladesh's current environment, not only erodes trust in democratic institutions but also threatens democratic values. A 2021 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) study suggests that the negative consequences of polarisation—from institutional inefficiency to political stalemate—further reinforce the perception that democracy is incapable of addressing the country's most pressing challenges and may push people towards authoritarianism and populism. It also turns politics into a zero-sum game where political opponents are regarded as "others" and dehumanised based on their affiliations.

We have already witnessed the interim government conform to populist ideas repeatedly over the last 15 months. The scrapping of music and physical education teachers' posts in primary schools and the arrest of Baul singer Abul Sarkar over allegations of hurting religious sentiments are the latest additions to a long list of decisions influenced by religious groups. Protesters who condemned the arrest and demanded bail for the singer were attacked by what some observers referred to as the "Tohidi Janata," which is a clear sign not only of rising authoritarianism but also of an erosion of democratic values at the social level.

According to Human Rights Watch, nearly 250 people, including policemen, Awami League supporters, and individuals from minority groups, were killed in retributive violence after Sheikh Hasina's resignation. Just a few months ago, bloody violence erupted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts among Indigenous communities and Bangladeshi settlers. These incidents send a clear signal to progressive groups—who have experienced harassment and are often labelled as "supporters" of the Awami League—as well as religious and ethnic minorities, that their freedoms and rights may come under threat. Therefore, the illusion of harmony suggested by the 65.3 percent is highly susceptible to the shocks of political and social unrest, especially with the national election approaching.

Now, let us take a deeper look at the survey's findings on perceptions of women's safety and what they reveal about our society and politics. According to the survey, more than 40 percent of respondents identified a lack of law enforcement and protection as the primary reason for insecurity. This is an alarming indictment of the current state of security and people's mistrust of the rule of law, access to justice, and state institutions.

Herein lies a major disconnect: people's perception of communal peace and harmony sharply contradicts their perception of gendered insecurity. A society where women live in pervasive fear cannot credibly be described as harmonious, and this is where political pledges diverge from the lived realities of women.

Recently, Jamaat-e-Islami's Amir Shafiqur Rahman pledged that if elected, his party would reduce women's working hours from eight to five per day while ensuring full eight-hour pay, and that homemakers would be honoured as *ratnagarbha* mothers. While framed as a gesture of respect for mothers—ignoring the other identities a woman may hold—the proposal is neither progressive nor respectful.

Rather, it is a deeply patronising and politically calculated move that threatens to undermine women's economic independence and exposes a fundamental refusal to address real issues of safety and equality. It is a deliberate diversion from women's physical insecurity to a non-issue that would further limit their economic opportunities. Although it took a long time for domestic work to be recognised economically, honouring homemakers through such policies adds another layer of disrespect for women striving for financial independence or pursuing their dream careers.

Furthermore, beyond the flawed sentiment, the proposal is harmful even from a policy-making level. According to a report, the unemployment rate of young people aged 15-24 remains the highest in the South Asia region, standing at 42 percent for young women. Moreover, Bangladesh has the largest gender gap in youth unemployment globally. The proposal would simply make hiring women more expensive instead of implementing policies that ensure their safety and security, eradicate sexual harassment and gender-based violence, create more jobs, and ensure equal pay.

With the national election approaching, the road ahead requires actionable plans that address the issues faced daily by youth, women, and other minority and vulnerable groups, both individually and collectively. Beyond political gimmicks, we require state institutions that uphold democracy, justice, good governance, and the rule of law. Today's youth want politics that deliver results. Now, the question is whether our politicians will hear their plea amidst all the noise of reform and electioneering, or, more importantly, whether they are willing to.