

Islambagh Again

The blazing inferno at Islambagh on Sunday has been a shocking reminder of grossly unplanned and dangerous habitation people are courting in this metropolis to throw away their lives.

The fact is, the devastating fire was far from accidental; it had to happen with heaps of highly inflammable material around inviting fire to break out at any moment.

Furthermore, it was a rabbits-of-a-warren situation as the so-called abodes were not even three feet apart with three to six families living in each one of them.

The fire starting at 5 pm could only be approached by professional fire servicemen at 7.30 pm, inaccessibility to the place badly obstructing their movement.

Islambagh shanties had been gutted twice before. The lessons went unheeded. Neither did we broaden the approach roads and the alleys inside the area nor were the plastic factories ordered out of the place.

Meanwhile, the homeless victims need to be helped to their feet as the Fire Brigade bosses improvised ways to fight fire in dwelling areas permitting no easy access.

World Water Day

We are pleasantly surprised to know that as many as 494 NGOs are working with water — particularly with its supply and sanitation. Thanks are due to them for drawing the nation's attention on the eve of the World Water Day to the water problem facing the country.

Water in this part of the world posed a problem not so much because of its scarcity but because of its abundance. But those are bygone days. With time the definition of the availability of water has also changed.

On both counts the country does not fare very well. Particularly alarming is the news that more than half of the country's districts have recorded a fall in the level of ground water by three to 26 metres.

A 20 per cent less rain last year may have some effects, there are other factors — some of them beyond our control — that have contributed to the crisis. So the water management has become an urgency for us.

Challenge for Japan

Terrorism or for that matter crime in Japan has not been a serious problem for that country. While most of the world is bewildered by ever rising violence and terrorism and does not know how to deal with the problem, Japanese society drawing its strength from Buddhist and Shinto culture has remained reasonably peaceful.

However, the peace is sometimes rudely shattered in a rather uncharacteristic way. On Monday a blow was dealt to the most efficient subway system in Tokyo. It is thought that the weapon used to attack the orderly life of the subway commuters was nerve gas.

For Japan which is recovering from the physical and moral devastation wrought by the Kobe earthquake, this heinous attack will prove too much for them. What is, however, missing is the motive behind carrying out this attack.

Bangladesh's Case for Environmental Diplomacy

by Dr Saleem Huq

THE government has recently constituted a committee chaired by Mr Morshed Khan, the Special Envoy and a leading businessman of the country to re-orient the Foreign Policy and particularly the Foreign Ministry and its activities with a view to focusing more on economic diplomacy.

There are a number of international environmental instruments which are relevant to Bangladesh. A few of the important ones are listed below:

• Framework Convention on Climate: Bangladesh signed the Convention at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992 and ratified it in 1994.

• Biodiversity Treaty: Bangladesh also signed the convention at Rio in 1992 and ratified in 1994.

• Montreal Protocol on Ozone Depleting Substances: Bangladesh is a signatory and has already prepared an inventory of Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) and country phase out plan by the Department of Environment and Ministry of Environment and Forest with funding from UNDP under the Montreal Protocol.

• Basic Convention on Transboundary Transport of Pollutants: This is an older convention of which Bangladesh is a signatory.

• Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Conservation: This convention aims to protect threatened wetlands and Bangladesh is a signatory. However, although Bangladesh has several significant wetlands of international importance none of them have been included in the Ramsar Convention list of threatened wetlands of international significance.

• Agenda 21: This was a comprehensive global document prepared for the Earth Summit but is not a mandatory or even obligatory document for individual nations. Instead each country is supposed to develop its own national Agenda 21.

• Global Environmental Facility: This fund was created at the time of the Earth Summit co-organised by the World Bank, UNDP and UNEP. It started with an initial first phase fund of 1 billion US Dollars which has been spent.

• Vulnerability to Climate Change: Being a low lying deltaic country Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to climate change and sea level rise with tens of millions of people at risk.

• Environmental Instruments: Bangladesh has a number of claims to being considered environmentally significant internationally, namely:

• Ministry of Environment and Forest and Department of Environment: The Ministry of Environment and Forest is the ministry mandated with looking after environmental issues both nationally as well as internationally.

• National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP): Bangladesh has a number of claims to being considered environmentally significant internationally, namely:

wetlands. A special area of international significance is the largest mangrove forest in the world, the Sundarbans which lies mostly within Bangladesh. This allows Bangladesh a tremendous opportunity to gain international interest and resources for its protection which we have not exploited so far.

• International Environmental Funds: With aid budgets in the developed countries shrinking and with more countries from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe competing for existing funds it will be increasingly difficult for Bangladesh to access aid funds in future.

• Non-Government Organizations: One of the relative strengths of Bangladesh is its strong NGO sector. This is not only true in the social sector with Organizations like BRAC, Grameen Bank and Proshika but also in the field of environment where organizations such as BCAS, NACOM, BUP and other institutions such as BIDS, BUET and the different Universities have gained some valuable experience.

• Bangladesh's Past Performance: The past performance of the government of Bangladesh in this area has been rather lacklustre.

The result has been that Bangladesh has so far failed to fulfil its potential in capitalizing on environmental diplomacy in the last few years. It is, fortunately, not too late to take action. If immediate action is taken now it is very likely that we will see a pay off in the very near future, certainly within the next one or two years.

• Foreign Ministry: The Foreign Ministry should adopt environmental diplomacy as an area of strategic focus at a policy level. In practical terms this means that they should have a cell within the Ministry to focus on environmental issues. Several officers at fairly senior level should be designated to specialize on specific environmental subjects.

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national issues. Nevertheless, the Ministry and Department have made some significant achievements including a successful GEF project on coastal waters, a country study on climate change, country phase out plan for Ozone Depleting Substances and the successful completion of a participatory National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP) which has received widespread international acclaim.

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ready been successfully done in the area of climate change study mentioned above where the government is cooperating closely with the NGOs and academic institutions. The government (both the Foreign Ministry as well as the Ministry of Environment and Forest) should prepare a plan of close cooperation with the other organizations to promote the country's interests internationally in the field of environment.

Conclusion

There is a strong argument for Bangladesh to include environmental diplomacy as a major focus of its foreign policy strategy. In order to do so the Foreign Ministry should make this a priority sector and develop its own expertise while also pooling the existing expertise within the country both from within as well as outside the government.

The writer is Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, a non-government, non-profit research and policy institute.

Looking Back at

March towards Independence

March 22, 1971

A rally of former Bengalee military officers and sepoy was organized near Baitul Mukarram, under the leadership of Col (ret'd) MAG Osmani. Everyone taking part in the rally pledged to participate in the struggle for liberation, and urged others who could not join the rally to do the same.

Since the morning, the city of Dhaka began to be the hotbed of 'awakened' and 'spirited' processions and rallies which moved towards the same, familiar destination — the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who communicated the same message to the people taking part in the processions: 'Let's hope for the best and get ready for the war.'

Under the leadership of Dr Ahmad Sharif, the 'Lekhak Sangram' Shibir' organised a poetry reading session to animate and activate the spirit of the struggle for independence. Those taking part in the poetry reading session included Al-hasan Habib, Shamsur Rahman, Hassan Hafizur Rahman, Humayun Kabir etc. Firing on the unarmed civilians in Joydevpur was also criticized by the poets and writers.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman held a closed-door meeting with his colleagues such as Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, Khondoker Mushtaq Ahmad, Mansoor Ali, Quamrurazman and Dr Kamal Hossain, and it was decided that if the Pakistani army made a single move arriving at threatening, oppressing and suppressing people in this part of the world, independence of the country (the Eastern wing) would be explicitly declared and that the test of this declaration would be transmitted through a wireless set to Dhaka or Chittagong Radio station for broadcasting.

Meanwhile, in a statement, President Yahya Khan declared the postponement of the National Assembly scheduled to be held on March 25, 1971.

Compiled by Afreen Huda

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'Holding of Election under Caretaker Govt is the Only Wayout of the Present Crisis'

Interview with Jatiya Party Acting Chairman Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury

by Krishna P Roy



The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury (MRC): The stalemate, which I like to call national crisis has been surfaced due to government's obstinacy and intolerance to the views of the Opposition. Things have developed in a manner that there is no way out without holding general elections under a non-party caretaker government under present circumstances.

the year, or at its scheduled time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice.

MRC: Holding of elections is the only alternative to get rid of present crisis for which the government is fully responsible. Normally elections should be held within 90 days from December 28, the day of Opposition's en masse resignation from the parliament. But the government prevailed upon the Speaker and he himself gave some 'rulings' on February 23, violating the constitutional provisions, particularly the Article 67(2) of the Constitution. The resignation issue was also brought to the High Court (HC), by which the government got some more time. Rather on the 23rd February, the government should have announced a schedule for election to be held within the shortest possible time before the advent of monsoon.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

MRC: Independent Election Commission (EC) in theory, is there in the country. But, in practice, the returning and polling officers and the members of law enforcement agencies remain weak to the government party, although they come under the EC for time being. The EC also cannot work under a party government due to interference. This is evident from the recent experiences of by-elections. Whatever is written in the recently passed EC Bill, it would not be equally applied for government and Opposition under a party government.

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when should it be held — within the next few months, or later in

to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code?

MRC: It is not needed to formulate any extra code of conduct beyond those described in the election rules. But it was seen in the past that party government with the help of police and administration hired anti-social elements and armed bandits before elections and engaged them in capturing polling stations of their choice and bring the results in their favour by rigging.

DS: What are your views on the need for a computerised voters' list and identity cards? Can we ensure fair election without them? If we want them, then what should be the time-frame for elections?

MRC: Computerised voters' list and identity cards (ID) would be wonderful arrangement for holding free and fair elections. Yes, I agree that scopes are there to tamper and rig elections under the present system. The time-frame is a negotiable point and we can decide it across the table. The government would have to take the initiative in this regard.

DS: We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the next election. What are your suggestions to make election funding transparent and accountable?

MRC: In an under-developed country like ours, black money is bound to be a factor in the elections. If we take the examples of 1991 elections, it would be clear that a good number of businessmen, traders and business houses took part in the polls and the number of such parties is the highest with the BNP. Election rules were not followed during the by-election of Mirpur. There may be at least 100 ex-

amples of violation of election rules during campaign of the candidates.

DS: What are your views on the mechanism under which the next election should be held? What about constitutional amendments?

MRC: Under the proposed caretaker government, the Election Commission should be restructured with neutral persons who have no political affiliations. The men in the district administration have to understand the fact that any undue interference in the elections shall make them liable for prosecution to the extent of losing job with penalty such as imprisonment, or fine, or both. We have created a convention of amending the Constitution after elections. This time, also, we can give legal coverage by bringing necessary amendments to the Constitution after elections. We gave enough time to the government to amend the Constitution so that next elections could be held on time.

DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the Opposition to ensure a free and fair election? Is such an understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not?

MRC: The present situation is not at a stage that a political understanding can be achieved. It could have been possible had the government accepted our demand before the en masse resignations. A political understanding between the government and the Opposition is a must for the sake of the country; but there will not be any understanding if the government does not change its attitude towards the Opposition.

To the Editor...

WASA's system loss

Sir, After years of decay and neglect some of the streets of Wari area, Dhaka were repaired and recarpeted about 9-10 months ago. It appeared that the old and lost glory of Wari residential area got a new lease of life as it wore a neat, clean and prestigious look.

But within a short period of one month of the completion of the long awaited nice work done, the DESA started digging the newly carpeted roads for installing underground electric cable. In the process DESA damaged a WASA pipeline which flooded the north eastern corner of Wyre/Folder street. After days of unabated flow of water on the road the relevant authority somehow managed to stop the flow and about two months ago recarpeted the dug out portion of the road.

Now again for the last few weeks water is leaking from the second-time carpeted portion of the road wherein the DESA had carried out the digging work and the WASA pipe line was got damaged. It seems it is no authority's headache to look into the matter and to do the needful.

DESA or the WASA have been doing so long? Who would pay for the wastage of water and the WASA system loss?

Surely the DCC, DESA or WASA officials would not bear the system loss. And of course the over-burdened and distressed tax payers would pay the penalty for the carelessness and negligence of duties and the so-called 'system loss' committed by some concerned officials of the concerned authority. Can't they be brought to book in the interest of public service?

O H Kabir Dhaka

Neutral government

Sir, The opposition political parties' main demand is to hold the next general elections under a non-partisan neutral caretaker government. Now the question stands who is non-partisan and fully neutral. The phrase needs to be defined and explained by the opposition leaders.

Any citizen of this soil above 18 years of age and mentally sound has a very genuine right to cast his/her vote in favour of a party/person he/she thinks best. So he/she will have a definite soft corner and sup-

port for that party. Can we call him/her a non-partisan and fully neutral? So, possibly no citizen of this country who has a voting right is non-partisan and fully neutral. Do our opposition leaders think that they will withdraw the voting right of the full administrative body of a caretaker government with a view to make them non-partisan and fully neutral?

We shall be very pleased to hear from any of our leaders: Mottus Samad Chowdhury Phulitola Tea Estate, Sylhet

Invisible jute-paper

Sir, Star reports (Mar 13) that 10,000 M tons of jute pulp/paper have been produced so far. I cannot find the jute paper in the market with the retailers, and the latter cannot provide any information of this strange paper product about which read regularly in the press.

The first release of jute paper in the market should have been ceremoniously conducted for publicity value, followed by a huge advertising campaign at home and abroad, and distribution of free samples through selected outlets (a sheet to each student). The dealers laugh and cut jokes when I ask

for jute paper out of curiosity. We must become publicity conscious; it pays in the long run, and the initial expenditure on advertising and PR can always be recovered.

Retail consumer Dhaka

Import of Mutton

Sir, Mutton price in the country is not merely high it is rather exorbitant. It is beyond the reach of average man. If some quantity of mutton is imported from Australia or New Zealand, it will have some sobering effect on local mutton price. Cost of imposed mutton will be much cheaper than local cost of mutton. Since at the moment we have comfortable reserve of foreign exchange, such import should not be a problem.

It may not be out of place to mention here that Pakistan has started importing mutton from Australia and New Zealand. May I therefore request the Ministry of Finance and Commerce to look into the matter and allow import of mutton in the interest of helpless consumers.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka