

# The Daily Star

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Dhaka, Friday, December 25, 1998

## National Water Policy

The first-ever National Water Policy has been announced to provide a framework of guidelines for harnessing, developing and managing surface and ground water resources in an efficient and equitable manner.

Surface water and ground water are an inter-related natural endowment of a country which in turn bears a relationship to rainfall at the upper reaches and usage at the headwaters of rivers being shared by a group of countries. Admittedly, the Ganges Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh has enabled the latter to formulate a national water policy for the first time. The point would seem proved by the fact that because of inadequate rainfall at the Himalayas during the first year of the accord's implementation, Bangladesh could not get her share; but this changed dramatically last year with heavy rains there, and Bangladesh received her quota in full.

Nevertheless, the understanding on the Ganges cannot by itself guarantee all that Bangladesh needs to be able to operate a full-fledged water policy. That is why it is considered key to a meaningful water management paradigm that India and Bangladesh sit across the table and thrash out the water sharing problems connected with their 53 common rivers. After the solution of the complex Ganges water sharing problem this should be so much the easier now.

The government has done well to end the laid-back attitude of the past by announcing a blueprint of policy action. But in doing so, it has assumed charge of delivering on the policy which for reasons adduced above is not entirely based on solid foundations. The government cannot be blamed for lack of pragmatism: 'the Water Resources Planning Organisation (WARPO) will not merely delineate the hydrological regions for planning the development of their water resources but will also prepare and periodically update a National Water Management Plan (NWMP)'.

As we view it, the policy will stand vindicated if, among other things, it succeeds in correcting some structural distortions that have crept into the water resource management system or a non-system. If it can bring different agencies involved in the multi-disciplinary field into a state of regular orchestration and coordination that will be big job done.

The national water policy envisages 'conjunctive' use of ground water and surface water obviously prompted by the fact that they are inter-related resources. In Dhaka we now feel the compulsion to go more for surface water treatment plants than tubewell projects, the latter having pumped out subsoil water to a point of causing a worrisome land subsidence now. A delicate balance has to be struck between the use of ground water and that of surface water on the basis of global knowledge on the subject.

The right to water has been recognised, in theory, with an intent expressed for removing prevailing discriminations in water availability between individuals, groups or regions. The best way to ensure this will be involving the private sector and local communities in the act. Privatisation coupled with decentralisation can bring about a sea-change in terms of water resources management.

Environment is of prime importance to a tropical country as densely populated as ours. The law needs more teeth and a no-nonsense enforcement to be effective against all forms of water pollution, industrial or otherwise. And in building structures or projects to implement a composite basin-development strategy the environmental safety considerations must never be glossed over.

We seek protection against both floods and droughts, something that makes regional cooperation a much sought-after goal. That way also lies the golden opportunity to prise open the vast potential reservoir of hydel power, and so much more indeed. Let's hammer that point with India and Nepal.

## Apocalypse Now

by Edward Said

Undoubtedly the US has manipulated the UN to its own ends, a rather shameful exercise given at the same time that the Congress once again struck down a motion to pay a billion dollars in arrears to the world organization. The major priority for Arabs, Europeans, Muslims and Americans is to push to the fore the issue of sanctions and the terrible suffering imposed on innocent Iraqi civilians.

It would be a mistake, I think, to reduce what is happening between Iraq and the United States simply to an assertion of Arab will and sovereignty on the one hand versus American imperialism, which undoubtedly plays a central role in all this. However misguided, Saddam Hussein's cleverness is not that he is splitting America from its allies (which he has not really succeeded in doing for any practical purpose) but that he is exploiting the astonishing clumsiness and failures of US foreign policy. Very few people, least of all Saddam himself, can be fooled into believing him to be the innocent victim of American bullying; most of what is happening to his unfortunate people who are undergoing the most dreadful and unacknowledged suffering is due in considerable degree to his callous cynicism—first of all, his indefensible and ruinous invasion of Kuwait, his persecution of the Kurds, his cruel egoism and pompous self-regard which persists in aggrandizing himself and his regime at exorbitant and, in my opinion, totally unwarranted cost. It is impossible for him to plead the case for national security and sovereignty now given his abysmal disregard of it in the case of Kuwait and Iran.

Be that as it may, US vindictiveness, whose sources I shall look at in a moment, has exacerbated the situation by imposing a regime of sanctions which, as Sandy Berger, the American National Security adviser has just said proudly, is unprecedented in its severity in the whole of world history. 567,000 Iraqi civilians have died since the Gulf War, mostly as a result of disease, malnutrition and deplorably poor medical care. Agriculture and industry are at a total standstill. This is unconscionable of course, and for this the brazen inhumanity of American policy-makers is also very largely to blame. But we must not forget that Saddam is feeding that inhumanity quite deliberately in order to dramatize the opposition between the US and the rest of the Arab world; having provoked a crisis with the US (for the UN dominated by the US) he at first dramatised the unfairness of the sanctions. But by continuing it as he is now doing, the issue has changed and has become his non-compliance, and the terrible effects of the sanctions have been marginalised. Still the underlying causes of an Arab/US crisis remain.

A careful analysis of that crisis is imperative. The US has always opposed any sign of

Arab nationalism or independence, partly for its own imperial reasons and partly because its unconditional support for Israel requires it to do so. Since the 1973 war, and despite the brief oil embargo, Arab policy up to and including the peace process has tried to circumvent or mitigate that hostility by appealing to the US for help, by 'good' behavior, by willingness to make peace with Israel. Yet mere compliance with the US's wishes can produce nothing except occasional words of American approbation for leaders who appear 'moderate'. Arab policy was never backed up with coordination, or collective pressure, or fully agreed upon goals. Instead each leader tried to make separate arrangements both with the US and with Israel, none of which produced very much except escalating demands and a constant refusal by the US to exert any meaningful pressure on Israel. The more extreme Israeli policy becomes the more likely the US has been to support it. And the less respect it has for the large mass of Arab peoples whose future and well-being are mortgaged to illusory hopes embodied, for instance, in the Oslo accords.

Moreover, a deep gulf separates Arab culture and civilization on the one hand, from the United States on the other, and in the absence of any collective Arab information and cultural policy, the notion of an Arab people with traditions, cultures and identities of their own is simply inadmissible in the US. Arabs are dehumanized, they are seen as violent irrational terrorists always on the lookout for murder and bombing outrages. The only Arabs worth doing business with for the US are compliant leaders, businessmen, military people whose arms purchases (the highest per capita in the world) are helping the American economy keep afloat. Beyond that there is no feeling at all, for instance, for the dreadful suffering of the Iraqi people whose identity and existence have simply been lost sight of in the present situation.

This morbid, obsessional fear and hatred of the Arabs has been a constant theme in US foreign policy since World War Two. In some way or another, the positive about the Arabs is seen in the US as a threat to Israel. In this respect pro-Israeli American Jews, traditional Orientalists, and military hawks have played a devastating role. Moral opprobrium is heaped on Arab states as it is on others. Turkey, for exam-

ple, has been conducting a campaign against the Kurds for several years, yet nothing is heard about this in the US. Israel occupies territory illegally for thirty years, it violates the Geneva conventions at will, conducts invasions, terrorist attacks and assassinations against Arabs, and still, the US vetoes every sanction against it in the UN. Syria, Sudan, Libya, Iraq are classified as 'rogue' states. Sanctions against them are far harsher than against any other countries in the history of US foreign policy. And still the US expects that its own foreign policy agenda ought to prevail (e.g., the woefully misguided Doha economic summit) despite its hostility to the collective Arab agenda.

In the case of Iraq a number of further extenuations make the US even more repressive. Burning in the collective American unconscious is a puritanical zeal decreeing the sternest possible attitude towards anyone deemed to be an unregenerate sinner. This clearly guided American policy towards the native American Indians, who were first demonized, then portrayed as wasteful savages, then exterminated, their tiny remnant confined to reservations and concentration camps. This almost religious anger fuels a judgemental attitude that has no place at all in international politics, but for the United States it is a central tenet of its worldwide behavior. Second, punishment is conceived in apocalyptic terms. During the Vietnam war a leading general advocated — and almost achieved — the goal of bombing the enemy into the stone age. The same view prevailed during the Gulf War in 1991. Sinners are meant to be condemned terminally, with the utmost cruelty, regardless of whether or not they suffer the cruellest agonies. The notion of 'justified' punishment for Iraq is now uppermost in the minds of most American consumers of news, and with that goes an almost orgasmic delight in the gathering power being summoned to confront Iraq in the Gulf. Pictures of four (or is now five?) immense aircraft carriers steaming virtuously away punctuated breathlessly news bulletins about Saddam's defiance and the impending crisis. The President announces that he is thinking not about the Gulf but about the 21st century; how can we tolerate Iraq's threat to use biological warfare even though (this is unmentioned) it is clear from the UNSCOM reports that he neither has the missile capacity,

nor the chemical arms, nor the nuclear arsenal, nor in fact the anthrax bombs that he is alleged to be brandishing? Forgotten in all this is that the US has all the terror weapons known to humankind, it is the only country to have used a nuclear bomb on civilians, and as recently as seven years ago dropped 66,000 tons of bombs on Iraq. As the only country involved in this crisis that has never had to fight a war on its own soil, it is easy for the US and its mostly brain-washed citizens to speak in apocalyptic terms. A report out of Australia on Sunday, November 16 suggests that Israel and the US are thinking about a neutron bomb on Baghdad.

Unfortunately the dictates of raw power are very severe and, for weak states like Iraq, overwhelming. Certainly US misuse of the sanctions to strip Iraq of everything, including any possibility for security is monstrously sadistic. The so-called UN 661 Committee created to oversee the sanctions is composed of fifteen member states (including the US) each of which has a veto. Every time Iraq passes this committee a request to sell oil for medicines, trucks, meat, etc., any member of the committee can block these requests by saying that a given item may have military purposes (tires, for example, or ambulances). In addition the US and its clients — eg., the unpleasant and racist Richard Butler, who says openly that Arabs have a different notion of truth than the rest of the world — have made it clear that even if Iraq is completely reduced militarily (which is now the case) the real goal of the sanctions is to topple Saddam Hussein's government. In other words, according to the Americans, very little that Iraq can do short of Saddam's resignation or death will produce a lifting of sanctions. Finally, we should not for a moment forget that quite apart from its foreign policy interest, Iraq has now become a domestic American issue whose repercussions on issues unrelated to oil or the Gulf are very important. Bill Clinton's personal crises — the campaign-funding scandals, an impending trial for sexual harassment, his various legislative and aesthetic failures — require him to look strong, determined and 'presidential' somewhere else, and where but in the Gulf against Iraq has he so ready-made a foreign devil to set off his blue-eyed strength to full advantage. Moreover, the increase in military expendi-

crucial role of public action is both in the sense of state-activities and in the sense of people's own ability to demand attention and to secure a response from those in authority.

In that context another article written by Professor Sen in Bengali elaborates on the theme. The title of the article is *Rabindranath and Bharatbarsha*. The engine for the spectacular economic growth in East Asia is the realization of basic education for all in those countries. If we look at the Meiji restoration period in Japan in mid-nineteenth century, the country was blessed with more impressive rate of higher education compared to Europe. In people's Republic of China, broad-based education preceded the economic reforms in 1979. The Maoist education programme that China continued to implement has been immensely fruitful when the country launched its market-oriented economic development. The situation in India has been otherwise, and therefore, the market opportunity has remained the close reserve of the few, the educated and powerful China on the other hand has been able to open the market-oriented growth process to many since basic education is deeply rooted among the majority population.

In other words the major problems of social inequality that are manifest in poor countries like ours are illiteracy, undernutrition of mothers and children, gross inadequacy of healthcare, lack of tenurial security of share-croppers, uncertain employment opportunities for the landless, subservience of the women population in family and social structure; and the inadequacy of micro-credit for resource poor people particularly women. One could say that the social opportunities and freedom which are necessary for unleashing the dormant creativity of many, are just not available to them. Naturally even when economic growth-rate is on the rise, the majority of the population cannot participate in that growth process.

Related to this first freedom mentioned above is equity in political opportunities and the importance of popular participation in decision-making at various levels of a society and a nation-state. What is necessary is the opportunity for open debate in public fora and the evolution of a consensus based

on divergent views and perspectives.

Tagore during his visit to Russia was most impressed with the spread and breadth of public education in that country. He was equally concerned about the lack of political freedom. What India can rightly be proud of is the freedom of the press and opinion in independent India. The dominance of the upper class in the political arena is still there. But there are welcome signs of stress in that fortress of the rich and the powerful. Where that has happened, the precondition has been broad-based educational program. For example in Kerala state, the activists opposed to higher-caste domination devoted themselves steadfastly in making education for the deprived a reality.

Another aspect of the imperative of political and social dissent and freedom of opinion has been articulated by Professor Sen. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943 which caused the death by starvation of 2 to 3 million people could have easily been avoided, if information-flow was not stifled. In the time of Kings

majority population. It is not a question of the paradox of affluence amidst deprivation. It is a question of opportunities for all for well-being and reasonable prosperity. If a resource-poor person does not have access to seed-capital or micro-credit, for that matter, how can he participate in market-exchanges? Allow me to quote Professor Yunus. According to him right to credit is one of the fundamental human rights. Today in Bangladesh, Grameen, BRAC and other NGOs have brought micro-credit to the door-steps of the poor and the women. They are taking advantage, in however limited form, of market-opportunity. Is it not possible to support such initiatives to become more wide spread? In order to make economic reforms universal and open up a country's economy to the global market place, it is important that social and political opportunities are more broad-based which can bring the different segments of population to a level play-field. And as has been mentioned before, the bases for such an endeavour are education, health-care, and protected freedom for the most disadvantaged. There lies the divinity in human kind that can transcend petty self-interest for common humanity. Or as Tagore puts it, 'the most noble can embrace each other in the glory of human relatedness. Success may not always be there, but the satisfaction will continue to be in committed endeavour.'

But such an endeavor presupposes, social responsibility deeply rooted in ethical norms. The exchanges in business must be transparent. The procedural aspects of governance or trade must not be clouded by unethical obstructions nor by corruption. Amartya Sen calls it procedural opportunity. It is not a question of efficient governance or pro-market reforms alone. It is a question of ethics of economics, ethics of governance and ethics of interpersonal behavior. A good example is the crisis in Indonesia, South Korea or Thailand where financial intermediation has been jeopardized by corruption, irregularity and nepotism. Hence the importance of morality at family, community, society and market levels.

The last point regarding protected freedom for the most disadvantaged has been touched upon earlier en masse. And that squarely is the responsibility of

the state, of governance at local levels. It is much broader than the off-quoted social responsibility. No, it is also a moral responsibility for those who are more privileged.

I recall the words of the Poet of all poets, Rabindranath Tagore. O Lord, may you bless us and lift us up from the inertia of fragmented life, form the cynicism of repetitive everyday, from self-delusion and petty comforts, from cowardly passivity and non-action. Unveil the veils of small vanities, of selfish hypocrisy, of impure celebrations. Take us by the hand and make us all stand before the doors of humanity that is resplendent without any embroidered cover and expressive in utter quietude. There, in that desolation, in that difficult terrain we will take our vows from you.

Honour me with the armor of the brave. Let me carry on the difficult task and suffer the pains and pangs of creation. Adorn me with the ornament of wounds. I shall persevere in the endeavours though not always crowned with success. When is the festival of human freedom most glorious? That is the day, when humankind remembers the power of human humanity, in mundane everyday a person is small and lonely. But on the day of the festival of freedom, a person is larger than life is large because s/he has joined with many, large because s/he is no longer alone and, ennobled by the power of human compassion.

Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. That is why Bangladesh held the trigger under the coconut tree in 1971. Women and men, old and young, farmers and laborers, teachers and students, office-workers and the militia chanted in unison:

*'To live is to give oneself to the motherland. It is to give oneself to the earth, the mountains and the rivers. It is to clench one's teeth in the face of the enemy. To live is to keep up one's courage in times of misery. It is to laugh in times of anger. To live is to remain optimistic in struggle.'*

Many indeed died clenching their teeth in the face of the enemy. But their optimism in struggle gives us strength today - their resolve for individual dignity and a new usage of social ability through human relatedness. The society they wanted to build is truly free in which the rights of some subjects are not defended to the detriment of the rights of others. Shall we fail them?

## Friday Mailbox

### Clinton's cruelty

Sir, United States' cruel attack by the Clinton administration on Iraq is simply a manifestation of the anarchy prevailing in today's world politics, and the Iraqi people are the victims of this lawlessness. The barbarous attack of the US on one country after another clearly indicates the today's world is under the threat of the US government which can attack any country at any time. And in this regard, UK, the plant blind crony of US, will follow the same strategy.

The economic embargo imposed upon Iraq caused untold sufferings for the people of that country. The Iraqis have shown utmost tolerance and endured everything silently. They have let the UN inspection body to search every corner of the country. President Saddam Hussein allowed them to investigate his own palace, which very few heads of states would allow. Now after inspecting for a long period of eight years, the puppet UN inspection committee has found nothing. Out of anger now the Clinton administration and the administration of his crony, Tony Blair, have made a shameful attack on the innocent people of Iraq. Through this military action, apart from Iraq's loss of some mortals, US and UK have 'achieved' the deepest hatred of the world population.

In fact, it is really a mystery why Clinton is behaving like this. I think he is suffering from disease, and it may be Monica disease.

M Al-Hasan  
Elephant Road  
Dhaka

### Plots: Only propagation?

Sir, To ease the housing problem of the burgeoning population of the capital city, Dhaka Rajdhani Unnayan Kartiripakkhya (RAJUK) and the Directorate of Housing took a massive plan a year ago. These two bodies invited applications from the plot expectants. Accordingly, thousands of applicants of middle and lower middle class applied with a handsome figure of security money. It was said that plots would be allotted to the applicants through a lottery by May '97. Though a year has passed yet the authorities concerned are to take any decision when the lottery of these applicants would take place.

However, being disappointed many applicants are approaching these two offices everyday to get their security money back. But the officials' behaviour is unexpected. They do not even offer any consolation for or indemnification to these sufferers.

I therefore draw the attention of the authorities concerned to our need and hope that our grievances may be redress at an early date.

Md Faruque Alam  
ICB Head Office, Dhaka

### Arsenic in the city?

Sir, Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH) organised a 2-day workshop on 'Arsenic Problem and Water Resources Management in Bangladesh' during December 14-15, 1998 and it was attended by a good number of local and foreign participants. On December 15, 1998 *The Daily Star* published a front page news item under the heading 'Arsenic invades Dhaka city' (an identical report also appeared in the *Bangladesh Observer*). The news item reports, quoting APB, that water in southern and eastern parts of Dhaka city is almost 90 per cent contaminated with arsenic and that the disclosure came at the inaugural session of the DCH workshop. As a participant of the workshop, it was both surprising and shocking to me because no such data or report were presented at the workshop and, to my knowledge, no such

data currently exist. On the other hand, at one point the news item reports, quoting Mr. Nayeem Wahara (a speaker at the workshop) that 'water is 100 per cent safe in Sylhet as surveyed by the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology.' In fact, Mr Wahara did not make any such claim and it is well known that a significant number of tubewells in Sylhet district are contaminated with arsenic.

S Rahman  
Green Road, Dhaka

### Bangladesh in international sports

Sir, To cut a long sad commentary short, the lack-lustre performance of Bangladeshis in most branches of sports in the international arena continues to be shameful. Why graze in or rake the past — take only the recent cases.

In the last Olympic games in Atlanta, the big bang by our boys ended in whimper. And it was a national disgrace when few just walked out of the camp and vanished in thin air causing a massive embarrassment to the US in international department. All the Bangladeshi sportsmen/athletes then made early exit from the World Youth Games held in Moscow from July 11-19. Bangladesh also performed poorly in lawn and table tennis competitions, as confirmed by Bangladesh Olympic Association. Again, people of Bangladesh are totally dejected by the performance of the national cricket team in the recent tour of Ireland, England and Scotland. Its really pathetic to see how a team that won the ICC trophy last year be crushed for lousy 97 against Scotland. And the World Cup in England in 1999 is almost knocking at the door and still there is no homework.

Rebecca Sultana  
Dhaka.

### Foreign degrees

Sir, An advertisement about appointment of Professors, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and Lecturers for a certain department of Chittagong University which was published in the DS on 8th December drew my attention.

It wanted a foreign university degree for each post which is nothing but playing games with perfection and with human rights. It is not unknown to us that there are a good number of affiliated universities and colleges with overseas universities which are not more than the standard of some coaching centres. We are also familiar with some educational institutions in our neighbouring countries. If the same thing happens in our society, then should we think that we are insulting our own educational system and we have no faith over the existing educational procedures? We may pursue foreign degrees which is not possible to be pursued in our country. The authorities concerned thus should mention specifically the names of best foreign universities for definite subjects or courses.

Another advertisement published in the *Bhorer Kagoj* of 10th December, 1998 required 20-year experience for a temporary post of adviser with high educational performances. I think where high and extra educational experiences and performances like M Phil/PhD is required, then the total years of service rule may be relaxed. This is the time to prefer charisma, wisdom and intelligence to that of the conventional seniority rule, albeit it required in a very limited scope.

Iftikhar Ahmed  
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