

Save Buriganga

A programme dubbed as Buriganga Bachao (Save Buriganga) has been taken up by the Department of Environment (DOE). Such a campaign was long overdue. When the Indian government launched a massive programme to bring the pollution of the Ganges water down to a tolerable level, we hardly made a serious attempt to take stock of our own Buriganga's water pollution.

Now experts are concerned that given the high rate of dumping or jettisoning, the Buriganga might one day embrace the fate of Jamuna near Tajmahal. That surely is a dangerous prospect. Now that the problem has been identified and the DOE has come up with a plan to involve various government and private organisations in the save Buriganga campaign, we can still have some reasons to be optimistic about the lifeline of Dhaka city.

Sure enough, we need quite a huge fund for the purpose of cleaning the river but our conscious decision not to foul the river's water would more than make up for our lack of fund. The key question is to convince people of the merit of a clean Buriganga. All the factories and industries releasing their waste and effluent must be made to install treatment plant as early as possible.

Criminal Degeneration

A case of kidnapping, raping and killing by poison of a school girl set off a clash in a Sonargaon village on Tuesday resulting in injury to a dozen and burning down of six houses. Afzal, also called Sudhir, wanted to marry Rawshan but, rejected, he kidnapped the girl and taking her to a hotel raped and poisoned her to death.

Only in May, 60 cases of rape were reported in the newspapers, says the Ain-O-Salish Kendro. The true figure for the period must be some two to five times more. Of these reported rape incidents only 36 were registered with the police. Twenty-nine of the victims were girls below 15 and 36 were gang-raped. And yesterday Shilpi, 14, a domestic help in a Rampura house, leapt from the first floor attempting to kill herself.

What do all these mean? We are in the vortex of great social change. The changes hardly have any uniform direction. But as an impact of all these taken together, there has been a great change in our value system — or the ways of the mind and of social intercourse developed over tens of centuries and sustaining our society as nothing else ever did.

While we should practice patience and wait for spreading education and social awareness and responsibilities to defend these in good time, we strongly urge upon the government to go for summary trials of rape and acid throwing cases and to that end set up special tribunals, specially empowered. To be an effective deterrent, the arrest of culprits and their conviction and carrying out of their punishments must not take more than three months.

How Bad is the Problem?

Business at Mitford street came to a standstill on Tuesday. Only after an intervention by the BMA secretary general Mustafa Jalal Mahiuddin that business got back into gear. Mitford is the biggest wholesale market for medicine in the country. On Tuesday noon a surgeon, of the rank of Professor, found water-like liquid in the syringe he was going to be used on a patient.

The importers and retailers of the syringes went into action closing down their establishments. Dr Mahiuddin patched up the problem somehow and it was business as usual at Mitford by nightfall. The questions now are a) are used syringes being sold at the pharmacists in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh? b) Does Dr Mahiuddin's amicable settlement bind the medicine traders and retailers to ensuring that used syringes would no more be sold?

It will take both resolution and efficiency and even sacrifice to know the true size of the used syringe trade and its casualty so far. The need for this campaign cannot be obviated by any settlement, howsoever amicable.

Election in Cameroon: An African Experience

The list of voters is supposed to be published and made accessible to voters at least 15 days before election. The voters are then issued special polling cards, which along with the voters' national registration cards, are to be produced for casting votes on the election day.

THE Parliamentary election in Cameroon, located in the central region of Africa, was held on 17 May 97. Cameroon is a bilingual nation using more French than English, was recently admitted to the Commonwealth.

Cameroon, like almost all other countries of Africa, had a long history of colonialism. The first to colonise the territory were the Portuguese, followed by the British and the French who held their respective domains as Trust territories. A section of the English speaking region in the north was allowed to join Nigeria following the outcome of a referendum.

The majority of Cameroonians are Christians, followed by Muslims in number. The two communities generally live in harmony. Their political beliefs and partisan attitude transcend communal parameters. The first President, Ahmed Ahijou was a Muslim. Tribal chiefs played a significant role in the election, as they do in guiding the life of their respective people.

The country is quite large, about three times the size of our country, and has an estimated population of 14 million. It is endowed with rich mineral and forest resources that lies in various stages of exploitation. The

Commonwealth Group of Observers were dispersed to the ten provinces several days before the election in order to enable them to familiarise with officials and leaders there and to ascertain the situation. The French speaking Littoral Province with the base in Douala, the largest city in the country, was allocated to me, perhaps specially because of my knowledge in French.

The framing of the 1991 constitution witnessed transition to a multi-party political system in Cameroon. The constitution envisages a Presidential form of government with a weak Parliament, as in France. At the same time, the Election apparatus, like in France and Italy, remains an integral part of the administration. The Ministry of Territorial Administration, similar to our Ministry of Local Government, is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out all activities, starting from the preparation of electoral rolls till after counting of votes.

Many European, African and other countries have conducted and are still conducting their elections in what may

generally be termed the Latin system. There exist Electoral Commissions at three levels — at the initial level before and during the polls, at the middle or Divisional level and finally at the apex or the highest level of Constitutional Commission. Political parties concerned are represented in all these commissions. The success of this system, as it is perhaps true to our Anglo-Saxon parliamentary system, depends upon the



Currents and Crosscurrents by M M Rezaul Karim

degree of political maturity and democratic tradition the nation concerned has been able to attain. The western democracies, by and large, are well-experienced and have developed a tradition that leaves less scope for rigging and committing irregularities in elections. Complaints unfortunately exist more in many developing countries where, besides inexperience, adequate civic consciousness and not too zealous partisan spirit are yet to grow due, perhaps, to lack of proper education and some other factors.

The opposition to the Cameroon ruling party is

strong. The successor to the political party which formed government after independence in 1960 continues to rule in the name of Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Transition to the multi-party system introduced in 1992 elections was welcomed and gave rise to the formation of a number of political parties not merely along their political philosophy and economic programme but also their respec-

themselves under the control of government delegates. The success of the SDF at the local government elections last year encouraged them to participate in the present election. In spite of severe allegations about limited and discriminatory registration of voters, the SDF thought that at least the counting of votes would be done honestly and correctly. It did not happen, according to them. The state-owned electronic media announced election results provisionally, declaring the ruling party the winner. The major opposition parties protested vehemently. The SDF claimed that they were the winner. The two largest parties demanded annulment of the election, unless the results conformed to their original counting of votes on the polling day.

The registration is different from what we know and appears unsatisfactory. The process is undertaken both by government and the electorate themselves. It stops immediately after the announcement of the date of election by the President. The list of voters is supposed to be published and made accessible

to voters at least 15 days before election. The voters are then issued special polling cards, which along with the voters' national registration cards, are to be produced for casting votes on the election day. But, in most cases the list was not published before the election day and in many cases voters' cards were not issued or distributed to voters. There were a sizable section of frustrated and angry persons who, on the very day of election, could not find their names on the voters' registers, despite their claim that they had been duly registered in time. The opposition also alleged that inadequate measures were taken to register voters in regions which were known as opposition strongholds. Furthermore, the number of total voters registered was 3.7 million. This was a figure much less than the one shown in 1992 elections, and also it did not take into account the increase in population during the period since then.

The conduct of the polls on the election day, besides some stray incidents and shortcomings, appeared peaceful and orderly. Violence was limited. The press exhibited an admirable degree of freedom. The Prime Minister told the Commonwealth Observers that it takes time to build a democratic tradition and that they were at it. In spite of all claims, allegations and protestations, without due and sincere adherence to laws, rules and procedure and without creation of a truly independent Electoral Commission, enormous anomalies and irregularities will continue to exist in a developing country like Cameroon.

Breathing to Die

by Chandra Shekhar Das

Maintenance of old vehicles under legal compulsion, improvement of fuel quality in the refineries, moving out of industrial units, mass transit system and improved traffic management are what the doctor ordered for the polluted ambience of Dhaka.

DHAKA, the city of mosques, bakarkhani, green robed senators in verdurous acres, tranquility and fresh air. No more. Home of nine million, the capital of Bangladesh has long turned into a city of filth, squalor and air that does not only reek foul odour but also contain elements capable of causing enormous harm to health.

More than the assault on one's olfactory organ by the bad smell from the open roadside bins, excreta-loaded drains, it is the slow but sure and relentless poisoning of our body through inhalation of harmful chemicals in the air, which causes more alarm these days. Although air pollution is a curse of the civilisation which hardly any country can escape, the difference between Bangladesh and most other countries is that the problem there does not have as many daunting sides as it seems to have it here in case of any remedial step. Vested interests, political stakes tend to make light of public health issue of immense importance.

The problem in Dhaka can hardly wait for any indefinite period of time for these problems to go away. Already tests of air at the busiest points of the city have proved it convincingly that pollution in Dhaka's air is well over the approved level. And this pollution is almost entirely caused by the automobile exhausts.

Lead is a toxic metal that is present in normal petrol and in the air as fine particles. It can affect the central nervous system, can cause renal damage and hypertension, children are three times more at risk than adults.

SPM consists of particles of dust and carbon coated with toxic gases, all emanating from factory emissions and vehicle exhaust. They coat the lungs, cause respiratory infections, persistent cough and throat ir-

ritation. These also aggravates asthma.

Carbon Monoxide is a colourless and odourless compound. It comes from petrol vehicles mostly two and three wheelers. Reduces the ability of blood to carry oxygen. It encourages heart disorders.

PAHC is caused by unburnt hydro carbon from diesel engines. It causes drowsiness, eye irritation, cough. It is also suspected as a possible carcinogen.

Sulphur Dioxide is a colourless gas that is a part of diesel exhaust and factory emissions; affects upper respiratory tract, causes bronchial problems, nose blockage and cough.

Probably the most lethal of the air pollutants is benzene. It is a part of unleaded petrol. It is a known carcinogen and has been linked with lung cancer and leukemia and is claimed to be damaging to the central nervous system.

Oxides of Nitrogen are formed during fuel combustion in motor vehicles and power stations. Nitrogen oxides lead

to bronchial infections, headaches and eye irritation.

Air pollution in Dhaka is an assortment of evils. These are great rise in the number of two-stroke engines, lax system of distributing fitness certificates to vehicles, poor quality fuel and virtually no enforcement of laws.

Studies have proved that two-stroke engines are the worst polluting sources. Motor bikes and the three wheeled auto-rickshaws — essentially two-stroke engines — emit six times more carbon, three times SPM more than four-stroke engines which ensure infinitely more efficient use of oil. But this may not necessarily point finger at cars as the way of the problem.

Recently a study report published in an Indian periodical said that buses per person emit 200 to 100 times less pollutants than two wheelers. Viewed from another angle, a car requires 44 times as much road space as a bus to transport an equal number of passengers. A car emits 90 times more carbon monox-

ide as compared to a bus meeting the same travel demand.

Back to two-stroke engines, two wheelers emit 49 times more emission for the same number of passenger as a bus while auto-rickshaws or baby taxis as we fondly call them emit 60 times more by the same token.

One thing is clear from these comparative states. The bigger the better. Authorities should waste no time in bolstering mass transit system by getting more buses on the roads. But mere increase in the number of buses will not do. The free reign of the two-stroke engines has to be marginalised.

In fact, the government should give active consideration to the idea of banning registration of new vehicles for some time. Dhaka is traffic laden do not seem to be capable of accommodating new vehicles any more.

Maintenance of old vehicles under legal compulsion, improvement of fuel quality in the refineries, moving out of indus-

trial units, mass transit system and improved traffic management are what the doctor ordered for the polluted ambience of Dhaka.

It is far from as simple as it may look on paper. To redeem Dhaka's poisonous air it will require a collective effort. The government has to bring all the concerned agencies under one umbrella because combined efforts lie at the root of the problem. A breakdown of the ameliorative scope as revealed by a recent Indian study will elucidate the point. According to it, good fuel should reduce emissions by 10%; 10% will come if traffic moves at around 40 kmph without too many stops; and above all good maintenance will reduce the margin of pollution by 50%. This is supposed to cure three fourths of air pollution. From the whop-ping margin of the problem due to poor maintenance drives home the necessity of enforcing the laws strictly in cases of violation of the standard. Apart from putting in place the system of instant fine, the authorities can think about the idea of enhanced renewal rate of registration and insurance to keep possible violators under a check. Dhaka's air is bound to be little salutary for that.

To the Editor...

Weekly Holiday

Sir, The announcement comes, made suddenly, on a Thursday afternoon. Why it had to be so sudden and confidential (no leakage)? To avoid endless debate? To gain popularity? Is it the first phase of a planned programme? Prepare the people one step at a time, for further changes, for the ultimate objective — Sunday off? No? No. Friday half-day? Hm. One benefit: the Secretariat will work whole day — available in the afternoon for policy work.

Sometimes, strategically, a slightly flawed plan is executed to enable the undesirable implications to be spotted by third parties — easy to bring about a change! The present regime appears to be fond of jerk-starts — look at the regional and sub-regional hop, step, and jump! Nervous tick?

In the press note several secondary and some irrelevant justifications were carefully drafted. For whose benefit? Who are the back-room boys running the show?

Once again, transparency has been bypassed. Now we should not expect to be prepared for policy decisions.

The citizens can't guess what is being next. The working days have been cut down from six to five (weekly total more or less same). More hurry now! Be prepared to be unprepared! A citizen Dhaka

Sir, On hearing that Friday and Saturday have been declared as weekly holidays instead of Friday only my former boss known to be a strong Awami League sympathiser reacted by saying, "Government lacked the guts to declare Sunday as weekly holiday". The reason he said this was that: i) When an Islamist party like Pakistan Muslim League of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was quick to realise the manifold advantages of having Sunday as weekly holiday and implemented the same, then what stops a party that professes secularism as one of its four main pillars, in declaring Sunday as weekly holiday in secular Bangladesh?

ii) There is no religious bar on working on Friday so far as Islam is concerned and this is agreed by everyone. iii) Sunday can no more be seen as a Christian holiday, it

has become universal weekly holiday. Non-Christian countries of the Far East and South East Asia including Indonesia and Malaysia work on Friday and enjoy Sunday as weekly holiday.

iv) If anybody thinks that we can act and behave like oil rich countries of the Middle East then he must be living in fool's paradise.

v) Moot point was not one day or two days weekly holidays rather it was Friday or Sunday. The decision of declaring Friday and Saturday as weekly holidays ignoring Sunday has come as a rude shock to the business community particularly those engaged with export. It is not important if we have one or two days as weekly holidays what is important is that if our holidays are in line with rest of the world.

We earnestly request the government to declare Sunday as weekly holiday and prove that they really believe in export-led growth.

Salahuddin Ayoobi Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka

Sir, I would like to express my astonishment at some of the narrow-minded and misinformed reactions to the government's decision to create a five-day working week. The most obvious rebuttal to many of the condemnations is that if it were so counter-productive it would hardly be the prevalent mode in the vast majority of countries including all of the OECD, G7, EC or any other group of developed nations you choose. As some readers may know, Pakistan has recently moved not only to have a five-day week, but to make the weekends on Saturday and Sunday (in order to allow Pakistani business to be in line with business in other countries and so facilitate trade). Presumably our opposition parties who have grasped at the most tenuous excuses to brand the government pro-Indian will now decide to brand it pro-Pakistan as a result? Let us look at the issue objectively.

In the first place, workplace studies in the West have shown that human productivity and concentration produce best results in short breaks and that rest is an important factor behind attentiveness and accu-

racy. This is why airline pilots have a day or two's rest after every trip. Secondly, most of the multinationals and foreign organisations in Bangladesh already function on a five-day week. I think it is generally acknowledged that these entities have proven more productive and efficient than their local counterparts. Third, even the most hardened manager knows that employees are better workers if their psychological well-being is cared for. By giving bread winners more time to spend with their families, they have a greater likelihood to achieve emotional balance which would result not only in higher productivity but given time, perhaps a reduction in social ills such as alienated children, disregard of women and other intangible, immeasurable benefits.

By giving them more leisure time to engage perhaps in sporting activities, it could even lead to having a healthier workforce since certainly office-workers are generally acknowledged as 'not having time' to swim, play tennis or exercise. And it would give them the opportunity to engage in social and community activities which are woefully missing in Bangladesh.

In short, the government has demonstrated a very sophisticated thought process (for a corporate entity) since they have recognised all of this in their decision which will have widespread impact in improving the quality of life (certainly also a sphere in which we are 'under-developed') and they deserve to be lauded, not criticised. The mistake they have made however is in not being able to present credible foundation for their decision (articles in the Press on Friday were vague as to benefits of the move) and so left themselves open to attack.

I feel many will join me in hoping that our compatriots will not allow the politicisation of this decision and that the government will not be forced to retract. To those who voice the loudest objections — Oh ye of short memories — were you not amongst those who wailed at the coming of the six-day week in the Eighties?

Abul Hasnat Dhaka

OPINION

Environment: Let's Get Going

According to a news item, the government has formed or is thinking of forming a committee to recommend ways and means of solving the problems of environmental pollution.

We already have a Ministry to deal with such problems. Why then there is need for a separate committee? The snail's pace at which the government machinery moves, it may take months for the government to nominate the members of the proposed committee. The committee, in turn, may take months to hold its first meeting to suit the convenience of all its members.

In keeping with our tradition, the committee will form several expert sub-committees. These sub-committees, in their turn, will form several cells to deal with different technical aspects of the problem. The cells will first hold several workshops and then some more seminars. By the time the committee submits its report, the problem will multiply tenfold, necessitating the formation many more committees and this process will go on and on.

Two of the primary factors responsible for environmental pollution in our cities are, one, the black smoke emitted by defective motorised vehicles and, two, accumulation of garbage dumps. Surely, it does not require a committee to see how hundreds of thousands of vintage and defective auto-rickshaws, tempos, minibuses, buses and trucks and even private cars emit black smoke throughout the day and up to late hours in the evening, thereby polluting the whole atmosphere. Nor does it require a committee to see and smell the stench of sky-high garbage dumps scattered all over the city.

What is needed is not committees but action on the part of the authorities concerned. Given the will and with stern and punitive action, it should not take more than a week to stop all defective vehicles from plying on the streets. Similarly,

A Qayyum

the City Corporation should not take more than two or three weeks to clear all the garbage dumps. If the existing fleet of garbage-carrying trucks is not adequate, the fleet should be immediately augmented.

Until the augmentation of its fleet of trucks, the City Corporation can easily employ additional number of drivers on a temporary basis for plying the available fleet in several shifts a day. Here, we can follow the example of a neighbouring city. Until recently, Calcutta was considered to be one of the dirtiest magacies of the world. But it is no more so. It is not long ago that the authorities concerned have started a campaign to make the city as clean as any other modern city of developed countries. The campaign has already started changing the city's face and visitors are all in praise of the city's improvement.

Surely, we too, can embark on a similar campaign. What is needed is the will and, most important of all, the political will.

Miscreants

Woodrow W Denham, Ph D

dozens of innocent passengers, barbaric bands of savages who gang rape teenage girls just for the fun of it, arsonists who set fires that burn down hundreds of impoverished homes and kill unknown numbers of women and children, perverted boys who throw acid in the faces of girls who reject their "love", and so-called students who wantonly kill and destroy on university campuses and in the process paralyze the nation's educational institutions?

By calling these people "miscreants", newspapers imply that the crimes they commit are trivial, and that the people who commit them are nothing more than naughty children who should have their hands spanked if anybody catches them, but that catching them probably is not worth the bother.

My thesaurus says that a murderer is a killer, butcher, assassin, slayer, it does NOT say that a murderer is a miscreant.

My thesaurus says that people who commit armed robberies are thieves, bandits or marauders; it does NOT say that gangs of armed robbers are miscreants. My thesaurus says that a rapist is an abuser, exploiter, attacker, defiler, despoiler, or ravager; it does NOT say that gang rape is committed by naughty children. My thesaurus says that criminal gangs who devastate universities and disrupt normal social processes are terrorists, NOT miscreants. When newspapers refuse to call a spade a spade, the problem is much worse than a conspiracy of silence about rampant street crime in Bangladesh. By saying that vicious criminals are miscreants, editors make them appear to be inconsequential nuisances and tacitly condone the impotence of the police and judiciary in their dealings with these evil people who are doing so much to destroy the country.

The writer is Associate Professor of Anthropology, North South University