

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 Narahauli 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 himself".

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

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".

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.

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 limits of proselytisation.

Had there been mass-scale forcible conversion—as distinct

from voluntary ones by, say, Dalits, to escape caste oppression—India wouldn't have had a well-dispersed Muslim or Christian population. In Goa, 400 years after "Christian" rule, the majority remains Hindu.

The Pope probably genuinely believes that Christianity alone provides true salvation. That doesn't mean he can accomplish this for Asia's three billion. There are enough social and legal safeguards in India to prevent coercive conversion.

Religious conversion involves a fundamental Constitutional right. Article 25 guarantees the right to "practise" and "propagate" religion. There is nothing immoral about conversion. Some faiths are based on historical belief in prophets and on revealed knowledge. This doesn't make them inferior to 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.

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.

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 mediocre poetry, smug assurance, and condolences from Mr Vajpayee on Archbishop de Laszlo'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.

Readers of this column know that the writer has been a fan of the writings of William Safire. With this blistering piece, however, Mr. Safire has eclipsed the rabid anti-Arab, anti-Muslim vitriol of his now-retired fellow columnist Mr. A. M. Rosenthal. Instead of being critical of western leaders for not speaking ill of the dead, Mr. Safire should know that such courtesy is a matter of etiquette, and that all religions, including his own, command so. After all, President Assad was not Hitler; he only reacted to Israel's intransigence. Assad was not an immoral person. What is immoral is the Israeli occupation and annexation of Syria's Golan Heights, what is immoral is the brutal 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel.

Mr. William Safire was a speechwriter for the late President Richard Nixon. During his years at the White House, did Mr. Safire ever write a speech criticising the dictatorial regime of the Shah of Iran? No. On the contrary, all the American Presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter profusely praised the pro-American and pro-Israeli dictator Shah for providing the region with a "sea of stability". Yet, Mr. Safire sees it fit to criticize the western leaders for observing the same about President Assad's anti-Israeli regime.

President Assad can rightly be criticized by human rights activists for the murder of thousands of dissident Sunni Syrians in Hama in 1982. But not by Mr. Safire. In all these years of reading his columns the writer has never read one Safire piece sympathetic to the Arabs. Mr. Safire's sole purpose in citing the Hama massacre is to score points for Israel; by pointing out to the world the "savages" surrounding Israel. Mr. Safire's supposed concern for the Syrians of Hama is truly shedding crocodile tears, especially when contrasted with his total support for the Israeli troops as they massacred and maimed thousands of Lebanese

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 right-wing in Israel and their allies in the United States expect to have their way. President Assad refused to play along. President Assad chided Yasser 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 to 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, Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians are getting squeezed out of East Jerusalem and more and more land in the West Bank, proving Assad's point.

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, Israelis 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

Hussein do to earn Israel's unqualified 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 peacemakers 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.

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. "Syrian track is derailed for at least a year," proclaimed Safire gleefully. Now that Assad is gone, Israeli right's real target is aging Yasser Arafat. As was evident last week, Ehud Barak's fractious coalition may collapse anytime, necessitating fresh elections, and fresh problems for Arafat.

The Israeli right knows that after the relatively evenhanded President Clinton is gone in November, whoever is elected 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. Throughout 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 as well as the Syrian 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".

Dr. Henry Kissinger assessed President Assad for

NEWSWEEK: "(Assad had) No great knowledge of the West. A man of extraordinary brilliance and a good sense of humour, he was also ruthless and passionately nationalistic. After I negotiated the 1975 disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel, I called on him and said: 'Look, you have no choice. You have to do the same thing. The only choice is whether you do it gracefully or gracefully.' He said, 'You're wrong. You've betrayed Vietnam. Someday you're going to sell out Taiwan. And we're going to be around when you get tired of Israel.' I said, 'That's not going to happen.' Waiting out everyone else was another of Assad's negotiating tactics. Kissinger believes.

According to Kissinger, Assad's concept of making peace was different: "He was very careful to conduct negotiations in such a way that the result did not appear as his own personal decision but as the result of a confluence of forces which he registered, rather than created. He was a man of survival and small increments. He was not a man of huge departures. Our conception of peace is a transformation from a state of hostility to an atmosphere of reconciliation. His conception of peace was a ratification of a balance of power that he was in no position to alter, but would not be necessarily binding if circumstances were to change. It's important not to think of his approach to peace process as a conversion, but as a calculation."

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

The decision by the BNP and its fair-weather political allies to join Parliament for half an hour or so was, I regret to say, yet another of their decisions devoid of any principle or common sense. If they honestly believe that the ruling party is manipulating Parliament, the Opposition should resign their seats and pave the way for either early general elections or by-elections. They cannot have it both ways. MPs have been voted in by the electorate not to sit back and continually boycott Parliament — while enjoying the various perks for being an MP — but to represent them in Parliament and to fight and argue their case on the floor of the House.

Further, it was all very well for the leader of the Opposition to deliver a speech on the floor of the House; she should then have waited and had the courage to face a reply from the Treasury bench. She was not at a public meeting, but in Parliament. The reasoning that the Government refuses to allow the Opposition to participate in Parliamentary proceedings is not an obvious and transparent argument. With television, radio and the press closely and constantly covering proceedings in the House, the general public is yet to accept the Opposition's stated reasons for staying out of parliament. If the Speaker or the ruling party is being partisan in their alleged control of affairs in the House,

let this be blatantly 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 party's personal property; the Opposition does not require the Government's permission or so-called "good" behaviour to return to Parliament. If the Opposition can make claims about corruption or level other charges against the Government, then the latter are fully entitled to respond in kind, and vice versa.

I say this because there is a critical need for the Opposition to return to Parliament. There are several issues that they need to confront the Government with on the floor of the House, particularly the law and order situation. It is quite outrageous that the police were unable to act quickly and question a ruling party MP's son who is alleged to be involved in the horrendous murder of a businessman in Banani. While the Government has moved against its own, as in the recent order to expel Chhatra League students from Dhaka University and the demolition of an unauthorized market in Uttara, the response of the police in a number of other major cases has been

very unsatisfactory.

The Opposition has a vital role to play in a functioning democracy by confronting the Government on the floor of the House and exposing their inability to control law and order. In addition, the continuing lethargy in the economy, the absolute incompetence and corruption in the stock markets and the absence of a coherent and functioning administration for the Dhaka metropolitan area (particularly the anarchic traffic situation), are other pressing concerns that the Government needs to be challenged on.

While the occasional street demonstrations or *hartal* are possibly understandable, the opposition's real role is in Parliament. That is why general elections are held and that is why MPs are voted to their seats. They are called Members of Parliament because that is where they are meant to operate and not constantly boycott the very same institution that is their *raison d'être*. It is the moral and constitutional duty of the Opposition to not only challenge the Government of the day on the floor of the House but to also visibly demonstrate that it is in the Parliament that the real power resides. The Opposition has little to gain (even from an electoral point of view) by their unhappy and distressing boycott of the Sangsad.

To the Editor ...

"Urdu writings on Asad Gate"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter published under the above heading on Friday the 23rd of June, 2000. In the letter the writer has made a remark about the writings on Asad Gate. However, I would like to inform that the writing is not in Urdu but in Arabic and those verses are quoted from the holy Quran, the sacred book for the Muslim.

After making personal inquiry I feel that it is my obligation to inform the readers about the fact regarding the writings on Asad Gate.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury
Dhaka

Sir, I have come across a letter in the DS issue of 23rd June regarding the writings on the Asad Gate. If the writing is in Urdu then I myself also agree with the writer that a renovation of the Gate is needed and the writings should be erased. But it has to be checked first whether the writing is really in Urdu or in Arabic. If it is in Arabic then it should remain as it is.

In this regard I would like to discuss about another issue. It is regarding the rehabilitation of the Biharis (Urdu speaking people) stranded in Bangladesh. Initially, I would say that we should not term the Biharis as "Stranded Pakistanis" because they are unwanted in Pakistan as well. Even the Chief Execu-

tive of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf is reluctant to talk about these so-called SP's repatriation. These Biharis however are mentally more attached to Pakistan than this country.

Considering their allegiance to Pakistan, after our liberation these Biharis were allotted lands, under the Geneva Convention to stay till they are repatriated to their country. The Biharis born here before the independence of Bangladesh still aspire to go back. But those born in the camps over the last 29 years are fully aware that they are not welcome in Pakistan. Most of them want to settle down here and merge in the society as Bangladeshis.

There are many Biharis doing even government jobs and we welcome them to our society cordially and appreciate their endeavor to merge in Bangladesh society.

However many of these Biharis living in the camps lead an inhuman life. They are branded as the people from camp and sometimes are denied of fundamental rights.

Some of these Biharis are earning fair enough to lead a better life than the life of the Geneva Camp. Apart from those who really want to go back to Pakistan, rest should make an effort to try their fate in our society and have a better life. If the Biharis really want to be a part of the Bangladeshi nationality they should adopt the culture of Bangladesh and let go their allegiance to Pakistan.

J Taher
Banani, Dhaka

English medium schools

Sir, A survey may be carried out to find whether it is possible to open cheaper English medium schools in the semi-public sector, thereby opening up this popular sector to the middle and upper-middle class families. At present such schools are more business-oriented and have thus become a source of quick profit-making in the developing countries. Any type of approved educational system must have some practical link to the average income of the guardians.

Foreign donors interested in the spread of English as a global language might be interested to come forward with some capital and technical assistance with the government providing the land and buildings, a percentage of teachers and other items as facilitator for the development of the infrastructure. Even it might be possible to find ways for a section of the numerous NGOs to lend a helping hand, at least during the first phase of the project. The government and foreign tie-ups will reduce the average cost of schooling and hasten standardisation.

If the scheme is successful, it will bring about a healthy change in the market. The current market forces are rather monopolistic, hence some sort of healthy competition has to be introduced.

A Guardian
Dhaka