

Land Subsidence: Rumblings Heard

MUCH that we snore and snort over many an early warning signal of brewing disasters this one is something we better pay an early heed to or we had it. It is literally the land under our feet or that under clusters of buildings in quite a few areas of Dhaka city that seem at risk of being sucked into the underground. It is the threat of land subsidence staring us in the face. This is being set in motion as a result of the hollowing of the subterranean through an extensive extraction of groundwater by means of water pumps.

This critical reliance on subsoil water for years together to a near complete exclusion of the surface water option, has led to a plummeting of the groundwater level to 50-60 feet from the surface. Underneath the Bangladesh Bank area, for instance, water table has dropped off to 150 feet below the surface which only means so much of clay has dried up risking a collapse from the crust downward. It is the probability of an implosion we are looking at, for the first time, instead of an explosion scenario.

Apart from the danger of land subsidence we risk adverse geomorphological conditions due to aridity of land and contamination of harmful chemicals with water as the pumps go deeper.

The lesson reads loud and clear. We have to rapidly switch over to surface water use, something that Syedabad plant which is likely to be commissioned in two years' time would flag off. Just one such water treatment plant won't do, given both the projection of future demand for water as well as that of the pollution level in the surface water sources girdling Dhaka city.

We have heard of a water policy for the country. But there is a dire need for a water management plan for Dhaka city alone. It is time the media took up the question of land subsidence for public awareness building on a scale that impels a change of direction in water use. The government has to accord a very high priority to this subsidence phenomenon. Basically our suggestion would be that a task force be constituted at once to go unto the whole question of safe water use in the metropolis.

Administrative Norms Subverted

IT is common knowledge that blatant politicisation impedes efficient and effective functioning of the government and that the bureaucracy is in dire need of reforms. Unfortunately, neither the ruling party nor the opposition is keen on the desired administrative overhaul. The reason is obvious: politicised bureaucracy perfectly panders to the partisan purpose of the ruling party. Such administrative decisions as posting, transfer and promotion of civil servants no longer follow the set norms and criteria. Instead, vested interest groups, in connivance with top-end politicians, pull the strings.

The status quo on promotion and transfer of some 150 deputy commissioners (DCs) and upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs), as reported in a Bangla daily on Monday, is a case in point. The ceiling on age and tenure as regards field-level administration is disdainfully tampered with. That 46 of the 64 DCs are aged above 50 and 12 of them have remained posted at their respective stations for more than three years are indications enough of anarchy in the administration.

This tendency to subvert set rules is not a rare phenomenon though. Previous regimes have also entertained extra-professional considerations in administrative decision-making. Mutual benefit sharing between politicians and vested interest groups has often resulted in undesired interference and intervention. Norms of administration have evolved over the years through a process of trial and error, and arisen out of a concern for and response to various pulls and pressures. In our view, such a feudal way of derailing the bureaucracy from a set course would backfire for the politicians, especially of the ruling party, in the long run. Things could be put on the reverse gear once the opposition gets to power. So it goes on and on.

There is no alternative to professionalism in administration. Unfortunately, BNP ignored the fact when it was in power. Awami League has done it even more forgetting that administrative professionalism is key to good governance.

Protect the Traders

INCIDENCE of extortion and terrorism has been on the rise in the city markets, so much so that it has started affecting business in a tangible way. Both small and big traders almost regularly fall victim to this lawlessness by known and protected faces. In the old part of this sprawling capital extortion and terrorism have become an everyday affair. There are a number of old and important wholesale markets along the banks of the Buriganga which are easily accessible by boats and launches. The road network is also good for carrying merchandise in and out of the market-place. The normally busy outlets are disturbed by the *mastaans* and hangers-on who have been causing 10 to 15 per cent loss of business, according to the wholesalers.

The worst-affected markets are under Sutrapur and Kotwali police stations as a report in The Daily Star on Monday pointed out. The traders hold the police responsible for such a deterioration in the law and order situation. Serious allegations of cops managing posting in these police stations have also been made by traders. In one or two areas the illegal toll collection is reported to be more organised than in others. The fallout has been devastating. Retailers, whose money has been snatched away in broad daylight, now feel sorry for going into shopping in those markets.

We strongly urge the law enforcers to do their duty strictly in accordance with the law so as to remove the impression of the gate-keeper becoming a poacher.

SUNIL Kumar Sharma, former police head of Narahalli in Mathura district, must be an amazingly dedicated man—dedicated to torture, that is. Suspended for the June 7 murder of Brother George Kuzhikandam, he would repeatedly torture the sole eyewitness Vijay Kumar Ekka, in illegal police custody.

Electric shocks and removal of fingernails failed to make Ekka confess that he, not Hindu-communal fanatics, had murdered the priest. On June 18, Ekka was found dead. Sharma claimed he "strangled him".

Sharma's cock-and-bull story would have aroused derisive laughter had it not been part of this year's 37th episode of anti-Christian violence in India. After the simultaneous bomb-explosions in churches in three different states on June 8, nobody can credibly claim that the attacks were random, unconnected and without purpose.

All this means that we are witnessing a sinister pogrom against religious minorities by Hindu-communal fanatics who enjoy state patronage.

Remarkably, Prime Minister Vajpayee has not thought fit to make a public statement on this issue. This is just as disturbing as his first reaction to the 1998 anti-Christian campaign in the Dangs: to call for "a national debate on conversions". Equally deplorable was his parroting of the utterly

Fanatics on the Rampage

Descent into the Dark Ages...

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Deep down, such attitudes betray a profound irrationality which drives fanatical intolerance and fantastic myth-making about imagined monsters. It is through the construction of terrible myths and misreading of history—seen as "repeated invasions"—that intense hatred can be made to sustain barbaric violence.

fraudulent claim that the attacks on Christian institutions in U.P. two months ago were mere law-and-order problems, without communal motives.

Such condoning of communalism has created a fertile ground for more violence. Without the downplaying of Dangs, Graham Staines killing might not have happened.

Such appeasement of communalism alone explains the ease with which Vishwa Hindu Parishad vice-president Giriraj Kishore can malign all Christians and Muslims as "anti-Hindu": "This [Christian] community is worse than Muslims... Muslims breed too much. But Christians go around desecrating Hindu gods..."

No less disgraceful is the Orissa "re-conversion" campaign, and formation of a Dara Sena, named after the man who burned alive Staines. Such elements feel so emboldened only because of the signals emanating from the top that hate speech is permissible; vicious anti-minority propaganda is "nationalist."

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There is a causal connection between our ministers' indulgence towards venomous communalism and the activities of the Giriraj Kishores. Even Mr Vajpayee is no exception to this—witness his fiery past speeches against conversion, and his smug statement that "all minorities are safe in India".

All among the sangh parivar share some deeply irrational beliefs. They imagine that India's primary, essential, identity is Hindu. Christianity and Islam are "alien". Second, they imagine that Islam and Christianity spread here through forcible conversions and there is a Christian conspiracy today to massively proselytise Indians, witness the Pope's speech last year: "In the third Christian millennium, a great harvest of faith will be reaped in Asia."

Third, they believe conversion is so immoral that it must be stopped and punished no matter by what means. Mr Arun Shourie even rationalises violent means: "Society is too dis-

organised to act in an orderly manner. Inundated by infiltrators, people cannot get to the authorities they will get at their neighbour in the adjoining slum. Incensed by mounting conversions, ... they will leap at the poor convert next door."

All these premises are false. Within our Constitutional framework, Indians have no "primary" identity, least of all a religious one. Nor is Christianity or Islam "alien". Indian Christianity goes back to 52 AD.

Christianity is much older in India than in Europe, today considered its "home". Indian Islam too goes back a thousand years on our soil.

Secondly, it is doubtful if most Indian Christians or Muslims were "forcibly" converted. The identities of India's medieval rulers were more ethnic—Cholas, Rashtrakutas, Yavanas, Kushans, Shakas—than religious. Even the Delhi sultans recognised the political rights of non-prophetic faiths, only different.

Constitutionally, a faith's adherents have the liberty to practise, preach and convert. To argue, as Mr Shourie does, that devout Hindus will naturally

"leap at the poor convert next door" is to rationalise fascist pogroms.

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Without such irrationality, superstition and hatred, it would have been impossible for Germans in the 1930s to demonise a tiny minority of Jews as a "threat" to their national identity or as pests to be destroyed—in gas chambers, if necessary.

In today's India, that demonisation is fuelled by forces which abhor logic and reject the values of the Enlightenment—i.e. of human emancipation from ignorance, religious fanaticism and unreason. Christians are only one, soft, target of these bigots. Their larger goal is to destroy the very foundations of modern rationality and humane liberalism which sustain pluralism and democracy.

That's why *Hindutva* isn't against the minorities alone. It assaults the humanity of us all. What we need is not more mendacious poetry, smug assurance, and condolences from Mr Vajpayee on Archbishop de Laistic's death, but action to uphold the law and stop the fascists in their tracks.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

How President Assad's Enemies Viewed Him

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Israeli right is celebrating Assad's death. They know that Assad's successor, British educated ophthalmologist Dr. Bashar al-Assad, who like his father belongs to the minority Alawite religious group that combines traditions of Islam and Christianity, will need time to consolidate his power.

THE day after Syrian President Hafez al-Assad passed away, "the dean of Israel's newspaper columnists" Mr. Nahum Barnea wrote: "We Israelis have no reason to shed tears over the death of Hafez Assad. It's a waste of water." The *New York Times*, in its June 12 lead editorial was not much more complimentary: "Hafez al-Assad bequeathed Syria a dictator's legacy of militarism, repression and economic suffocation."

The legacy of President Assad should be judged not only from the predictable lamentations of his friends, but more importantly, from the vituperative utterances of his adversaries. Mr. Barnea was by no means the worst. William Safire of the *New York Times* wrote on June 12: "If you want to make a list of the Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad's good deeds, begin with this: he was an enemy of Iraq's Saddam Hussein. That's where the list ends. On the debit side of his life's ledger can be included his eager alliance with Soviet Communism; his slaughter of thousands of dissident Syrians in Hama; his avid support for terrorists worldwide; his military occupation of neighbouring Lebanon; and most consuming of all, his abiding hatred of Israel, which made Assad the Arab world's most relentless rejectionist."

Safire continued: "At his funeral tomorrow, crocodile tears will flow from Yasir Arafat, long the object of Assad's contempt, who must be delighted at having his tormentor. Western leaders will proclaim respect for 'stability' provided by such dictators-for-life. Groping for ways not to speak ill of the dead, they will note that once Assad grudgingly made an agreement, he 'kept his word' by sealing his side of the border. Wisely, Bill Clinton decided to bypass this chance at wearing his imitable lip-biting, mournful look, and won't dispatch Vice President Al Gore, his normal substitute, to Damascus... an unelected official, the secretary of state, will represent the US at the funeral of a world figure; the deliberate diplomatic slight will not be lost on Middle East leaders or American voters."

President Assad refused to play games. He demanded specifics. All of the Golan Heights, or no peace agreement, was his well-known negotiating position. He showed the Israelis his cards, and expected the Israelis to do likewise. Without much room for play, Israel labeled him "too inflexible" and "uncompromising." Contrast President Assad's death with the passing of Jordan's King Hussein last year. Israelis of any consequence, from the President to all the Prime Ministers past and present as well as leader of the opposition descended on Amman for the King's funeral. No Israeli showed up at Damascus for Assad's funeral. What did King

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civilians over the last two decades. Laughably, Mr. Safire even criticises President Assad for keeping his end of the bargain, by sealing the Syrian side of the Golan border after Henry Kissinger arranged for the disengagement of the Israeli-Syrian troops.

The reason President Assad raised Mr. Safire's ire is because the rightwing in Israel and their amen corner in the United States expect to have their way. President Assad refused to play along. President Assad chided Yasir Arafat only because he knew Arafat made a blunder by signing a vague peace agreement with Israel, which depended on the goodwill of the Israelis. Assad has been proven right. Oslo One, signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, was not to the liking of the next Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He renegotiated a Better Oslo (better for the Israelis, of course), Oslo Two. Now Oslo Two is not entirely to the liking of the new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. He is renegotiating an Even Better Oslo (even better for the Israelis, of course), Oslo Three. All the time, Yasir Arafat and the Palestinians are getting squeezed out of East Jerusalem and more and more land in the West Bank, proving Assad's point.

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Hussein to earn Israel's unequalled affection? Israel loves complaisant Arab leaders. Israel had grabbed the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock from Jordan in the 1967 Middle East war. King Hussein concluded a "peace treaty" with Israel without getting back any of these in return, either for Jordan or for the Palestinians. Furthermore, the King leased some Jordanian territory to Israel for 99 years. No wonder King Hussein is "Israel's favourite King!"

Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 war when Hafez al-Assad was the Syrian defense minister. Since then, getting back every inch of the Golan has been the cornerstone of Assad's negotiating position with Israel. Assad has been repeatedly assailed in the West for this stance. In its editorial *The New York Times* blasted Assad for his "unyielding insistence that all territory held by Syria prior to June 1967 be returned, as though there was something unethical about demanding back all of one's own territories!"

The Israeli right, which believes that Israel might make any concession to the Arabs unnecessary, is heaving a sigh of relief. Commenting on the near peace agreement with Syria last March, former Israeli Ambassador to the US and a current spokesman for the rightist Likud Party, Zalman Shoval, wrote in *The Jerusalem Post* that Mr. Assad's death "underlines just how unreasonable was Israel's headlong rush into negotiations with Syria." Prime Minister Ehud Barak countered by reminding them that peace with Egypt and Jordan continues to flourish well after the death of the peace-makers who concluded those treaties. Barak too is relieved that he pulled out of southern

Lebanon while Assad was alive; withdrawal would have been extremely difficult politically after Assad's death.

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President of the United States will toe the Israeli line. After announcing his candidacy for President, Republican candidate George W. Bush paid the customary visit and swore his allegiance to Israel. Through his political life, Vice-president Al Gore, the Democratic Presidential candidate, has distinguished or disgraced himself (depending on one's point of view) by his uncritical and absolute support for Israel. If the Israeli right can somehow derail the Palestinian track until the next Israeli election, which they hope to win, they may be able to pull off another Netanyahu—going through the motions of making peace, while continuing to build Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Golan Heights, thus irreversibly changing peace-destruction "facts on the ground."

President Assad for

Dr. Henry Kissinger assessed

that he will now have to finish the calls. I wonder what he will say."

Tom Friedman of *The New York Times* put President Assad's death in perspective: "He stayed too long and he died too soon." Meaning, his longevity notwithstanding, President Assad left a lot of unfinished business. "It is rather fitting that Hafez Assad died in mid-conversation on the phone with the President of Lebanon. Because in many ways he was also in mid-conversation with the people of Syria and Israel as well. These were conversations too late in coming. Bashar will now have to finish the calls. I wonder what he will say."

OPINION

Opposition has Little to Gain by Boycotting the Parliament

Ahsan Ahmed

let this be blantly obvious to the voting public. They will deliver their verdict at the next general elections.

Moreover, the Opposition cannot give the excuse that because the Prime Minister is saying this or that, therefore they will not return to the House. Parliament is no political