

Body-blow to Chittagong

ATELY Chittagong has been caught in a web of strikes, which even by her standard proclivity to shut-downs, looks more coiled up than anything she has had the misfortune of experiencing before. Rocked by five hartals in the month of August alone, the *de facto* economic capital and the premier port city of the country looked extremely vulnerable to trouble in the eye of foreign investors.

A close look at the stuff of which the hartals were made would prove the point. On August 7 a half-day hartal was enforced in protest against a terrorist attack on Jatiya Party city unit chief Jahangir Alam; on the 20th a transport strike took place in reaction to fuel price hike; on the 21st dockers abstained from work paralysing Chittagong port; on the 23rd there was standstill for half a day owing to opposition four-party alliance's countrywide strike in reaction to the killing of a BNP-leaning lawyer in Dhaka; and on the 24th SKOP dragged the whole city into a hartal just to highlight their demands for reopening the towel factories at CEPZ and reinstatement of 15 workers expelled from the industries earlier on. As if the spate of hartals in August was not enough we have seen the first week of the current month ending on a strike curiously called for 'the release of the convener, Chittagong Islami Oikya Jote unit'.

The pattern of strikes shows that Chittagong has become the prime target of all sorts of body-blows being inflicted by diverse quarters, political parties, professional groups and trade unions.

We do not have even a modicum of understanding as to the kind of negative signal all this is sending to foreign investors, EPZ exporters, importers and the shippers vis-a-vis our tall claim that Bangladesh is emerging as 'a favoured destination' of foreign investment.

Either the politicians and labour union leaders help repair this badly battered image of Chittagong by a hands-off policy or we face the backlash of reduced investment as well as declining prospects of future investment, both local and foreign.

Mass Arsenic Poisoning

THE World Health Organisation (WHO)'s latest warning that Bangladesh faces "the largest mass poisoning of a population in history because of groundwater used for drinking has been contaminated with naturally occurring inorganic arsenic" comes with dreadful statistics. Between 33 and 77 million of the country's 125 million-strong population are at a mortal danger of taking in a high level of arsenic through the water they drink and use everyday, the study by a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley, published in WHO's monthly bulletin, warned. We are looking into the eye of an environmental disaster "greater than any seen before." It is not that the WHO alarm should catch us unawares, although it must certainly have caught us unprepared to meet the exigency. We all know that people have died, are dying and will die of diseases caused by sustained exposure to arsenic-contaminated water. However, in the midst of conflicting reports, we have perhaps nurtured a faint hope that the threat has not assumed any menacing magnitude. Now, we know for sure that it has.

Popular perception is that the government has been sluggish to react to the alarm set off by the hydrologists in the neighbouring country way back in 1985. Thousands upon thousands of deep tube-wells were installed with the UNICEF's help in the rural areas to supply safe potable water, thereby eliminating the risk of widespread waterborne diseases. However, we should have anticipated the consequences of groundwater overuse. We may have crossed the stage of finger pointing. At this point in time, what we need is decisive and definitive action.

The only way to avoid arsenicosis is to stop using arsenic-contaminated water. We understand that UNICEF and DPHE have been on a comprehensive testing and marking campaign whereby tube-wells extracting 'poisoned' water are being red-marked so that people don't use these anymore. The World Bank and UNICEF have already channelled more than 34 million US dollars for developing alternative sources of water supply. Surface water treatment and rainwater harvesting have been two major options. There have been reports that despite warnings people still use water from contaminated tube-wells, primarily for convenience, which means they are not convinced of the danger such a practice has on offer. Therefore, alongside research and development equal, if not more, emphasis should be put on dissemination of information and sensitisation.

No Compromise on Quality

TO the students' disquiet and immense tutorial loss, the primary school teachers are on a strike. The crisis is now said to be awaiting prime ministerial intervention on her return from New York. But then it could be only reactive to the political fact that opposition leader and some of her colleagues would have attended the agitating teachers' rally yesterday as per an earlier schedule. The primary school teachers who are drawing 60 to 80 per cent of their basic salary from the government are now demanding full payment from the national treasury. After the government signed an agreement with the high school teachers who observed a 45-day strike to get an assurance for the payment of 90 per cent of their basic salary from the government's coffers, the primary-level teachers feel inspired to follow their footsteps. What is being affected in the process is the country's education system which is already beset with problems of declining standards and quality. The teachers don't seem to understand that young learners are being deprived of their help which is essential for their future. As it is, we average not even 500 hours of classroom instructions to the students in an academic year to the exclusion of holidays and vacations. Strikes make matters even worse.

If experience is any guide, nationalisation in the education sector has not helped improve the quality of education. On the contrary, what we have had is poor quality teaching leading to cheating at the examination halls. Our advice to both the teachers and the government is that their aim must be to upgrade the state of education in the country. Any compromise on the quality of education must be done away with.

UN Millennium Summit: Growing Challenges

World Leaders Should Strive to Find Answers

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The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



launched his proposal that rather than a single Secretary General of the UN, the world organisation should be in the hands of a troika composed of world powers and of course the Soviet Union in the chair's seat, failing to make any headway in the vast organisation.

Khrushchev launched a tirade against the suave Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General and as good as blackballed him from reelection. That became unnecessary because Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash in the jungles of Congo, newly independent former colony of Belgium.

Pakistan was represented by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in his early thirties and the youngest Minister in the cabinet of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the President. Young and enthusiastic Bhutto made it a point to visit nearly all the great leaders including Khrushchev. He was like a school boy hunting autographs of world leaders.

Bhutto was determined to make his mark in the world media. Since I was the Press Attaché of the Pakistan Mission to the UN in New York, Bhutto singled me out to launch him in the media. We were about the same age and he was determined to demonstrate that he was the boss. I had excellent contact in the media of the

UN and persuaded a journalist friend of the Herald Tribune to print a story on the front page concerning Bhutto's negotiations with the Soviet Union in the field of mining. Pakistan was one of the most loyal allies of the US and Bhutto's hobnobbing with the Soviet Union was frowned upon. This made news. Yet it did not satisfy Bhutto because his photo did not accompany the story! It was futile to explain to Bhutto that he was competing with the biggest newsmakers of the world.

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