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Launch accidents beget another image problem

A single safety authority the crying need

HE horrendous cheapening of life by ferry service disaster in Bangladesh hogged news headlines next to the Iraq war mop-up obsession in the international media. Slow-motion rescue operation was agonising, the tragedy hardly localised. It triggered wailing in as many corners of the country as the passengers belonged to. In the process, the signal that went across was one of governance failure reflected through our inability to head off accidents which were essentially preventable.

Human errors being avoidable are patently inexcusable. More so when these cause loss of lives in such big numbers -- ranging from a hundred to four hundred as in the case of MV Salauddin capsize last year. Mitali-III that upturned in Buriganga on Monday entrapping and suffocating so many to death was decidedly flawed in design, the usual fallout of insatiable greed and bought-out fitness certificate.

A government worth its salt has to own the human errors up and that's where the governance question figures revolving around enforcement of rules. There is a seeming duality of authority and control over inland navigation and transport. The department of shipping headed by a director general is responsible for river routes management and issuance of fitness certificates to launches including checking their safety status. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) says its job is not to enforce safety standards but to only provide port facilities to rivercraft. One would have thought since terminal facilities are the BIWTA's charge, they would check overloading of passengers and goods and even stop the violation of other traffic rules. On the other hand, the biggest instrument is in hands of the shipping department to enforce safety: its authority to delicence a launch by declaring it unfit for navigation.

Fitness, to our mind, ought to have a broader definition than merely certification. For instance, who should be the legitimate authority to make sure all the masters and navigators are trained people? The shipping minister laments that out of 50 employees served with a call-up notice to attend a training session only five turned up. Who should ask the launch operators to explain? The BITWTA or the shipping department? We know some agency in the shipping ministry is in charge of clearing the river routes of shoals. But do we know who is designated to ensure that the weather forecasts are heeded before a launch engine purrs?

Clearly, the responsibilities are not delineated between the department of shipping and the BIWTA. It is more a case of undemarcated jurisdiction than one of functional overlapping. While on a day-to-day basis, this induced passing of the buck to each other, on a longer term whatever corrective measures were suggested by post-accident inquiry committees would go down the drain because of the fuzziness about who is to implement what.

So, there is a dire need for a separate inland safety authority, which basically entails updating of the Inland Shipping Ordinance (ISO), 1976. A good deal of work has already been done on it; all we need now is to recover the draft update from dusty oblivion and use it to form a separate river safety authority. The size of waterway traffic considered, it is a pity also that river police squads remain on paper only!

Statistics portray the awesome magnitude of risks in river journeys. Of the two lakh vessels of different shapes and sizes plying only 8,000 are registered. Most of the big launches cannot pass any moderately applied fitness test. In other words, most rivercraft run either on fake documents or no paper at all.

With such structural deficiencies remaining, the 3 to 8 pm taboo on launch operation during the two-month nor'wester season is adhocish since accident could happen outside those hours and in the rest of the year. The reduction in mobility could spell sizable economic loss as well. So, why not basically perfect the weather forecast system by issuing hourly bulletins and making sure these are heeded by launch operators on pain of instant penal action. Simultaneously, it should be incumbent upon launch owners to have the needed telecommunication equipment fitted into their vessels. Can they afford to remain primitive in a new

One sure way of dinning safety precautions into the ears of launch owners would be to have them provide insurance cover to passengers or make them liable for payment of adequate compensation to victims of accidents.

Guilty as charged



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

T was the first salvo from the legal perspective but should not be the last. A representative of an international relief organization told BBC that his organization was contemplate ing filing a case against the American General in Iraq for obstructing medical help to the Iragis. The case for bringing criminal charges against America rests on many grounds and compared to these the one mentioned by the international relief worker is a minor one, though very significant from the humanitarian point of view.

It is high time that the world com-

munity woke up to the threat posed by America. It is a threat that goes back to its unsavory past and encompasses all the sordid deeds and heinous crimes committed by it all through its history. Indictment of America should proceed historically and systematically to lay bare its guilt for the long list of crimes committed at various times and against different people. The mask worn by America in the name of liberty, freedom and democracy should be torn apart to reveal the ugliness that is innate and persistent. Its claim to world leadership should be debunked and the Americans as a nation, at least majority of them, should be shown in their true colours. Hypocrisy, deviousness and dissimulation should no longer be tolerated because it amounts to appeasement. Appeasement of evil makes it look banal and therefore less horrifying. That cannot and should not happen.

Americans now occupy a land that once belonged to the Red Indians. Through chicanery, betrayal and brute force the native Indians were decimated in hundreds of thousands. Treaties were entered into by the Americans only to be violated when the need and opportunity arose.

Armed with superior weapons American settlers and their governments of the time committed one massacre after another. It is a grisly tale of ethnic cleansing. They have now been confined to concentration camps in unattractive areas of America in reservations where they are free to get drunk and gamble. So deep is the hatred and opposition to the Red Indians that Hollywood movies continue to depict them as bad guys. So pervasive is the policy of the rampant exploitation and brutalisation of the native people. Decolonisation of the country has not and cannot wash the crimes off America's hands. The litany of charges against her colonial rule can still be heard, if one cares to dig into the past. The abominable and outrageous conduct of America at the present warrants resurrection of the past to prove that there is a pattern in her apparently random behaviour. A man with a criminal background cannot

with arms and ammunition to invade. How is one to describe these outrageous and horrendous acts? Leaving aside the issue of nomenclature, are not these to be treated as crimes under

A book written by an American called 'The Invisible Government' revealed all the shadowy and criminal activities that are indulged in by CIA including assassination of leaders of other countries. Several attempts were made to assassinate Castro but he

Iraq have now issued decks of cards with pictures of Iraqi leaders who are to be arrested or killed. Killed? Why and under what law and authority? America is not only committing crimes but behaving like a reckless outlaw intent upon establishing its own rules. It is well on its way to becoming a serial killer and an international gangster.

The litany of war crimes committed by America will remain incomplete if the prolonged war in Vietnam is left

giving birth to terrorism and abetting it with arms, ammunition and funds. Bin Laden and his ilk were their creation and were used in Afghanistan for terror attacks against Russians. Like Frankenstein's monster they have now turned against their master. If one traces the bloody trail one will find America as the main culprit for the present scourge of terrorism.

America invaded Iraq in violation of international law with the excuse of disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction(WMD). So far there has been no smoking gun. Hans Blix has now come out publicly that America used fake documents to prove that Iraq possessed WMD. There is no doubt now, if there was any, that Iraq war was a blatant case of aggression All the deaths and the destruction that have taken place following the naked aggression should be regarded as war crimes and a dossier should be prepared accordingly. To this dossier should be added the looting and vandalising of public buildings, libraries, national archive and the National Museum containing relics that are part of human heritage.

In her obsession with and propaganda about weapons of mass destruction America seems to have forgotten that it is the only country that has used atom bombs on innocent civilians. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not military targets and yet they were subjected to nuclear holocaust. That, too, should be a part of war crimes committed by America.

Where should this trial be held to hear about these indictments? The case against America for crimes can be brought before a court specifically set for this purpose. Alternatively, the case can be heard by the recently established international court for war crimes. Obviously, America will not recognise these courts, as it has already refused to agree to the setting up of the latter. But one need not worry over this. There is no need for trial America is guilty as charged. Only the verdict of punishment has to be announced. This may have already been given by the court of world

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IN MY VIEW

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successive American governments that no Red Indian has been able to prosper and participate in any walk of the national life. America's treatment of Red Indians clearly comes in order of the category of crimes against humanity as well as war crimes

The bestiality involved in the use of slavery as an institution to build the economy is no less a crime than the one committed against the Red Indians. Uprooted from their native soil and forcibly brought to America, the black slaves from Africa were treated like beasts of burden. Made to work for long hours without adequate food and shelter, their longevity was shortened. They enjoyed no rights as human beings and were subjected to inhuman torture and all types of abuses. Hundreds of thousands died as a result of inhuman labour, malnourishment, illness without medical treatment and physical torture. Like the Red Indians, the black slaves in America became the victims of heinous crimes committed by white Americans, particularly their governments over the years. In any indictment against America her record as a slave owning and slave abusing nation should figure prominently.

As a colonial power its occupation of the Philippines was marked by

 $reform\,himself\,beyond\,recognition.\,So$ is the case with nations. America's record of violating

human rights reached its low point during the long association with dictators in Latin America. In Cuba. Guatemala, Argentina, Nicaragua Salvador, Haiti and Chile America openly supported the repressive regimes and connived with the murder and disappearance of thousands of civilians. CIA gave advice, strategy, training and funds to these dictatorial regimes on a continuous basis. In Chile it actively participated in the overthrow of the first elected communist government under Allende. Following the ouster of Allende's Government by the junta in close collaboration with CIA, thousands of Chilean civilians, including a few Americans, were killed in cold blood. Costa Gavra's film 'Missing' is not fiction but almost a documentary of what happened in Chile in those dark days. If these abetments in large-scale murder are not crimes what is criminal America invaded Granada, a

sovereign country, arrested the President of Panama and brought him as a prisoner to be tried on the soil of America. It plotted to overthrow Castro and sent mercenaries to Cuba

survived them through sheer luck. It seems that assassination is regarded as a legitimate part of foreign policy in America and they mention this unabashedly. The objective of the first bombardment in Iraq was 'decapitation' of the Iraqi leadership. How can one country openly declare its intention to kill leaders of another country without going through due process of law? In this respect so cavalier is America's attitude that its Generals in

out. It was a war where villages were razed to the ground, forests set ablaze with napalm bombs and millions of civilians were killed in a blind fury of anger and reprisal. Millions of American G-Is also died in the prime of their life, not knowing why were they fighting. The world cannot forget this horrifying war inflicted by America on a people who posed no threat to their security

America should also be accused for



God and truth



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THAT is the difference between God and truth? God creates man and man creates truth, although the epiphanies of both vary from man to man. But wait, there is even more. Man believes in one God or many and that is his faith. Man accents one truth or another, and that is his freedom. In faith man surrenders to God. In freedom, man captures the

Some men worship truth, others use it as a weapon, Historian Joseph Ellis lied about his Vietnam War experience to make his lectures more interesting and relevant. He wasn't telling the truth, he said in an apology. Instead, he was telling a metaphor. On the other hand, Socrates passionately believed in truth, and that dialogue was the way to find it. The politicians of Athens killed him for corrupting their youth.

What is truth then? Philosophy tells us that the good, the true and the beautiful are inseparable. Does it mean truth is always good and beautiful? As a matter of fact truth hurts in most cases when the anesthetic influence of falsehood is gone. Truth is unpleasant, because it rips the mask of innocence

to expose the ugly side of reality. But if truth is embarrassing, it's also

emollient. A guilty conscience often feels relieved once it has unloaded the burden of truth. The death row criminals want to confess to the prison chaplains before their sentence is executed. There is a kind of discomfort in hiding the truth. It bothers the conscience like a festering wound.

So what is truth? Is it a talent of man, trait of his character, tact of his mind or term of his conscience? Francis Bacon

is paraded in the garb of pragmatism, its perfection is compromised and its purity is diminished. Fundamentally, truth is the interre-

lated consistency of statements and their correspondence with the facts of reality. It suggests an integration of character, and adherence of virtue, a kind of reliability. According to the theologians, the concept of truth is derived from the character of God, who cannot lie. In that sense, truth is the exact opposite of the concept of lying.

Why should someone not be eclectic and mischievous instead of being truthful and steadfast?

Perhaps God alone has the knowledge of such truths, which are vet to unfold for human comprehension. Ptolemy had discovered that the sun revolved around the earth. Copernicus contradicted it with his own hypothesis that the earth revolved around the sun. But it took one Galelio Galilei to suffer in order to establish that truth. In between valiant men like Bruno,

than the truth.

Hegel believed that what is latent in history is the Spirit, the Absolute; and the essence of Spirit is freedom, History, therefore, is the progress of humanity in the consciousness of its own freedom. Keith Jenkins reasons in Re-thinking History (1994) that there is no neutral or disinterested position, tual expressions of the self-interest of the individuals, groups and institutions which produce them. 'In the end

Both science and art were mashed together in fictions like Around the World in Eighty Days by Jules Verne or The Time Machine by H. G. Wells, where art sheltered science, imagination stretched reality, and the reality etched the unreality. Man wished to

God and deny his limitations, conceiving the powers of his own maker to relish that freedom. Fact ran parallel to fiction, art to science, thought to imagination, faith to freedom, man to God, and truth to false hood.

Truth is the ultimate wisdom, the pinnacle of perfection, which differentiates man from God. It's the gap between man and his creator, the buffer that will forever distance the divine from the human and separate flesh from fiction. Truth is the secret between the image and its reflection, and everything that happens between them. If God has created man and man has created truth, truth has created its own distortions. It walks in the house of mirror, its reflection multiplied on its reflections.

For that matter, man may speak the truth and man may occasionally find it as well. But whether he knows and understands the truth is hard to tell Man dies when his struggle to become God comes to an end. Voltaire writes, "We owe respect to the living: to the dead we owe only truth." Man who comes from God returns to Him. But every time the book of life is closed, truth remains the carry-forward bal-

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writes, " What is truth? Said jesting Pilate, and would not say for an answer". Many people have asked this question and none has said for an illustrious answer. What is truth? Is it some kind of a mirage in the woods? Is it the ghost of man's original sin? Or is it man's obsession with his own limitations that there must be more to what he knows?

One way to look at truth is to think of man in his bare skins. That is what we mean by naked truth. You tell it like it is. You see it like it is. Then you dress up that truth, and watch it disappear under layers of cloths. Truth is the bare bones, the seed of fact that disappears when the tree has grown. When reality

Since God cannot lie we know that everything He says will happen will actually take place. If we are to become perfect we need to be known as individuals who tell the truth, like God. That means when we promise something we need to keep that promise or not make it in the first place. The truthful man will steadfastly stick to his words. He will perform what he will promise.

But that is the working truth in daily life. What about the higher truths, truths that constitute the basis of human conditions, birth, death, religion, justice, etc., the truths that provide justification for truthfulness?

Islamisation has grown louder over

Vanini and Fontainier would be burned as atheists.

Thus the truth of science varies from the truth of art. Pablo Picasso said that art was a lie, which made us realize the truth. A sculpture or a painting, the script of a drama emulates truth with false pretense, often turning to imagination to piece together unfathomable reality. Science is different, it unrayels the existing reality to understand and prove the truth lurching in it. Art evolves reality, where it fails to understand the truth. French playwright Jean Anouilh explains that the object of art is to give some shape to life and to do it by every artifice possible, making it truer

history is theory and theory is ideological and ideology just is material inter-

Is truth, therefore, a state of reality intermediate between self-interest and freedom? According to the French film director Jean Cocteau history is a combination of reality and lies, where the reality of history becomes a lie, and the unreality of the fable becomes the truth. Perhaps every man's wishful thinking is the height of his selfish freedom. He wants to find unlimited freedom in endless possession. In science he explores and calculates his reality, and in art he gives free rein to his imagination.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

OPINION

While secularists slumber

Mahfuzur Rahman

OMETHING astonishing happened at the national airport in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, home of 130 million Bengalis. A huge neon sing appeared atop the newly constructed extension to the airport. It read Zia International Airport. In Arabic. The Daily Star of Dhaka reported the story on April 12, just as Bengalis were beginning preparations for celebration of the Bengali New Year. The newspaper also reported that the sign was erected about a month earlier. It is still there in its full glory.

One could be forgiven if the news reminded him, as I was, of the words of the seventeenth century Bengali

poet Abdul Hakim a free translation of which would be: Born in Bengal, and yet Bongobani they scorn Who begot them then; to whom were they

It will of course be argued that the Arabic sign was used alongside the Bangla and the English, and therefore no insult to Bangla was intended. But why on earth was the sign put up at No traveller, including those from the Middle East, needs it. For all foreign travellers the sign in English enough. What, then, was the motive behind the innovation?

Whatever the motive, it could not have been frivolous. According to the Daily Star report, the sign was put up there "at the instruction of some top policymakers". An official of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh told the -- perhaps exasperated -- Star reporter that people should be "happy" to see the sign in question. I cannot imagine that happiness of travellers is among the highest priorities of the folks at the civil aviation authority. But one can have a pretty good idea about the motive behind the decision to flaunt an Arabic sign on an airport of a Bengali nation: it is to make the country look more like an "Islamic' country. Never mind that a Bengali speaking can be as good a Muslim as an Arab. But for some that would not be enough. They would want the Bengali Muslim to be Muslim in their

For a perspective in the matter it is necessary to step back in history. The process of Islamisation of public life in Bangladesh is not new. It started long ago, within a few years of the birth of the nation. Initiated under state power, it was pushed along by a variety of forces, some all too open, others less visible and seemingly innocuous. The omission of secularism as a fundamental principle of state policy from the first constitution of the country, and the enshrining of Islam as the state religion, are well-known landmarks in that process. They were a great source of strength and inspiration to forces of Islamisation in the country. The battle cry for further

the years. The secular tradition has been challenged and secular laws broken with impunity. Two High Court judges, who had ruled that the Fatwa, such as those sometimes handed out by the village religious leader, was unlawful because it violated basic human rights, have been proclaimed apostates by national religious leaders. Not only has there been a proliferation of political parties and caucuses demanding the creation of an Islamic state; such demands are already being accompanied by threats of violence. Shadowy political groups openly call for the violent overthrow of secular democracy and establishment of Islam-ic rule

which the process is fed every day. When, for example, the Prime Minister of the country tells her countrymen, as the present leader of the opposition in Parliament once did in the aftermath of a devastating flood, that God tests His servants patience through such calamities, she acts like a religious sermoniser and not a political leader. She brings into public life what is a matter of private faith. She also, perhaps unwittingly, strengthens the process of Islamisation of the ethos. When soldiers beat up people for not fasting, as a group of them did during Ramadan last year, and are not $punished \, for \, it, they \, too \, contribute \, to \,$ the process. So does a minister when

But there is a myriad other ways in

he says in public, as the present minister of home affairs did so soulfully a few months ago, that human life belongs to God and it is He, and not human society, who decides what to do with it. The minister, pilloried later, was consoling the bereaved parents of a child killed in a

Some actions purported to be Islamic do not have political goals. But many of them certainly have. Some are results of ignorance that is exploited for political ends. Some are clothed in innocence. A satisfactory taxonomy of the phenomenon will be long and complex. The decision to put up a neon sign in Arabic on the national airport of Bangladesh

There has been a series of steps over the years at various levels of our national life that can only be described as attempts to nudge the nation away from its Bengali ethos towards the goals of political Islam. The neon sign in Arabic on top of the airport in Dhaka is one such nudge. And it is sharper than most people seem to realise There have been protests, in the

should, however, be easy to describe.

in deep slumber. Mahfuzur Rahman, a former United Nations economis

relative safety of letters columns of

newspapers, that is. Silence pervades

elsewhere. Most secularists remain