

Dhaka, Sunday, December 10, 2000

Brick Field in Algirchar

ANY things - war, famine, flood, cyclone, tornado, village moneylenders, etc have ravaged our villages. Now a new ravager looms in the horizon - brick fields. So long brick fields used to be in places away from human habitation and also away from dense vegetation. Never have they been smack in the middle of villages endangering the lives of thousands of people who live in the vicinity. But that is about to change. Algirchar village under Nawabganj thana in Dhaka district has, as of Friday, a fully functioning brick field in its very centre.

We ran a story detailing how the owner of this brick field 'managed' his permission through the corridors of power in spite of the fact that it violates all the environmental laws of the land. What is happening here is a typical bureaucratic game of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. The ministry of environment and the department of environment, located within the same ministry, are sending different signals to the district administration, taking advantage of which the illegal brick field has started its operation. As things stand now the district commissioner says he has received two instructions - one from the ministry that the licence for the brick kiln has been renewed, while another from the department of environment saying that the kiln should be stopped. Now he has asked for a clarification from the ministry. Meanwhile Algirchar will continue to burn.

We have decided to take up this case simply because we think that the environmental degradation in Bangladesh has reached a stage that it is endangering our whole ecosystem in a fundamental way. According to studies, one brick field destroys the fertility and regenerative power of land within a radius stretching several kilometers from the kiln. Nothing will grow in the Algirchar village and in its vicinity for several years. When the soil again becomes capable of growing crops after several years it may never attain the fertility of the present. In the mean time the livelihood of thousands of villagers will be lost wrecking their lives, perhaps forever. And all this is being done to fill the coffers of one businessman with high political connection.

We would like to point out that there is growing evidence of serious corruption in the environment ministry. We are forced to conclude that serious environmentally damaging projects are slipping through its fingers because of corrupt practices of its officials. Our forests are being denuded, water is being poisoned, air is becoming polluted - all of this while the environment ministry merrily looks the other way. The brick field instance is the latest case in point.

We are still not in the habit of taking the environment seriously, especially at the policy making level. Nothing could be more foolish and self destructive than this. We demand immediate closure of this brick field. We want a clear cut government decision that brick fields can be set up only in the designated places after a full consideration has been made of their environmental consequences. Please wake up to what is happening to our environment. There is really not much time left.

Thoughtful Suggestions from PHA

THE People's Health Assembly(PHA), 2000, held in Savar, was a global gathering of some 3000 committed health activists, professionals, scholars and the like, who spent five days outside Dhaka, focusing on making health care a pro-poor system around the globe, accessible by and available to all people irrespective of their economic or social standing. The mammoth event, participated by representatives from 95 countries, was a success, both in terms of its logistical and managerial organisation and also for the substance and subjects that were raised within it. We congratulate the organisers, Gono Shasthaya Kendra, and commend them for achieving this landmark event here in Bangladesh.

We believe that for a country like ours, the issues raised at the PHA are of fundamental importance. We are well aware that if we in Bangladesh are to break out of the spiral of poverty, health care for all is the very least we must offer our masses. But "health care for all" has remained a hollow promise that has not been translated into tangible results at all - not only in Bangladesh, but also in most of the developing world. International aid agencies, together with governments and multinational organisations, have been responsible for advising and developing our health care systems, allocating resources, devising strategies and deciding on priorities. If this system had succeeded, there would have been no need for debate. But it is obvious that the system has failed. Millions of people in developing countries still have little or no access to basic health care. How can we change this state of affairs? The answer can be found in the main goals adopted by the Charter of the PHA on its concluding day - goals with which we are in agreement and which we, especially in the media, are committed to support. The solutions lies in challenging the present systems of health care, and also at the same time, trying to end all economic, social and political inequalities in the world.

It is one thing to adopt high-minded goals, but quite another to actually implement them. How can we actually make an impact? Ultimately, change must take place in the mainstream. The core of the health system must become pro-poor. Whether that can happen as a result of this one meeting, mammoth though it might have been, remains to be seen. At least the PHA has started the process and helped to raise our awareness of these issues. The task is for us to move forward and we in the media will provide our wholehearted support to the initiative in every way possible. We do not seem to have understood the fundamental fact that health lies at the core of all other issues of social development. It is only when a population is healthy that we can produce an educated human resource that will be fit to compete in the knowledge society of the 21st Century. So a pro-poor health policy is a precondition for the success of all our policies in education, IT, industrialisation, attracting FDI, etc. The faster we understand it the better it will be for us in Bangladesh, as well as for the developing world.

Time to Confront Political Terrorism

If the campaign against political terrorism is to succeed, co-operation among different political parties will have to be initiated, and the momentum generated by various socio-cultural organisations and public outcry demonstrated in the news media in recent days will have to be sustained. Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating political terrorism.

THE defining feature and the most revolting aspect of terrorism is that it deliberately targets innocent people, not those who are able to defend themselves. The revision that terrorism creates is intended. It seeks both to astonish and frighten people. In that single, repellent sense, the political terrorists who are regularly killing innocent people throughout the country are successful.

The recent spate of killings in various parts of the country are particularly shocking, perhaps because of the barbaric fashion of the acts and because the atrocities are occurring in places that are not widely known as a cockpit of political violence.

The blame for the killing of political opponents and innocent civilians in different places rests squarely on the shoulders of those who commit these crimes. Political terrorism can be at least partly explained and understood, but it can never be justified. It is the work of the morally bankrupt.

Everyday, the news media are carrying reports of concerted violence among political adversaries that show an alarming pattern which would leave any rational individual concerned about the direction the country is moving towards. These acts, both individually as well as collectively, undermine civil society, political system and the country's sovereignty by normalising violence and graft and introducing a corrupt cancer into the political structure.

There appears to be a concerted effort to destabilise the transition to democracy in Bangladesh. Whoever is involved in unleashing violent terrorist activities on innocent people should be brought to justice. The Awami League, as the ruling party, has a dual role. On one hand, it should take decisive actions against those involved in these activities.

On the other hand, it should also prevent its own supporters from participating in similar acts of violence.

It is unfortunate but true that no major political party is immune from the criticism of using armed cadres to suppress their opponents. Awami League has done it. BNP has not been far behind. Who can forget Jatiya Party's activities during its heyday. Extremists, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, have a long history of annihilating those with whom they differ on political issues.

Faced with this scenario of terrorism, the prospect of achieving radical improvement in the Awami League government's measures to combat terrorism lies in its consistency and courage in maintaining a firm and effective policy against terrorism in all its forms. They must abhor the idea that terrorism can be tolerated as long as it is only

ais or small cells. Trouble mongers can take advantage of this situation by advancing their own agenda.

Given the Home Minister's closeness to the party hierarchy, it was assumed during the early days of his tenure that he will have a freer hand, than his predecessor, in weeding out terrorists from his own party. His initial public statements were quite assuring. Mohammed Nasim was quoted as saying, "I will not compromise on the question of curbing terrorism. Stern action will be taken against any terrorist whichever party he may belong to" (DS, March 15, 1999).

would be to eradicate terrorism from our lives.

Combating terrorism can act as a double-edged sword for the Awami League government. The response has to combine law enforcement techniques and political measures. This, of course, is easier said than done. Involvement of the law enforcement agencies in a democracy is a delicate problem. This involves a political decision, based on a threat assessment or risk analysis, which assumes that there is a consensus supported by the majority of the population. Because of the involvement of law-enforcement agencies in anti-terrorism activities, it raises an important issue. How far can a democracy go in combating political terrorism without destroying itself? Are terrorists likely to succeed, that is, achieve their political, religious, or social goals through the tools and logistics they use? More specifically, can the phenomenon of terrorism be a direct threat to a democratic state? The answers are important in order to determine how far a democratic state can infringe on individual liberties in order to protect those very same rights.

It is important to realise that terrorist activity doesn't take place in a vacuum. Rather, increases or decreases in political terrorism are the results of an interaction between terrorist activity and counter-terrorist initiatives. The two are inherently linked. Hence there is a need for well-thought out policy responses to a terrorist threat and to warn of the danger of overreaction. In other words, a simplistic approach will only further serve the terrorist groups with political opportunities and support from the local population. The Home Minister will have to walk a fine line. Tactical measures alone, without the willingness to look at the political situation and the roots of the violence, are doomed to be ineffective in the long run. The government that falls into this pitfall loses its normal ground.

If the campaign against political terrorism is to succeed, co-operation among different political parties will have to be initiated, and the momentum generated by various socio-cultural organisations and public outcry demonstrated in the news media in recent days will have to be sustained. Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating political terrorism.

Never once in history, a political terrorist group was able to destroy an open democratic society because there is an outlet for political discontent in the normal process of governing.

Only a very small minority of extremists will turn to violent methods. However, it has happened that democracies destroy themselves in the process of fighting terrorism. If the response to terrorism involves suspension of democratic rights, this will play into the hands of the terrorists.

During every prior incidence of political violence, leaders of the major parties have tried to portray a holler-than-thou role. They would have us believe that violence are always instigated and perpetrated by the supporters of the opposing party. Nothing can be further from truth! It is a fact that all major political parties have armed cadres of their own. The sooner the leaders realise the follies of this policy, the easier it

the real criminals will escape in those actions but the public confidence will be dealt a blow. One of the goals of terrorism is to provoke government overreaction, especially indiscriminate action.

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