

Watery Grave Again!

In less than eight months of the launch named Deep Kanya sinking in the Meghna with 200 passengers we hear the shocking news of ML Falguni on Saturday capsizing in the same river with 300 passengers on board. Twenty-five of them met their watery grave instantaneously while, among the 100 missing, only a miracle could have saved a few on being picked up by a passing boat or two.

The most tragic fact to bemoan here is how basically avoidable these accidents keep looking on a hind-sight. What has been so far learnt about the ill-fated craft Falguni is that it was carrying passengers twice its capacity. It went on to hit a hidden shoal and was thrown further off-balance by high waves rolling in as a oil tanker passed it by. We also have it on the authority of BIWTA chairman that the operator of the launch who was plying it without a route permit had the temerity of committing another grave offence by navigating through an unclassified channel.

But is it not the responsibility of BIWTA officials to supervise compliance with the relevant laws regarding registration of river-craft and taking out of the required route permits to operate them? If we had learnt the lessons from the Deep Kanya disaster or a plenty of other happenings earlier on, we certainly would have been the gainer in terms of enforcement of rules.

Deep Kanya, an oil tanker-turned-passenger launch which was only found fit to ply on the calm waters of Buriganga, was reprehensibly put to the high rolling waves of the Meghna with the result that it drowned in deep waters killing passengers in droves. Not only was it unlicensed it was being driven by an assistant to the Sareng. May we ask the minister in charge of the inland water transport and the BIWTA chairman as to what has happened to the report submitted by the Principal Officer, Mercantile Marine Safety about the Deep Kanya disaster on May 8, 1999? What corrective actions have been initiated or taken so far in the light of his suggestions?

At least we can have lifebuoys, safety-jackets and minimum communication gadgets on board to put out an SOS call in time for a prompt rescue operation in place of a pitiable apology of it.

Nurtured Nonsense

WHAT the president of Surya Sen Hall unit of the AL-backed BCL did Friday night was more than flexing ruling party muscles. It was audacity consequent upon nonsense nurtured for a long time. Surely, it was not the first time that the hall administration was faced with, and forced to meet, such a ridiculous demand. Maybe, it wasn't ten meals a day; it was, nevertheless, pandering to undue 'requests'. It is the same story at almost each and every hall of residence of Dhaka University. The hall administration, however, has very little choice other than caving in. It doesn't have the brawn to match with that of the student organisations, nor does it have the support or protection the 'defaulters' enjoy. It is actually a lost war for them from the very beginning. Rules and regulations are there, but power, authority and protection to enforce them aren't. As a result, mortal fear often subdues moral responses and whims of student activists get catered to no question asked.

Ominously, it seems to have become an all-pervasive phenomenon. On Saturday, some 40 students of the Jahangirnagar University School and College exploded home-made bombs, locked the main gate and confined the principal for an hour to force the administration into allowing them to sit for HSC exams despite their failure to pass the qualification test. Here, too, the perpetrators tried to bludgeon their undue demands through.

On the whole, the students appear to have no sense of ethics and morality left in them and that is a scary proposition for the nation. There may be sociological explanation to the unrest now prevailing among students as to why crime and violence perpetrated by them are alarmingly on rise. However, we feel the tyranny has its roots in years of enforcement failure. We are sure that if the government had extended unconditional support and protection to the university administration instead of the student activists, it would have been a different story.

DCC and Mosquitoes

FIENDSHIP between the Dhaka City Corporation and the mosquitoes infesting the city is a time-tested one. The occasional desperate activity of the DCC in the name of mosquito eradication drive is more of a show than a genuine effort. The total lack of perception and seriousness on the part of the DCC's Mosquito Control Committee (MCC) was revealed in a report published on the front page of this paper on Sunday. It demonstrated in detail the tendency of the MCC to put the cart before the horse at a huge cost to public money. Eight spray machines procured at a cost of about Tk one crore have been gathering dust for about two years now. The modern machines are supposed to be efficient provided the right type of insecticide is used. But the insecticide required for these spray machines is not even registered with the Plant Protection Department and is not recommended by the World Health Organisation either. The insecticide is available in the market only for agricultural purposes and not for public health programmes, which means that it can pose health hazards if sprayed by the machines in question. The most interesting point is about the decision taken by the MCC, headed by the Commissioner of Ward No. 36, to buy these machines at an exorbitant price. Knowledgeable circles allege corruption in the procurement of these eight machines by over-invoicing.

We strongly suggest that the LGED ministry institute a probe into the irregularities being alleged about the procurement of the spray machines in question. No one has the right to endanger public health and squander public money.

Iran's Khatami: 'A Man of his Time'

The crucial question, however, is whether Khatami can fulfil his promise to the electorate in the face of enormous odds he is confronted with. Khatami has been likened by many to Mikhail Gorbachev who aroused his people but could not contain their passion with his speed... Ayatollah Khamenei, the constitutional head of the state and spiritual leader of the revolution, will play a crucial role in determining whether Khatami is able to successfully implement his liberal programme.

war is an unwritten quiet alliance between President Khatami and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Indeed, without the Ayatollah's backing Mr Khatami might not have survived last summer's street riots which almost led the Conservatives to stage a coup against the reformist leader. Mr Khatami apparently enjoys invaluable support from the top because the supreme leader is hoping to restore a degree of unity through the president to Iran's antagonistic factions. His overriding aim is to save the Islamic system from total collapse in the event of a confrontational situation.

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But Mr Khatami also has had to pay a price for it. Whatever quid he may have had, he supported last July's crackdown on the street riots, an action that has led to the arrest of hundreds of his pro-democracy supporters in the universities. This cost him the backing of the more radical dissidents, who had gravitated to him in the hope of breaking the hold that the conservative clergy have on power. But Khatami has always been aware of his limitations, knowing that any attempt to go it alone would be doomed to failure. Increasingly he has been sticking to the supreme leader and involving the latter with his own progressive agenda. In any case, he has already redefined political discourse in Iran and can afford to go slow but sure on his reform programme.

not want to clash with the well entrenched conservatives who had all the levers of control in their hand. Instead, he wanted to invigorate the civil installations like the press, judiciary, students' and women's organisations as well as political parties. Once these institutions were created or given fresh life they would make an impact on Iranian society and the whole system would operate under the rule of law.

The sacrosanct legacy of Ayatollah Khamenei, the father of Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, dictated that the state and society would be run according to the principles of divine precept and that a core group of clerics would define and apply those principles in the statecraft. Mr Khatami and pro-reform faction of which he became the symbol did not recognise this dispensation. They did not agree to the claim that the religion was limited to someone's or some group's own understanding of it. They increasingly demanded the cultural liberalisation and openness of Iranian society. The women's social and legal rights were high on their agenda and so were the pluralism and democracy in the heart of all political debates they initiated.

As a cleric himself Khatami stands inside and outside the system. Being a firm believer in the Islamic ideals of the Revolution he did not want to change the system altogether. He also knew of the unpredictable consequences of a counter-revolutionary upsurge. Therefore, what Khatami and his followers chose to take Iran out of its present predicament was a cautious calibrated reform. He did

could, both before and after election, inspire the new generation of Iranians to join the political process and sound their voices for change. He could take major step in judicial reform by appointing a moderate to head the judiciary after the retirement of a conservative incumbent. He has shaken the clerics' closed mindset by signalling his willingness to engage in a 'dialogue of civilisations' with the west, particularly the United States. His CNN address to American people in January 1998 has catalysed a fundamental change in

demonstrators serve warning

not only to the conservatives

but also to President Khatami.

Elected by 69 per cent popular

voters mainly comprised of

youths and women, the Presi-

dent is already under fire for

moving so slowly on his

promised reform agenda.

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ment his liberal programme.

Khamenei controls most of the

organs of power including secu-

rity forces and the Judiciary.

He, not the president, sets the

broad policy directions.

But here is where there ap-

pears to be a silverlining for

the reformists in Iran. Altho-

ugh it is as yet unclear whether

Khamenei and Khatami are

working in tandem or have just

found an accommodation with

each other, the two have, of late,

discreetly worked as a team.

While Khatami remained loyal

to the defining principles of the

revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei

has recently called the presi-

dent a pious cleric who 'is work-

ing for the rebirth of Islam'.

A little known factor in

Iran's reformists conservati-

ve effectively institutionalised what is the use of its facade?

Much ink has already been wasted in delving on harta. All pleadings for a dialogue instead of a duel in the streets have apparently fallen into deaf ears. In the meantime, the country is being marginalised. Back in 1974 a London-based journalist wrote (*Kevin Refferty in his book 'Bangladesh — the Test Case For Development'*) that if Bangladesh was to be erased from the face of the earth it would not have any impact whatsoever, both strategically and economically.

Do the masses deserve to be treated in such derision and contempt? The politicians may not have any stake, but the people definitely have. It is therefore time for the people to act, and act decisively so that the power-hungry hartaite politicians can no longer play foul and havoc with their destiny.

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How Many More Hartals Does the Opposition Require?

by Mansoor Mamoon

Much ink has already been wasted in delving on harta. All pleadings for a dialogue instead of a duel in the streets have apparently fallen into deaf ears. In the meantime, the country is being marginalised.

Millennium 2000 through harta and consequent clashes and bloodsheds, when the entire outside world will be jubilant and in a mood of celebration.

In bemoaning their pitiable fate the ordinary citizens are found to be asking — how many more hartals the four-party opposition will require to materialise its one-point 'oust the government' movement as well as to create the 'mass upsurge' at the crest of which the BNP and its allies hope to taste the flavour of power?

Probably the enforcers themselves have not counted how many hartals they have so far imposed over an unwilling nation and forced it to pay the price dearly. According to an estimate given by a vernacular daily (Ajker Kagoj, December 5, 1999 plus the counting by the author) during the last three years and a half of the Awami League rule there have been as many as one hundred ninety-eight hartals (counting the harta of December 13) and work stoppages for a staggering number of two thousand three hundred fifty two hours. Of these, thirty one shutdowns were nationwide and rest localised. Over fifty people have been killed and nearly four thousand maimed in the harta related clashes. Exact figures, however, are not readily available. During all these hartals nearly three thousand different types of vehicles were smashed or gutted. Loss to properties, both state and private, due to looting, plundering and bomb blasts was, in one word, enormous.

The longest harta was observed in Comilla town for five days (a record number of 120 hours) with effect from August 31, 1997 at the call of the BNP and the Jamaat.

It will be worthwhile to

conduct an extensive research into the losses incurred by the country due to all these hartals. It might well beget a coveted doctorate degree for any aspirant. Our harta-happy politicians will have good reason to gloat over their performance as to which alliance has the maximum number of hartals in its score board and wrought maximum damage and destruction to the economy. After the 1991 parliamentary elections the Awami League, then in the opposition, set a record of 173 nationwide hartals. The BNP-led alliance has outstripped the AL in respect of localised hartals but still lags behind in respect of countrywide shutdowns as the survey shows.

Supposing one single harta costs the country four hundred fifty to five hundred crore taka as estimated by the country's chamber bodies, then what had been the total loss when the AL enforced general strikes and how much due to the current spate of shutdowns by the opposition? How many industries and establishments, educational institutions and social and physical infrastructural facilities like medicare, hospitals, bridges, roads etc could have been built and extended with the money drained out by hartals? How many slum-

villages could have been electrified and economic activities generated for their poor dwellers? What could have been the percentage of literacy?

About three crore people are presently unemployed and nearly half of the populace are living below the poverty line bracketed as extremely poor. Had there been no harta this huge figures could have been easily contained and poverty could have been alleviated to a large extent. Bangladesh missed the bus when the East Asian countries like Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan etc started their journey in the seventies towards progress and prosperity. We again preferred to remain helpless bystanders when in the eighties and nineties Thailand, Indonesia (albeit the disparities among income groups), the Philippines, Vietnam etc caught up with the locomotive of growth. In the sixties, the condition of these countries was no better than ours. Per capita income-wise our position was, in fact, better than theirs. But these countries could shake off their inertia and stood up with full vigour while we continued to grope in the wilderness.

Apart from loss sustained by the country due to hartals, according to a World Bank estimate about thirty per cent of the funds meant for implementing vital development projects are either plundered or pilfered with impunity. Accountability and transparency are rhetorics signifying nothing.

Russia is ignoring the laws of modern warfare. Remembering earlier defeats, they are shying away from engaging the Chechen fighters. Instead, they are blasting towns and cities with long-range artillery and aviation. In all the towns that they have 'conquered' so far, the Chechen fighters withdrew to save the population from annihilation.

The Chechen conflict shames humanity on the eve of the third millennium. Although saddened by the loss of life, we are nevertheless bursting with pride at the heroic resistance put up by the Chechen fighters against a vastly superior enemy.

Syed Zainul Akmal Al Mahmood

Stop this war
Sir, Russia's brutal assault on Chechnya has turned the Chechens into a nation of refugees. But the world press seems to be tooting the Russian line about 'anti-terrorist operations'. To put the matter into perspective we need to remember several key points.

Before the latest Russian as-

ault a peace treaty existed be-

tween the Russian federation and the Chechen republic.

Signed in 1997, it ended the

earlier war between the two na-

tions. By breaking its word, Russia has raised serious doubts about its credibility.

The charge of terrorism hasn't brought home to the Chechens. Russia has ignored the question of proof.

The Chechens on their part have always protested their innocence.

Even if a number of terrorist

organisations operate on

Chechen soil, does that justify

the Russian action? The