

Hazardous river routes

Why no enforcement of law?

It is disturbing news that passenger launches are operating on 26 river routes identified by the shipping ministry as hazardous. The ministry has actually marked 11 of them as being turbulent round the year, while 15 others remain so during the season of nor'westers and gusty winds.

The ministry undertook the job of assessing the level of turbulence of different rivers back in May 2001. It drew a clear picture of the danger associated with the movement of river vessels on certain routes and issued the necessary directives to the launch owners. But the owners are not going by the rules and launches are still operating on the dangerous routes. The danger is actually multiplied when nor'westers strike regularly during the months of April and May.

The report is another example of how the safety of launch passengers is being ignored, despite the launch disasters that took place in the recent years. The disasters brought to light the casualness and technical incompetence of launch operators which make launch journeys on some routes extremely perilous. The shipping ministry responded to public demand by framing a set of rules, concentrating primarily on compliance with navigational rules and removal of structural faults of the vessels. There was an attempt to stop operation of launches having faulty designs by placing them in different categories. But the rules alone could not bring about the desired changes. Launch operators continue to run their business with the same kind of disregard for the safety of passengers.

Identification of the turbulent river routes was certainly needed to make launch journeys safer, particularly during the season of nor'westers. But the move won't pay any dividends as long as the launch operators flout the rules with impunity. We, however, believe that ensuring compliance with the rules should not be a particularly difficult task in this case, since the details of the turbulent routes have been given by the ministry and launch operators know where the danger lies.

The authorities cannot brook such violation of rules if they really believe that the safety of passengers is a matter of great importance. They must make sure that passenger launches, most of which are not capable of absorbing any kind of turbulence, do not ply the routes known to be hazardous, unless certified by the authorities as being fit for doing so.

HIV among drug users

Wider social awareness needed

A recent World Bank survey report gives us the bleak news that HIV virus is fast spreading among the intravenous drug users (IDUs) in Bangladesh and that it is gradually taking the shape of a concentrated epidemic among this group of high-risk people. The report further elaborates that the rate in central Bangladesh has risen from 1.4 per cent to 4.9 since 1999. And in a place near the capital the rate has been recorded at 8.9 per cent. The high prevalence of unsafe sex practice among the drug users and the resulting diseases also need to be addressed by the health officials.

The threat of an outbreak of HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to haunt the nation even though the number of HIV infected people in the country is still well within the acceptable rate. But with high prevalence rates in many of our neighbouring and regional countries, there is no knowing when the virus would strike down large numbers of people in Bangladesh. The report of large number of IDUs getting infected by HIV does put the nation in a vulnerable position and calls for prompt action by the authorities.

The social conditions that help sustain and spread all sorts of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV virus are very much present in Bangladesh. On the other hand, because of the low literacy and awareness level, especially among the low-income groups, most cases of STIs and HIV do not get reported to the authorities in time. The other factor that contributes to the spread of these diseases and infections is the hidden sex industry at various levels in society that often remains untraceable.

We feel the report of the donor agency on the spread of HIV virus among the intravenous drug users should be taken with due seriousness by the relevant authorities, if an epidemic is to be averted.

Committees, sub-committees and sub sub-committees

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

It's an old problem, isn't it? Judiciary and Executive. Executive and Judiciary. But I have already formed ten committees, twenty sub-committees, and thirty-five sub sub-committees. You see we have to look at it from all angles. What is the best way to go about it? How can we separate the two? You see it is like the case of conjoined twins. One may die or even both may die while trying to separate them. So, I have to be very careful. I don't want them to die. Do you want them to die?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE other day I have had the opportunity to talk with the Minister for Law and Dilly Daily Affairs of that great country named Land of Hope for nearly one hour. We discussed many issues of national interest. Excerpts are produced below:

Q: What is your opinion regarding separation of judiciary from the executive in your country? Some people say it is taking longer time than it should.

MLDDA: Who said it is taking long? I am sitting on it for four years only and you call it long? Don't listen to the people. You see it is an interesting topic. Very interesting, don't you think so? All my friends are of the opinion that it is very

interesting and I agree with them. It's an old problem, isn't it? Judiciary and Executive. Executive and Judiciary. But I have already formed ten committees, twenty sub-committees, and thirty-five sub sub-committees. You see we have to look at it from all angles. What is the best way to go about it? How can we separate the two? You see it is like the case of conjoined twins. One may die or even both may die while trying to separate them. So, I have to be very careful. I don't want them to die. Do you want them to die? No, you don't. Therefore, I have been studying all the cases of conjoined twins in the history. Interesting read these are, I tell you ...

Q: But sir, you haven't answered my question ... I wanted to ...

MLDDA: Yes, my dear. I know what your question was. And I am addressing your question. It is a very good question. Ah, where was I? Hmm ... yes ... you see, it is so critical. Just as critical as separating conjoined twins or like separating salt from the seawater. The last case of conjoined twins I know of is the twin sisters from Iran. Unfortunately both of them died. How sad. Therefore ...

Q: OK, sir. We may go to another subject. What about allegations that you attended a party abroad where a dangerous criminal was present? There is a photograph where you are seen standing on his right. The person was absconding from law after a death sentence was served on him. It is being said that your office played a major role

in getting him a pardon from the highest authority in your country. Please tell us about it.

MLDDA: Oh, you mean that party? It was a good party. Food was good. Beverages were first class. The host was a wonderful chap. He called me "brother" and all that. He has such a lovely family ...

Q: Sorry, sir. What about the photograph? The pardon?

MLDDA: The photograph? Oh, that! Did I wear a suit? I hope I did, because I don't like to be seen without a suit and a tie. Was I standing on his left or right? I hope I was on the right because I don't want to be identified as a leftist ha ha ha.

Q: I have another question, sir, if you may please give a straight answer. What about the killers of the great leader of your country? Why you did not do anything to expedite dispensation of justice?

MLDDA: Killers? Has someone been killed lately? Oh, you mean the one that took place sooooo many years ago! Amazing memory you people have. Well, first of all, most documents have been eaten up by uloo, I mean termites. Then many judges have been so embarrassed by the case that they have become mute permanently. I feel

so bad for their family members. How can a mute person carry on in life! You see it is very difficult to get good and dedicated judges these days. You know when we were young we used to look up at a judge as someone next to the angels. Those judges ...

Q: Sir, you are drifting again ...

MLDDA: No, no. I am right on track. You are concerned only with one murder. On the other hand, I have to take care of so many murders. I have to find so many ways and means to ... anyway, those sentenced in that murder incident that happened so long ago ... by the way, what was the day ... was it a Friday or a Sunday? Do you remember the day? I remember this much that I was supposed to address a seminar that morning. I had my best suit out with a matching tie. But I could not wear them. Everything turned upside down because of that murder ...

Q: You mean upside down for the nation?

MLDDA: No, no, for my going to the seminar wearing my new suit and tie. It was cancelled. The case? Oh, yes, I am looking into the case. That's my business, isn't it? That's why I am here. Again I have formed twenty-five committees, thirty-five sub-committees,

and forty-one sub sub-committees to look in to the matter. You know what, I have to read so many documents and reference books that I may have to change my glasses. In fact, I am going to Singapore for a new pair of glasses. I'll be there for a couple of months and after I come back I shall wear my new pair of glasses and read the relevant papers. Some of the handwritings and typed texts are so illegible that I may need to change my glasses once again. Why didn't they computer compose them? Computers were not available those days, you say? Ah ha, that explains it! Well, where was I?

Q: Nowhere, sir. And that's where you always are. Neither here nor there. Thank you, sir, for your candid answers. You have thrown enough light on the subjects. I am sure our readers will enjoy reading this interview. You have always been a straight talker.

MLDDA: Anytime, dear. I treat foreigners with great honour. Locals are locals. But foreigners are different. I hope you will print this interview on the front page of your daily. It will help me a lot.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

India's mumbling policy

BETWEEN THE LINES

The whole thing is in a mess. The king did not realise the power of the awakened people. New Delhi cannot escape the blame. All countries except the military-ruled Pakistan and the Communist China were backing India. New Delhi just could not make up its mind, how far to go to put pressure on the king. At one stage, the fear was that Islamabad and Beijing would assist the king if challenged. They could not have done so in the face of the nation's unity behind the demand for the restoration of democracy. New Delhi's problem is that it opts for the least line of resistance. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it doesn't. Nepal is one example where it did not. India may have to pay the price for its mumbling policy.

KULDIP NAYAR

NEPAL has three power centres: the monarchy, the political parties and the Maoists. The current struggle against the monarchy once reduced the number from three to two. The Maoists joined the Seven Party Alliance to make a common front against the king. They merged their demand for the abolition of the monarchy and a democratic socialist society with that of the Alliance. The latter wanted to make the king a mere figurehead and revive parliament.

The scenario has changed after King Gynendra has conceded both the demands. The Alliance heads the government and parliament is in session. Once again, the centres of power have become three. Maoists have returned to their separate entity because they want the constituent assembly and abolition of the

monarchy. The king does not recognise them. That was clear when he invited the Alliance to name a person for the post of prime minister to run the government. His was the same stance at the time of convening parliament.

Whether the king takes notice of Maoists or not is of little consequence. The ground reality is that they have almost half of Nepal under their sway. This bothers the Alliance as well. It has seen during the movement that the Maoists really inflamed the people's response. That the public came on the streets at the call of the Alliance was true. But the Maoists' support was crucial.

How does the Alliance bring the Maoists into the mainstream of democracy is the real challenge before the country. People want both to join hands to establish a democratic polity. Although the Maoists have rejected the revival of parliament, people still believe

that a rapprochement would come about because a constituent assembly is being convened.

Both the Alliance and the Maoists have been on the opposite side except when they were jointly fighting against the king. In fact, the Maoists raised the red flag in 1999, only after they felt that the Alliances' target of peaceful, parliamentary way would not bring about a socialist revolution. Can a violent approach fit into peaceful democratic structure? Unlike the political parties, the Maoists are fighting an ideological battle.

The monarchy is a sticking point. The Alliance wants the king to stay as a constitutional head. Prime Minister GP Koirala while leading the Alliance said during the movement: "We want continuance of history as we cannot survive without it." Most people are also emotionally attached to the monarchy. So are the armed

forces which remain a stable institution. Nothing will work without their active cooperation and they do not look like jettisoning the king.

It is obvious that Dr Karan Singh, New Delhi's envoy who met the king on behalf of the government of India, obtained assurance from the Alliance that the king would continue. New Delhi's policy, as enunciated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, also wants the king to stay. Manmohan Singh has said that a constitutional monarchy and a multi-party democracy are "the two pillars of Nepal's polity." In the face of this, the Maoists demand to abolish the monarchy is difficult to meet. On the other hand, if the Maoists are kept out of the settlement, the country may return to the same scenario of unrest and insecurity. Unity of purpose is important for Nepal's peace and development.

Looking back, sending a former king to meet King Gyanendra was not a good idea. Nepal's political parties have been close to the socialist leaders in India. The Alliance would have preferred an envoy from among them. The Maoists too would have liked someone else other than Karan Singh to talk to the king. Their participation in any future set-up is important for peace in Nepal. Their violent methods have, no doubt, scared the people. But they would have to give up their arms. Otherwise, the Alliance would be forced to fight them.

India faces a dilemma. No doubt, it has changed its pro-king

stand by announcing that it will abide by what the people of Nepal decide. The Alliance is too straining every nerve to persuade the Maoists to accept the parliamentary concept of government. Were they to do so, their fear is that they would compromise on the original demand for "overthrowing the bureaucratic capitalist class and monarchy." They might face the wrath from their own ranks which have been ideologically motivated: An armed struggle to establish a socialist government. They want to overthrow the parliamentary system which they believe comes into conflict with the Marxist-Leninist teachings.

New Delhi does not want a scenario where the Maoists are lionised. It can visualise the effect on the Naxalites in its own backyard. They have assumed a proportion which is already causing concern. According to official sources, the Naxalites have an upper hand in large areas of India's countryside, one fourth of 600 districts in 13 out of 28 states. The Naxalites in India and the Maoists in Nepal have also constituted a SAARC-like organisation: Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and organisations of South Asia

(COMPOSA). They want a socialist South Asia through an armed struggle.

It is true that the situation in Nepal would not have come to the boil if the king had listened to New Delhi. It tried its best to persuade him to give up power but failed. It should have been firm earlier. After all, the king yielded to India's

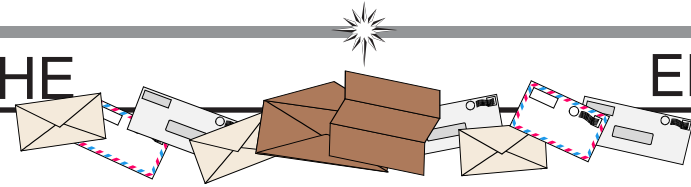
pressure. Still, New Delhi has not emerged unscathed and is seen on the side of the king. The Nepalese who put their eggs in the Indian basket are disillusioned. They had to come to the streets themselves and face the bullets to get power. At best, India was a sympathetic spectator.

A constituent assembly is probably the best way out of the impasse between the Alliance and the Maoists. But the tough job is going to be the selection of members. No doubt, a free and fair election can throw up people's representatives. But how do you hold free and fair elections when the king stays in power, even as a constitutional head?

The whole thing is in a mess. The king did not realise the power of the awakened people. New Delhi cannot escape the blame. All countries except the military-ruled Pakistan and the Communist China were backing India. New Delhi just could not make up its mind, how far to go to put pressure on the king. At one stage, the fear was that Islamabad and Beijing would assist the king if challenged. They could not have done so in the face of the nation's unity behind the demand for the restoration of democracy. New Delhi's problem is that it opts for the least line of resistance. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it doesn't. Nepal is one example where it did not. India may have to pay the price for its mumbling policy.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Bangladeshi doctors in UK

Over the last couple of years a huge number of Bangladeshi doctors came to UK, to complete post graduation and to gain valuable experience. They are influenced partly by corrupt medical post graduation and employment system of our country and partly by reports, posters and leaflets about "Great demand of doctors in UK".

Though the three staged exam system for getting UK registration (IELTS - PLAB1 - PLAB2) is pretty expensive, many doctors tried to get through it with a dream of golden future. Some of them got training posts, some got part time jobs, called locum, whereas some other couldn't manage anything at all.

However, they were trying to find out a place in an already overcrowded job market. Suddenly, the UK government made a drastic change in its immigration rule by which overseas doctors are no longer having the rights of working in a clinical post without work permit, commonly known as Permit Free Training visa. Now they have to have a work permit like anybody else for working here, which is almost impossible. Moreover, from now on EU graduates will get preference, which means, even by scoring the highest mark in an interview, an overseas doctor wouldn't be able to get a job if there is an EU graduate present as a candidate for that post.

This overnight change put all overseas doctors in a miserable condition. Indian doctors' association arranged a protest rally on 21 April, 06 and their high commission is negotiating with the British government for their doctors (few days ago they made an educational agreement with UK government). As usual, our high commission is unaware of our existence and our association is divided into two groups and doesn't dare to utter a single word against the new rule. This is the reflection of our own nation and there is nothing that we can do about it.

However, I heard from one of my junior friends, who came here recently with the same dream, that still similar reports and leaflets about 'Job opportunities for doctors in UK' can be seen in Dhaka which is definitely not true. I want to make all Bangladeshi doctors aware of this new and changed situation, and I would suggest them to think twice before spending time and money for a false hope.

S Michell
One-mail

Factual error

In quoting John Locke, the article by Ikram Sehgal (April 29) states the years of his birth and death as "1734-1802". In fact John Locke was born in 1632 and died in 1704. This mistake was not really expected in the editorial page.

Yahya
One-mail

Telephone defaulters

In Bangladesh, we have a law that bars loan-defaulters from contesting in general elections. Loan defaulters borrow money from state or private banks and do not return them in time.

Recently, the High Court directed Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) to realise unpaid telephone bills from 427 members of the fifth and seventh parliaments within six months. These MPs took the service from the state-owned telecom operator and did not care to pay the bills. To me, they committed the same offence as loan-defaulters and they should be barred from participating in the general election.

Abdus S. Wahed, Ph.D
One-mail

Performance of commerce ministry

Usually, the commerce ministry plays the role of consultant, negotiator and representative of various trade and business related issues from the national to international level. In a third world country this liability is quite tangled because here the ministry is to ensure all pervading facilities to attract foreign and national investors. But from this point of view, is our com-

merce ministry successful? There are different questions from the specialist level about the pertinence of our minister and the other members of the commerce ministry. The government has removed our commerce minister from his post accusing him of failure to control the price of essential commodities and also for failure to deal with some key international issues. But it is not new to us, already it has happened twice. Here the question is why does it happen again and again? Has it not proved the incompetence of our political leaders?

However, it is a big obstacle in the process of nation's development because it is a ministry which is inseparably related to national economy. Unfortunately, our government has never taken this issue seriously. From my point of view, I can say if the government wants to improve the performance of the ministry, they have to be more concerned about some key issues: the government has to make the proper judgment before giving the charge of a ministry to any member of parliament. The ministry has to be more transparent and accountable.

Roney
Ibrahimipur, Dhaka

Tongi election

The local body election in Tongi Municipality, the adjacent one to Dhaka metropolis, has shown a

definite trend in the formation of public opinion ahead of national polls. Needless to say, this is the public reaction to five year-long misrule of the four-party alliance. Soaring prices, deteriorating law and order and all out politicisation are taking their tolls.

We urge the government to take the defeat gracefully and learn the due lesson from these elections.

M.Sanaul Haq
Uttara, Dhaka

Democracy and Bangladesh

I fully agree with Abed Choudhury and Rabeya Rahman. But I would like to focus on something relevant but different from what they have pointed out.

We have seen 15 years of democracy in its most primitive form in Bangladesh. The majority of the MPs in the parliament are nowhere near their counterparts in India or Pakistan when it comes to understanding democracy.

Lately, we have heard both the US and British ambassadors preaching us on the positive side of sustaining and prolonging democracy. I think the US, Britain and EU can easily play a vital role in this regard if they expose the wealth of the ruling parties and their next of kin that has been accumulated in the West over the last 15 years. The US and Britain seem to value sheer monetary worth over brain no matter how it is acquired. That is why

you will see so many of the corrupt high profile members of both the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party leaders and their relatives owning luxury homes, expensive cars, hotels, fast food restaurants and businesses in major cities like Alexandria, New York, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, to name a few. It is an irony that some of the former ministers preached nationalisation at home while laundering money abroad.

If democracy means flight of capital, then I think it is time for us to look for an alternative for the commoners who are repeatedly cheated by these hypocrites. I hope the US and EU will stop rendering lip services to the cause of democracy. Otherwise, there will be further rise of JMBs as clearly pointed out by General Musharraf of Pakistan. Poverty is a curse. Extremism can only be wiped out by economic development. Economic development can only occur if bleeding of economy by corrupt means of the ruling mafia clans is stopped.

Wasim Hassan Rajah
One-mail

An appeal to past, present and future MPs

Our two main political parties have agreed to disagree on every issue of national interest, but there is no disagreement on every issue that goes against the national interest.

Let's start with student politics -- this is the recruiting and training ground for their musclemen, terrorists and extortionists.

These people go on to become government contractors, or are inducted into the police and civil administration. Both parties shamelessly indulge in politicisation of the police, civil administration and public institutions. Both parties will find some excuse to stop or delay the separation of the Judiciary and functioning of an independent Anti Corruption Commission.

Both parties have put Bangladesh on the top of the corruption list, both parties flagrantly use muscle power and black money in the election process. Bangladesh has many problems -- poverty, illiteracy, corruption, fundamentalism/militancy, but no problem retards our development as much as this system of confrontational politics.

With elections around the corner, both parties are again making tall promises, but no indication from either of the two parties that they will resolve their differences and work together for the development of the country. The premeditated objective for the two political dynasties with the help of a bi-polar politicised administration is to divide and rule this country forever, just as the British and Pakistanis did. The

rest of us can continue to look forward to a choice between the lesser of the two evils (if we are lucky), followed by hartals and the looting and pillaging of the national exchequer.

Our two political dynasties are morally bankrupt, with corruption starting at the very top and permeating down. Their narrow self-interests have one dynasty joining hands with fundamentalists, and the other trying to paint Bangladesh as a Taleban state.

Many of our honourable MPs of AL/BNP may claim to be honest (at least financially), but how can anyone be a party to this system of politics and be politically honest? I call upon the patriotic MPs of both parties to do a little soul searching -- what is the future for Bangladesh under AL/BNP?

Put aside your petty differences, unite under a common platform and reject this system of dysfunctional politics. How hard can it be to field 300 honest and capable candidates under a common platform? The movement for clean candidates will have to start with a movement for clean parties.

The good citizens of Bangladesh will vote for you, the Citizens Committee will support you. Let us not live in the past, let us look to the future.

Omar Chowdhury
Uttara, Dhaka