

Megacity on a Dead River

The Department of Environment, a new-fangled thing not yet accorded any power or importance any government set-up is entitled to, has come up with certain results of a number of investigations they are subjecting this nation's physical and biological situations to. One of these, although not quite a revelation, is a disclosure that calls for very quick attention on a very high national priority basis.

Oxygen is found dissolved in quite sizeable portions in all of the naturally occurring water on the earth. And this is not true of Buriganga on which the megacity of Dhaka stands. The dissolved oxygen, quite a different thing from the oxygen-hydrogen combine that make up the water molecule, accounts for the phenomenon of aquatic life from which all life originated and which forms by far the better part of all living things in the known universe. Plant and animal forms of life can thrive in water having at least four milligram of Oxygen to a litre of it — or four parts in a million. This is we say sizeable for this proportion is enough to sustain everything living in water. Till just the other day we had in the Buriganga an average of 5.7 milligram of oxygen to a litre of water. Now for a certain stretch of this important river, from the Mirpur Bridge to Pagla, the oxygen ratio has come down to an incredible nil. The import of this fact has not, very evidently, dawned upon those who run the nation. Unless the nation's leaderships are dead set on leading the country on to a national suicide, they must heed the warnings in time and act to lead the nation away from the precipice we now almost stand on.

The Buriganga is a very short run of water connecting two branches of the mighty Padma. But on its shores live a tenth of the nation's 120 million population. And a fair share of the nation's industry uses its water and return to it thousands of tons of regularly poisonous effluents every day. For want of any sewage treatment plant, close to a million ton of pollutant finds its way to the small river direct from the bathing and lavatory facilities. Everyday. The result: we are now living on a dead river and soon enough we shall be living on a stinking cesspool.

There are two complementary approaches to revive the clinically dead river and making it what a river always has been — life-giving and culture-spawning. It must be cleaned even as the Thames has been or parts of the upstream of our own Ganges. And its pollution must be stopped by banning industries of all size and kind from emptying any waste into the river and arranging for all domestic human waste to be treated and recycled and turned into fertilizer far away from any river or other water reservoirs.

If the government is serious, this would be no forbidding proposition. How and when can we be sure of government turning sincerely to the Buriganga problem? When we shall see government doing something in earnest about the waters of the Dhamondi Lake? Is there any cause for hope in such matters? Hardly. More than 70 per cent of the tens of thousands of motorized vehicles in Dhaka do belch black smoke. The government has miserably failed to come to grips with this flagrantly conspicuous poisoning of the atmosphere. Tagore once wondered if Creator in His endless compassion for the created could forgive those who 'poison His atmosphere and diminish His light'.

The Department of Environment has lamented in self-pity their position of being a paper tiger. The reality is worse. Theirs is possibly a cosmetic presence. This is the society's perception. The government will have to move itself, first of all attitudinally, considerably to change this by grasping the urgent and true challenges to Bangladesh's physical existence.

Mugging: Cowboy Style

Mugging in this city is nothing new. But there is something new about the carrying out of this criminal practice. One vernacular daily reports that attractive young women are being used to lure unsuspecting men into the trap of the muggers. So the mugging strategy has undergone a noticeable change. In fact, it has followed the pattern of cowboy cinema of the wild west. The threat of fire arms and sex appeal have been shrewdly combined in the fashion of Clint Eastwood to track down the victim. Certainly, it is a departure from the crude style of conventional mugging that depends more on raw courage in the action.

The problem with the people falling prey of such double-pronged attack is that most of the time they do not report these cases to the police stations. Sometimes, the incidents happen in such a manner that before the victim has decided what to do, his undoing has been completed. In such a situation the police also find it increasingly difficult to deal with these muggers of new generation. It appears the conventional training and weapons they rely upon, prove woefully inadequate and obsolete to deal with the better equipped and smarter breed of muggers.

However, it is not that the life for the muggers was earlier made difficult by a remarkable improvement in the service of the law enforcers and that has induced the anti-social elements to invent ways for outdoing the latter even more. In reality, the law enforcing agency are yet to cope with the old-style mugging. The same report says that mugging has recorded an abnormal rise in recent times. Contrary to what was reported earlier, this fresh spurt in robbing people of their cash and valuables in the street may have a connection with the coming Eid festival. If it is not, things are taking a pretty bad turn.

The change in the style of mugging is an indication of more educated young people coming into this illegal profession. Intelligent, and acquainted with the latest sophisticated devices, these muggers can easily outwit the police. The signs are quite clear that in the coming days, more innovative ways will be followed to rob people. So, a better trained and equipped police force needs to be in place to serve the city people. Even the members of the public ought to be extra cautious in detecting the trap laid by the muggers. A mugger-infested city ultimately tells on the people's psychology. It affects business and all other economic activities most adversely. Before the muggers have a field-day, the law enforcing agency should be made competent and capable enough for striking a fatal blow to them.

The Daily Star Public Debate

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?



Today **Barrister Nazmul Huda**, Minister for Information and Vice Chairman, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, puts forward his arguments against the proposition.

Interviewed by Chapal Bashar

BEFORE saying anything about opposition's demand and for holding the next parliament elections under a caretaker government, we have to evaluate why the general election of 1991 was free and fair. The reason was because, Awami League was almost certain that it was going to emerge victorious and that BNP was not going to win more than 10 seats. The AL leaders thought that the BNP would be defeated and they (AL) would form the government, and a free and fair election would add to the credibility to their victory.

Why the holding of general elections under a caretaker government was necessary in 1991? Yes, it was necessary then because the democratic institutions were totally destroyed during the autocratic regime of Ershad. The Election Commission (EC) became a stooge of the then government. The elections under Ershad became farcical and did not reflect the will of the people.

The EC was used to give the illegitimate regime, a so-called legitimacy through the process of sham elections. People ceased to have any faith in government institutions. Judiciary also became very much dependant on the desire of the executive and the entire nation including the lawyers demanded the resignation of the then Chief Justice Munim, having become totally frustrated because of the fact that the judiciary had lost all its independence.

Therefore, a change in the government was necessary to ensure free and fair elections so that a truly representative government could come to power. The holding of the free and fair elections, which could truly reflect the will of the people, was essential. **The removal of the autocratic regime could not be possible through an election under their control and therefore the change was effected by the popular uprising which brought the entire nation and the people together and compelled the autocratic ruler to resign.**

It was also necessary to ascertain the respective political position of the different political parties vis-a-vis the support of the people so as to enable a truly representative government to emerge. Hence was the necessity of a neutral caretaker government to hold a free and fair election for the purpose mentioned above and to take charge of the state craft in the interim.

Before this was achieved, the popular movement had already got rid of Chief Justice Munim, and the independence of judiciary was restored following the historic judgement of the then Acting Chief Justice Badrul Haider Chowdhury on 8th amendment. Independence of judiciary having been ensured, it was possible for Justice Shahabuddin who became chief justice on retirement of Justice Badrul Haider Chowdhury to head the caretaker government on the basis of a national consensus. And the stage for restoring the constitutional democracy was set.

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THE Al-Khiyam prison camp, run by Israeli forces in South Lebanon is alleged to be no different from the Nazi concentration camps of the '40s.

A Lebanese civilian released recently narrated his five-month ordeal inside Al-Khiyam, which started when his brother was taken hostage by Israelis.

Ahmad Kamel, 24, was accused of "anti-Israel activities" a few months ago. The Israelis made as a condition for the release of his brother Kamel's surrender.

"Although I was not guilty of anything," he said, "I could not let them hold my brother, who is physically weak and suffers from asthma."

Mr Kamel, after giving himself up, was first taken to a detention camp, where he claimed he was handcuffed for six hours during interrogation. He was then beaten on the legs, hands and genitals. Israeli

soldiers plucked his beard, threw him around the room, and threatened to rape his female relatives and hurt his parents and friends.

Detainees, he claimed, were not given adequate medical attention, food, water and other basic necessities.

Mr Kamel developed an eye ailment while in detention as a result of inadequate treatment. Thus, some parts of his narrative were read for him at a meeting organized by a group called the Support Committee of Al-Khiyam.

At one point, Mr Kamel recalled that soldiers "placed bags on our (detainees') heads and kept us under the burning sun." They were forced to stay immobile for 36 hours without food and water, he added.

The prisoners were sometimes kept at the detention camp for several months with-

out any reason given, Mr Kamel said.

Mr Kamel and 19 other detainees were later moved to Al-Khiyam. Each cell, which housed 12 prisoners, measures two metres long, two metres wide, and two-and-a-half metres high. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported recently that prisoners in Al-Khiyam live in tents on a hilltop surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers.

Medical assistance inside the camp was practically nonexistent, according to Mr Kamel. Water is scarce so that detainees were given only 10 litres a day for drinking and

Detainees were allegedly not given adequate medical attention, food, water and other basic necessities

washing. Showers were forbidden.

A month after, Mr Kamel was moved to one of two sections of the cap, each containing nine tents.

There, a form of democratic representation was set up in which every tent of 20 detainees elected a leader as well as a "mayor" for the entire prison camp. The representatives would meet ICRC members once a week.

Despite such inhuman treatment, the ex-detainee said morale was high inside the camp because of regular teachings from religious leaders.

Mr Kamel said that when

To the Editor...

Caesarean section!

Sir, UNDP's suggestion to raise women's reserved seats in the parliament to 20% is more than a support to the rights of womenfolk.

Twenty per cent is an eye-opening figure, no matter what difference that number will make on the floor of the House even when the strength of elected female members can be 100%.

This well-merited proposition could not be more potent to have satisfied liberating Bangladeshi women bypassing the issue of having sex dis-

criminated legally against the nation's sex ratio (50:50 approximately).

Parliament is the citizens' representative body to mandate the governing laws for the democratic state, and any extra-state interference can raise the doubt about its integrity and sovereignty desanctifying the exercise of voters' rights as regards the definition of National Assembly via a vis such an insert by a UN organ.

Just to practise democracy, a government in a state of illiterate majority (about 75%) may not mean what the gov-

ernment in a state of literate majority (over 90%) does.

Bangladeshi government can always turn to school students for solutions to problems, else Cesarean section in its functioning can raise the doubt about its integrity and sovereignty desanctifying the exercise of voters' rights as regards the definition of National Assembly via a vis

such an insert by a UN organ.

Representation in the parliament has to be based on adult franchise which empowers the electorates to choose

their representative, not a particular gender, and democratic Bangladesh is no exception.

For a cost-efficient alternative to the "millionaires' parliament" of this Third World state, which will lead this poor nation toward affluence, divisionalization of National Assembly with accountability to a federal decision-making authority (State Assembly) composed of representatives from major administrative areas — one per district, for instance — may be a topic on state agenda.

As the state of the state indicates now in the "post-aut-

ocratic democracy", a political pundit may find his/her brain stormed by so many educational institutes in the country when a high education is not necessary to become a member of parliament, to govern the state, or to get rich even.

M. Rahman
Zilla School Road
Mymensingh

BBC Dhaka programme

Sir, BBC opened their Dhaka programme: Morning extension of 15 minutes of the

first day was with a musical collection, majority chosen from India. Leaving Runa's countless originals a number is played cherished in Dhaka for Ferdousi's voice.

Announcers were also not BBC's Dhaka people. Hopefully if Ms Manashi is from Chittagong.

Programme for Dhaka and surrounding area have pronounced non-Bangladeshi flavour. We do not know if BBC is also relayed from Calcutta in FM band.

Haroon Hug
Dharmundi, Dhaka

7. Measures may be taken to ensure the presence of polling agents of each candidate in the centres. Any candidate not having such polling agents should not have the right to raise any objection. The presence of polling agents may be institutionalised as a system.

8. A provision may also be made for strictly following the rules to supply a copy of the results in any polling centre, under the signature of polling officer, to all the polling agents immediately after the counting of votes. This system may also be institutionalised.

9. Polling centres should also be established on a more permanent basis in such a way that entry and exit of voters are through different points thereby avoiding any possible confrontation among the persons who have already cast their votes and persons who have lined up for voting.

All the above suggestions along with others may become subject-matters of discussion among the political parties to protect the democratic rights of the citizens for electing members to the parliament. A provision for caretaker government as envisaged by the opposition parties can only confuse the nation instead of solving any problem.

The way the opposition is behaving, one can easily say that for them democracy means rule by the minority and parliamentary democracy means everything happening outside the parliament. This should not continue for long and it is hoped that opposition will sincerely pursue its desire to hold free and fair elections and for that purpose invoke the due role of the parliament to meet such desires.

We, the parliamentarians, are people's trust. People have trusted us to think about the nation and to carry out our responsibility in the national interest. And if we fail to carry out such responsibilities, this will be a breach of mandate of the people.

It is our sacred duty irrespective of our party affiliation to uphold the cause of democracy and thereby protect fundamental rights of the people. I sincerely urge the opposition political parties to come back to parliament and make it effective in protecting such rights of the people.

Tomorrow Amir Hussain Amu, Member of Presidium, Bangladesh Awami League, argues in favour of the proposition.

Israeli guards suspected the prisoners of planning an escape, they fired tear gas at them.

He was released last month from Al-Khiyam.

Meanwhile, to raise Arabs' awareness of human rights, a conference was held recently in Minya, Egypt.

Participants were mostly representatives of different non-government organisations working in Upper Egypt. The conference was organized by the Cairo-based Legal Research and Resource Centre (LRRC) in cooperation with the Appropriate Communication Techniques (ACT).

It was pointed out in the conference that political systems in the Arab world tend to constrain freedom instead of championing it. Also, it was noted that political parties there are inclined to believe that human rights are a tool of the opposition.

— Depthnews Asia