

Human habitat and national priorities

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THE threat to our environment is extremely serious and has to be taken with utmost seriousness. It is still largely urban and has yet to become a serious threat in the countryside. Of course the threat of arsenic is mainly in the countryside.

What is good about this menace is that it is not invisible. It is very much visible. What is also encouraging is that the citizens are very concerned and very much willing to contribute towards prevention of environmental degradation. The success of the present government in this respect is noteworthy and praiseworthy. The near elimination of polyethylene from our culture is fantastic. Even more courageous and praiseworthy is the abolition of two-stroke engine from metropolitan Dhaka. Both have contributed significantly and profoundly towards a better environment, better hygiene, better health and definitely a healthier future for a significant portion of our population. These achievements will remain as two of the most significant milestones of the present government. This has been possible to achieve because of the tremendous support the initiatives enjoyed across the board from all segments of the population.

The air in the metropolitan Dhaka area is much clearer, and healthier now than it used to be in recent past. City air is also free of the poison namely lead which has only recently ceased to come out of automobile exhausts. This has again been possible because of introduction of lead-free petrol at our filling stations, again an admirable move by the government.

There are however many more moves that need to be taken by the government. Let's face the facts. The metropolitan Dhaka is one of the very few current mega cities of the world today. It also happens to be the capital of the most densely populated and least developed country of the world. Needless to say its health and environmental problems are, to say the least, gigantic. So much need to be done in the areas of water supply, sewerage, sanitation, drainage, disposal of both solid and liquid wastes etc. The government and the city

administration have been making efforts in all these areas. Unfortunately, they are way behind the needs and requirements of the time. I don't think we have sufficiently trained and experienced personnel to deal with the enormous environmental and health problems that the metropolitan Dhaka faces. I am certain that we have more than sufficient number of administrators, engineers, doctors, city planners and others. A massive bureaucratic jam. I do not have the faintest doubt that the kind of dynamic and dedicated leadership the metropolitan Dhaka needs it does not have at the present time. It won't be unfair to say that the city never did have that kind of conscious leadership. I am extremely sorry to say that the country as a whole also lacks that kind of bold and imaginative leadership that is needed to deal with the environmental and health threats that our population is facing today.

If there is moderate to heavy shower for an hour or so, a significant portion of our dear city goes under water. Imagine what that brings to sewerage, sanitation, drainage, and other aspects of city life. Imagine what kind of misery that brings to squatters and poor people of the city. The number of these two categories of people will certainly be over several millions. What have we done to face up to this extremely serious problem of our mega city other than installation of some pumps to pump out water? Where is the problem? Why is it that we have not been able to do something about water-logging in Dhaka City in the last twenty years? Is it something that defies solution? I don't think so.

One thing is certain that there is financial constraint. It would have been a miracle if there were not any. One would in fact expect serious financial constraints given the administrative and political leadership of the country since its inception. For an impoverished country like ours if 10 percent (4000 crores) of yearly budget is earmarked for defence and another 12-14 percent earmarked for the so called public administration, much does not remain for Health, Education and Environment, which are the keys to national growth and development. Investments in these areas are the real investments for present and future.

Adamjee Jute Mill was shut down because it was alleged that the industry had been a losing concern for last thirty years. The allegation may not be as simple as it sounds. There has been a great deal of debate, about Adamjee shut down. Who finally got to suffer, who finally got axed? The helpless and the hapless poor employees and their families, their hundreds and possibly thousands

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of school and college going children. The culprits got away and possibly got rewarded handsomely for their complicity in the shut-down scenario.

The waste in our massive bureaucracy is in no way small and possibly much bigger than, Adamjee. The bureaucracy is getting bigger and bigger and has gotten from bad to worse. It can't get any worse. It has hit the rock bottom as far as its performance is concerned. Is it going to get axed? I hope so; unfortunately I do not see that happening in near or distant future. Because bureaucracy is too mighty to be challenged.

The other major drain in our national economy is of course the disproportionate defence expenditure. Remember those eight MIG 29s which cost the national treasury 800 crores? That purchase was one of those mortal sins, which was not pardonable. I hope the present government does not get itself involved in similar extravagant shopping spree. There is absolutely no reason for an impoverished country like ours to spend as much as 10-14 percent of our National Budget to nourish such a large establishment of Armed Forces. I am not against our armed forces to be transformed into a respectable stable institution of our country. I am very much for it. Because, without it the Republic will be a banana republic. However, I am against syphoning away very large and disproportionate share of our national budget at this juncture of history. This share of defense

budget cannot be compared with those of our neighbours namely Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka simply because Pakistan and India have been at war over Kashmir since their inceptions back in 1947 and Sri Lanka has been waging a bloody civil war for the last twenty years. So these countries have justifications for a big chunk of their respective national budgets for defense expenditures.

body (World Bank, IMF, ADB, etc.) will come forward to provide whatever is needed. If no money is available at the present time, the government should scrap its gram-sarkar project and instead, channel that money to overhaul the police force. Gram Sarkar may bring chaos and conflict rather than conformation. To me, as a citizen, the gram-sarkar concept seems misconceived.

most scientific way(s) to contain these diseases? Do we use the now infamous DDT or bacterial insecticide namely Bacillus thuringiensis or some herbal treatment such as neem. We should describe the merits and demerits of each treatment procedure. Cholera, Salmonella and other types diarrhoea are rampant in our country. Safe drinking water and sanitation can come in a big way to reduce these

Although most of world's neem trees are grown in our subcontinent, it is the Europeans, Austrians, New Zealanders, Americans and others who are making most of the wonder tree. In India the tree is called the village pharmacy. The seeds, bark and leaves contain compounds called limonoids with proven antiseptic, antipyretic, anti-inflammatory, anti-ulcer and anti-fungal uses.

Environmentally, neem has a reputation as a natural air purifier, exhaling out oxygen and keeping the oxygen level in the atmosphere balanced. Neem's ability to withstand extreme heat and water pollution is well known. It also helps to improve the fertility of the soil and to rehabilitate degraded waste lands. The tree can also play a vital role in controlling soil erosion, salination and preventing floods.

The most promising and profound effects of neem has been found in agriculture as an effective insecticide and pesticide and at the same time neem is ecofriendly. Neem is nontoxic to honey bees and other beneficial insects compared to synthetic insecticides and pesticides. Neem pesticides are

now being increasingly used in India on crops like cotton, vegetables, fruit trees, coffee, tea, rice and spices.

Neem derivatives may serve as affordable and widely used available contraceptives. Studies in USA and India indicated the potential of neem extracts to be used both to control male fertility and to prevent women pregnancy. Neem extracts are toxic to herpes and hepatitis B virus. An active ingredient in neem leaves, called iroindin A, is toxic to resistant strains of malaria. Either eaten or applied externally neem inhibits allergic reactions. Neem oil or leaf extract has been suggested to cure psoriasis, an extremely debilitating skin allergy.

The United States National Institute of Health reports encouraging results of neem extracts on AIDs. No wonder then that the United Nations declared Neem as the "Tree of the 21st Century".

Let us dissipate these beneficial effects of neem. Let us start a national campaign to grow more neem for a better and a healthier environment.

and all other diarrhoeal diseases in the country.

Browse the world wide web to find out whether the net has anything to offer that we can adopt which is affordable and doable. I asked one of my young colleagues to search the net on neem. We know from our childhood days that people use neem for a variety of ills ranging from chicken pox, scaby, bone fractures to mouth wash, etc.

Finally, the mega health and mega environmental project of our mega city. What is it? In my opinion it certainly is the Buriganga project. The river has to be saved from ruination and degradation. She has to be saved from occupation and pollution. Buriganga is the life blood of Dhaka. If Buriganga dies, Dhaka will also die. If Dhaka dies, what is left of our dear country? Not much. What was Buriganga only forty years ago and what is she now today? What a painful and sorrowful degradation of such a gift of nature! What a fantastic potential the river has for the beautification of our dear city. Can you imagine a European country bestowed with such a gift! What have we done to save the river, to protect and to preserve that gift? I can't recall much. We have used the river, I do not know for how many centuries. Now we are abusing her. We have subjected her to so much of insult and injury. How could we have been so unkind and imprudent? She has been crying out to be saved for a considerable period of time. We have ignored her for too long. We have become deaf and dumb. It is time we rise and save her and save our dear old city and save our country.

All our donor countries without exception and international organisations namely World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank etc. have been urging our government for good governance for a considerable period of time now. We see that (appeals for good governance from a variety of quarters) every morning when we open our daily newspaper, it is the same in electronic media, good governance, law and order etc. Law and order has been awfully bad for the last several years and there is no sign that it will get better in near future. The police force is awfully inadequate, incompetent and corrupt. What is certain is that brighter and also better officers have to be inducted in police force. A thorough overhauling is necessary. The emphasis needs to be shifted from Armed Force to Police Force. What it means is that a lot more funds that do not seem to be available at the present time will have to be made available to make the police into an effective law enforcing force. This should get topmost priority. The budget allocation should go to where it is needed most. Thousands of bright officers are needed to tackle the extremely difficult law and order problems of the country. This won't be cheap and this won't be easy.

From where would the money come for good governance? To overhaul the police force every-

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