

The Business

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Critically threatened forests

According to a review report issued by UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation about our forestry sector, Pakistan's natural forests are critically threatened due to widespread human activity. Illegal logging, conversion of forest areas into agricultural lands, and ever expanding human settlements are causing unprecedented damage to ecosystems and animal habitats. In fact, dangerous encounters between humans and animals are frequent in many places. Just the other day, in Battal area of Mansehra a common leopard killed a man who had ventured into the reserved forest near his home. This is a worrisome trend in a country with a tree cover of only 5.1 percent against the minimum required standard of 10 percent. It holds devastating consequences for the remaining forests, the people who depend on them for livelihoods, and the environment. Also getting exacerbated are other problems, such as carbon sequestration reduction and natural disasters. Indeed, arresting environmental degradation is one of the top priorities of this government. A '10-billion-tree tsunami' campaign is under way and steps have also been taken to stop illegal logging. But the bigger picture seems to have escaped its attention. As the FAO report points out, no comprehensive assessment of the situation has been carried out with the objective of ranking hotspots on the basis of characteristics like value for species-richness, uniqueness of flora and fauna, economic importance and extent of the threat to ecosystems due to biotic and climatic factors.

The report identifies several 'hotspots' calling for priority action. These include the chilgoza forests of the Suleman Range in Zhob, Sherani, Dera Ismail Khan, North and South Waziristan, and Chitral, which, it says, are endangered by excessive grazing, tree cutting for fuel and timber. The juniper forests of Ziarat and Kalat with slow growing trees as old as 1500 years, and the riverine forests of Sukkur are being similarly depleted. Then there are the mangrove forests of Karachi under pressure from ingress of industrial projects, habitat fragmentation and reduced freshwater flows from upstream. Unless these forests as well as others vulnerable to human activities get due attention environmental damage will become irreversible.

The way forwards is to fix flaws in the policymaking process, as suggested by the FAO. The top-town bureaucratic approach needs to change and a new forest policy formulated by involving real stakeholders. However, it will succeed only when the political leadership, both at the provincial and federal levels, is ready to deal with the challenge. For, they will need to allocate necessary resources for providing sustainable livelihoods to local communities, and also ensure that no licences are issued for commercial or agricultural use of forest lands.

Systemic issues

MIKE LOFGREN

In recent weeks, the coronavirus pandemic's devastating effect on the airline and tourist industries has been graphically evident. Airlines cutting flights by 50 percent or more while hurtling towards bankruptcy; passengers in chaotic airport scenes as they try to get home before travel bans; Venice, Paris, Rome – for once – resembling ghost towns; levitator cruise ships forlorn and empty, like Wagner's Flying Dutchman.

This might not be a temporary bump in the road for these industries, but a precursor to their long-term viability if they do not radically change their business models. Observers have for many years questioned the environmental sustainability of both industries. What's more, airline travel has become so onerous for passengers that a consumer rebellion could be brewing even without fears of infectious disease.

Tourism has long been cursed with an inherent paradox that recent events have thrown into sharp perspective. Since about 1980, airline travel has gradually ceased to be an adventure (in the positive sense), and come to resemble the Stations of the Cross. From nonexistent cabin service, to checked bag fees (causing the need to shoehorn everything into the overhead, forcing delays both entering and exiting the plane), to intricately tiered fees imposing a rigid class system (like the accommo-

dations on the Titanic), to shrinking, jammed-in seats making the airliner resemble a winged sardine can, the lot of the traveler is not a happy one. And all of that is simply what happens on the plane. Since 9/11, airports have come to resemble mini-Soviet Unions, with every passenger under quasi-military discipline (including the requirement to "hurry up and wait," familiar to every GI). There are subtle indignities like removing belt and shoes, and what has been described as "security theater" (it is in practical terms all but impossible to take inert liquids into an aircraft rest-room and mix them into an explosive, given the need for a pressure vessel and freezing temperatures, but maybe the vast wastage of water bottles is economic stimulus for the concessionaires' \$2 water on the other side of the checkpoint).

Is all this flying really necessary? Perhaps the current virus outbreak will teach businesses sending their employees hither and yon that all the fancy teleconferencing gear they've bought is actually usable. And possibly the reason business travel has heretofore not been perceived as a burden is because it can be expensed. That may change as the health, as well as environmental, costs of plane travel become more pressing.

Excerpted from: 'Are Mass Plane Travel and Mass Tourism Unustainable?'
Commondreams.org

Sanity in the time of corona

FARRUKH KHAN PITAFI

The novel coronavirus outbreak threatens to permanently alter the way we live. With the ever-increasing number of infections, only a small proportion of the total population being tested and a significant number of casualties, caution can evidently not be thrown to the wind. That is why governments around the world are being compelled by circumstances to impose partial or complete lockdowns. The key reason for this drastic step is the reckless attitude of citizens who seem oblivious to repeated warnings. Many confront reality only after being infected.

The fact that we still know precious little about the said virus which appears to be a recent mutation does not help. Scientists are still unsure whether it can remain airborne and we have seen contradictory claims by various studies. The findings discussed at the first-ever "virtual Grand Rounds" at Massachusetts General Hospital, are alarming to say the least. The clinical challenges that were highlighted include transmission before symptoms, biphasic illness where symptoms remain mild for some time and then situation takes a turn for the worse, transmissions in hospital and prolonged viral shedding. These alone build a strong case for precaution. And since no vaccine has been invented and no breakthrough is in sight, you can rest assured that social distancing and eventual confinement to your homes remain the best options. Flattening the curve and breaking the chain may go a long way in gaining enough time to find a cure at best and helping governments build capacity to do justice to the dire cases at the

very least. Hence, even if your government has not imposed a full-fledged lockdown, you should know that it is just a matter of time before that happens. In this climate of uncertainty, you can see how tense people already are. It is very important to keep your wits about in this age of public anxiety.

But mental health becomes a serious concern when you are in a state of lockdown, confined to your living quarters. Kids who are accustomed to going to schools in this time of the year seldom get comfortable with the idea of staying in one place for such long intervals. When they get jittery parents often lose their cool. And that is not all. Adults are hit the hardest. Their usual privileges like mobility, social lives, entertainment, exercise and professional lives, all are compromised. Therefore, there is a serious chance of mental decay or harm. Sadly, our media's obsession with politics ensures that such finer details are rarely paid the heed they deserve. And when the authorities are preoccupied with the chores of everyday firefighting there is very little chance that they would take out time to focus on these matters. So, the public message is usually an incoherent mix of alarm, aspirational words and the desire to avoid mass panic. It might help to remind yourself why you are confined to your home. You have only one life and nothing is worth losing it. Then you are also protecting your loved ones. Since almost everyone possesses a cell phone these days, keeping the phone number of a qualified shrink may always come handy in case of severe depression. If you have a smartphone with data connection, you can always have a video

call with family and friends through a videocall app. You will be surprised how many people forget that their phones have this feature. If you can do neither then perhaps you need some hacks. To find some I consulted a few very accomplished experts. Here is what you can do.

The most important thing is to ensure that you and your loved ones keep their minds occupied. An idle mind can encounter many problems ranging from boredom and frustration to severe depression. The first thing experts advise is to shield yourselves from the mental stress caused by distressing news. In a gloomy climate unless the media decides to invent happy stories it is bound to report more disturbing news. While information is essential to survive a prolonged lockdown, there is no need to binge watch news channels. Watching news reports twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, should suffice. If you must watch television, find something entertaining, light and funny to watch. And then another. Listen to good music. If you are religious and avoid music, listen to something religious. There is melody there too. Take up a hobby. If you are not in self-quarantine play games with your kids. If you have a pet pay more attention to it. If you like cooking or gardening indulge yourself. Give yourself small goals and find joy in accomplishing them. If you have pending office work finish it. Document what you do. Write a blog, publish a video online. Nothing heavy. Mild, happy stuff. And while you are at home don't be a slob. Get up and work out regularly. All of this will keep you from going stir crazy. On social media stay away from divisive politi-

cal debates. Hang out with people and in online groups that are fun.

And whatever you do please do not succumb to conspiracy theories. Traumatic times are usually not easy for everyone to handle. Many give in to the temptation of seeing a conspiracy behind everything. Two common trends these days: claiming that the coronavirus was produced in a lab and seeing it all as a conspiracy against your religion or country. Remember, propaganda wars are going on between nations that want their opponents to be blamed for the outbreak. There is no point in falling for this. This trend of spreading rumours and conspiracy theories started with 9/11 and has worsened with every passing day. In recent days you must have seen countless videos ranging from Saddam using the word corona in his Arabic testimony to many documentary clips claiming that the virus and its probable cure have existed for many years. One former ambassador to the UN has even listed some patents linked to an alleged coronavirus. Interestingly, from astronomy to anatomy, the word "corona" has many meanings. And coronavirus is the name of a class of viruses.

The current one is called the novel coronavirus. These conspiracy theories usually have many moving parts, many variables and details. The fact that one or two verifiable bits are added doesn't change the whole unverified body of the theory. In the current case please remember that nature is fully capable of producing something as lethal as this virus and far worse. Stick to the verifiable mainstream explanations. Conspiracy theories at times can be deadlier than all viruses put together.



The eye of the tiger

ABDUL NASIR KHAN

The novel coronavirus, in all likelihood, will last much longer than we wish it would. There are indications that the virus may survive the summer months and temperatures: Singapore, Australia, and Argentina are all currently in the middle of summer but have reported hundreds of cases and many fatalities.

So the hope is that as we slow down the spread through prevention, a possible vaccine, and luck, we will be able to deal with this virus like we do with so many others. However, the frequency, intensity and geographical spread of such viruses has increased in recent years. Evidence suggests that this is linked to greater global travel and integration, urbanisation, changes in land use, and exploitation of the natural environment. In short, human greed causes ecological imbalance.

In our misplaced quest to be immortal, we, the human race, have resorted to taking more than our fair share of resources from planet Earth, and have created a culture of hoarding in the false belief that wealth and possessions will somehow protect us from death. It is ironic that people are now hoarding food, hand sanitisers, masks and toilet rolls to try to outlive each other during this pandemic, which is the direct consequence of hoarding in the first place.

Such abuse of our home is not sustainable. It can cause earthquakes, floods, or a pan-

demic like that of the current coronavirus and wipe us all out. Period. Forever.

Let us allow this lesson to sink deep into our collective consciousness while we practice our hand washing and our social distancing in our disinfected, quarantined safe houses. This is a proverbial divine knock on our doors, a warning from our deepest inner selves. We need to wake up because the next round may not be as kind and forgiving, assuming that we survive this one.

This is not a time for panic, but for action — action by each one of us, individually and collectively. Introspection, self-monitoring and self-accountability is where it all starts. The current crisis has made us realise more than ever before of how interconnected we are with each other and with our environment. Humaneness is a

creed above all others. It is what connects us with ourselves, with each other and with nature. It is the common ground, where we drop our acquired identities and meet as members of a larger universal community. It is the cosmic tavern where everyone gathers to drink from the same eternal fountain of peace, benevolence and mercy. It is where we go to rest our souls and to rejuvenate our spirits and then return to our communities and homes with a heightened sense of urgency to act with compassion and responsibility. We no longer have a choice but to drink the magic potion or very soon we will cease to exist as a species, as have many before us.



Time to give up the Fund's austerity plan

M ZIAUDDIN

Considering the anticipated recession that is bound to follow the Covid-19 impacted national economy, we need to get the IMF to let us abandon the Fund's \$6 billion three-year austerity plan. Bring back Asad Umar to renegotiate the Extended Fund Facility.

Next, we need to try to spend our way out of the on-coming recession phase launching as many construction projects as possible. This would surely double the already double-digit inflation rate. But, since in the process enough spending money would enter circulation triggering demand unblocking the closed manufacturing capacities, unblocking supply-lines would bring prices, including electricity and gas bills down. Simultaneously, the domestic oil prices are expected to decline to reasonable levels in response to the world oil price collapse thus sending the rate of inflation racing down to 5-6%, creating needed space for the SBP to reduce the interest rate by as much. This in turn would turn the wheels of the national economy faster, expanding the GDP at an estimated rate of 5-6%, which would hopefully enhance the government's revenue manifold.

With the increase in revenue incomes the government would perhaps be in a better position to allocate a larger budget for the BISP to take care of at least three times the population that is now being covered by the programme, which would considerably improve the lot of the 25% of the most destitute in the population. Professional economists, especially belonging to Milton Friedman's school of thought, would certainly call these moves an economic absurdity.

But consider this: Pakistan is a market of over 200 million. We can produce for this market and keep a strict watch on the supply and demand equation and become self-sufficient in many manufactured products. Indeed, due to the global devastation wrecked by Covid-19, the world is already being forced to face the prospect of a profound shift to a self-sufficient

economy. Meanwhile, according to one estimate, if the government reduces petrol prices by Rs30 and diesel by Rs40, it would be passing a bailout package of Rs700 billion to the people without losing any oil-related revenues. Add to this the savings in interest payment due to massive reduction in interest rates.

This would total up the bailout amount to over Rs1.5 trillion. The IMF is already contemplating making available \$1 trillion for member countries facing Covid-19. Pakistan is aiming to get a slice of \$1.4 billion from this allocation. And according to an official statement, the World Bank would provide \$238 million and the ADB \$350 million to Pakistan in support for the Covid-19 emergency response. The US has also

announced an initial aid of \$1 million to Pakistan to help it combat the outbreak. The IMF has also assured Pakistan that any additional budget allocation for meeting the threat of Covid-19 would not be counted as part of the fiscal deficit. Meanwhile, self-sufficiency efforts aimed at expanding domestic capacities to develop various tools and items to meet the immediate requirements for fighting the pandemic, the Pakistan Against COVID19-Volunteers (PACV) is using 3D printing to manufacture necessary medical equipment, including ventilators, respiratory valves and splitter for connecting one vent to four patients. The group is also developing non-contact thermometers, hazmat suits, facemasks and face shields (Pakistani Volunteers 3D-print Ventilators, Joins War against Covid-19, published in The Express Tribune). The first 3D ventilator prototype is expected to be ready for testing soon. The PAF is said to have already offered to field-test the splitter. Lab test for non-contact thermometer is said to have been done and it has now been sent to the Punjab Health Department for field testing. The hazmat suit is currently in the field testing phase. The NDMA, Pakistan Engineering Council, PAF and various universities are said to have shown interest in the group's initiatives.



Letters to the Editor

Break the chain

Since the coronavirus has totally shocked the world, each country is mulling over how to curb it. As there is no proper vaccine to treat the infected, the best option we have is to keep social distancing and break the chain so that it may not be able to spread. In our country the affected toll has risen to more than 1200 cases. But the PM says one thing, the ministers another and the provinces say something else.

The government, opposition and the provinces do not seem to be on the same page to tackle this issue. Looking at the gravity of the situation, the government and the opposition must be on same page. And PM IK can play a major role in it. I request the PM to go for a complete lockdown of the country, and to request the public to help out the poor in this time of trouble. Mr PM please lock down the country so that

the chain of the virus is broken. The decision must be taken immediately before it is too late. Break the chain, save the country.
Syed Badshah
BUNER

Recognising our heroes

It would have been appropriate that on Pakistan Day awards had been given to medical workers who laid down their lives providing essential services to poorest of the poor, including those who are spearheading such campaigns. A young GB doctor Usama Riaz died on Friday March 20 while providing services to pilgrims returning from Iran. There are hundreds of these foot soldiers, most of them underpaid, who have lost their lives fighting polio in Pakistan for several years and are now involved in this campaign against Covid-19. The tragic criminal neglect

of our bureaucracy and political elite is that while funds are available for providing limousines, perks, palatial housing, allowances etc for officers who sit in secured rooms, lack of funds was cited as an excuse for providing these foot soldiers with essential safety kits etc. This criminal neglect is not just confined to the present federal government headed by the PTI, but all those which preceded them. If only the state had realized that quality and quantum of medical equipment matters. Given poor sanitation services, the unfortunate citizens of Pakistan will always be susceptible to various epidemic viruses.

Malik Tariq Ali
LAHORE

Lockdown

As the number of coronavirus cases are

continuously rising, it is imperative that to control the virus we make sure we lock down all major cities. If this is not done people will start dying like flies as Pakistan does not have enough money, hospitals, doctors or even PPEs for doctors and care-givers to look after the sick. However, a lot of brainstorming is required so that while affording protection to the citizens, the economy does not go into a tailspin. Hospitals, pharmacies, pharmaceutical factories, businesses producing food-stuff, grocery stores, vegetable stores, oil refineries, petrol pumps, automobile workshops, public transport, etc should remain open to service the sick and healthy. Chen Xi, an assistant professor at the Yale School of Public Health, talking about the Wuhan lock down has said countries should follow strategies like social distancing, early diagnosis, early isolation, and early treatment.

Syed Hussein El-Edroos
ISLAMABAD