

The ordeal of a water-logged city

No alleviation measures in sight

WHY the city roads go under knee-deep water even after a moderate rainfall remains an annoying question in the minds of the citizens. The water-logging in the main thoroughfares disrupts normal life with vehicles and pedestrians getting stranded for hours. The already heightened traffic congestion is rendered intolerably worse.

The media has been crying hoarse in a bid to draw the attention of the city fathers to the problem but the latter's apathy only adds insult to the injury. The way water-logging has exacerbated in the city year after year would have provided sufficient ground for citizens' groups elsewhere to press public demands for an early solution to the problem or face condemnation. Unfortunately, no political party talks of the problem, they being distracted by high sounding political issues.

Why do city roads suffer from water-logging after a little rain? To quote some officials of the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, it was only slightly over 85 millimeters of rainfall on last Saturday, but that is not enough to flood the roads the way it did. So, what went wrong? The answer lies in the encroachment and filling up of the natural drainage sources like the numerous canals that crisscrossed the city once, and the moribund condition of the underground and surface drainage systems. While last year there was much ado about reclaiming some of those canals from the hands of the encroachers, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) suddenly stopped the drive.

The water-logging problem has to be addressed on both a short-term and long-term basis. What is imperative at the moment is to set up a taskforce during the rainy months whose job it will be to arrange for contingency pumping of water out to a safer zone and brick-soling the pot-holed roads so that transports can move unstuck on them. The authorities will also have to make the storm sewers operational through removing all materials that clog these outlets.

On the long-term side, we need to make the moribund canals within the city area and on its periphery operational. Secondly, the encroachments on the river banks must be removed so that the excess water can find its way into the larger rivers.

Unless the challenge is responded to on a national footing we have a serious problem lying in store for us in the shape of a more dysfunctional city.

Manpower export to Malaysia

The early hiccups must go

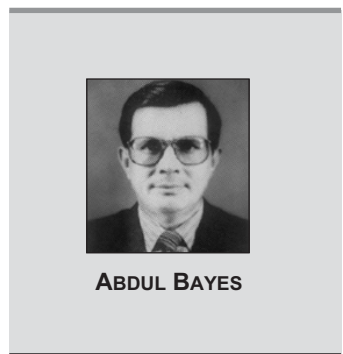
WE heaved a sigh of relief to learn that the Malaysian government had lifted the decade-old embargo on manpower export from Bangladesh. But it seems the people and organisations concerned are not making the most out of the situation, as disputes have arisen over the extra amount of money allegedly charged by the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) from the job seekers.

The workers have been asked to pay an extra Tk 30,000 in addition to Tk 84,000 that the agencies are supposed to charge for a job. Though the BAIRA president has assured that the agencies won't charge any extra amount, it is still not clear why the issue could not be resolved in time. We cannot overlook the fact that manpower export to Malaysia under the latest arrangements should have begun in August. Even the Malaysian authorities have expressed their reservations at the way things are being handled at our end.

Now, this is another example of a good opportunity being nearly spoilt by inept handling. Bangladeshis working overseas are contributing significantly to the national economy, and the workers ready to go to Malaysia will, of course, play their due role in enhancing the remittances once they are employed. But they are facing all sorts of odds that make it almost impossible for them to get a fair deal. The middlemen fleece them heavily and now the recruiting agent is also reportedly creating problems for them through overcharging. Obviously, the attempts to find a new job market abroad to alleviate the pressure of unemployment in the country will not produce the desired result if the issue is mishandled. It does the recruiting agents little credit that they could not yet dispose of the 10,000 plus job offer letters that came from Malaysia. Many more are likely to follow.

The recruiting agencies should immediately settle the problems with the job seekers and make sure that the country doesn't lose any big job market. They have to act with a sense of urgency and responsibility keeping in view the great importance of manpower export from our country.

When the price pinches



ABDUL BAYES

LAST week in this column, we warned about the upcoming volatility in the international rice market. We argued that the international rice market is very thin: only 7-8 per cent of the total rice production finds its way to the market. Most of producers are also consumers of rice, and hence, they tend to send only the residual rice to the market.

We also pointed out that, apparently, ominous signs loom large on the horizon with record level low stocks worldwide, conversion of lands for other use in China, growing import dependency of the Philippines, Indonesia and some other countries, and also a fall in production in the US. By and large, available forecasts indicate a rise in rice prices by a big margin in the near future.

In this column today, we shall talk about marketable surplus (not marketed output) of rice in

BENEATH THE SURFACE

There is no harm in importing rice. Remember the famous saying: if milk is cheap in the market, why should you buy a cow? But "milk" -- in our case rice -- is not going to be cheap in the international market in the near future. Therefore, we shall have to re-do the calculations to come to the conclusion that more rice needs to be produced at home. This calls for more innovative and technology-driven rice management system in Bangladesh. Not hands off, but hands on the rice plates, please. After all, the price rise pinches us all.

Bangladesh. A larger proportion of marketed rice does not mean that households are well-off and that the country is self-sufficient. One should look at the "marketable" surplus that comes after consumption needs of the households are met. However, I shall draw upon household level data placed in the forthcoming book: Rural Livelihoods in Bangladesh: Changes and Challenges (By Dr Mahabub Hossain and others). The authors' data relate to the most recent periods. The interpretation of the data, however, is mine.

First, about 14 per cent of households, owning 1.01 ha (one acre) and above, account for about 44 per cent of total output at household level, whereas 53 per cent of households owning up to 0.2 ha (functionally landless households) supply 19 per cent of the total output. In between, the small

and marginal households (owning 0.21 to 1.0 ha) supply about 37 per cent of total paddy. By and large, roughly 56 per cent of the output originates from small, marginal and landless households, while the rest is contributed by the medium and large farms. This indicates the importance of poor farm households in the production of paddy in Bangladesh.

Second, when production is pitted against consumption needs of respective households, the emerging scenario becomes a bit different. Those owning above 0.41 ha -- constituting one-third of households and supplying roughly three-fourths of total output -- stand out to be surplus farmers. But those owning less than that limit, turn out to be deficit farm households.

To be specific, the rate of deficit is about 60 per cent for functionally landless house-

holds, implying that they have to buy 60 per cent of their rice output from the market. In other words, only one-third of households in rural Bangladesh are net sellers and two-thirds are net buyers. A rise in the price of rice, thus, affects a large chunk of the population, mostly in rural areas, while at the same time it goes to reward a smaller section.

Third, large land owning group, who control roughly one-fourth of total output, tend to produce 60 per cent more than their consumption needs and medium farms produce 32 per cent more. Thus, only 14 per cent of households in Bangladesh supply 92 per cent of the surplus to feed markets. This indicates the importance of a remunerative price for rice. In other words, rice-pricing policy in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, is faced with a precarious choice. Fourth, the threshold level for

household level self-sufficiency seems to be 0.41 ha or one acre of owned land. That is, if you can cultivate at least one acre or so, you are off the hook with a family size of six!

Let us now lead the discussions as per farm size group. Households belonging to 0.41 ha and below farm size groups are net buyers. They account for 31 per cent of households and about 82 per cent of total output. The non-farm households, mostly urban dwellers of middle and lower income groups -- appear to buy 96 per cent their consumption requirement from the market. Those coming from up to 0.41 farm size group depend on market for purchasing 51 per cent of their consumption requirement.

In terms of poverty groups, only the solvent group (based on the feeling about oneself) lives with a sigh of relief by producing 47 per cent more than their consumption requirements. The vulnerable group appears marginally better with almost a "break-even." The most disastrous conditions wait for the moderate and the extreme poor, pervasively dependent on the market, respectively, for 61 and 90 per cent of consumption requirements. In other words, these households earn a living only to buy food. Only a fall in price could enable them divert a portion to other uses e.g. education, health, clothing etc. And for all

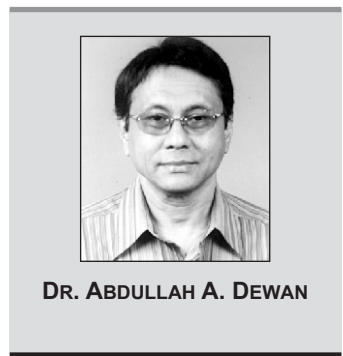
households, there is a marginal surplus of 4 per cent of net output coming to the market, and possibly for feeding the urban population.

If 4 per cent is the net marketable surplus then, presumably, our celebration of rice self-sufficiency is misplaced. We, in fact, import rice to meet the deficit. The answer to the paradox, "why import rice if the country is self-sufficient?" possibly lies in the arithmetic miscalculation of our statistical bodies. The paradox furthermore assumes more prominence in the wake of soaring rice prices in recent periods in the domestic market.

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The brotherhood of retired bureaucrats



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

LAST weekend over a dinner table in my house, several friends were exchanging their views on many current issues that have plagued the country for many years now. These friends are readers of my column in The Daily Star. They asked me if I would be interested in writing a piece on the issue of retired secretaries becoming columnists.

The intriguing question, lingering in the minds of many of us, is that why, after all those years working for the government in various capacities, having enjoyed post-retirement extension as favoured officials, they are now writing columns against some of the same policies which may still carry their signature stamps (metaphorically speaking). We all wondered why the government and the people should pay attention to their views now.

At 57 they retired while still young. Generally, they lived well as public servants, built decent retirement residences in the posh areas of the capital. Some even managed to build houses. Most of all, they accumulated priceless experience about inefficiency in

NO NONSENSE

Politicians come and go, but the institutions of governance, of which civil servants are the building blocks, continue to exist. One wonders, could our civil servants, as a group, have spared the country from the present predicaments of corruption and politicization? If the entire cluster of civil servants stick together and demand fair reform of the institutions of EC, CTG, judiciary and the very structure of civil service, no politicians can ignore it. They can thus save the country from further defamation and ruin.

bureaucracy and poor governance.

The current predicament of the country in almost all public sectors, be it corruption, energy crisis, politicization, is to a great degree ascribable to the "self-promoting" strategy of the civil servants (which include all public servants).

This contentious topic "why the government and the people should pay attention to their views now" was raised by Anwarul Islam, senior engineer at Ford Motor Company, who himself frequently vents his opinion in "Letter to the Editor" in The Daily Star. Other discussants who delved into the issue were three engineers: Dr. Aziz Khandaker, Dr. Nripen Saha, and Dr. Ali Hyder.

They grumbled that they do not read most articles in the Star because they are too long, and in many instances, they (my guests) are detached from issues analyzed in the articles. Several friends including Kawser Jamal from Little Rock, Arkansas raised the same issue during the September 1-3 FOBANA (Federation of Bangladeshi Association in North America) meetings in

Atlanta. People conjectured why these senior officials held back all their good ideas during their tenure of service.

On the last leg of my December 2005 trip to Bangladesh, I met two columnists: former secretary, Latif Mondal, and former controller of examinations of BUET, Asadullah Khan, at Latif's Uttara residence. Since we met for the first time we had to cover a lot of ground on mutual acquaintances. Once I felt at ease, I told Latif that many of my friends sometimes wonder why he and his former colleagues did not act on many pressing issues while sitting in the highest positions of public service about which he articulates now so persuasively.

Latif with his gracious manner explained that in a parliamentary form of government civil servants are essentially order carriers and implementers of the ministry's policy. They could not boldly object to anything they considered improper and politically goaded that would be contrary to good governance. They were always afraid of being: (a) transferred to a low-profile department, (b) becoming an OSD, or (3) pushed out to an early retire-

ment. Former secretary, Ghulam Rahman, also a columnist, voiced a similar theme.

During that trip, I also met a few disenchanted retired friends who groaned about being discriminated against by the government when they applied for extended service contract after retirement. Had they been given a similar indefinite extension of their service like the current principal secretary to the PM, they would have still remained in service. One thus wonders if the newspaper columns of many retired secretaries, disapproving policies and activities of the same politicians they served so obediently are in part a manifestation of "crybaby syndrome" or a genuine concern now about achieving good governance.

My friends asked me if I knew of any high officials ever raising their voices against corruption or resigning in protest against politicization and other irregularities committed by their political bosses, as we now read a lot of articles by bureaucrats on these issues. In almost all cases, even the departments under their direct control suffered from many inefficiencies and irregularities,

and even corruption. These departments were outside the purview of their political bosses.

Politicians come and go, but the institutions of governance, of which civil servants are the building blocks, continue to exist. One wonders, could our civil servants, as a group, have spared the country from the present predicaments of corruption and politicization?

If the entire cluster of civil servants stick together and demand fair reform of the institutions of EC, CTG, judiciary and the very structure of civil service, no politicians can ignore it. They can thus save the country from further defamation and ruin. Yes, perhaps I am too naive to expect such a recourse from most of our civil servants who join forces with the wheelers and dealers of politics motivated by self-promotion and interest.

The citizens of the country and the readers of newspaper columns would like to believe that the senior public servants have a greater role in policy making. They should be allowed to express their opinions in public forums on decisions that they consider are contrary to greater public interest.

Under what modus operandi the current civil servants would be able to vent this relevant information to the public needs to be formulated. Until then, providing absolute transparency about governance is the way to go. Meanwhile, the government and the people should pay attention to the former public servants' views and suggestions on all issues of local and national importance. Given the experience and exper-

ience of our politicians, the country needs all the thoughtful suggestions, regardless of where they emanate from. As for the former-bureaucrats-turned-columnists, they should keep giving their best in print, even if the politicians take no cognizance of them.

There are a lot of disappointments for columnists when they find that their writings have no tangible impact on the issues they write about. Three weeks ago when I talked to Madan Shahu of The Daily Star, he advised me to continue doing my part even though frustrations creep in.

In his book, "There's a Country in my Cellar," Russell Baker, the New York Times columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author articulates how a columnist needs to master the arduous task of crafting creative thoughts week after week and getting people to read all that and then having them believe in what you wrote.

Being a columnist means having a passion for life, a love of words, a desire to present objective viewpoints. Words are seductive, says Stephen King in his autobiographical memoir "On Writing." A successful columnist can transmute simple situations with extraordinarily original words so captivatingly that people look forward to reading what you write week after week after week ... yes, and till the time your name appears in the obituary.

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We want to believe the prime minister

We hear that Justice K.M. Hasan has a good record as an honourable judge and chief justice of the Supreme Court. He felt embarrassed in the disposal of the death reference of Bangabandhu murder case as one of the killers was his relation. Why does he not feel embarrassed once more, this time in accepting the job of caretaker chief and thereby help the nation overcome the crisis?

CAPT. HUSAIN IMAM

PRIME Minister Khaleda Zia's call for a dialogue between the secretaries general of BNP and Awami League in a public meeting held at Brahmanbaria last Thursday to break the stand-off between the ruling alliance and the opposition parties on electoral reform has rekindled the hope of salvaging the country from an imminent national crisis.

Although BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan was the other day trying to suggest that Begum Zia's recent public addresses rejecting outright the electoral reform proposals of the opposition parties and going tough on them were to be viewed from the fact that those were *metho* (field level) speeches, at least this time we don't want to

consider it so. We want to believe that this time she is serious and sincere in her call for dialogue to resolve the issue. We want to believe that she has at last been able to feel the pulse of the people as well as that of the international community, and decided to act accordingly.

The opposition parties are smelling rat re the prime minister's sudden U-turn. The reasons are obvious. On February 12, Sheikh Hasina, as leader of the opposition, placed her proposal for reform of the electoral process in parliament. On February 28, Begum Zia came out with the proposal that a committee with members from both the sides may be formed to look into the matter.

The rest of the story is known to all. BNP wanted to include members of Jamaat-e-Islami in

the dialogue. The Awami League-led 14-party combine would not sit with Jamaat or any other Islamic group who opposed the liberation war and who they believe are linked with the rise of terrorism in the country. The result being that the prospect of the much needed dialogue got stalled.

Not only that, since her announcement in the parliament to form a committee for dialogue, the prime minister never missed the opportunity to tell the public, whenever she got the chance to address them, that reform was unnecessary, that the opposition parties' proposal for reform was a ploy to jeopardize the election and come to power through the back door.

The opposition alliance wants full reform of the electoral process including the caretaker

government and Election Commission to ensure a free, fair, and credible election. The ruling alliance is not interested in the reform. The opposition alliance is determined not to participate in any election under Justice K.M. Hasan as Caretaker chief and Justice M.A. Aziz as chief election commissioner on the ground that they are either partisan or incompetent to conduct a free and fair election. The ruling party alliance is all out for them to be at the helm of affairs for the next election. Why is anybody's guess.

The opposition parties were and are still on the street with one after another agitation programs to realize their demand for reform. The ruling alliance has preferred facing these programs with force. The consequence being, the next general election due to be held in January 2007, has become uncertain.

Against this backdrop, Begum Khaleda Zia's call for a dialogue between the secretary general of BNP and Awami League to resolve the issue is most welcome. The civil society, the business community, and the people

at large want this to happen, so do the donor agencies and the international community. Now that the ruling party seems to have moved a step forward in the right direction, whatever may be the reason for this sudden change of heart, the people would like to see that the opposition parties take two steps forward and make the best use of the offer.

It is, however, important that the opposition parties maintain the pressure they have been so consistently and passionately mounting on the ruling party from both inside and outside the parliament to realize their legitimate demand for reform of the electoral process so that people can exercise their right to franchise freely and independently. After all, it is the amount of pressure that matters for our rulers.

It can not be denied that the people in general are in favour of reform of the country's electoral process, specially the Election Commission. They do not believe that the existing chief election commissioner and his three deputies can conduct a free and fair election. In fact,

they have no confidence in the Election Commission itself. The voter list prepared by them after so much of chaos and confusion and at such a huge cost of time and money (6 months and Tk 95 crore) is reported to be full of fake voters, one crore to be modest, and flawed enough to be discarded as scrap.

A true voter list is a sine qua non for a fair election. If the voters are fake, how could the result be real? So the top priority would be to quickly reach an agreement on reform of Election Commission and preparation of a fairly accurate updated voter list. This will require among other things, again priority-wise: (a) replacement of the present CEC and the ECs by neutral, non-partisan and credible persons acceptable to the major political parties, (b) Election Commission secretariat, free of the clutches of the Prime Minister's Office and or any other office of the executive organ of the state, (c) exclusion of the 300 election officers, allegedly recruited on political consideration, from participating in the preparation of voter list or any other election duty.

The second agenda on my check list is to agree upon having transparent ballot box. This will be a big step forward in preventing stuffing of ballot boxes by false votes. As the EU countries have offered supply of these boxes free of cost, we find no reason why any body should have any objection to it unless he or she wants to indulge in vote rigging.

The third in priority is to have a non-partisan, non-controversial person as the chief of the caretaker government. Ex-Chief Justice K.M. Hasan, the would be chief of the next caretaker government, is considered by the opposition parties as a partisan man as he was once the secretary general for international affairs of BNP.

Begum Khaleda Zia did not help him get rid of the suspicion when she went to the extent of amending the constitution to increase the retirement age of Supreme Court judges by two years so that, as alleged by the opposition parties, Justice K.M. Hasan can be the Chief of the next caretaker government. Nor did Justice K.M. Hasan prove himself otherwise when he vis-

ited a peer major at Comilla along with some local leaders of BNP last Sunday.

We hear that Justice K.M. Hasan has a good record as an honourable judge and chief justice of the Supreme Court. He felt embarrassed in the disposal of the death reference of Bangabandhu murder case as one of the killers was his relation. Why does he not feel embarrassed once more, this time in accepting the job of caretaker chief and thereby help the nation overcome the crisis?

The last but not the least in the agenda is to keep the army above politics. Let the politicians do their job, the army theirs.

As I am writing this article, BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan, the key person for the dialogue, is in Singapore for heart treatment. We pray for his early recovery and return home. We also urge upon the opposition parties to pray for his quick recovery and return home.

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