

India must step up efforts to reduce deforestation

ALIYA NAZ, ABHIROOP CHOWDHURY AND ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

India pledged to cut its carbon emissions to net zero by 2070 at the 2021 Conference of Parties (COP) 26 in Glasgow. India ranks fourth in carbon emissions after China, the United States and the European Union. But India sidelined one of the major commitments at COP 26, namely the Glasgow Leaders Declaration on Forest and Land Use. This declaration focuses on commitments to reduce deforestation.

The tiger is India's national animal. In the 18th century, during the British colonial era, there were some 58,000 tigers in India. Habitat destruction, hunting, poaching and deforestation reduced this population to 2,000 in 1973. To conserve this regal animal, 'Project Tiger' was initiated by the Indian Government. There are now 50 tiger reserves. About 80 per cent of the global tiger population resides in India. The state of Madhya Pradesh stands first in the total number of tigers in the nation, with 526 tigers as per the 2018 tiger census. MP also boasts a large forest cover. But the future is bleak for this biodiverse state as the nation's economic needs supersede its environmental commitments.

The diamond mining project of Buxwaha forest, MP, will clear 364 hectares of forested land with the felling of 200,000 trees. This mine site has diamonds worth 34 million carats. This same forest land is home to tigers, leopards, foxes, bears and many other wild species. These forests are also home to indigenous tribes whose lives and livelihood revolve around the forests. A fifth of the total population of MP belongs to Scheduled Tribes, as per the 2011 census.

Mining activities result in deforestation, alter the community ecology



of native wildlife and push populations to extinction or migration. This will increase the instances of human-wildlife conflict. These short-term economic gains will ruin the wildlife habitat as well as impose soil, water and air pollution.

Such projects are being challenged by public interest litigators in the Madhya Pradesh High Court. The area has more than a century-old history of conservation by local communities. It also supports the catchment area of Khandari Lake, which is a major drinking water source for the neighbouring cities. One hundred hectares of this land have been allocated to the Indian Institute of Infor-

mation Technology Design and Manufacturing (IIITDM). The waste from IIITDM is polluting the pristine waters of Khandari, another impact of the forced development ventures.

Tiger safaris make the situation even worse. Residents fear that more development projects being planned in this region will undermine its environment. Of these projects, 40 acres have been allocated for railway quarters, 25 acres for a 'green' city development that includes a stadium, and 10 acres for a residential complex. Local populations are rising up to protest the destruction of this fragile habitat.

India reported about 0.38 per

cent of annual growth in forest, and saw an increase of about 4,000 sq. km of forest between 2017 and 2019. However, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown has impacted about 0.67 per cent of global forests, according to the 'Global Forest Watch Report'. During this period, India lost about 38,500 hectares of tropical forest in 2019-2020. At present, 24.56 per cent of the geographical land is under forest cover. Still, India is unlikely to reach its goal to cover up to 33 per cent of land under forest cover.

The COP 26 pledge to cut carbon emissions to net zero by 2070 cannot be achieved by side-lining the deforestation issue. Trees are the last war-

riors standing in mankind's war with climate change. India is home to four biodiversity hot-spots, and houses the largest population of Royal Bengal Tigers across the planet. Deforestation to make way for economic development is a trade-off that the world cannot afford in the wake of the current climate crisis. Forest conservation needs to be prioritized above short term economic gains from diamond mines, development projects and tiger safaris.

The writers are, respectively, Independent Researcher, Associate Professor, and Dean at Jindal School of Environment and Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana.

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Another aspect of Mr. Lloyd George's manifold personality has been revealed to the world during Dail Eirean's fateful debate upon the acceptance or rejection of the Anglo-Irish treaty of peace. It has been the tendency to regard the Prime Minister as a facile opportunist, who is ready to give way to anyone who uses big enough threats. Very different is the picture drawn by Mr. Barton, one of the Sinn Fein plenipotentiaries. "He gave the Irishmen until ten in the evening," says Mr. Barton, describing the conversation of December 4, "saying that the signature of all the plenipotentiaries was necessary, or warfare would be resumed." Mr. Barton frankly admits that he did not wish to sign the treaty, but was literally compelled to do so by the British Prime Minister's ultimatum. It is clear from the trend of the Dublin debates that Mr. Lloyd George displayed not merely an unexpected firmness during this critical interview, but that he also displayed even more than his customary adroitness. He has clearly driven a wedge into the solidarity of the Irish republican movement, so that, whatever happens to the treaty as the result of the voting in Dail Eirean, he is assured of a powerful backing, in Ireland itself, for almost any measures which may prove to be necessary in the event of a rejection of the peace terms.

NEWS ITEMS

TREATMENT OF PRISONERS AT MADARIPUR

With reference to the statement which appeared in the Servant newspaper of December 19 that 200 prisoners had been shut up in a close flat at Madaripur the following are the actual facts of the incident referred to one hundred and twenty prisoners were being transferred from Madaripur to Faridpur on December 16 and 17 on a flat towed by a police launch. All arrangements for the accommodation etc., of the prisoners were made under the supervision of the Assistant Civil Surgeon, who acted under the direction of the District Magistrate, Faridpur, compounders with medicines were on board. The suggestion that there was any danger of suffocation or that the prisoners were neglected is entirely without foundation.

MURDERER'S APPEAL DISMISSED

ALLAHABAD, DEC 21
Justice Ryves and Justice Stuart at Allahabad High Court disposed of an appeal preferred by Bach Ram, who had been convicted by the Sessions Judge of Kumaon for having murdered three small children as a sacrifice to a deity and sentenced to death. It appears that the accused went to the house of a neighbor, Khim Deb, and cut off the heads of Khim Deb's two sons, aged four and three respectively, and then, going home, killed his own daughter aged four or five using the same axe in every case. A plea of temporary insanity was set up on his behalf, but was overruled and their lordships, not finding sufficient reasons for interference, dismissed the appeal.

EXPLORATION OF MOUNT EVEREST

The Duke of York was present at a distinguished gathering at the joint meeting of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club at Queen's Hall, to hear reports from the members of the Mount Everest expedition. Sir Francis Younghusband, who presided, explained that the expedition had cost pound 4,000, including the expenses of the Government of India on survey work, instead of pound 5,000 as anticipated. Mr. Mallory, reporting on the mountain reconnaissance, said he was far from sanguine as to the success of the next expedition, although he believed that Mount Everest would finally surrender if the climbers persevered. The chances in favour of the success of any particular party, however, were not very great.

BRITISH IRON AND STEEL INDUSTRY

Figures just published show that the production of pig iron in Great Britain in November was 271,800 tons, and steel 442,800 tons, compared with 235,500 and 405,400 tons in October. The figures are, however, still 50 per cent under the autumn returns of 1920. Commenting on the position Mr. Layton, of the National Federation of Iron and Steel Manufacturers, said the fact that pig iron could not be produced economically at home had turned Britain from exporter to importer of pig iron. Before the war Britain imported on an average 18,000 tons of pig iron monthly and exported 100,000 tons. Now the figures were almost exactly reversed. He urged the reduction of high railway rates which would do much to remove the depression in the British iron and steel industry.

Colombo must adopt rational policies

JEHAN PERERA

Headstrong and misguided leadership have brought Sri Lanka to a sorry pass. The Fitch Rating agency has downgraded Sri Lanka to a rank of CC. This reflects its view of an increased probability of a default event in coming months in light of Sri Lanka's worsening external liquidity position and drop in foreign-exchange reserves.

The government has responded by finding fault with the ratings agency for being biased and not looking at the entirety of the country's financial situation and likely sources of foreign exchange inflows. The governor of the Central Bank had stated that the fast-depleting foreign reserves will receive a boost before the end of the year. On the other hand, the grim reality is that with every passing month the country's foreign reserves have been shrinking and positive predictions to the contrary have not materialised.

A similar situation obtained for over six months in the case of the ban on chemical fertiliser. The government stubbornly stuck to the position of a total ban on the import of chemical fertiliser for use in agriculture and its replacement by organic fertiliser. The fact that there is no country in the world that relies solely on organic fertiliser for farming was disregarded. Instead, the government held to the ideal that organic agriculture was the best practice, from both a health perspective and in terms of protecting the environment. There was no instant solution. In practical terms, this meant a drastic reduction in the country's agricultural production as hybrid crops that respond best to



chemical fertilisers did not receive adequate quantities of nutrients. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the bid to keep the price of dollars low by artificially restricting demand for them.

A basic feature of economic theory is that if the price of a commodity is kept artificially low by means of price control, its supply will shrink. On the other hand, if the price of a commodity is allowed to rise, based on the demand for it, the supply of that commodity in the market will also increase. This is an economic reality that applies in the case of dollars as much as it will apply in the cases of any other commodity traded in the market. Due to the price control imposed on dollars, there is a shortage of dollars in the market.

We are nearing the parameters of a failed state, when the state is unable to restrain companies from selling gas cylinders that explode, killing and maiming dozens, and ships are berthed in the harbour awaiting payment to be made in dollars for the goods they have transported. Today the prices of fruits, vegetables and grain are at an all-time high due to

short supply. Adding to the woes of citizens is the shortage of essential commodities such as milk powder and kerosene oil.

There is a need for rational thinking at the present time. The government demonstrated rational thinking when it ended the ban on chemical fertilisers in the face of farmer protests and expert agricultural advice emanating from Sri Lanka's academia and practitioners. It reaffirmed that its longer-term policy was one of pursuing organic fertiliser but agreed that the ending of the ban on chemical fertilisers was the rational thing to do in the prevailing circumstances.

In a similar manner, the government needs to deal with the foreign exchange crisis. Instead of denying the fact that a serious problem exists and hoping that hoped for future flows of foreign exchange would ease the situation, the government needs to take concrete steps to rectify the situation immediately.

In a rationally argued position paper, the Pathfinder Foundation has recommended that the government goes to the IMF to secure financial

assistance. So far, the government has refused to go to the IMF on the grounds that it imposes its own conditions on the loans it grants which are costly to the people of the country. According to this analysis, an IMF programme could include strengthening the government's revenue base (widening the tax base and improving tax administration); improving the primary balance in the budget (revenue-expenditure-interest payments); proactive, data-driven and non-interventionist monetary policy and a flexible and realistic exchange rate policy to assist in building up external reserves.

The analysis also makes the point that other countries might be more willing to support Sri Lanka if they were confident that the country would come out of the economic doldrums. It says: "The package of assistance offered by India is an encouraging start and needs to be finalised as soon as possible. It has to be supplemented by financing from other friendly countries, like Japan. There is scope for India and Japan to work together to support Sri Lanka at this critical juncture. Their willingness to step forward is likely to be greater, if it is known that Sri Lanka has taken a decision to approach the IMF. While our development partners will be wary of having to make an open-ended commitment, they are likely to find bridging finance more palatable."

The appointment of Foreign Minister Prof G L Peiris as acting Finance Minister, increases the possibility of rationality in the decision-making process. As Foreign Minister, he has been tasked with winning more international support for the government. This would include ensuring that foreign policy and

human rights pressures on the government do not lead to an adverse outcome. The international community, especially Western countries, are looking for signs that the government will pursue some reforms.

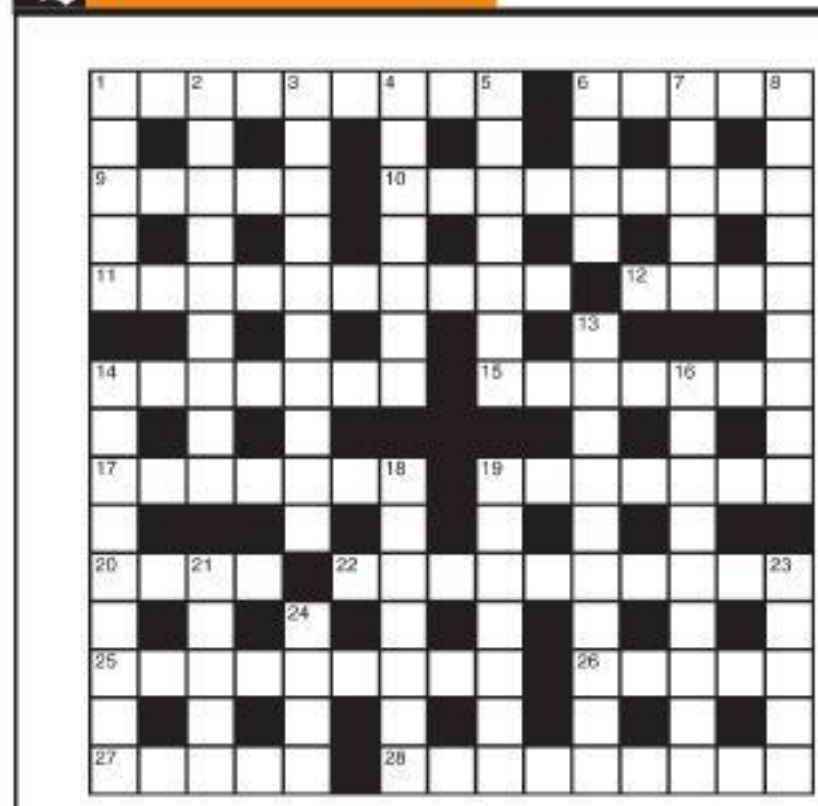
Among the initiatives that Minister Peiris has been leading is the amendment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In recent weeks, as chairman of the ministerial subcommittee on amending the PTA he has invited both sections of civil society and the Bar Association for discussions where the proposed amendments have been presented and responses to them obtained. Several PTA detainees, whose cases had received international visibility, have been released on bail.

There are other indications of rationality emerging in choices being made in different areas. One would be the reinstatement of Dr Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi and pay his salary arrears after it was suspended in 2019. The surgeon was falsely accused of sterilising thousands of Sinhalese women without their knowledge in the operating theatre during a time of nationalist frenzy that had been whipped up for political reasons. This is not the time for nationalist politics. The new appointments made to independent institutions that are expected to play a watchdog role are also likely to send a message that the government is getting serious about charting a new path. If the current changes are shown to be sustainable, the government will be able to generate greater confidence both locally and in the international community which is crucial for economic development.

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CROSSWORD

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



ACROSS

- Endless crude oil misused by humans? Absurd (9)
- Son in tree composes sacred poem (5)
- King had this made specially for crossing river (5)
- Clock American magazine article? (9)
- Keep selves circulating around: removing one is simple (10)
- Courtly love but no husband for this regretful lady (4)
- Slim country and western singer with assassin (7)

- New uranium crystal used in fission? (7)
- Substantial amount is duty Nadhim ultimately wasted (4,3)
- Element burning with pong when current put through (7)
- Runs when piano produces rough sound (4)
- Duck in cove caught and stabbed (10)
- Commoners vote, enduring hard claims for attention (5,6)
- Across sentimentality about distant land (5)
- Pottery expert consuming litres (5)

DOWN

- Accommodate duke in theatre box (5)
- Like spring rolls? Main man devours one (4-5)
- Firm needs million to guarantee settlement (10)
- Bunting taken from door to landing (7)
- Instrument is imported by Salvation Army people (7)
- Writer to apply zero pressure in Patmore's case? (4)
- 007 not someone lacking in manners? (5)

- Virtuoso rounds lake and medium whirlpool (9)
- Strange cut perhaps not targeted (10)
- Doctor was there with daughter for turning point (9)
- Old weapon put in cold storage for life (9)
- Complaint from Tees before son gets stuck into the beers (7)
- Catty 6 Down? (7)
- Succeeded with murder in facility (5)
- Savine rupees, bed down in rubbish (5)
- American writer close to Walt 14 Across? (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

