

Water Quality

Tap water supplied by the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) must be chlorinated before it is pumped out into the distribution system. A collaborative test conducted by different organisations, including the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) to determine the quality of supplied water has revealed that the points where water is supposed to be disinfected either witnessed neglect of duty or improper handling. Five out of six city pumps tested were found not to have used any disinfectant and samples from six points out of a total 12 were found to have contained bacteria.

This wilful negligence has no excuse particularly when considered in the context of overall management of water and sewerage by the WASA. Forty to forty-five per cent population of the city do not get water supplied by the utility body and to make the matter even worse about 60 per cent of those who enjoy the benefit do so illegally i.e. through unauthorised connections, depriving the government of a substantial amount of revenue. Now this alarming development comes as a last straw on the camel's back.

Sometimes mechanical and systemic failures or faults can be responsible for poor quality of service. But in this age that too gets detected before major damage is done to the consumers — in this case to their health. How can one explain the conduct of the authority concerned when untreated or unchlorinated water is supplied day after day without informing the consumers beforehand? When a utility body such as the WASA can be so indifferent to public health, we have reasons for serious soul-searching. Just imagine what would have happened in countries where people take such authorities to court for the slightest of irresponsibility or negligence of duty.

The lapses of the past should not hold it back from devising its next course of action. The WASA has a duty to inform the public about how long it will continue to supply water without disinfection. Then in consultation with the Public Health Department and other competent bodies it must let the affected people know what measures they should adopt now to purify water and avoid falling sick through using or drinking it.

More Rotting There

In a heroic escapade befitting cloak-and-dagger films Advocate Salma Ali and a group from her National Association of Women Lawyers on Tuesday raided a city-centre brothel and rescued three minor girls from there. We are all admiration for the courage and determination the group displayed. And we record our appreciation also of the DU student who out of sympathy for one of the girls informed the group and himself led them to the den. How we hope that this would initiate a regular systematic campaign to rescue all minor girls forced into prostitution at the brothels. But an earlier such expectation was belied when a greatly successful rescue operation mounted by women activists in the infamous Tanbazar red-light district of Narayanganj failed to be followed up by police and organised social forces.

Before deciding on the raid Advocate Salma Ali went to police, gave them the details of the situation and sought help in the operation. Police was not greatly moved by the entreaty and said the activists would get a lorryful of policemen near the target area to give them a helping hand. So, without police the women went into the den and wouldn't stay there long enough to enable other children to come out with them. And the lorry was nowhere to be found.

The police must now make good their awful lapse by first starting cases under women and children repression law involving these victims, as very rightly demanded by Salma Ali. Then they must rescue the minor girls remaining there selling bodies for the benefit of the criminals. Police have their own good sources to know precisely the number of children being abused in Kandupatty or Tanbazar or the hundreds of other brothels. Why don't they act then? This is a puzzle we would want the Home Minister to unravel. We are not asking the police or Home Ministry to be involved in the issue of prostitution at large which, as things are, would lead to nowhere. But we do ask them to rescue children from those holes of hell. Let them heed us and help us call ourselves civilized.

Ponchishey — the Ever New

Today is the Ponchishey Boishakh. Millions around the world would join in celebrating the birth anniversary of one who died 57 years ago and still lives more meaningfully and influentially than almost all of us who still now kick and shout around. Karl Marx said he fears more a Philistine than a Predator. Records say that this day this year too would be overtaken as usual by Philistines and the next worst species of those that haven't read a single line of Rabindranath. This is irritating but does not at all detract from Tagore and his continuing alchemy on the societies of the Bengalee people — in any measure.

This state could benefit rightaway from Tagore's ideas on education, rural development and politics meaning governance. And now that the demands that dictates of sheer survival would force this state into a global march towards elimination of all inhibitory factors to human development, such as poverty and backwardness, we shall do well to look up our Rabindra-Rachanaboli to get our true bearings.

The nation at the crossroad needs now most of all a kind of great awakening, a cultural surge submerging all divides of petty loyalties and conflicts and greedy selfishness and uniting the multitude in one great human wave pressing against the portals of the new millennium.

In the year 1644 an incident of far reaching consequence took place in the palace of the great Mughals at Agra. A favourite daughter of the reigning emperor, Shahjahan suffered severe burn injury when her clothes caught fire. In vain did the native physicians of great learning and celebrity employ their skill to effect a cure. To soothe the anxiety of the sorrowing father some courtiers advised him to try a physician from among the English traders in the country's Western coast. Catching at the idea the emperor forthwith despatched a messenger to fetch one such practitioner from Surat. The English promptly responded to the request of India's ruler and deputed one Gabriel Boughton, the surgeon of the East India Company's ship, the 'Hawthorn', to attend the princess.

The surgeon succeeded incompletely healing the sore thus earning an unbounded gratitude of the emperor. When Boughton was asked to name his own reward the patriotic Englishman allowed the opportunity of enriching himself to pass and preferred to request the emperor for allowing the Company to trade in Bengal. Obviously it was instantly granted.

The English were already trading for some time in India. During the summer of 1600 when the 'Hawthorn', the first ship of the East India Company arrived at Surat its dour Captain, Hawkins, ventured into the court of Jehangir and was successful in obtaining an imperial firman which authorized the Company to open trading depots north of Bombay. Although the Company's success was impressive and a deluge of dividends, some of them as high as 200 per cent, came pouring down on its shareholders, the English traders with their avidity for oriental wealth, greedily fixed their eyes on Bengal, the richest province of

Demystifying the Myth

by Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz

The idea of sub-regional cooperation for economic prosperity has now already started to ring hollow. Because it is yet to spell out specifically as to what is it really upto.

warmth at the dawn of our independence which unfortunately was betrayed by later developments.

Against this dismal backdrop there is again an alacrity to try refresh our luck. For the purpose, when a conscious effort is underway to build up a case for the country's liberal opening to India its advocates are not necessarily guided by any ill motive, after all, some ideas need to be evolved and some action programme initiated by some for the delivery of our hapless masses. They have done exactly that although there are snags. The advocates of the idea are well within their choices to see an unprecedented bonanza in a subregional cooperation even without suggesting concretely how will that be brought about. They can also envision a passage to prosperity through a transnational highway notwithstanding its design and direction. In their considered view there would be an enormous revenue earning for an aid sustained poor Bangladesh if the country and its maritime ports are opened to India for transits and services.

The package, when implemented would look open the sesame door of our fortune. All these lofty and innovative ideas for our well being must have sprung out of the sponsors' genuine concern for our chronic underdevelopment, backwardness and abysmal poverty.

But then, unlike in the past, it is no more the rulers' prerogative, idle desire or whim, neither is it our ancestors' politics of emotional swing either this or that way. Today we must be able to reckon its cost-benefit, measure up its workability and assess its desirability. When dealing with the destiny of the people it is no more possible to

bypass their verdict. Any deal to be struck with any quarter involving the people's fate will have to be brought under their close scrutiny so that they are not subjected to deceit and foul play as before. There is an all orchestrated effort these days to build up the myth of a subregion of prosperity and its enormous promises. It has been suitably padded up with enough of rhetorics — the rhetorics of an economic globalization and a Europe with no interior border and also liked to the prosperity zone of East Asia. It has been adequately wrapped up in emotional rediscovery — the rediscovery of a great cultural and linguistic links and profound commonality of the hopes and aspiration among the people of the subregion. The concept has been described by its promoters as an economically integrated and interdependent subregion in South Asia's North East and sometimes also as South Asia's growth triangle of East Himalayan region.

Inspite of the rhetoric of these descriptions which did generate some hopes in public mind in the beginning the idea of sub-regional cooperation for economic prosperity has now already started to ring hollow. Because it is yet to spell out specifically as to what is it really upto. On the contrary, the news reports indicate that the sub region's cooperation would, for the moment, remain confined only to the cooperation in curbing insurgency and it would not immediately take in its purview even the much vaunted harnessing of water resources of East Himalayan catchment area.

In absence of the specifics on the subject there are scattered thoughts among the experienced observers as to what is it all

about. Although the proposed subregion is supposed to be composed of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India's north eastern states and Nepal, for all likelihood India has to be the principal actor in the whole scheme of things. It is not just now clear how India's North Eastern periphery can cooperate with a sub regional structure while its policies would perhaps be guided from Delhi. It can however be gauged that it would be an equation essentially between India and Bangladesh which is considered a vital link for India's north east while Nepal and Bhutan are to be coopted as proxies to lend credibility to the structure. The question unavoidably lurks in public mind: how serious is India even about the progress and prosperity of her north eastern states — let alone her concern, if any, for the prosperity of her neighboring states in the subregion? In half a century while India made impressive progress in its heartland the peripheries like those in her northeast remain as neglected as ever. In the meantime an interneccine insurgency has been raging in most of these states to defy the authority of Delhi with which they want to break their tenuous link. Unless the prevailing unrest in those states are contained the conditions are hardly congenial for any cooperative progress — that too involving other sovereign states in the region. So, India's priority is immediate containment of insurgency in her turbulent north east and not really to turn it into a zone of prosperity.

Before the British exit of 1947, the sub continent was one single political entity. Out of it grew several more nation states

during the subsequent years. Who can guarantee that there would not be more number of nation states in the region in future? There were odd three dozens of member states when the United Nations started its journey after the Second World War. In less than half a century their number rose to nearly two hundred. Who can stop the march of the history which is propelled by its own dynamics? Amidst militant assertion of sub national identity all over the world the pluralistic large polities are obviously under threat. Not only a disintegrated Soviet Union is a case in point, even in the Balkans and Central Europe where the nationalities questions were apparently settled after series of devastating wars including two great wars of global proportion. The question is reopened with surprising ferocity redrawing the political map of the regions. So just now India's only interest is strategic whether it is the question of a sub region or that of obtaining a transit right through Bangladesh or an Asian highway entering Bangladesh from India and re-entering India from Bangladesh thus making it an ideal conduit for strategic supplies, even though the whole process may enrich the proposed subregion to an extent. The thrust of the exercise is to hold back the freedom loving ethnic and tribal groups of the northeast as long as possible. Who can know better than India the potency of such liberating forces either at national or sub national level!

Obviously India would like to have more than one contingencies to save the situation in an area part of which is also claimed by China. Should Bangladesh entangle herself in the complex cobweb of intra state conflicts. Should we after all burn our fingers in the furnace of the notorious triangle of 'little wars'. We can not afford to falter in making our choice.

Crisis-Mongering Doesn't Help

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

Begum Zia's declaration in a public meeting at Feni not to extend any cooperation to the present government anymore is fraught with at least a potent danger of destabilizing the current serene investment climate.

A premature tempest appears to be precipitating in the north-west. Its fury and usual violent sweep blow away the impoverished huts of the poor and there they languish in all worldly distress. But they have a dream for a better tomorrow. The unending darkness of nights still does kindle lights of hope and of life. They derive these two inspirational elements from those who are at the helm of affairs of the country. Their simplistic pattern of life is often lit by words of sympathies from the political leadership. However, such temporary episodes soon recede into obscurity and the glittering promises continue to remain unfulfilled.

Such being the historically grim reality with the poor, hapless majority people of the country for several decades now, precisely over the last two, the expressed realisation of Sheikh Hasina and her government would not ordinarily evoke much interest among them. Still then the apparent honesty of purpose and already proven urge to change the lot of the have-nots appear to have been realistic. In her budget Sheikh Hasina has retained a provision of a hundred crore taka to assist poor farmers in procuring necessary inputs for augmenting production. And besides our own scanty resources, the government has now been able to mobilize an additional fund of over eight hundred crore taka from Asian Development Bank. This amount shall be disbursed through Bangladesh Krishi Bank on easy term small credits to the intending farmers.

For the poverty alleviation programme of the government a comprehensive plan has been drawn up in collaboration with (besides the own projects of Govt) Grameen Bank, national and international NGOs operating in Bangladesh, banks, donors etc.

And keeping the scandal with fertilizer during BNP's rule in green memory, the present government wasted no time to take this issue in firm grip. As a result and in consequence of a strong administrative and distribution system the supplies of fertilizers to the poor farmers have been made stable. Prices have also been either static or even below government rates.

In the 'education for all' by 2006, that is ten years from now, the government has bigger budgetary allocation. The principal beneficiaries will again be the children of poor families. The mass-literacy programme too will largely benefit the illit-

erate elders in both rural and urban areas. The government is making all out efforts to mobilize 6000 crore taka from the World Bank. For the health sector also the government has already attached maximum importance to the poor, rural population in particular and those in urban areas generally. To provide better health care to them the government has decided to recruit 1000 qualified Doctors for the rural/thana health centres on priority basis.

On the labour front the government has been giving due attention so that the closed mills could either be re-opened or disposed of on payment of the backwages, PF and gratuity etc. for the displaced workers new employment opportunities at home are being created. In this context the numerous foreign investors and/or their local collaborators in the expanded EPZs and exclusive industrial park of South Korea (for whom land has already been allocated), China, Japan and other countries will have huge employment possibilities in the near future. Employment of our skilled and unskilled workers is also being streamlined at highest levels.

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The shock from Sheikh Hasina's historic success was invariably malevolent to Awami League's main political adversary BNP and the Jamaat. before even going through the circulated text of the Treaty, we recall, the BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan hurriedly called a press conference and gave his sharp reaction against it. Jamaat's Abbas Ali Khan (in a separate encounter with journalists) had sarcastically branded the treaty an outcome of India's 'special love' for Awami League and not for Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina's post elec-

tion will find considerable response in no time.

Besides, the government has expressed its willingness to embrace private-sector investments in all conceivable sectors, particularly in power and telecommunication. Lot of interest has already been evinced by private enterprises in supplementing public sector investments in all these areas. The aviation sector has also been opened to private sector for operation within the country. At least one private company has already been providing its own air service to the people connecting a number of cities and towns. Some more are coming in the near future. The absolute monopoly which was being enjoyed by a single private company in mobile telephone communication, said to be patronized by BNP, has been broken by the present government to make it more democratic. Three more private companies have already been appointed through public tenders to reach the services at cheaper cost to the intending subscribers. Rural telecom services are also being provided by a few private companies through their own network. Added together, all these investments by foreign investors exclusively in joint-ventures with local entrepreneurs and those of their own in the private sector now have created or are creating sizeable employment opportunities to myriads of unemployed youths in the country. The whole nation is now genuinely poised to make a bigger thrust for a large scale economic development. All it needs now is absolute social and political stability.

Against such a desirable backdrop the blustering of BNP leadership on some pretext or the other is lamentable. Begum Zia's hysterical declaration in a public meeting at Feni not to extend any cooperation to the present government anymore is fraught with at least a potent danger of destabilizing the current serene investment climate. Though she was good enough to

say in the same breath that she didn't intend to go for such movement as would discourage the foreign investors, she did not realize for a moment that her statement of non-cooperation was enough to create doubt in them. Re-emergence of such an unwholesome crisis would be greatest dis-service to the whole nation and its unemployed teeming millions. However, whether or not she understood that in spite of her negative declaration there was too a positive feature. Unknowingly she had acknowledged the great efforts and resultant big success so far achieved by her political adversaries in the present government in attracting large scale investments from abroad. It is though a very subtle deduction, the people of the country or, for that matter, the huge unemployed population will be to take note of it.

The natural apprehension of a 'gathering storm' in Winston Churchill's expression prior to the 2nd World War expressed by this writer at the preamble though appears out of tune with the otherwise redeeming status of the situation may yet be not entirely preposterous. BNP leadership is capable of undoing the scenario if not for reason, at least by mischiefs. Having been unseated from power in the last general election it is yet to overcome the resultant frustration. The government shall be well-advised to make forehand adequate precautionary and people-oriented measures to contain any eventualities. It must also be prepared to go for mid-term election in extreme circumstances to obtain even more thumping renewal of popular support.

Awami League has been a trend-setter of government by consensus. Even President Bill Clinton seemed to have been largely inspired by such an innovative idea and made a straightforward offer to some of his Republican friends to join his government for the second term asking for consensus on all major national issues. Perhaps BNP's narrow visual aperture could not locate the distinctive features innate in such novel state of governance. They can only pity themselves for being perversely parochial where greater national interest is of secondary importance.

To the Editor...

Power of parliamentarians

Sir, We understand a BNP law maker proposed a bill known as "Parliament Member Special Provision Law" to increase the power of the members of the parliament. It is an irony of fate for the people of Bangladesh that at last the MPs are set to acquire power disregarding the norms of parliamentary ethics prevalent in parliamentary form of government in the world. The MPs are sent to the Parliament to be spokesmen of the constituency and to make laws for the welfare of the people and not to become administrators. We have witnessed the parliamentary proceedings on the TV where hardly 100 MPs are seen in the Parliament during sessions.

Why should majority of the MPs remain absent? If they become administrators they will hardly be seen in the Parliament during sessions. The parliament will be meaningless.

om an MP's permission will be required to set up an industry in his/her constituency? Is it not a step to block investments?

Again, when a natural calamity occurs in an area in Bangladesh, why an MP's permission is needed by the voluntary organisations or individual to succor relief to the victims of calamity? Can an MP provide all relief to?

We urge the MPs to be our spokesmen in the Parliament, to speak our sorrows, sufferings, to participate in debates to enact good laws for the welfare of the masses and raise voice against injustice, corruption and terrorism.

G M F Abdul Rob
New DOHS
Mohakhat, Dhaka

Politics — use of dangerous tools

Sir, The standard of politics is going down — and certainly, it is not improving. Dangerous tools are being introduced and used — for example, sabotage (power tower). This technique may spread to the other sectors, harming the national economy and infrastructure.

There are other undesirable tools. Politics is using armed

workers. There are perhaps lakhs (a quarter of a million or more) unauthorised small firearms in unauthorised hands, inside and outside the political arena. What will happen if these guns start firing? The leaders and their families will not be safe. Violence begets violence. Who will be the cat?

Besides arms, there are other dangerous precedents. Do the labour unions wield more power than the government? They will if these bodies are politically patronised. It took a Margaret Thatcher to break up the British labour unions. The political parties (in Bangladesh) will become the victims of bodies they patronise in the outside zones — the student bodies and the labour leaders and the intellectuals.

The distribution of potential power (and influence) amongst different power points in a society (vertical and lateral) should conform to national interest, to minimise misuse of power/influence.

Have the political leaders the right to disturb the academic environment on a cam-

pus, by encouraging active participation in party politics? Then, when to study, and how to complete the academic career? Why the politicians disturb the non-political (professional) sectors? The politicians are notorious for trying to hug all the limelight upon themselves. This is a distorted view of life.

Our leaders must assert their rights and resist infiltration of political control and indoctrination. The politicians cannot have the last word on every occasion. This is a fundamental right. Any objections?

A Zabir
Dhaka

Crime and punishment

Sir, Day in, day out crimes like rape, murder, bribery, forgery, smuggling, fraud, violation of traffic rules, theft, squandering of public money and hijacking etc., are being committed throughout the country unabated for years together.

It appears that whoever is in power in the country whether

J. P. BNP or Awami League the majority of our ministers, MPs, bureaucrats, Dy. Commissioners, SPs, union council members and our political leaders are not carrying out their duties and responsibilities efficiently.

There are millions of laws, rules and regulations and above all the Constitution of our country to combat crimes. Every crime