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Why must MPs get offices in upazila parishads?

It may further erode the power of local administration

It is rare to see members of parliament (MPs) of the ruling party and the opposition be so united in their agreement on anything. The announcement by the state minister for Local Government that MPs would get their own rooms at upazila parishads has been unanimously welcomed. But granting such a facility would revert to the old practice of MPs exercising undue influence over upazila parishad affairs, which are meant to be handled by local administrators.

An MP from NCP (National Citizen Party) had raised the demand on March 31 for allocating sitting spaces for MPs within their constituencies; it was agreed upon in less than a month by the government. When it comes to facilities granted to MPs, there is little disagreement in the parliament.

We, however, would like to know why MPs need separate rooms in the upazila parishad buildings in the first place. An MP's main role is to deliberate on and pass legislation in the parliament. They are not required to go to the upazila and have an office to meet members of the public. Curiously, as there is no provision in existing regulations for allocating rooms in the name of individual MPs, these rooms have been labelled "Inspection Rooms". We can only imagine the huge cost to the government exchequer, not to mention taxpayers' money, to build such rooms for each MP. What happens when a constituency has more than one upazila parishad—will there be a designated room for the MP in each? According to the law, MPs get a monthly allowance for maintaining an office in each of their constituencies, which negates the need for a separate office in the upazila parishad premises. Furthermore, having such an office will conspicuously diminish the local government's authority.

We remember only too well how MPs of the previous elected government interfered with upazila parishad administrators' work, hogging the district development funds for projects that would make them popular. Instead of being the advisers to district bodies as they are supposed to be, MPs have in the past undermined the authority of the local administrators and hampered the normal functioning of these local government bodies. We do not want to see the same syndrome repeat itself in a post-uprising Bangladesh that demands real change in political culture. Empowering local government is crucial for rural development and decentralisation of power. The local government reform commission also recommended de-linking MPs from local government administration, allowing the upazila parishads to function independently.

While we appreciate that Prime Minister and Leader of the House Tarique Rahman also issued directives stating that MPs shall not take any additional privileges beyond public expectations and that no member should take a duty-free vehicle, the order concerning dedicated rooms for MPs in upazila parishads seems to contradict the spirit of good governance. Thus, we urge that lawmakers and the government revisit this decision.

A puzzling policy turnaround

Lifting of e-cigarette ban will weaken tobacco control

We are puzzled by the BNP government's decision to reverse the ban on e-cigarettes and similar products. While many lauded the parliament's approval of the Smoking and Tobacco Products Usage (Control) (Amendment) Ordinance earlier this month, a report in this daily points out how a crucial section imposing a ban on e-cigarettes was dropped before the bill's passage. This particular section included an expansive definition of e-cigarettes and outlined an airtight ban on the production, import, export, storage, advertisement, promotion, endorsement, marketing, distribution, purchase, sale, and transport of various forms of e-cigarettes and their components. Additionally, when amending the Land Use Control and Agricultural Land Protection Ordinance ahead of approval, the ban on the cultivation of tobacco on triple-crop land was also lifted.

It must be noted that passing the tobacco ordinance without the provision banning e-cigarettes contradicts BNP's own health services commitments to curbing tobacco consumption in its election manifesto, which is very disappointing. It is equally disturbing to see the responses of Ziauddin Hyder, an adviser to BNP Chairperson Tarique Rahman, when asked to comment on the reversal by this daily. His argument that the ban has been lifted so that research can be conducted on electronic tobacco products seems disingenuous. His assertion that there are too many regulations on tobacco cultivation already, and that there is no need for more, totally misses the point.

As anti-tobacco groups have pointed out, electronic tobacco products such as vapes are not only detrimental to public health, but they also act as a gateway for young people to develop nicotine addiction. Undoubtedly, the dropping of the aforementioned section would further weaken Bangladesh's already weak tobacco control framework and may even encourage more of these products to flood the market.

While vapes are banned in as many as 41 countries around the world, including neighbouring India, and with the UK this week imposing a ban on tobacco use for anyone born after 2008, how can Bangladesh let slip the chance to tighten its tobacco control mechanisms? Can we afford such laxness in a country where more than 1.3 lakh people reportedly die each year from tobacco use? The evasive responses of government representatives when questioned about such backtracking are also least reassuring. This is reminiscent of the way previous political administrations brushed aside questions surrounding their policies.

Whether the decision to lift the ban on e-cigarettes is the result of backdoor influence or not, it is crucial that the government reverses it. Vaping is neither recreational nor harmless. In fact, it may even be more harmful in some ways than tobacco smoking. There is still time for the government to act in the public's best interest by reinstating the dropped provision on the tobacco products usage and control law. We urge that it does so soon.

Rethinking canal dredging to improve flood management



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As another monsoon season approaches, the government's current canal dredging programme can be a core option for flood preparedness. The aim of the programme is clear: restore drainage, reduce waterlogging, and allow floodwaters to recede faster. But the real question is deeper: can canal dredging alone shield Bangladesh from increasingly intense monsoon floods like the 2024 flood? Or does it need to evolve into a broader, nature-based flood mitigation strategy, as seen in countries like Australia?

Although Bangladesh is a deltaic country, over time, both natural (e.g., sedimentation) and artificial (e.g., illegal encroachment) factors have disrupted the country's natural hydrological system. The current canal dredging programme may smooth out this hydrological system. Fundamentally, the programme aligns closely with what global literature describes as nature-based solutions (NbS)—approaches that "use natural systems...to reduce flood impacts while delivering broader environmental benefits." However, there are also negative outcomes, such as accelerated downstream flows, destabilised canal banks, and channel instability, arising from excessive canal deepening.

If asked about the success of the canal excavation programme, the answer depends on whether it is treated as isolated dredging or as part of a larger ecosystem-based flood management strategy. The immediate waterlogging problem can be resolved with an isolated strategy, but it does little to address broader flood risks. In ecosystem-based flood management (i.e., NbS), long-term resilience is ensured by reconnecting canals to floodplains, wetlands, and vegetation, thereby allowing the adjacent floodplain to absorb water, reduce peak flows, and regulate naturally. Canal restoration must therefore evolve beyond engineering fixes into a holistic, ecosystem-based flood management approach.

Recent flooding in Australia has accelerated the shift away from reliance on engineered infrastructure alone, driving a transformation towards NbS

to manage flood risk. Traditionally, flood management relied on levees, dams, and channel modifications. However, these approaches often accelerated water flow, transferring risk downstream rather than reducing it. NbS, on the other hand, seek to retain water within the landscape by absorbing it, slowing its flow, and spreading it out. In Australia, this approach centres on restoring wetlands, reconnecting rivers with their floodplains, and reinforcing



Overflowing river water washed away part of a coastal dyke in Khulna during the devastating flood of August 2024.

FILE PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

upstream vegetation to reduce runoff. Upper valley dense vegetation plays a critical role by storing water and weakening its energy, whereas wetlands act as natural reservoirs, absorbing excess rainfall and reducing flood peaks.

Modern flood management is increasingly grounded in the understanding that ecosystems can regulate water more effectively than strict infrastructure. Scientific studies confirm that instead of rapidly draining water away, wetlands absorb and slowly release runoff, attenuating peak flows and easing downstream flood impacts.

of Bangladesh's most flood-prone and hydrologically complex systems. Scientific evidence indicates that this basin is susceptible to severe flooding, bank failures, and large-scale agricultural losses from extreme events. Apart from this basin, the devastation that the other basins can cause is evident from the 2024 floods that affected the eastern basins, including that of Gomati and Selonia, Muhuri, Feni rivers. According to the World Bank, over 12 lakh households were isolated, while total losses reached \$1.67 billion, heavily impacting infrastructure and livelihoods. These incidents make

Ecocide is hard to litigate, but we must still demand accountability



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We like our crimes tidy. A victim, a perpetrator, a sequence of events that can be narrated without requiring a climate scientist, three expert witnesses, and a decade of satellite data. It helps with closure. It helps with headlines. It reassures us that the world, however chaotic, is at least legally coherent. Ecocide has a rather inconvenient habit of refusing to behave like a proper crime. In Dhaka, for instance, the evidence is everywhere and nowhere at once. The air is unbreathable, the rivers look like they have given up on their original purpose, and yet life proceeds with impressive discipline. Offices open, traffic builds, weddings happen. There is something almost admirable about a city that can function at full capacity while slowly poisoning itself. If this is not harm, it becomes difficult to define what is.

We do not call ecocide a crime, of course. That would require the unpleasant business of accountability. Instead, we call it development, urbanisation, or, when we are feeling particularly philosophical, inevitability. These are comforting words. They suggest that what is happening is both necessary and beyond control. Yet, there is a word for it. International lawyers have spent decades trying to

formalise it. They call it ecocide, the widespread and long-term destruction of the environment caused by human activity. The ambition is to recognise it as a crime under the Rome Statute, placing it alongside genocide and war crimes. In other words, to admit that environmental destruction is not an unfortunate side effect of progress, but something for which someone should be held responsible. If that sounds excessive, it is only because we have normalised the alternative.

The difficulty is not in seeing ecocide. It is in proving it. In Ukraine, environmental destruction during the ongoing conflict has been described as ecocide, yet prosecutors have struggled to convert visible damage into viable legal cases. Out of hundreds of incidents, only a small number have progressed to a stage where they can be meaningfully pursued in court. The problem is not a lack of evidence in the ordinary sense. It is an excess of complexity. Environmental harm does not arrive neatly packaged. It unfolds over time, across borders, and through chains of causation that are anything but linear. Harm is cumulative, responsibility is diffuse, and causation is buried under decades of decisions politely described as necessary trade-offs. By the time the damage is visible,

it is already global.

Consider climate change. No single factory causes a flood in Bangladesh. No single policy decision raises sea levels. And yet, collectively, the damage is undeniable. Homes disappear, farmland becomes saline, and entire communities are displaced with quiet regularity. The harm is real. The perpetrator is less easy to isolate. Then there is the question of thresholds. What counts as "severe"? How widespread is "widespread"? How long is "long-term"? These are precisely the kind of ambiguities that determine whether a case survives or collapses. Add to this the requirement to prove knowledge or intent and the problem becomes even more complicated. Environmental destruction is rarely framed as destruction. It is framed as growth, infrastructure, and necessity. The same decision that pollutes a river is also the one that creates jobs. The same project that displaces a community is also the one that boosts GDP.

Proving that someone intended environmental harm, rather than economic progress, is not just difficult. It is politically inconvenient. Even where intent can be inferred, science introduces another layer of discomfort. Environmental harm relies on modelling, projections, and probabilities. Courts, understandably, prefer certainty. Science offers likelihoods. Somewhere between the two, accountability begins to blur. And then there is power. Recognising ecocide as an international crime would not simply target isolated actors. It would involve systems. Corporations, governments, and economic models that rely, to varying degrees, on

the necessity of aligning the canal restoration initiative with NbS crucial.

A critical question, therefore, arises: how can the government align the current canal excavation work with NbS? While deepening seems like the primary focus of this initiative, it should be achieved through variable channel design with pools and shallow sections, resulting in reduced flow velocity and enhanced habitat as was done in the Mary River Catchment Rehabilitation Project in Australia. Equally, maintaining the canals' natural bends rather than straightening them should be the key to managing the in-channel flow regime, as suggested by the National guidance of Australian Stream Rehabilitation Practice. Beyond excavation, reconnecting canals to the adjacent floodplain, palaeochannels, cutoffs, and wetlands is a vital option for spreading excess water, storing it, and reducing downstream runoff. Additional measures, including restoring riparian vegetation, adopting bioengineering for bank protection, and enhancing upstream infiltration, can further strengthen alignment with NbS principles.

Relying solely on structural flood protection solutions may fail during extreme events. Our past experiences say so. During the 1988 flood, the Chandpur Irrigation project embankment failed, and the Meghna River shifted by about 550 m, causing catastrophic flooding. Emphasising NbS does not mean replacing engineering infrastructure. Rather, it means a complementary approach as seen in the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project in Australia. For managing floods in Bangladesh, levees, embankments, and polders will continue to play a critical role. To enhance their effectiveness, incorporating NbS can open a new window of opportunity. So far, the hybrid approach integrating engineered systems with NbS is the most resilient and successful in flood management strategies.

Therefore, it is time to rethink Bangladesh's canal excavation strategy. Given that Bangladesh's landscape is different from Australia's, the programme can be adjusted in line with Australia's examples and guidelines. Unless canal excavation integrates NbS and moves beyond conventional dredging, achieving effective, sustainable flood management remains unlikely. The principal theme should be working not against water, but rather giving it space, reducing velocity, and applying natural systems.

environmental extraction. The question is not whether the law can be written. It is whether it can be enforced against those who can resist it.

For countries like Bangladesh, this tension is particularly stark. Bangladesh contributes a fraction of global emissions and absorbs a disproportionate share of the consequences. Floods intensify, cyclones strengthen, and salinity advances inland with quiet persistence. The damage is measurable, visible, and ongoing. Even still, there is no courtroom where this harm can be fully argued. Ecocide offers a way to reframe that reality. It shifts the narrative from vulnerability to injustice, from adaptation to accountability. It suggests that environmental destruction is not merely unfortunate, but wrongful. But it also introduces an uncomfortable mirror since Bangladesh is not a mere victim. Its rivers are polluted, its wetlands encroached upon, and its air quality routinely ranks among the worst in the world. These are not distant harms. They are local, visible, and in many cases preventable. If ecocide is to function as a meaningful legal concept, it cannot be selectively applied. Accountability, like pollution, does not respect borders.

We like to imagine that the most serious crimes announce themselves loudly; that they disrupt, shock, and demand immediate attention. Ecocide does none of these things. It is gradual, normalised, and, in many ways, convenient, which is precisely what makes it dangerous. It is because the hardest crimes to prosecute are not always the ones we cannot prove. They are the ones we have quietly decided not to name.