

RAJUK Must Explain

The death of five construction workers in an under-construction building collapse in the city's Kalabagan is as much tragic as it is shocking. No words of consolation can be equal to the loss of lives and we can only express our sympathy for the bereaved families at these hours of tragedy. As for the building's collapse — for which human factor is solely responsible — we feel outraged.

This is not for the first time that a building has been constructed in defiance of the plan, design and specification of construction materials. Once an under-construction building collapsed in Basabo, another had to be dismantled, two others tilted and yet another is hanging precariously in Paltan, Mohammadpur and Kakrail areas respectively. There was nothing to be surprised if more buildings collapse and Dhaka City suddenly gave a look of a devastation wrought by an earthquake.

This is no dooms-day fantasy with the country's capital. The collapse of a single building unfortunately is symbolic of a slow but sure degeneration of a system of housing in the city. This building's story will suitably fit into the construction process of many such buildings in this metropolis.

The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK) now says that it approved a four-storey building but the owner added three more stories which moreover was laid on an uneven foundation. To make the matter worse poor quality construction materials were used for its construction. Therefore the question is: how can one defy the Rajuk-approved plan and use substandard construction materials? Does the RAJUK have no system of monitoring or if it has, can it be bribed to make a mockery of the approved plan? We would like to know how the RAJUK ensures that the approved plan is followed. This tragic incident should serve as an eye-opener to the organisation. A thorough probe into the building's collapse might reveal what went wrong and where. If the monitoring at several stages of a building's construction is absent, it should be put in place immediately with the responsibility to do the job honestly and efficiently. If there is already one then it should be made more accountable. We want to see the system work — and work efficiently.

In the meantime we want a speedy investigation of what went wrong in this case, and punishment of everybody responsible for this unnecessary tragedy.

A Good Step

There used to be a ministry called LGRD. Everyone knew of its clout for it was headed by the second most powerful man in the erstwhile government and the party at its helms. But in fact he presided over something that was practically nonexistent, namely, local government. Bangladesh's history of last quarter century is the history of concentrating state-power centrally into one person's or at best a coterie's hands — the residual powers going to hangers-on to mastans busy doing the dirty jobs of a party in power.

The new government is evidently determined to change all this. Soon after assumption of office an eight member local Government Commission was formed at the instance of the Prime Minister. It was asked to recommend a law establishing a four-tier system involving the local people. A government is democratic only if power is decentralised especially to the lower tiers.

As the plan now stands, recommendations would be made basing on responses by a cross section of the advanced sections of the society — writers and teachers and lawyers and other professional people — to a questionnaire on the shape and powers and functions of the local government. The commission sources say the questionnaire is ready and will reach the respondents any day.

This is a sensible step. We sincerely hope the local government questionnaire would be well-circulated and answered to with interest and the law be made by incorporating the best of the suggestions made.

The law is projected to be ready by December. If all goes well, we may be having a four-tier local government very soon. How soon, will depend on how vigorously the government follows through on the present process. As an when it comes about, the proposed local government structure promises to be a turning point in the system of governance in Bangladesh.

Environmental Concern

At a seminar organised in observance of the International Ozone Day on Monday speakers were unanimous in seeking reduction of and ultimately an end to the use of Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) in Bangladesh. Their concern is with the chemical type of the ODS such as propellant gas as used in aerosols, CFCs as used in refrigeration, anesthetic gas, fumigating agents for fire fighting and cfolios, etc. The important point here is that Bangladesh produces none of these ODS but imports them all.

The developed countries have not only started phasing out 80 per cent of their ODS production but also found substitutes for them. In Bangladesh, alarmingly enough, the import of ODS has recorded an increase of 50 per cent, volume-wise, during the 1986-95. The good news is that we have local substitutes for a few of the ozone-depleting agents. What therefore is needed is to frame an appropriate policy to put into commercial use those local substitutes in place of the imported environmentally harmful agents. At the same time efforts have to be directed towards finding environment-friendly substitutes for other ODS.

Apart from chemical agents, the need to reduce the use of wood as fuel and also to check industrial and automobile pollution must be incorporated in any environmental policy. International joint actions in this regard are welcome but in their absence we must try to place our house in order to the best of our ability.

The Siachen Battleground: Withering Heights

The charge of the horse cavalry against German Armour in World War II evoked the comment: "C'est Magnifique, C'est pas la guerre" — It is magnificent, but it is not war. Reality overwhelms hyperbole in Siachen, it is magnificent, but unfortunately it is war.

DESOLATE but beautiful, not God-forsaken, that is the first impression of the craggy, snow-lined mountains in the proximity of the Siachen Glacier. Can any place on earth, however bleak, where there is both life and death, be without God? And what a life in lonely synthetic-igloo eyries atop nameless mountain peaks, living in cold isolation for weeks at a stretch, survival against the vagaries and extremes of nature and the environment is all that those who have to endure this ask for, man-made modes of death and destruction are a secondary consideration. The sheer magnificence and enormity of the tremendous landscape puts one in a state of trance for any number of reasons. In awe of the stupendous beauty, in awe of the incessant danger, in awe of a seemingly impossible undertaking and above all, in awe of the men who have chosen to live and maybe, die here. No words can adequately describe "God's little acre" that comprises the highest mountains and glaciers in the world. No justice can be done in print to the courage and endurance of man in this environment.

Historical Background

The Karachi Agreement between India and Pakistan in 1948 after the Kashmir conflict demarcated the entire border in Jammu and Kashmir upto point NJ 9842, 40 kms short of the border with China. The delimitation exercise envisaged an imaginary dividing line heading due north from NJ 9842, through Zingrulma to the Karakoram Pass. Siachen Glacier commands the eastern approaches to the major mountain peaks. K-2 (also known as Godwin Austin) and the Gasherbrum family. Various international mountaineering expeditions have climbed these high mountains for years without interference or protest from India. "Atlas of the World" by National Geographic Society, "Encyclopaedia Britannica," "Historical Atlas of South Asia" and "Times Atlas of the World," show Siachen well within Pakistani territory. While there are reasons to suggest that India sent military mountaineering expeditions near to the area in dispute in the late '70s, the first real hint of trouble came in 1983 when then Director General, Frontier

Corps Northern Area (DG, FCNAO), Maj Gen (later Lt Gen Imtiazullah Warrach) was informed about a possible Indian incursion into Pakistan territory. He immediately ordered a patrol of 2nd Battalion Northern Light Infantry (NLI) to investigate. Adjutant 2 NLI Capt (now Lt Col) Javed, accompanied by Superintendent of Police Skardu who knew the area well, led a 40-man patrol beyond Goma till further passage was blocked by snow and crevices.

The patrol came across traces of a patrol of Indian Ladakh Scouts (a cap badge, empty cigarette pack, Indian Re-ten note). DG FCNA personally satisfied himself by going upto Goma that this was just an incursion and there was no serious Indian encroachment. Many years earlier, Col Babar (later Maj Gen, presently Minister of interior) had led 4 Army Aviation Squadron (including KKH flight) on a familiarisation flight from Skardu, some pilots in an Alouette 3 (among them Maj (later Maj Gen) HUK Niazi and this scribe), flying a short distance beyond village Dejusong (there two/three huts only) before returning to Skardu Zingrulma, the first post occupied by the Indians, where Pakistani skiers had been going till 1982, is now used by them as a major base. On April 13, 1984 Indians experienced in mountain warfare since their drubbing at the hands of the Chinese in 1962, carried out "Operation Meghdoot," airlifting special mountain warfare units to occupy the two important passes in the Siachen Range dominating the traditional approaches to the Siachen Glacier. In a belated reaction, then DG FCNA Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Pir Dad moved forward troops ill-equipped for snow-line warfare as late as May 1984 to occupy the important passes of Gyongda and Yarmala and prevent the Indians from further advancement. Convoy Saddle, on the approaches to K-2 and the Gasherbrums was occupied at 22000 feet, conceivably the highest regular post in the world. Thereafter except for occasional forays, the line has

been frozen literally and figuratively.

While the Indians have no real strategic objective, the Karakoram highway linking Pakistan to China (KKH) being too far away, ours is mainly a necessary reaction to Indian encroachment i.e. defending the country's sovereign territory. The military situation is fairly routine with artillery shells being lobbed against each other frequently and helicopters that stray into range being shot down. In 1990, when Lt Gen Imtiazullah Warrach (then in JCSC) led a military delegation (inclusive of then DGMO, Maj Gen (now COAS) Gen) Jahangir Karamat, their opposite Indian numbers were of the opinion that presence of 1) Pakistan skiers at Zingrulma as well as 2) traces of Pakistani approved

supplied mostly by choppers, entailing expenditure five to six times that of ours, for the Indians almost Rs 5-6 crore daily. Cliffs and great accumulations of large, fallen rocks (taluses) occupy a vast area with traverse valleys looking like narrow, deep, steep ravines. The Karakoram are characterised by great glaciation, glaciers occurring on both slopes but more developed on the southern, more humid Pakistani side of slope. The snowline on the Pakistani southern side on the nebulous frontline begins at an altitude of 15400 feet and glaciers at 9440 feet, making it tougher for our posts, in contrast, on the northern slope the snowline is at a higher altitude of 19400 feet and glaciers at 11580 feet.

The climate is for the most part semi-arid and sharply con-

ditional faces is at once captivating as well as devastating. Why have all our flowers gone to mountain peaks? To remain face to face with death so early in life for so extended a time on a daily basis is not what one would wish for anyone. As guardians of this country's ideological and geographical frontiers, a more hostile environment for initiation from youth to manhood does not exist in this.

The Brigade Commander at

Siachen is symbolic of all our

fighting men in Siachen. A rifle

company commander in De-

cember 1971 in one of the out-

standing infantry units of the

Pakistan Army, 44 Punjab

(later 4 Sindh), then com-

manded by one of the Army's

roughest, toughest COs Lt Col

(later Brig) Taj (hell to be with

in peacetime, you would go to

hell and back with him willingly in wartime), my former

colleague is cool and calm as he

briefs, with quiet confidence

and conviction, hard-bitten

journalists not easily given to

emotion. One remembers him as

a young officer, leading his

elan troops with great elan in

stabilising the line in the sandy

wastes beyond Chor in the Thar

Desert in 1971. 25 years later he

remains representative of the

bravest and finest that this

Army has on offer. His quiet

courage was as much evident in

Balochistan in 1973 as it is in

Siachen in 1996. The years

have aged him well, inculcating

in him an inner strength, a coil

of steel bound by the require-

ments of command. It is a sheer

privilege to know him and men like him, in the same mould of

the modern Pakistani soldier.

well-educated and well-

groomed, ever ready to go to war

in order to keep the peace for

his countrymen. You stand

humbled not only in the vicinity

of such an environment but in

the presence of such men.

Siachen is a test of human and

logistics endurance that has

been forced on Pakistan but one

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AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

mountain expeditions in the vicinity of Siachen had triggered the Indian reaction and thus the resulting dispute. This far-fetched apprehension has led to two armies now facing off each other in an ongoing war of attrition in the highest battlefield in the world.

The Battlefield

The sparsely populated Karakoram Range is one of the highest mountain systems in the world with at least four peaks exceeding 26000 ft, K-2 being the world's second highest mountain after Everest. The Karakoram serve as a watershed for the basins of the Indus and Tarim Rivers. The range consisting of a group of parallel ranges with several spurs. Characterised by craggy peaks and steep slopes, the southern slope is generally long and very steep in contrast to the northern slope which is steep and short. This has allowed Pakistan to bring roads and tracks right up to most of the posts while the Indians on the northern (and reverse) side have to be

united with the southern slopes exposed to the humidifying influence of the monsoons coming in from the Indian Ocean but the northern slopes are extremely dry at altitude of more than 16000 feet, precipitation takes a solid form even as late as June whereas in the lower and central part of the slopes, rain and snow is precipitated in small quantities. At altitudes of 18700 feet the average temperature during the warmest month is below zero whereas between 12800 feet and 18700 feet it remains around 10 C. In cold weather, i.e. 9 months of the year, the wind chill factor takes the temperature 50 C below zero. Rarely air, intensive solar radiation and great ranges of temperature, add to the vicissitudes of life. Mountain passes are situated at altitudes of 16000 feet, open only five/six months of the year. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica: "Siachen Glacier is one of the world's longest mountain glaciers lying near the India-Pakistan border. The

Diplomacy Track-III : Bangladesh Perspective

by Sinha M A Sayeed

ing out of India's own reality, vis-a-vis the mindset of Indian bureaucracy and the limitations of Deve Gowda's coalition government.

Indian foreign minister came to Bangladesh with an approach of 'a symmetrical relations', meaning a big neighbour should do more than take from the small one, a deviation from India's previous stand of about turn/evasive policy to Bangladesh or in the world, of Gujral 'all or nothing' stand of both the sides which virtually made us prisoners of the past.

He pointed out that unlike the people in ASEAN, what we agree in private, oppose in public and vice versa — a real threat to a confidence-building frame between the nations and states in South Asia. He left Bangladesh seemingly with a satisfaction that 'now both the government

not renew the 25-year treaty of friendship with India, of course, with a convincing logic that after the creation of SAARC and SAFTA the very basis and appeal of the treaty has withered away.

Bangabandhu perhaps did not find enough friends with and around him while Sheikh Hasina appears to be fortunate in having the same covering USA and China and her first official visit to China (September 16-21) bear a significance in the light of the ongoing geo-politics in the subcontinent. After her arrival at the Zia International Airport from China in 1993, she told the waiting reporters: "China has a great role to play in Asia." Chinese president and premier also sent messages on the occasion of the first national mourning day of the father of the nation

undertaken officially by the ministry of foreign affairs.

On question of a national interest under any circumstance, any sort of ambiguity and ambivalence may lead to a serious catastrophe. Out of such a perception, the then leader of the opposition in Pakistan national assembly Benazir Bhutto, now premier of Pakistan, at the request of her arch-rival the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, led Pakistan delegation to USA and negotiated successfully with US policy makers and that saved Pakistan from being listed as a terrorist state by USA. Atal Behari Vajpayee, leader of the opposition in the Indian parliament did not hesitate to accept the offer of premier Rao to head Indian delegation to negotiate the issues arising out of Pakistan's formal allegation to the Human Rights Commission to brand India as a violator of human

following suggestions are made for consideration by both the ruling party and the opposition in the 7th Sangsad, and specifically by the premier as the very initiative would come from them:

a) The parliamentary standing committee (PSC) on the ministry of foreign affairs shall be renamed as parliamentary standing committee on foreign ministry and relations;

b) Formation of the PSC shall be based on a proportional representation of the (number) members of parliament belonging to the respective political parties in the 7th Sangsad with the leader/deputy leader of the opposition in the chair;

c) There shall be a number of sub-committees for SAARC, ASEAN, EEC countries, UN and other international bodies etc;

d) Special sub-committees for India, Pakistan, China, Japan and USA may also be set up considering the overall importance and necessity for the issues.

functions: a) The first and foremost task of the PSC shall be to prepare and formulate a common approach to be known as Bangladesh approach to the issues while dealing with a particular state to settle them amicably and peacefully. PSC with due back-up of respective political parties in the Sangsad may have enough opportunities and scopes to meet the requirement;

b) Formal structural relations between PSC and its sub-committees and ministry of foreign affairs in particular and other related ministries in general shall duly be formulated and ensured;

c)