

Water-logging Insufferable

THE cyclonic storm that brushed Dhaka on Saturday with 149mm incessant downpour as it veered away to the east left most of the metropolis water-logged. At several places people had to wade through 2-3 feet deep water. Stranded mechanised transports jammed the traffic as never before. All this served yet another notice on the government to set the drainage network right or have us live with an engulfing reality of cesspools.

The Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) has been consistently warning us of the rumbplings of a sewerage disaster befalling us only four to five years from now - at the current rate of network deterioration. The storm sewers, the surface drains, or for that matter the entire drainage network, is bursting at the seams under mounting pressure from water, garbage and the whole lot of putrid and squalid stuffs. The noxious gas-laden sewer pipes at times cracked open to surface in full public view on a thoroughfare or two.

Yes, the city has expanded demographically and physically at a galloping pace while the speed at which the basic amenities have grown could at best be termed as snail's pace. But, if one were to single out the worst victim of neglect in terms of maintenance-related and developmental investments then it must be the drainage network. Whereas this is an infrastructure that receives maximum attention elsewhere in the world for the role it plays in the public health domain we are perhaps a lone exception trivialising its importance. As if it were something on a low priority having to deal with dirt and filth.

Over the years, indestructible polybags have choked the drains, a construction spree has gobble up all open spaces and the natural channels have all been blocked under severe habitation pressures. The experts, technocrats, bureaucrats, civic body leaders are all aware of the factors that render Dhaka city increasingly unlivable as years go by. Yet nothing happens to alleviate the situation. Nobody bothers. The political parties are pathologically indifferent to issues of civic life and living. Even the civil society's attention stops short of the drainage system, although they are otherwise passionate in their crusade against pollution.

Unplanned development is the biggest problem we face today in the capital city. This has to be reversed if urbanisation is to hold any meaning for us. Let's have a think-tank of a task force assigned to fine-tune the existing Master Plan with a longer range view by weeding out the inconsistencies and superfluities in it and strengthening it with more of modern, scientific features.

Row over Electoral Roll

THE fresh voters' list, as released by the Election Commission on October 26, confirms the earlier impression of a big and sharp rise in the number of voters in the last five years. An increase of 18,831,471 eligible voters since 1995 is unprecedented beyond doubt, and therefore, demands a formal explanation from the EC. The secretary-general of main opposition BNP while voicing his objections to the list has cited some facts and figures which also need to be responded to. However, his sweeping claim that the list is "unrealistic, inconsistent and not acceptable" sounds sweeping for two crucial reasons, in our view.

First, the Election Commission has published the figures with the pronounced intent that there may be some further correction and verification before it is finally made public in December this year. If more time is needed on this purpose, then the deadline can always be made flexible. So, in no way is the chapter closed.

Second, as the principal opposition party, it should have played an active role in facilitating the EC's work in which it had as important a stake as the ruling party. Unfortunately, neither the BNP nor its allies volunteered adequate support to the EC. From the very start, theirs has been an attitude of hostile non-acceptance. It is not a healthy sign, to say the least.

Moreover, BNP's summary dismissal of the list leaving it to the EC to be obliged to take note of its objection raised at some press conference can not be helpful in perfecting the list either. There should be some meeting-point on this considering the importance it holds for the entire electoral process. Basically, we expect the BNP to come up with its objections in black and white, formally addressed to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). It must not try to win some political points over this. The ruling party must not go head over heels to ridicule BNP's claims either; for, it is much too serious for that. Ideally, we visualise a situation where the EC should play the pivot in engaging all the political parties and civil society members to weed out the discrepancies, if any, contained in the fresh voter-list.

Take Guard Against Fire

FRIDAY's fire at Gulistan Hawkers' Market proved catastrophic with all the highly inflammable material around burnt to ashes. One can measure the loss from the destruction of 306 shops. Fire fighters from Postagola, Sadarghat, Plassey, Goran, Tejgaon, Mohammadpur, Kurmitola and Mirpur units had to be called out to bring the blaze under control. Shop-owners on Saturday maintained that the fire broke out due to electric short circuit, accusing the city's electricity authority for having turned a blind eye to the power-related problems of the market-place. What worries us is the rate of occurrence of fires at the markets with those on the organising committees doing very little to take precautions against them. The absence of fire extinguishers is an all-too-evident example of their vulnerability to fires. Moreover, it is suspected that improper electrical wiring, born of unauthorised connections, is one of the prime causes to ignite fires.

It is worthwhile to mention that two devastating fires that occurred at Bangabazar several months ago were linked to 'sabotage' although it was not proved. Since then the security vigil should have been stepped up at the market-place. More so, because people in the surrounding areas are also exposed to these mishaps, let alone the huge loss of property wrought by them. The government, together with the Dhaka City Corporation, must make sure that the city markets have basic fire-fighting equipment of their own.

Challenging Globalisation

"Economic democracy is a viable expression and one which good corporate citizens should share. If companies continue to carve up the world and unchecked capital speculation makes the securities of the communities increasingly volatile, then the tide up protests against globalisation in its current form will grow."

the income of the bottom 20 and it has doubled in the last decade" which was precisely the decade of globalisation. No one knows how long will it take for the 'trickle-down effect' to benefit, if ever, the poor in a world where the fifth of the humanity live below poverty level and another fifth floats just above it.

The angry protests stirred by these inequities have just begun. After the violent demonstrations of Seattle, Washington and Prague now it was in Melbourne early last month. By mobilising people and staging protests, the movements like S-11 (September 11, when the world Economic Forum started its three days session in Melbourne) sought to alert the people to the dangers of

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

economic globalisation. And they were also questioning the legitimacy of a world economic order tailored and imposed by huge business conglomerates and international economic bureaucracy. The anti-globalists consciously made WEF (World Economic Forum) their latest target because it, like the World Trade Organisation, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, supports and promotes free trade

and economic globalisation.

It is argued by the WEF's organisers that without economic growth spurred by global free trade and investments there wasn't much future for the poor and developing countries. East Asia is held as an example of the benefits of liberal trade with access to export markets of rich industrial country. The detractors of the globalisation do not buy this argument. To them the

An aerial view of Protesters at WEF meet in Melbourne, September 11



organisations like WTO and WEF are actual problem. Because their advocacy of globalisation is based on corporate greed seeking to impose their will on an unsuspecting world.

Although the protests against globalisation are too disparate to present an alternative paradigm they do make a case of sorts to pause and reflect. Is economic growth promoted by globalisation an end in itself? If globalisation is so self-evidently good why are the people unhappy even in the US where the economy is so robust? Why are most of the developing countries trapped in poverty even after riding the global train? Why is Africa so much mired in backwardness in the midst of all the hypes about free markets and global economy? Why are the poor people in the poorest countries made to repay their debts leaving nothing for them to spend on their critical social sectors?

There are no convincing answers to these questions but they do lead people to an understanding of the deceits they are subjected to. According to Jorge Jorcuera, the spokesman of S-11 Alliance, "the world's three richest men Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Paul Allen own assets equivalent to that owned by the 600 million people in the world's 48 least developed countries." The UN Development Programme states that 500 corporations now control 70 per cent of the world's trade and 80 per cent of its foreign investment.

Can, in a world of so great inequities there be an economic order providing succour to the weak and deprived ones? John D Clark, a development specialist in the World Bank, candidly admits that the globalisation was always highly selective thing. The advocates of free trade wanted only an unrestrained market for capital. The result has been to maximise

the return on capital while minimising return to labour. The world over the gaps between rich and poor widened as richer population and countries raced ahead of the poorer.

But how potent are the protests against the globalisation and its institutions and symbols? What started in Seattle in the form of smashing the store-front windows provided only a stormy image of anti-globalisation and had little in substance. More or less the same image of protesters could be found in Washington during the year's spring session of the IMF. But during the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Prague the anti-globalists turned to an increasingly sophisticated and intellectually robust protest movement, mixing idealism with pragmatism. In Prague they wanted to replace the angry visage of Jose Bore, the French farmer recently imprisoned for storming a McDonald's with cool features and articulate aplomb. With 350 citizens' organisations representing lands from Mauritius to Mexico the battle of universal capital really unfurled in Prague.

In Melbourne the critics' experience in fighting globalisation seems to have been more rewarding in absence of violence. With the reasonings and persuasions the anti-globalist could effectively make an inroad even into the proceedings of the WEF which was dominated by free and frank discussion in total academic spirit. As a result many dissident views were expressed and accommodated in the meeting. According to Sharon Burrow, President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions who spoke in the WEF: "Economic democracy is a viable expression and one which good corporate citizens should share. If companies continue to carve up the world and unchecked capital speculation makes the securities of the communities increasingly volatile, then the tide up protests against globalisation in its current form will grow."

Vicious Verdict on Narmada : A Charter of Destitution

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

On ethics, the judgment follows 19th century utilitarianism which justifies sacrificing the rights of the underprivileged for the good of "the greatest number". This violates the requirement of modern ethics that we must first protect the interests of the weak. No project-affected person should be worse off than before. It is ludicrously undemocratic to design a project without consulting and obtaining the informed consent of the people it will affect.

IMAGINE policemen and bureaucrats descending upon your ancestral home and ordering you to leave it, because a highway must run right through the kitchen. You will, they tell you, be "rehabilitated" of course in another state where people speak a different language, the water tastes funny, and the trees are not the same.

Of course, you'll be given a tin-roofed shed as a house and Rs. 4,500 cash in "compensation". All this for "development" project largely serving car-owners never mind its effects on land, water and air, or people. You protest and resist for 15 years, and move a petition before the Benevolent Emperor only to see it contemptuously dismissed.

That's roughly what has happened in the Narmada case. The road in the story is the Sardar Sarovar Project, the world's most controversial dam. The Supreme Court replaces the Emperor.

But your plight in reality would probably be worse than in the story. For, there would be no "rehabilitation" - no land, no tin roof. Most of the "compensation" wouldn't reach you thanks to bureaucratic corruption.

The Supreme Court has legally sanctioned this monstrous assault upon two lakh livelihoods. Its clearance for stage-by-stage dam construction from the present height of 88

metres all the way to 139 metres without an external review, environmental impact assessment, and examining land availability, makes a mockery of fundamental rights, as well as economics and ecology.

One doesn't have to be an anti-big dam "fundamentalist" to say this. Consider this:

The Supreme Court betrays incomprehension of basic reality. Fifty-six million people have been displaced in India by dams built in the name of "development". Three-fourths of them haven't even been resettled, leave alone "rehabilitated". This equals the population of a large European country like Britain or France. Over 60 per cent of them are Adivasis and Dalits.

The Court blithely declares:

"Residents... around Bhakra Nangal... Nagarjun Sagar... Tehri and other... developmental sites are better off than people... in whose vicinity no development project came in." This is wrong. And it altogether ducks the issue of displacement.

The Court declares: "Experience does not show that... large dam[s]... lead to... environmental degradation." Studies, including the latest by the tripartite (including construction-industry representatives) World Commission on Dams, show precisely that. Big

The judgment fails to note that the environment ministry only granted the SSP conditional, tentative, clearance in 1987 subject to further environmental studies and remedial plans. These conditions were never fulfilled.

No land is available to house those already displaced by the SSP, leave alone the much larger numbers yet to be ousted. The Madhya Pradesh government repeatedly told the Court that it can't provide land; it isn't there. A good chunk of the earmarked land is uncultivable or encroached upon. The uprooting and brutalisation of another 150,000 people would be a monumental tragedy. The Court has written a charter for their unending destitution.

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dams have absorbed the bulk of India's water resources budget, but added only 10 per cent to agricultural output.

"Large dams... accentuate social-economic inequities," says WCD. They have submerged five million hectares of forests, and produced waterlogging and salinity, as well as huge topsoil losses and adverse rainfall patterns.

SSP is economically suicidal. It costs works out at over Rs. 2 lakh per hectare. Depreciation and interest on this alone will annually cost Rs. 30,000. But our yearly irrigated-land output is only Rs. 20,000/hectare. This will make all downstream agriculture unviable.

SSP's design is based on 50 year-old assumptions about water-flows, some of them demonstrably false. This seriously compromises the project's desirability. But the supremely unconcerned Supreme Court justifies adding 19 feet to the dam height for power generation. That will submerge 26,000 hectares, half of it prime-quality forests,

when alternative power-sources exist.

The Court barred the petitioners from discussing the generic problems of big dams. Yet the judgment says: "The petitioner has not been able to point out a single instance where... a dam has had an adverse environmental impact." This adds insult to injury!

The Court has summarily dismissed the Morse Commission report, an independent review ordered by the World Bank under public pressure. It also ignores the thoughtful suggestions made by the Five-Member (expert) Group, which it itself appointed.

Equally sadly, it ignores all alternatives. A plan drawn up by engineers and social scientists (Paranjape and Joy) would decrease displacement by nine-tenths, while yielding more irrigation at a lower cost.

The Court has uncritically reproduced all the dubious claims of the Gujarat government, although it is an interested party. It wants the environment

ministry to clear future construction. But the ministry lacks the requisite technical expertise. Having served on its Expert Committee on River Valley Projects, this writer can vouch for this.

The Court has ordered the Prime Minister to be the final arbiter of future disputes. The Prime Minister is a political animal. S/he can't be expected to do justice to a state ruled by, say, an opposition party.

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It is ludicrously undemocratic to design a project without consulting and obtaining the informed consent of the people it will affect.

The Supreme Court has sanctioned this. It declares that "a third party like the petitioner" cannot challenge the 21 year-old Narmada Tribunal award. This treats the affected people as external to a process undertaken in their name. The Court has made nonsense of the entire rationale of public interest litigation undermining its own credibility, while sanctioning wholesale destruction of livelihoods.

ion, the prize money should be allowed to be unfettered.

In view of the foregoing, the concerned authority in the Ministry of Finance is fervently requested to withdraw the unjust tax forthwith.

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To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Muslim meal in the British Airways

Sir, While travelling from London Heathrow to Amsterdam by BA 444 on 19th October, I was shocked at the attitude of indifference by British Airways while complying to special meal request of passengers. This leads me to believe that this airline in particular and perhaps most airlines in general have been deceiving the Muslim passengers or are ignorant of what Muslim meals are and the significance as to why they are requested in advance.

As is the practice with all airlines, persons who have requested any particular special meal are identified by their seat number prior to take-off and they are also served separately. During my flight, the crew members did the same as per their routine. The meal also came with bright yellow glaring stickers stating

MOML (Muslim Meal). But alas, the meal was sliced pork with green salad and turkey fillet, the bird which I could well imagine under circumstances, was not slaughtered as per halal requirement.

Upon bringing the matter to the in-flight attendants, it was initially confirmed by them that it was MOML. Having shown the meal with pork and the questionable turkey fillet, the cabin crew director came and expressed her half-hearted apology and passing it off as a mistake. But this cannot be accepted as a mistake since the special meals are supposed to be dealt separately and stickers are attached accordingly.

I hope from now on the British Airways would care to respect religious ethics and codes vis-à-vis the sentiments attached.

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PM and Biman degrades humanity

Sir, I have been saddened and flabbergasted to read a news item (Daily Inqilab, 21 October) that Bangladesh Biman refused to take the dead body of one Md Mostafa from New York in the flight of 19th Oct because of the PM of the poor dead man's own country. Though there was confirmed booking still Biman did not think of notifying the party of its inability prior to the evening of 18th Oct. If there was any concern of so-called security the incumbent party ought to have been notified well in advance since the arrangement of the VVIP flight wasn't in place without schedule. My feeling is that the PM of the poorest country should have intervened (of course if aware) and shown magnanimity by ordering carriage of the dead body in its last journey from this world.

AFRahman
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Unjust taxation

Sir, The scheme of investment by way of prize bond in the denomination of 10 Tk vis-à-vis the system of periodical draw

with different scales of prizes was introduced by Bangladesh Bank after liberation as a legacy of the past.

Few years ago, the scheme of 50 Tk prize bond was also introduced but these were subsequently withdrawn and replaced by introducing the scheme of the present 100 Tk prize bond with effect from 1st July 1995, the first draw of which was held on 31st October 1995, providing amongst others, for the first prize to the tune of Tk ten lakh one against each series. The amount of prizes were afterwards modified, and the first and second prizes were cut down to Tk Six lakh and Tk three lakh twenty-five thousand respectively.

But suddenly Bangladesh Bank imposed heavy tax on the prize money won over the draw of 100 Tk Bangladesh prize bond with effect from 1st July '99 and the prize money is, at present, subject to 20 per cent tax cut which is like a bolt from the blue on the general people. When a person gets a prize of Tk ten thousand, he is subjected to a cut off 20 per cent i.e. Tk two thousand out of Tk ten thousand and he gets only Tk eight thousand from Bangladesh Bank after a minimum of two months from the date of deposit of the winning bond to