

Crimes in Chittagong

Perhaps no part of Bangladesh stakes stronger claims to be considered as a microcosm of the country as does Chittagong nowadays with its deteriorating and order situation. Nothing — no amount of press report, editorial exhortation, citizen and businessmen's worry — seem to have any effect on the sickening situation there.

Crime phenomenon that even in these days of criminal universality read the other day like a tale from Columbia, Sicily or more lately Russia, only to be known in the pages of newspapers or fiction, has now become the order of the day there. Almost every day the morning press alarms us with reports of abduction of moneyed men by organised groups of criminals in Chittagong. Only Thursday last, a leading Bangla newspaper reported on the abduction and release of a local businessman at the Nasirabad industrial area. The man was taken to a nearby hideout at the gun point but their sponging bid was thwarted as police, informed by victim's relatives, cordoned the area. The man was released but nothing was known about those who hijacked him. Going by the record of police action and the crime pattern it is possible to infer that police might have stopped pursuing the criminals after they had rescued the victim.

Has Chittagong turned into a free zone for the criminals? However undesirable, crime is perhaps the greatest social reality. But what is really frustrating is the strange inertia and ineffectiveness of the law enforcing agency in tackling the criminals. The whole administration there seems to have been so much bedevilled by corruption that even before police can get a move on to go after a gang or a criminal the news reaches them and so far the criminals have not been short of hiding places. Not too long ago, a police official while explaining his forces' failure to capture a hardened elusive criminal himself gave out this home truth.

The worsening criminality serves as a pointer to the lack of vision and will of our political leadership something that has come to be reckoned as greatest national curse. When will they realise that deterioration in law and order there affects the whole economy? We had suggested earlier in this column and we reiterate that: Put Chittagong under special consideration. Home Ministry should form a task force to look into the factors abetting or sustaining the major criminal phenomena like holding people to ransom.

What's Up in Iraq?

Having observed the diplomacy at work to end the standoff over UN arms inspections in Iraq and the US' seeming hype to 'punish' Saddam once again, we have got a fair picture of the relative merit of the two options.

The mediation efforts of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the Middle-Eastern and European envoys have yielded some positive results already. There has been a mellowing of the Iraqi position on the number of off-limits sites, since reduced to eight, with a further promise made out to even open such locations to inspection subject to certain conditions relating to timetable, and the nationality of the inspectors. The numerical predominance of US-British inspectors in the UN team has been a sore point with Saddam Hussein. In a literal sense, retaining even one off-limits site is antithetical to the "full and unfettered access" demanded of Iraq in a series of UN Security Council resolutions on the subject. For Iraq's part, however, there is now a minimalist desperate bid to cling to basic nationalist sentiments. Such sensibilities can be regarded as normal for a nation although these are likely to be viewed in the US as Iraq's 'impertinent' refusal to budge on essentials. By all means, let Iraq be made accountable for its non-compliance, if any, with the UN resolutions and watch-dog coalitions be also formed to keep an eye on Iraq's arsenals, but the situation is far from warranting a military strike on Baghdad now. More problems will be created than solved if such a course of action were adopted.

And, isn't it a bit abrasive and unilateral on the part of US administration to say, 'it does not need the approval of other countries', a new UN resolution or any act of Congress to punish Iraq?

Weird Addiction

We have been crying hoarse over our young people's general predisposition to addiction. And for long. We did not feel for a moment that the problem was amenable to only government intervention. But we never thought for a moment government would not give it a serious thought.

Drugs are an expensive addiction. One may think that for that reason sons, and may be daughters too, of the affluent ones in the big cities would be the main patrons of the drug pedlar. Mugging is said to be resorted to by young people, often from wealthy families but also from other backgrounds, to pay for the costly stuff. But this is a wrong picture. Parts of most of our towns in the interior turn into a kind of demimonde after sundown. Many of the pharmacies start selling narcotic drugs, their key to sustenance and even prosperity. This is as dangerous a scenario as can be. We are mortgaging our future with a chance of never recovering from it.

Once one has developed addiction, one gets inured to the stuff he started with and keeps going after harder and more harmful drugs. One doesn't know where to stop. This progressive lapse into more and more dangerous material has lately hit a queer object of passion and hallucination. From India the criminals are importing a kind of fly resembling largely our homegrown *jondi* or fireflies. One of these the addict places on his tongue. And the fly stings the fellow for once. And the action starts — comporting the consumer to his paradise. A vial ten such flies now costs Taka 10 thousand. It is not known whether a fly can sting for more than once.

What will be the state of our society and polity when a substantial section of our society will be irrecoverable addicts of even weirder kinds? The early performance of our Home Minister led us to expect fireworks on the drug scene. We are disappointed.

Agriculture and Ecology: Elements under Threat

The farmers, the scientists and the policy makers have to cobble together the criteria of ecological sustainability, economic efficiency and social equity into a coherent and participatory framework.

DEATH is cheap when grain is dear. And death by hunger has stalked Bangladesh in the past. The tragedy of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 and the more recent food crisis in the early seventies are indelibly etched in the collective memory and conscience of the people. It is no wonder, therefore, that the people and their leaders in Bangladesh have emphasized increased domestic food production as their priority concern and commitment.

Food production has indeed increased in the 23 years since the crisis in 1974 by about 60 per cent. But problems have been emerging just beyond the horizon. Output from the once resilient eco-system has started to falter since the early nineties. Arable lands are at their thinnest slivers in Bangladesh. In fact the land frontiers were reached almost three decades ago. Significant inroads have already been made into land with low potential. Today per capita landholding stands at 0.09 hectare per capita. Further, with population pressure and urban sprawl, more and more farmlands are being lost. The increasing population and declining farm size are two key issues in relation to agricultural development that is sustainable.

Elements Under Threat, Land and Water

Within these two basic characteristics let us look at the natural resources and the elements under threat. The most serious form of land-degradation affecting the areas with unreliable rainfall, low moisture holding capacity, high lands, poorly managed wetlands and the precarious coastal belt is accelerated water and wind erosion. Taken South-Asia as a whole water and wind erosion are estimated to affect respectively 25 per cent and 18 per cent of the sub-region's total agricultural land.

Riverbank erosion in Bangladesh for example washes away significant amounts of river-side cropped land. Adverse environmental impacts have been observed around flood-control structures which had been designed without adequate consideration of the flood plain's periodic inundation so necessary for crops and fishery

production.

However that may be, under accelerated soil erosion, soil losses take place much faster than new soil can be formed and a kind of deficit spending begins with the top-soil. The two major human activities contributing to the removal of soil's vegetative cover are shifting cultivation and deforestation. To a greater or lesser degree, much of the farming enterprises in low-potential land involve a form of shifting cultivation. For, in the absence of access to agricultural inputs and adequate labour power the farmer has little choice but to move on as the fertility of the land depletes. The underlying causes of deforestation include the combined effects of poverty, skewed land-distribution, rising population pressure, increased demand for tropical timber by the rich and woodfuel by the poor.

It may be pointed out here that crop-production in Bangladesh is predominantly carried out in rain-fed conditions. Technologies are yet to be developed to mobilize the specific resources for relevant farming systems in areas where production environments are variable, and subject to abiotic stresses like rain and drought, erratic rainfall or salinity. Further the exclusive focus on the production of market commodity like rice has meant that the so-called minor crops, like oil seeds, pulses, tubers and coarse grains have been bypassed. Yet they are of critical importance to providing survival security in times of environmental stress and for resource poor people in less endowed areas.

High production potential areas are usually well-irrigated and can sustain intensive cropping as long as care is taken not to exceed the soil's regenerative capacity. The Green Revolution success story of the seventies and the eighties was developed for and took place in these areas. The success, however, carried certain economic and environmental penalties.

First, such high input-high productivity farming system have been dependent on a steady supply of expensive inputs like fertilizer, fuel and

pesticides. Second, many of the development projects have not been environmentally sound. Some intensive irrigation programmes have neglected drainage and proper water management practices leading to water-logging, salinization and water wastage. Scientists have estimated that some 32 per cent of the net cultivable land in Bangladesh suffer from salinity problems. Water logging and poor aeration affect almost half the total arable land. Indiscriminate withdrawal of ground water in certain areas has led to falling water tables, decrease in the dry season flow of water ways and intrusion of salt water. Further induced aquifer recharge has increased the risk of groundwater pollution along with the contamination of chemicals already taking place. Besides, scarce water is flowing uphill by the poor.

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around 70 per cent of the cultivated land has gone down during the last decade. In a broader context concerns are being expressed that the all important rice-wheat system in South Asia may be over-exploitative of the natural resources base resulting in degradations in soil health and in water quality. Another problem associated with intensive and chemical agriculture is pest-pressure and the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

The effects are less reliable food supplies and lower income for the farmers. Reduced crop-yields and increased inputs both have the effect of reducing the farmer's return from labour and thus progressive impoverishment for him or her.

Looking Ahead

Given the scenario, the fact remains that in the years ahead

frontier.

Agricultural research and development till date has given a major thrust to optimize the factors of production of market commodities and maximization of profit at the farm-level. In the process there have been negligible attempts to perceive small farmers in less-endowed areas as those who try to minimize risks for livelihood security. Also neglected have been some critically important crops. Similarly integration of field crops and fisheries in the wet lands, and more generally of crop-agriculture, livestock, farm forestry and aquaculture can be helpful in enhancing rural income and protecting resource-health. The technology required for resource-poor farmers is that for the production system as a whole under a product mix regime of a given set of resources.

Many traditional agro-biodiversity practices are environment specific, less risky and sustainable under low levels of production with respect to time and resource use. Blending the ecological and social strengths of the traditional technology with the production potential of new technologies is a major task ahead. That will entail a new partnership covenant between the policy makers, the scientists, the extensionists and the farmers. Securing quantum jumps in the output of individual commodities will remain important for the research and development efforts. But a reorientation on the basis of specific resource endowment complexes such as the tropical monsoon system, dry land system, wet land and coastal systems is essential.

Specificity in that context also refers to the socio-economic resource endowment of a given farming community. It is at that micro level that pragmatic solutions should be found. Conservation farming system or programme that builds on local knowledge, is affordable, and provide immediate tangible economic benefit will be more attractive to small farmers than the finest agronomic practices which go beyond their understanding and means. Whether it is soil and

water conservation or tropical forest management, an important structural consideration is the little people's stake in the resources.

In high potential areas water is the life-blood of intensive agriculture. Vital sustainable components therein are participatory management control by the user-community, increased water use efficiency and judicious on farm water management. A prerequisite will be stronger linkage of lowland with upland catchment areas and the integration of irrigation management with natural resources planning. Conjunctive use of surface and ground water and adequate drainage are all necessary for maintaining the water-level, minimising water-logging and preventing salt-intrusion in irrigated areas.

In a similar vein, integrated plant nutrient system is required to compensate for the greater removal of soil nutrients that intensive cultivation entails. Such intensification has to be based on techniques that depend on farm grown biological inputs with judicious supplement of minerals. Incorporating animal husbandry and farm forestry into diversified crop agriculture provides scope for organic recycling and green manure. Integrated Pest Management likewise can increase yields and empower farmer peer-groups to make their own decision about micro-agro-ecology of their farms and reduce dependence on chemical pesticides.

In summary, the farmers, the scientists and the policy makers have to cobble together the criteria of ecological sustainability, economic efficiency and social equity into a coherent and participatory framework. Ecological degradation and human misery are integral to each other. Disastrous consequences of failure to redress decisively the impoverishment of the two together are appearing in exhausted soil, denuded forests, sterile fishing grounds and destitution of the rural poor. Unfortunately the call to grow more food does not include a call for the protection of our soil's fertility, our water's purity, our air's cleanliness and our farmer's security and dignity.

the money. Cities and industries can afford to pay more for water than agriculture can. Yet the bulk of the food supplies for the future in Bangladesh will depend on irrigation and water security.

Soil fertility decline, directly or indirectly associated with fertilizer application is also beginning to cause concern. Few countries have made estimates of the extent of the problem, but reports of organic matter depletion, negative soil-nutrient balance, and the onset of secondary and micro-nutrient deficiencies are beginning to emerge. In Bangladesh, for example, the reapplication of bio-mass, such as rice stalks and animal waste has dropped drastically. The organic matter content of some arable land has gone down below 1 per cent as compared to the minimum 3 per cent required to sustain productive capability. According to some estimate fertility level of

Bangladesh has to produce more and diversified food for larger populations from less land and scarce water. Simultaneously, ecological degradation that hacks away at the natural resources base and poverty that brutalizes the lives of millions of people must be reversed. As new frontiers of science are being probed, novelty should not sap continuing commitment to less glamorous but essential programmes like secure and equitable tenurial rights, participatory and community control of natural resources, sustainable production and post-production systems that are less energy and chemical intensive, and technological empowerment of small farmers. Increased sensitivity in strategic sectors such as the breakthroughs in molecular biology, tissue and cell culture must ensure that the grim paradox of progress amidst stagnation is not replicated in the new

a young man smiling at her and she began feeling humiliated on account of her condition. She changed her seat and he seemed more amused.

She moved again and then on her fourth move he burst out laughing. She had him arrested.

Then the case came before the court, the young man was not invited to the court, the young man was asked why he acted in such a manner. His reply was: When the lady boarded the bus I couldn't help noticing she was pregnant. She sat under an advertisement which read Coming Soon: The Gold Dust Twins, then she moved under one that read Sloans Liniments remove swelling.

I was even more amused when she sat under a shaving advertisement which read William's Stick Did The Trick. Then I could not control myself any longer when on the fourth move she sat under an advertisement which read Dunlop Rubber would have prevented this accident.

The case was dismissed.

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"Admission to Architecture Dept..."

Sir, This is in response to the opinion published on 9th February, '98 by Mr Mahmuduzzaman. Of the three respondents who are writing this letter, two are ex-students and one current student of the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AAS), London, the oldest in UK (est. 1847) and probably the most prestigious architectural schools of the world. Mr Mahmuduzzaman has presented his case with a table. Such is the plight of the only superpower left in the world now!

Under the circumstances

the least the UN (read USA) can do is to lift the sanctions now and at the same time carry on inspections simultaneously at the expense of Iraq, of course! However, the inspections should not go on for an indefinite period.

Abul Mohsin

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