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Re-opening the nation's arteries

The water runs dry in Bangladesh's rivers in the winter, confronting riverine transport system with serious problems of siltation. Dredging is the only way to keep parts of the river routes open to traffic. This dredger is now working round the clock to keep the vital Aricha-Daulatdia route navigable. — Star Photo

Negligence turns rivers into man-made death traps

By Ehsanul Haque

When 15 people drowned in the Buriganga after the launch they were travelling on broke into pieces, it hardly caused a furore. But behind such 'common tragedies' lie tales of poor supervision, technical incompetence and gross mismanagement.

Shipping sources say that between 1984 and September 1998, a total of 1,561 people have been killed in 226 accidents. Evidence reveals that the accidents are largely man-made and deaths the results of negligence on the part of both launch operators and regulatory authorities.

According to sources in the department of shipping, inefficient and incompetent operators, overloading, bad weather, technical faults and reduced navigability are the main reasons behind riverine tragedies that occur frequently.

They say that nearly 5,000 motor vessels and seven lakh mechanised boats are operating in the country's rivers without any fitness certificate. Officials say that these unfit boats are largely to blame for the accidents on the waterways.

But regulatory authorities such as Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and the department of shipping are no better. Poor surveillance by these departments, particularly of river traffic including motor launches and engine boats, has increased dangers to the passengers. Poor maintenance of motorised vessels and overloading by launch operators and boat-owners are often cited as the most common causes for riverine accidents.

Sources point out that the motor launch involved in the Buriganga tragedy did not have any safety equipment, even though it had a 'fitness certificate' issued by the department of shipping (DoS).

Through the number of major accidents are few in number, minor accidents are always taking place, a DoS official who declined to be identified said.

According to the Inland Mechanically Propelled Vessel (IMPV) Act 1917, motor vessel

of any horse power (HP) should be registered with the DoS for plying on rivers. But water transports propelled by less than 16 HP engine do not require to obtain any registration or fitness certificates under an amendment to the IMPV Act 1917.

A consequence of the amendment was that many under-16 HP vessels and other vessels falsely claiming to have engines less than 16 HP, which were unfit for carrying passengers and goods, started sailing without registration. Frequently these transports which are very old, violate river traffic rules and contribute to accidents, the officials pointed out.

The sources also said that in foreign countries a brand new motor launch is allowed to sail for 20 years. But in Bangladesh a vessel, fitted usually with re-conditioned engines, runs for more than 40 years in ramshackle condition, virtually without maintenance. Failure of steering system and other mechanical trouble are inevitable for these old vessels.

Crews without proper training and experience are also responsible for the accidents. Besides gusty winds, inferior quality of wooden body also contributes to accidents. A good number of launches sail at night without search lights.

A survey conducted by the department of shipping on river accidents during 1984-1991 reveals that overloading was the single-biggest culprit, accounting for 34.42 per cent of all accidents. Collision came second with 22.72 per cent; negligence of master was responsible for 21.43 per cent, bad weather 9.74 per cent, technical reasons 6.49 per cent and grounding 4 per cent.

Most of the launch owners who are responsible for causing accidents are never taken to task if their boats meet with accidents. This puts the onus on crews who leave their masters virtually carefree about the fitness of the vessels.

Bangladesh is the only country in the world where launches with wooden body are still in operation. In one of the launch disasters it was found that the

roof of the launch was blown away. 'This was fantastic', an investigating officer observed. 'I do not know whether the roof was riveted on the body or pasted with glue,' he noted.

At least 60 per cent of the passenger launches are of wooden body. A marine engineer said that the government should ban the wooden body launches and the vessels operating for more than 20 years.

On the fitness of crews, the sources said they obtain their certificates without going through examinations or training. The law provides for mandatory presence of lifebuoy, life-jackets and fire-extinguishers, but the equipment seldom come to any use in emergency because few know how to use them.

According to DoS sources, registered vessels number about 6,886 which include 2,082 passenger vessels, 1,362 cargo vessels, 3 ferries, 73 tankers, 240 tugs, 70 fishing barges, 1,610 dumb barges and 1,396 miscellaneous cargo vessels. But only about 2,141 vessels have renewed their registrations.

The Inland Shipping Ordinance 1976, makes it mandatory for every mechanised vessel having more than 16 HP to undergo annual survey. In which keel, hull, engines, navigation lights, safety equipment are checked. Only then are fitness certificates given. Whenever a vessel is withdrawn from operation, it has to be registered.

But these procedures are not followed strictly. Not surprisingly, about 4,745 vessels sail without any survey certificates. In addition, about seven lakh vessels are in operation claiming to have engines under 16 HP thus requiring no registration.

There are only four qualified surveyors and eight survey inspectors in four survey offices in Sadar Ghat, Narayanganj, Barisal and Khulna. The number of survey officers are inadequate for a river route having 5,968 kilometers in length. The survey office does not even have minimum transport facilities, the source added.

Under existing shipping

laws, launch owners have to pay a penalty of Taka 100 per passenger taken on board in excess of capacity. But still then the incidence of overloading has not declined because of lack of enforcement by the mobile team of DoS and BIWTA.

Senior Vice-president of Bangladesh Inland Waterways Passenger Carrying Association, Md Baduzzaman Badal said that about 55 per cent of passengers travel through river routes and approximately 60 to 70 per cent of merchandise traffic is carried by the cargo vessels. Though these river routes are playing vital role in the economy, this sector is not getting proper supervision of the concerned authority, he said.

Continuous siltation of the major rivers is reducing the length of navigable waterways maintained by the BIWTA, affecting river communication in the country.

The length of classified navigable water ways under the BIWTA declined from 8,433 km in 1984 to 5,968 km in 1997. DoS sources said, adding that the length shrinks to only 3,800 km during the dry season.

According to BIWTA sources, the total length of navigable waterways including channels for low draft country boats is about 2,400 km and more than half of the country's land area is located and three-quarters of all commercial activities take place within a distance of 10 km from a navigable waterway in all the seasons.

Although maintenance of the waterways system is becoming difficult due to continuous siltation of the rivers, it is generally much less capital-intensive than the construction and maintenance of land transport modes, a BIWTA official noted.

The annual maintenance cost of bituminous roads stands at around Taka 150,000 per km without the periodical upgrading and rehabilitation costs, whereas the estimated cost of development and maintenance dredging of the classified inland waterways is about Taka 42,000 per km, the official said.

High drama as BNP man hops both ways

Khaleque joins AL, then says he was hijacked

By Staff Correspondent

In a high political drama yesterday, a city BNP leader created controversy over his joining the ruling Awami League.

State-run media reported that S. A. Khaleque formally joined the ruling party and met the prime minister in a simple ceremony at 11 am in the morning.

Later in the evening, the former deputy mayor went on record bursting into tears in front of hundreds of journalists that he had been coerced into joining the Awami League. It was an iftar party hosted by BNP chief Khaleda Zia for journalists.

BTW news bulletins in the evening showed Khaleque presenting a bouquet to prime minister to mark his return to Awami League.

Better known for frequently changing his political colour, Khaleque had been with BNP during the rule of the late President Ziaur Rahman. He later joined General Ershad's Jatiya Party. He returned to the Khaleda Zia-led BNP after the Ershad government had been overthrown.

The government-controlled BTW aside, the official BSS news agency crested a story at 4:06 pm that Khaleque had

joined the AL. PID also released a handout and a picture showing the 68-year-old man standing beside the prime minister.

But a sobbing Khaleque told journalists that DGF (Directorate General of Forces Intelligence) forced him to go to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and asked him to join the ruling party.

By noon, news spread in the city that the former MP had shifted his allegiance to the ruling party.

But it all took a dramatic turn when Khaleque, in presence of Khaleda Zia, was presented before journalists at the Minto Road iftar party. Minutes before the magrib azan, a sobbing Khaleque gave an account of how he had been treated by the DGF officials.

After the iftar, the controversial politician from Mirpur, flanked by BNP secretary general, gave more details to the reporters. He was sobbing all through.

S. A. Khaleque described the story as follows:

I was with BNP but Ershad forced me to join his party. It was me who called the JP government a corrupt on the floor of the (1996) Parliament while I was an MP of that party. I had never been a member of the AL.

Even I did not keep Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's request to join the party.

Following my active participation in the BNP long march to the CHT on March 8, members of the DGF started contacting me. Major Rahman of the agency first came to my house (at Mirpur) on November 19 and phoned me later inviting me to visit him.

As I went to his cantonment office, the Major took me to the chamber of the Director General of DGF. They treated me very well. Present there were Brigadier Nazrul and Colonel Iqbal, two other DGF officials, who told the DG that I had agreed to join the ruling party. But I protested their statements and returned home.

I also went to the DGF office again at the invitation of the DG. On that day, I was told that there was nobody called Major Rahman. In fact, the official I came to know as Rahman was Major Emdad. The major told the DG that I along with a DCC commissioner agreed to join the AL. Again, I contradicted with them.

Following the second such incident, I informed Lokman Hossain Bhuiyan (a close aide of BNP chief Khaleda Zia and head of her private security

force) and through him the madam (Khaleda Zia) of the matter. Then I also discussed the issue with some other BNP leaders.

Again, another day, two DGF officials came to my house after talking to me by telephone. At that time, I was ill and keeping myself away from all political and business activities. I also stayed away from my Mirpur residence for a few days but once again I received a phone call from the DGF office when I returned home to attend a family programme. I asked the caller not to try to take me to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Yesterday (Wednesday), they also phoned me to say they will take me to the PMO today (Thursday). They came to my Mirpur house at 9.30 in the morning and first took me to the DGF office and then to the PMO.

At the PMO, I found Salman F. Rahman (of Beximco), Chittagong AL leader Akhtaruzzaman Choudhury Babu among others. Mayor (Mohammad Hanif) and state minister (Mofazzal Hossain Choudhury) Maya were later called in there. I could smell their conspiracy after the DGF officials had

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SEC under fire in JS committee

By Staff Correspondent

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) came under strong criticism from the Parliamentary Standing Committee yesterday on the Ministry of Finance, for its 'inability' to improve the capital market situation.

A number of MPs called the SEC a 'dumping ground for retired bureaucrats', meeting sources said. They suggested that the SEC be run by people having first hand experience with the capital market.

Members of the parliamentary standing committee were also highly critical of the SEC for 'unnecessary interference with the activities of the DSE and CSE. They asked the SEC, especially its chairman, to allow the bourses, which are 'self regulatory organisations', to work without unnecessary interference.

The Parliamentary Committee yesterday referred two set of recommendations to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for the latter's scrutiny.

The recommendations were made separately by the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) and the Chittagong Stock Exchange (CSE). The leaders of both the bourses believe that the recommendation, if implemented, would help substantially improve the health of the country's capital markets.

The CSE recommendations included introduction of weekly netting system, amendments to certain provisions of the security regulations, acceleration of the ADB suggested reform programmes including disinvestment of certain public sector enterprises.

The DSE recommendation included provision for automatic renewal of brokerage licenses every year against the payment of required fees. Currently the SEC renews the brokerage licenses every year.

The DSE also proposed that the brokers be allowed to underwrite IPOs. Under the latest SEC directives, from January next year, only licensed merchant banks and issue managers would be allowed to underwrite IPOs.

Attack on garments workers: 5 hurt

Five female garment workers were injured in an attack at a garments factory in the city's Tejgaon area yesterday evening, reports UNB.

The injured — Rumi, 28, Minara, 20, Kajali, 18, Maksu, 28, and Momtaj, 28, of Padma Garments at Begunbari were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

They alleged that the Assistant Production Manager of the factory attacked them when they tried to save some of their female colleagues from police custody.

Earlier the management of the factory had handed over four female workers to police for leading a movement demanding salary hike and payment of arrears.



Praying for salvation: On the eve of Christmas, a Christian bows in humility to Mary, mother Jesus Christ, at a church in Dhaka. — Star Photo: Zahedul Khan

Christmas brings joy to Christians

By Staff Correspondent

The Christian community in the country celebrates Christmas as elsewhere in the world today with due religious fervour.

Holy Xmas, the birth day of Jesus Christ, is the greatest religious festival of the Christians. It will be marked with morning prayer at churches, exchange of gifts, cutting of Xmas cakes and other festivities. Most of the Christian

households in the city have already been tastefully decorated with Xmas trees and kaleidoscopic lights.

Usually the day is a public holiday, but this year it falls on the weekly holiday in Bangladesh.

Festivities, however, began yesterday evening with holy masses at churches and Christmas eve parties at homes.

Devotees attended night masses in thousands. In the capital, holy masses were held at St. Mary's Cathedral at Kakrail, Holy Cross Church at Tejgaon, National Major Seminary at Banani, St. Christian's Church at Asad Gate and Kafur Catholic Church.

Christmas Day masses will be held from 6:30 to 9 this morning.

Why not JS and UZ polls under caretaker?

Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia yesterday said parliamentary and upazila elections could be held one after another under the caretaker government, reports UNB.

'Upazila election is important as well. Both upazila and parliamentary polls should be scheduled in a way so that the caretaker government could oversee both the polls,' she said while talking to a group of journalists after the iftar hosted by her at her official residence.

She told a correspondent

that it is not necessary to amend the Constitution for holding upazila elections under the caretaker government.

Asked whether her party would take part in the upcoming city corporation election without the caretaker government, Begum Zia said, 'We have not yet raised such demand. But it's true that the government and the Election Commission have lost neutrality and confidence of the people as manifested in Pabna-2 by-election.'

The opposition leader said the Election Commission

should be reconstituted before holding any election in future to ensure the fairness of the polls.

'We will discuss threadbare the issue of city corporation, upazila and parliamentary elections in our party meeting as well as with the parties allied to us,' she added.

About alliance in the mayoral election early next year, BNP chief said, 'We will consider it later.'

Begum Zia ridiculed the claim of the Prime Minister that her party would secure at

least 175 seats in the next general elections. 'Similar claim was made by Awami League chief prior to the 1991 polls,' she said.

'If she (Hasina) is certain of a landslide victory, why she is hesitant in calling election immediately? questioned the opposition leader.

Sohri, Iftar timings			
Ramadan	Dec	Sohri	Iftar
5	25	5-14	5-22
6	26	5-14	5-23