

We Need to Be Austerere for Our Survival

by Brig Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd)

The imperative need is to set our priorities and tighten our belts. We must practise austerity and shun all forms of ostentation in our national life. And the example must needs be set by the government.

Highway Gang Robbery

It happened in the small hours of last Thursday. In the rather short span of one and a half hours some fifty buses or night coaches and loaded trucks were cleaned out of all valuables by a small horde of two score thugs barricading the Dhaka-Chittagong highway at a point of Bandar Thana of Narayanganj. The looters graced their act by a softening up prelude of a very generous general beat-up of passengers and vehicle crew. That evoked some very shrilly vocalisations of pain and suffering that soured the dawning winter night. Alas, not one soul from the clusters of heavily populated villages around responded. As it started getting light at five, the looters, who could very well be people from nearby villages, left the place with their booty.

Where such an occurrence can take place without the least challenge from anywhere — we refuse to call that place civilised. What is that place? Bandar, the already infamous criminal-infested place? No, the place is Bangladesh. For this, exactly this and even worse, can take place anywhere in Bangladesh — and they do take place every now and then, everywhere. How can one, in such a situation, call the country liveable?

We have always, almost religiously, maintained that, specially in the states of the oriental mores and traditions, of special ideas of political and social responsibilities — no social malady can lend exclusively to state measures for its cure. The social element, ignored here so much, is daily recognised and stressed upon in these columns. And we believe, without being contrary to the current trend of 'statifying' education — the society has indeed the bigger part in educating the nation. And the society — that is the non-government part of our social polity, is continually wallowing in the mires of uneducated, unthinking backwardness deep down an abyssal hole mostly because society at large has come to divert it of all responsibilities relating to education and, its fountainhead — culture.

In the incidents of the kind that happened at Bandar on early Thursday morning, we, however, are constrained to see the problem from a contrary point. If these flagrant violations of law and order cannot be prevented and the society be made a hundred per cent secure against such organised, pre-planned acts of gang crime — then why should there be an administration for? Why should we blame police, who should, as a matter of routine, have mounted patrol round making it possible to thwart the Bandar rampage? Why should we blame the absence of armed police or Ansar guards on all of these vehicles for the fault of their absence does not lie with them at all?

It is a measure of our — meaning us all — total loss of claim to the sense of both civility and civilisation that we do, even after this incident, not cry hoarse against such occurrence. The Home Minister, possibly to be decent, has responded by not taking any responsibility in the matter or all such matters or even a note of it, matching our overall lack of the burden called civilisation. Let us demand of the government that highway robbery be made subject to capital punishment. The villages around proved to be offering sanctuary must also be held responsible. Or we shall be back to the days of the Pindari Thuggies' with no Schliemann to heal the roads.

Solving Water-logging of Beel Dakatia

Different regions of the country have their own peculiar problems. Khulna's share in this regard is water-logging, siltation and sanitation — each one of which has the potential to leave the region and even the entire country maimed and the combined impact of them can only be imagined. No surprise that Beel Dakatia, where the water-logging problem is so acute, has made screaming newspaper headlines from time to time. Perpetual hostility of nature is bound to rob people many of their human qualities and virtues. And no wonder, that Beel Dakatia has often been a scene of bloody human hostilities as well.

That bloody saga of intense rivalry of interests between small farmers and jotedars engaged in shrimp cultivation appears to be coming to an end with the implementation of the proposed two-and-a-half-crore-taka project. Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control M. Majed-ul Haq recently disclosed the government plan after visiting several water-logging spots of Beel Dakatia. The minister did not elaborate how the problem would be solved but we understand that the project will be similar to the 1068-mile-long embankment constructed in and around 39 polders between 1961 and 1974. That project has reportedly saved 4,00,000 hectares of land from saline water in the region.

The water-logging problem in Beel Dakatia started only 10 years ago but it has wrought, by this time, a colossal loss. Hundreds and even thousands of families have been affected by the stagnated water. Many of them have simply been displaced, thanks to the combined cruel effect of natural and man-made crises. Although a problem of only 10 years' duration, its solution was, however, long overdue. In a land-scarce country like ours, we can only ill-afford to leave such a vast tract of land under stagnated water. The shrimp culture has filled the coffers of influential and moneyed men with ill-gotten profits at the cost of small farmers' miseries. More, according to some experts, the shrimp cultivation in the Sundarbans area in particular is doing immense harm to the mangroves as well as the environment at large.

As for the proposed project, we again feel that we have reasons to sound an equally cautious note. The construction of an embankment of such great length involves a considerable amount of physical change in the geography. This is a serious matter and needs to be thoroughly studied before conclusively making the option for or against the plan or for any alteration. Farakka has been responsible for changing the physical structure of the country to a great extent and, by extension, much of the present sufferings here. A dam or embankment also has its plus and minus points and where the positive side has the over-riding compulsion, we know our choice.

THE Members of our Parliament may differ on many issues of national importance. But they displayed remarkable unity in the Jatiya Sangsad (National Assembly) on the question of enhancement of their own remuneration and other financial benefits. They quickly sank all their political differences and stood foursquare in demanding higher remuneration and other perks and privileges than had been proposed by the government. One MP reportedly demanded that their remuneration must be more than the salary of the highest paid government servant even if the increase be by one Taka and he was applauded by members of both the Treasury Bench and the Opposition. Such an increase was considered a matter of prestige and social status for an MP. After all an MP is an elected representative of the people. Our people may be poor, ill-clad, starving but that does not mean that they democratically elected representatives in the parliament should be less paid than a government servant. A member of parliament must get pension which he or she never got before in this country. During the last autocratic regime, an MP was allowed to import a car or jeep free of customs duty etc. Now under a democratic government why our members of parliament should be deprived of this privilege? Surprisingly there was not a single dissenting voice in the Jatiya Sangsad on this question. Not a single person stood up and said, "No, these demands are not fair. Our poor country can't afford these."

So be it as it may. The Bill for Remuneration of Members of Parliament has been unanimously passed by the Jatiya Sangsad. As reported in the press, an MP will now get a remuneration of Tk. 6000/= and sumptuary allowance Tk. 1,000/= per month — a 100 per cent increase over previous rate — with effect from 1st July 1991. Besides Tk. 1,500/= as office expenses, Tk. 48,000/= as telephone allowance, Tk. 30,000/= as travelling allowance and Tk. 75,000/= as discretionary allowance a year. An MP will also now get pension of Tk. 1,000/= per month. A car or a

jeep can also be imported free of customs duty etc. These facilities and privileges will be equally enjoyed by the Prime Minister, the Speaker, the Ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the House, Ministers of State, Deputy Ministers, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Deputy Speaker and the Whips by virtue of being members of parliament in addition to other privileges and perks attached to their respective offices. The enhanced remuneration and various other allowances of members of parliament will alone cost the government exchequer in the region of Taka eighty million a year. Import of cars/jeeps by the members of parliament will entail an enormous loss to the government in revenue earning by way of exemption of customs duty, development surcharge, sales tax etc.

Ostentation
The government has sought to justify the enhanced remuneration and other additional allowances and privileges of the members of parliament ostensibly on the ground of added responsibilities of the members as people's representatives in a changed democratic polity and soaring prices of essential commodities. The rationale seems to be odious as it tends to imply that a member of parliament is possibly dependent on the state like government servants, for his or her livelihood. A government servant regardless of rank and status is duty bound to serve the state and pursue no other profession or business while in service and the salary and allowances paid by the government are the only means of his or her livelihood. A member of parliament on the other hand serves the cause of the people of a constituency that he or she represents and is free to pursue his or her own profession or business unhindered. It would be wrong and disparaging even to suggest that an MP depends on the remuneration and other

privileges for his or her livelihood which is affected by price hike. Being an MP is a great honour in any democratic country; and high remuneration and increased financial benefits is not the measure of honour and dignity bestowed on an MP.

Remuneration and other privileges and perks enjoyed by an MP has hardly anything to do with either his or her responsibilities as an elected representative of the people of a constituency or with higher prices of consumer goods. To pay remuneration etc to an MP is merely symbolic. This again has to be in keeping with our resources and the general standard of living of the common run of the people. Let us not forget that ours is the poorest country in the world. More than eighty five per cent of our people live below poverty line. Our per capita income is one of the lowest among SAARC countries. Let us not go to Singapore and quote what an MP gets over there. Singapore is a highly developed country and a model for all developing countries in terms of economic development and social welfare but not as a democracy. The people of Singapore enjoy a very high standard of living and therefore it is not surprising that their elected representatives should also have been enjoying increased financial benefits and privileges befitting their national economy. It will be worthwhile for us emulating India, our neighbour and the largest democracy in the world with much higher GNP and per capita income than ours. What do the members of parliament in India enjoy as remuneration and other privileges? Can they purchase cars/jeeps produced in their own country free of duty etc? what are the Indian President, the Vice-President, the Prime Minister and other ministers of India entitled to in terms of salary, allowances, pensions, privileges, perks etc? We should not and must not even

claim as much they enjoy because Bangladesh is certainly a much poorer country than India.

During Autocracy
During long nine years of corrupt and autocratic rule, our national wealth has been plundered and looted and economy reduced to shambles. There is no production in mills and factories. We have to depend on large food imports to feed our people. We are almost 100 per cent dependent on foreign aid to fund our various development projects. There is mounting unemployment in the country particularly among the educated youth. Funds are urgently needed to develop our communication networks, to combat population boom and illiteracy, to improve housing, health and sanitation, to boost agricultural production, to balance and modernise our sick industries and for a host of other vital sectors. The imperative need is to set our priorities and tighten our belts. We must practise austerity and shun all forms of ostentation in our national life. And the example must needs be set by the government. There must be austerity in the true sense of the term. Let there be no publicity stunt in the name of austerity. I remember Lt Gen Ershad riding a bicycle once in the full glare of TV cameras and news reporters as he professed to launch a so-called austerity drive soon on seizing power in 1982. But he quickly got down from the bicycle and sat in his luxury car as soon as the TV cameras and news reporters got out of range and he was not seen on a bicycle again.

Some Suggestions
Here as an ordinary and conscientious citizen of the country, I am putting forward some suggestions to mount an austerity drive in the country:—
a) The President, Ministers, Ministers of State, Deputy Ministers, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the Oppo-

sition, the Whips and all members of parliament should voluntarily announce a self-imposed cut in their salary, allowances, privileges and perks for the whole tenure of their office. The Prime Minister has already set a personal example by not receiving any salary etc.
b) A moratorium for 2 (two) years on decoration, beautification, repair, renovation, extension etc of all official residences and offices of the Prime Minister, Ministers, Ministers of State, Deputy Ministers, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition and other political leaders so entitled at the public expense.
c) No expenditure whatsoever at government expense on decoration, beautification, renovation, repair, extension etc of a private house of the Prime Minister, Ministers, Ministers of State, Deputy Ministers, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition and other political leaders entitled to government accommodation when suitable government houses exist or can be hired for them.
d) A freeze on import of cars/jeeps free of customs duty etc by MPs for 5 (five) years.
e) Ceremonial guards and other protocol at the air port must be cut down and restricted to the President only.
f) Foreign trips by the Prime Minister, Ministers and government officials must be few and delegation kept small.
g) There shall be no government car above 1300 cc. All cars above 1300 cc have those earmarked in Bangladesh and Foreign Ministry pool for Foreign Heads of State/government and other dignitaries of equivalent status be phased out and auctioned.
h) Staff buses of Ministries/Divisions/Corporations/Autonomous bodies be auctioned and their use discontinued.
i) Use of government transport for travelling from residence to office and back and for private purpose on monthly payment of a fixed amount be restricted to only the Secretaries to the government and other officials of equivalent

rank and status. In a poor country like ours, our government officials must learn to travel from their residence to office and back in private car/bas/autorickshaw/cycle rickshaw etc at their own cost.
j) All Ministries/Divisions are allowed to retain cars at the scale of one car per 4 (four) officers of the rank and status of Deputy Secretary and above excluding Secretary for official duties only. A separate committee may be formed to work out minimum essential requirements of various Ministries/Divisions etc.
k) All cars withdrawn from unauthorised officials and found surplus to the requirements of Ministries/Divisions be auctioned.
l) All officials from Additional Secretaries down to Assistant Secretaries and members of staff of all Ministries/Divisions/Corporations/Autonomous Bodies be paid conveyance allowance at a sliding scale. A separate committee may be set up to recommend suitable scale of conveyance for officials and staff.
m) Except for escort and security duties and essential field trips, fewer jeeps be authorised to various government offices located at Dhaka and other cities.
Twenty years ago Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign country through a mass uprising leading to a bloody war of independence. Our people had to pay a very high price for our independence. About thirty million people — undoubtedly the best of our manhood — laid down their lives, thousands of our young womenfolk suffered dishonour and indignity at the hands of the barbarous Occupations Army of Pakistan and over ten million people including the old and the infirm, women and children were forced to flee the country and take refuge in neighbouring India.
We have a difficult task ahead. Our leaders failed us in the past. We have already lost a good deal — many a patriot and much precious time — in the struggle for power. The going in front is all uphill. Let us eschew our differences and sacrifice some of our comforts and luxury and privileges today in order to consolidate our hard earned independence for our posterity to build on further to-morrow.

Turkey Fears Geo-Strategic Loss in Global Politics

Radical changes in the global political landscape are causing deep concern in Turkey, whose front-line state status gave it strategic value during the Cold War. Thalif Deen of IPS reports from Ankara.

WITH the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist empire, Turkey faces the prospect of losing its geo-strategic importance in global politics. A member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Turkey was one of the heavily armed 'front-line' states sharing a border with the former Soviet Union and assigned to help defend the Western world against Soviet encroachment.

But with the former superpower reduced to a military non-entity, there is no longer a credible enemy to justify the continued flow of sophisticated weapons from the United States and Western Europe to Ankara. Perhaps the biggest single fear in Turkey, according to political analysts here, is that the country may lose its position as the world's third largest recipient of US military aid.

Seyfi Tazan, president of Turkey's Foreign Policy Institute, said recently that his country's geographic location has always carried with it certain responsibilities for maintaining peace and stability in the region.

But the radical changes in the global political landscape are expected to have a significant impact on Turkey in the 1990's.

As the mass circulation daily, Hurriyet, said, the break-up of the Soviet Union is "causing grave concern at the Turkish Foreign Ministry".

The pro-Islamic daily, Zaman, argues on the other hand that the creation of a Slavic union comprising Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus has left the former Soviet Muslim republics with no alternative but to join hands with Turkey. There are about 42 million ethnic Turks living in Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

Besides its long-standing dispute with Greece over Cyprus, Turkey also faces renewed threats from other sources.

Recently, Kurdish separatists escalated their violence when they fire-bombed a department store in the heart of Istanbul, killing 11 persons. The government pointed a finger at the outlawed Marxist Kurdish Labour Party which has been fighting since 1984 for an independent Kurdish state in the south-east.

In a television interview in Ankara, Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel charged that Kurdish guerrillas were being provided sanctuary by the neighbouring countries of Iran, Iraq and Syria. More than 20 per cent of Turkey's 60 million people are of Kurdish origin.

In a hard-hitting statement after the bombing in Istanbul, Defence Minister Nevzat Ayaz said: "Turkey can never surrender to anybody. Terror will be prevented."

The renewed terrorist attacks and the Kurdish insurgency come at a time when the Demirel government is watch-

ing with dismay the possible rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey.

But since the fundamentalist Welfare Party and its two allies received only about 16.7 per cent of the votes at last October's elections, political analysts argue that the threat from Islamic fundamentalism may only be a reality by the mid-or late 1990's.

Turkey's political problems have been compounded by growing new economic concerns — the rate of inflation is an unprecedented 70 per cent, with economic growth averaging about five per cent annually.

The Gulf crisis had the most devastating impact on the economy. Joining the US-led coalition against Iraq, Turkey shut off the Iraqi oil pipeline thereby losing about one million dollars a day in royalties.

Although Ankara was compensated with additional inflows of foreign capital, the World Bank has said that the impact of the Gulf crisis spilled over into domestic output, contributing to a decline in gross national product (GNP).

Meanwhile, US military aid to Turkey is expected to decline in the 1990's. Last year, Washington reduced its security assistance from US\$545 million to US\$497 million. The main reason was the reduction of East-West tensions and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

OPINION

Shahjahanpur Road : A Case Study

Traffic congestions with identical features at different points in the city have come to be classified as a major problem. It should be noted with alarm that some people with a stick in their hand regulate the traffic with a view to clearing the congestions. They collect tolls from mainly the private car owners after providing them a quick passage. At this stage, with a stick in their hand they kick the cars if money is not given to them. As already mentioned in many an earlier write-up on this subject, the traffic constables on duty, after initial un-successful efforts to clear the congestions leave the place to be taken control of by the people with the stick.

The next stage, unless the problems are promptly resolved, shall necessarily be violent because, with the disappearance of the law enforcing bodies from the scene, the so-called income generating aspect of the congestion problem, has already started attracting the hoodlums on the streets. This has all potentialities to grow into a serious criminal problem developing side by side with the traffic congestion.

In the present write-up, this writer wishes to focus the attention to the case of Shahjahanpur Road as a case study where immediate remedial measures should be applied, and followed in other similar cases.

Shahjahanpur Road starts from the east of Rajarbagh and ends up at Khilgaon Rail Crossing having sodium lights, road dividers etc. This connects the city with the vast areas like Khilgaon, Taltala, Goran, Mather Tek, Bashabo, Manda and other adjoining areas conveniently reached from the newly constructed Biswa Road. This road is wide enough to take the required traffic load.

Congestions occurring on this road can simply be termed as horrible. When trains pass, the rail gate is closed at the end of this road on the east. In the resultant halt in the traffic movement, congestions develop in a twinkling of an eye occupying almost half of the Shahjahanpur Road. In the process, all the feeder lanes on the north linking up with Shaheed Bagh, North Shahjahanpur, Khilgaon Bagicha etc. are also blocked. This continues at times, exceeding an hour. In the congestion, all kinds of vehicles such as lorries, staff buses, micro-buses, cars, pick-ups,

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tempo, rickshaws, rickshaw vans, push carts etc. with their different sizes remain awkwardly jam-packed providing no space to the pedestrians to cross the road from one side to another. This phenomenon recurs in varying degrees on this road several times a day.

There is no denying the fact that as long as the trains shall move on the tracks, the rail crossing would have to be closed and avoidance of the resultant traffic congestion would continue to be impossible. It should, however, be possible to settle the contributory problems which are: i) Side-walks along the Khilgaon Rail Gate down to the Municipal Primary School have turned into an extension of the market behind. During congestions of the main road, it takes hell of a lot of time to move on these side-walks. ii) Along these side-walks, the tempo, coming from the direction of Goran, have their transit point to pick up passengers for their terminating point at Gulistan. There are always quite a few available tempo there with small helping boys hunting for passengers and at times competing or quarrelling with other tempo boys. iii) A few steps ahead, rickshaw vans can be seen on the road off-loading merchandise for the market. A few steps still farther, empty rickshaws are available for Gulistan and other places.

On the opposite side of the road dividers, there is the same scenario with rickshaws and tempo's returning from Gulistan en route to Goran. In the mornings day labourers occupy the available space on the road on the northern side.

Similarly numerous motor workshops have encroached upon the main road near the Shahjahanpur graveyard leaving narrow space for the vehicular movement. Shahjahanpur Road is a very important thoroughfare because it is the only link road for densely populated areas mentioned above. There is an urgent need for a couple of alternate roads to connect the above areas with the city. In the present state of affairs, deployment of all the traffic constables with extremely efficient police officers, shall yield little results. Growth of hoodlums with sticks in their hands under the circumstances, shall continue to confront the already problem-ridden society, with an additional violent problem.

Cost-benefit analysis of town planners is one thing while those moving on the roads have their own cost-benefit considerations and for that matter, the Malibagh Rail Crossing and the rail crossing on the south of Kamalapur Railway Station have failed to share the traffic load which is easy, direct and short for the areas linked with.

To some extent, the Bashabo Rail Crossing, now closed to the traffic, did serve as an efficient alternate route. It is really puzzling to think over as to why the Bashabo Rail Crossing, with an over-bridge, was at all provided for and the good reasons for which this has now been sealed off. Yes, the Kamalapur Railway Station is nearby which calls for frequent closures of that rail crossing. This necessitates very effective and efficient management of Bashabo Rail Crossing to pre-empt accidents. But once a viable idea still being reminded by the existence of the overbridge, should not have been so hastily abandoned and sealed off. Probable solutions are: i) A long-term plan for erecting a fly-over at Khilgaon Rail Crossing to be funded after feasibility study and other relevant exercises by the World Bank or other donor agencies which is a time-consuming process. This also runs the risk of legal action in the process of land acquisition required for the fly-over. ii) Resumption of Bashabo Rail Crossing with effective and efficient arrangements against accidents. iii) Another rail crossing, somewhere in Khilgaon Bagicha/any other convenient point so that the present traffic load on Shahjahanpur Road is evenly distributed.

From the case study of Shahjahanpur Road, we may draw the following conclusions which may be applicable with some modifications here and there to other cases, too: i) No use blaming the traffic police. ii) Requirement of a couple of alternate routes, one of which being the Bashabo Rail Crossing is most pressing and urgent. iii) Existing management of Shahjahanpur Road with reference to the extension of the market over the side-walks, transit point for tempo and parking lot for rickshaws etc. along the Khilgaon Rail Gate and encroachments near the graveyard is extremely poor. iv) Hoodlums with sticks should be checked.

To the Editor...

Flight Information Desk

Sir, Persons who do not understand the meaning of "Service" should never be allowed to sit in the counter for Flight Information in the Airport.

I had a bitter experience on February 22. I rang up, asked for Flight Information. I was told that the flight of Dragon Air from Hong Kong was delayed and expected around 8:35 pm. I checked up with Dragon Air City Office and I was told that they had no such information. However, the lady was kind to tell me that she would check up and let me know. Around 5:40 pm I got a

ring from Dragon Air saying that the flight would come at 18:35. This was service. I had to rush to the Airport. The passenger whom I was expecting had already come out by the time I entered the visitors' lounge. Thank God, the Dragon Air authorities had informed me the correct time of arrival.

Persons who are not equipped with relevant information or do not know how to read the time after deducting 6 hours from GMT should never hold the charge of F I Desk. I presume, the gentleman confused between 1835 hours and 2035 hours.

Fatrul Quadir
Dhaka-1207

Roadside shops

Sir, A section of traders builds shops beside the roads in a manner which tells upon normal traffic. On the other hand, another group builders or plot owners, keep construction materials like bricks, sand, rods, etc. In front of peoples houses. This causes immense troubles both to the pedestrians and the private residents and all this perhaps is occurring more in Mirpur than any other area in the city.

Though they have several times been requested to stop these activities, but they only pay little heed. I, therefore, appeal to the relevant authority

S Rahman
Mirpur, Dhaka.