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Save Uttara Lake

A progressive environmental deterioration in and around Uttara Lake what might soon become an irreversible environmental disaster through our inaction has driven my conscience to bring the relevant facts to a wider attention through your paper.

There are innumerable drains of all sizes that constantly unload all types of liquid, semi-liquid and solid waste in the Uttara Lake. Out of these, about a dozen are very large drains and many small, some partially hidden, drains. The pattern and distribution of pollution in the lake showing accumulated garbage and dirty, filthy water at every spot where a drain opens convincingly indicates that the drains are the major polluter of the lake. There are many unauthorised unsanitary open latrines mostly concentrated in the northern segment of the lake adjacent to sector 11. I found about fourteen open latrines along the western lakeside adjacent to sector 11 used by the residents of a nearby slum. Some of these are bored-hole type or pit latrines. The open latrines pose serious health risks to the slum dwellers though their impact may not be as serious as those arising from open drains and garbage disposal.

The Lake has become a convenient outlet for the residents to dump various types of waste including household refuse, garbage and rubbish. While household garbage of food origin are mostly putrefiable and biodegradable, other rubbish, such as polythene, plastic materials, glass, cans and metals, are not. These pose serious, long-term environmental concern. Part of the problems are fortunately taken care of by 'Tokais' who scavenge street-side garbage dumps and collect plastic bottles, cans and metal objects to be sold for their economic benefit, which are, in turn, recycled.

Since we return to Uttara often after a long absence, rapidly of deterioration of the lake and its surroundings becomes more visibly perceptible to us. The expected further increase in the waste-load can well be imagined by the fact that most of the multi-storied buildings will have about

12 flats, each of which will be inhabited by an average of sixty (12x5=60) people. This inhabitation pattern is many times greater than what was originally conceived at the time allocation of plots.

Anyone who has seen the transformation from what was clean and nice water to what you see in the photos now (photos 10-11 here), would agree that the rate of pollution has been accelerating in proportion to the rate of new construction in the surrounding. It is only in our visual memory when water was clean where we used to think of boating. Now I would no longer even dare to touch the water. If the current rate of pollution continues, perhaps in one or two decades people may find it too repulsive to even walk along its side.

We must realise that Uttara Lake is not a river. Unlike river water which flows and carries away most of the waste along the down stream, lake water is still and, therefore, whatever is deposited in it accumulates and does not self purify.

Uttara Lake is a case in study the facts are relevant to most areas in Bangladesh.

Those who are not living around this area should have no concern because the process of environmental degradation has been taking place almost all over the country with only at a different rate and scale. What, if anything, that we should do? I believe that the following measures can contribute greatly to reverse the present rate of lake pollution.

(1) Ban on discharging drains into the lake: I do believe that open drains have been causing maximum pollution. Since human excreta are largely biodegradable, up to a certain limit it is taken care of by nature's purification process, though human excreta poses health risk because they carry microbes to spread disease. In contrast, many contents of garbage, especially those of plastic origin, are not biodegradable and cause irreparable and lasting degradation of the lake environment. Therefore, some

alternative must be sought to redirect the existing drains somewhere else.

(2) Removal of lake front latrines: All lake front latrines should be removed immediately and a monitoring system be established to ensure that these are not rebuilt. The concerned people should also be educated and advised on where and how they can construct alternative sanitary latrines.

(3) Community action: Community action can play the most effective role to create awareness among the residents to reverse the rate of further deterioration of the lake. As I know, Uttara Association is very well aware of the problems and, as some readers may recall, recently on 25 December 2005, a demonstration was staged under its auspices near the Park

adjacent to Sector 13 with slogans designed to save the lake.

This effort has been laudable and has surely contributed towards awareness creation.

However, further and more aggressive actions are necessary. (4) Construction of parks all around the lake: Once I was told by some Rajuk employees who came to remove illegal establishments on the lakeside in sector 7 that there are plans for forestation of the small stretch of land. They were not sure if that was planned for all the segments of the lake. If such plans were extended to construct parks all around the lake as was in the Sector 13, it would be the most ideal way to reduce dumpers.

Dr. Atiqur Rahman Khan
Dhaka



Role of opposition leader

I am surprised to read the letter of Dr. Aziz Ahmad, Ph.D., P.E published in your newspaper on Feb 10, 2006 where he had asked several questions related to the latest speech of Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina.

Dr. Ahmad is perhaps not fully aware of the past happenings and of course the history of Bangladesh since its birth. Two people must know the real history of Bangladesh and the changes made by the ruling party during their tenure. Dr. Aziz is viewing only one side of the picture. He should be able to see the ground reality that there are anti-Bangladesh people in the four-party alliance.
Taher J, U.A.E.

Proposal of Professor Yunus

With reference to what Professor Yunus proposed to resolve the election impasse, I would like to say that there might not be any need for him to step in. If the government side shows some kind of willingness to accommodate the changes that Awami League wants in the present caretaker government system and the Election Commission, then the parties do not have to find anybody to help them. The concerns of AL are about Justice K M Hasan becoming the Chief of Caretaker Government and the composition of the present Election Commission.
The Awami League feels that

if things remain as it then the election will not be held in an impartial, free and fair manner.

Everybody now knows the character of present Election Commission. How can anyone expect it to be fair when the government appoints commissioners who are completely biased toward them and are flouting the High Court directives regarding voter enrollment? The CEC reportedly becomes sick whenever he chooses. Two new commissioners made controversial statements in the media regarding the High Court directives and about their fellow commissioners. The government also appointed more than 300 Chhatra Dal activists as upazila election officers. Politicisation of the commission has become a norm in recent months. So there has to be de-politicisation of EC and appointments of commissioners who are acceptable to all the parties for holding a free and fair election.

Given the present caretaker system and top to bottom politicisation of civil service and the Election Commission, AL fears the election will not be free and fair at all.

I would like to know whether Professor Yunus would volunteer himself to mediate between the parties in this impasse. What kind of solution will he offer to break the deadlock? What kind of solution can the people expect if the parties do not agree to compromise?

Kamrul Momin
Dhanmondi, Dhaka
Petrobangla
Petrobangla purchases gas

from the IOCs at a rate of around \$1-3 that depends on whether it is purchasing gas from an onshore or offshore field.

Great example is KAFCO, which was signed by President Ershad during his rule, for which Bangladesh is still paying a high price. Bangladesh buys gas from IOCs at a high price and sells that to KAFCO on a discount price and again buys fertiliser from KAFCO at international rate.

Should we again make any such deal with a foreign company?

Sayeed Rahman
Kentucky, USA

Crusade against corruption

Didn't we win our freedom in nine months? Then why can't we be free from corruption? I think corruption is our worst enemy now. We should shoot this enemy out and bring about our real freedom.

We, the Bangladeshis, should show the world that we could do things too; we can sort out our problems.

It's not a good thing that we are being champion in corruption year after year. There's point in being anxious here, it's no more a laughing stock now. Our law minister might have a "cool" and "Don't give a damn" attitude. But we can't remain cool, we feel ashamed and outraged.

We have to do something about it, right now.
Cantara Wali Ruh
Dhaka University
Soaring of US dollar

As a citizen of Bangladesh I would like to express my opinion about the issue of soaring US dollar against taka. The news is-- US dollar is soaring every day and taka lost 65 paisa in one week in case of opening Letter of Credit. On 9 February of this month dollar was selling at Tk 69.95. But it is a matter of worry that if this condition continues, depreciation of taka will have a great impact on our imports. This is really an undesirable situation for all of us. This condition will create a long term effect on our national economy. The Bangladesh Bank has suggested raising exports and remittance flow to overcome the situation. But it's known to all that it's very easy to offer suggestions. The real picture of the market is quite different.

The price of every necessary product is increasing gradually and is going beyond the purchasing power of people. We know that the majority of our total population are living below poverty line. Though the government placed the memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies at the IMF board and has conveyed its future plan concerning its foreign exchange management, the ultimate result is zero. The government should take the matter seriously and try to find out a probable solution, so that things remain under control.

Rajib Chakrabarty
On e-mail

Cartoon controversy

The Danish cartoon controversy reminds us that Muslims are not alone in an island. There is a historical evidence of the cartoon when Voltaire (1694-1778) wrote in his play about the prophet of Islam and he is remembered as a French writer, satirist and the embodiment of the 18th century Enlightenment. History repeats itself. Muslims are our brothers and sisters. Their problems are our problems. Humanity is like an ocean. We could not divide it in the name of religion. Religion is compassion, not weapon. Al-Qaeda and terrorist Taliban regime destroyed two historic great Buddha statues, one measuring 53 meters and the other 48 meters in central Bamiyan province of Afghanistan in 2001. However, the task is to identify problems and solve them without commitment to any overreaching goals. Religion dominated down through the centuries. Since then political religions became triumphant. One lived and died for one's religion. But religion means all embracing compassion. Religion means destroying the walls of darkness of ego. We can't divide the humanity in the name of religion. Clean the garden of humanity with compassion and we must not kill each other. Will of Allah or God is: Renounce anger, hatred and delusion. Misguided religious people are killing each other. Thus religion is misinterpreted here.

Sona Kanti Barua
President
Canadian Buddhist Council, Toronto

The Danish newspaper that created a storm in the Arab world by publishing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has cancelled plans to reprint several cartoons dealing with Israel, a senior editor told Haaretz yesterday.

"We wanted to show that we make fun of everyone, not only Muslims," said Pierre Collignon of Jyllands-Posten. "But for fear of being misunderstood, we cancelled the plan at the last moment."

"We wanted to show that even the Jews, with all the historic sensitivity, accepted satire aimed at their sacred symbols without staging angry demonstrations."

Meanwhile, a Jyllands-Posten's editor said on CNN yesterday that he would cooperate with the Iranian daily Hamshahri, which announced a competition of cartoons on the Holocaust. However, the newspaper hastened to issue a denial.

Editor-in-chief Carsten Juste said the editor had been misunderstood. "On no account would we publish Holocaust caricatures together with the Iranian daily," he said. What can we surmise?

Asaf Uni
On e-mail

I think that violence is not the solution. We have to use our logic. We can boycott Danish and French products. I think that will be the right thing to do. And we Muslims must show patience and we must remember that Islam is a peaceful religion.

ABM Rashid
HUT, Finland

The Muslim world has been set alight due to the recent controversy with the

cartoons published in the Danish newspaper. We have all read or heard the news about it, so no sense into going further.

So what do many Muslims do in retaliation? They cause violence. As if saying, "How dare you call me violent? I'll see you shot for this!"

No one seems to see the absurdity of the situation.

The cartoon itself was unremarkable and created solely to stir controversy and peddle a few papers. But what Muslims are not realising is that the country they were published in is protected by its own laws.

Christians and Jews are not spared ridicule in newspapers in the West. There are even several comics and cartoons which abound, depicting Jesus doing day-to-day activities. Of course, the cartoon went too far, but one must also ask oneself, as a Muslim, seeing the wanton destruction and slogans that have been banded about recently during the protests, whether people aren't taking things too far.

Abraham Kent
London, England

There has been quite a volume of write-ups on this subject in the recent days. It is probably worthwhile, at this time, to step back and take an objective look at the issues involved.

To begin with, as has been vigorously asserted by one side, the Western Press does have the right to publish what they want. Of course one expects some judgment in such exercise, and it is widely conceded that it was poor judgment on the part of the Danish paper to do what they had done. At the same time, it is established that the Muslims worldwide have a right to take offence and protest at what they consider a sacrilege.

Now it is important to analyse what the target and the form of such protestation should be, and what avenues are available for redress.

The first question would be, who should the protest be targeted at? It might help to think of a hypothetical situation: Suppose a Bangladeshi newspaper decides to publish some items that turn out to be offensive to the Hindus. Now, imagine that the Indian population is up in arms about it, and starts burning the Bangladesh Embassy in New Delhi, and threatening to kill Bangladeshi people. Obviously, this would not be a rational response, since the population of Bangladesh, or the Bangladesh government for that matter, had no control over what the newspaper printed. (Of course, it is conceivable that the government will decide to ban the paper and arrest the editors; but such options are not available in Western countries). So it is important to keep the perspective when mounting protests against the Danish cartoons. Unfortunately, the overwhelming response from Muslim population, primarily in the Middle East, has missed the mark.

The next question would be, what should be the form of protests? Here again, it would be instructive to look at a scenario that would most likely play out in the US should a newspaper decide to print something derogatory about the

Black Americans (using the 'N-word', for instance). The newspapers here have the right to print such items. However, if they proceed to do so, there will be condemnation, not only from the Black population, but also from a large section of the White population who will find this offensive. The politicians will also join in (although there will be no clamour for the President to ban the paper; he has no authority to do anything like that). However, the crowds will not burn down the newspaper office, nor threaten the editors to death. More likely form of protest would be a boycott of the newspaper, and more effectively, boycott of any business that advertises in the newspaper. Since advertisement revenues are the lifeline of the newspapers, this could essentially mean the end of the newspaper as business. In this context, the commercial boycott of the Danish products probably made some sense (although indirectly, since the businesses themselves may not have anything to do with the newspaper); the diplomatic reprisals have some weight of symbolic protests. Once again, subsequent events have deviated from what effective form of protests should have been.

The third item relates to redress for the perceived offence. While most of the Western countries do not prohibit anti-religious material, there are laws on books against libel, defamation, incitement to hatred, etc. Muslim citizens of these countries can certainly pursue such avenues. It should be noted here, that some countries do have some restrictive laws, such as against 'holocaust denial' in Germany. However even in those countries, the government cannot summarily take action against individuals or newspapers for such transgressions. The individual or organisation has to be sued in the Courts of Law, and it is only after the due process that they may be penalised. Some letters in this newspaper seemed to refer to some apparent instances where Western governments supposedly took 'appropriate' actions when Christian/Jewish faiths were attacked in the newspapers. It is not apparent what actions are being referred to here, other than possible denunciations by the Prime Ministers, since such issues have to be addressed through Courts and the Ministers do not have any authority outside of law.

Of course, the above discussion does not address the issue of what might be considered provocation by some Western quarters, especially during these times of turmoil. That would be a whole new topic of discussion. But it has to be acknowledged that if their goal was to deliberately provoke a reaction from the Muslims that they could then use to justify their caricature of Muslims, I am afraid they have succeeded to a large extent.

Shabbir Parvez
Oak Hill, USA

