

Tragedy Again on Meghna

UTHLESS profiteering of launch owners coupled with administrative inaction has once again spelled death for 64 passengers just a day after the Eid-ul-Fitr. In the dense early-morning fog, Dhaka-bound MV Jalkapot-2 hit ML Rajhangshi and the latter, headed for Madaripur with some 400 passengers on board, went under water. Festive mood gave in to mortal fear as passengers found themselves in the wintry water of the Meghna, trying desperately to keep afloat. Most of them hung on till local fishermen, police and later district administration and fire-fighters rescued them. The hapless 64 including as many as 33 children could not. Quite a few were reported missing. The death toll may well rise. Over-crowding was identified as the prime reason for the mishap. Again.

We wonder how many more deaths would it take the government and its regulatory body, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to go beyond such infuriatingly academic exercise of instituting probe committees and do something concrete. Haven't we had an inquiry following each tragedy on riverine route before? How many of them have actually come up with any comprehensive report? And, how many of the recommendations of those that have are under implementation? How many of the devious launch owners have been put in the dock and punished? Obviously, not too many. Are we to infer then that the whole exercise is nothing but a mean ploy to deceive people into believing that the authorities care and are active?

Just before the Eid vacation began, a front-page report headlined *Overcrowded launches leave terminal under the nose of special security teams* (Saturday, December 23) attempted to bring into BIWTA's attention how its rules and regulations had been routinely flouted by owners of launches and steamers. It related how passengers, eager to spend the Eid vacation with their near and dear ones, had been put at mortal risk by being allowed to board on overcrowded watercrafts. We were afraid that disaster might befall any of these overloaded passengers carriers. Our worst fears, unfortunately, have come true.

Time and again, this paper has urged the authorities to get the inland water transport sector into order. To no avail, it seems. Early this year, two major mishaps on the Meghna in the span of just over a month left some 300 passengers dead. Also, one launch went under water when one of two racing river crafts rammed into it. Last year, a faulty launch plying on another's route permit, brought about death to a couple of hundred people. The list could go on and on, and it only highlights one simple truth: the government in general and the BIWTA in particular have simply failed to discharge their responsibilities.

Besides execution of immediate disciplinary measures and effective enforcement of its rules and regulations, the authorities should give some thought to the fog factor. Why not equip the passenger launches with fog lights and horns, so that these could keep off the harm's way?

Back to Work Now

WITH the Eid festival truly over, only the congenital work shirkers could grudge others getting into their usual functional rhythm at the soonest. It was a big stretch of holidays the vacationers enjoyed and they should swing back to work right away. There is a special reason why the sense of urgency to work back into the normal pace is so great.

The Eid vacation - its main segment of holidays being conjoined with week-ends and other holidays - has been the longest in memory, perhaps the longest ever. For nine straight days we were put in a limbo, quite a spell of standstill, unheard of anywhere in the world. The saving grace being though that the extra length of holidays was due to a fortuitous turn of calendar dates, not a deliberately given something. In other words, like the extra-terrestrial phenomena, such a combination of holidays as we have just left behind will revisit us only rarely. Nevertheless, here we are with the effect of a long absence from respective posts creating its own backlog in terms of file work, decision-making, and disposal of cases. With our batteries recharged for those many days it is only to be expected that we should be clearing that backlog on a double-quick basis stepping on the fast-track escalator to progress.

Regrettably have we noticed a negative build-up of a slowdown throughout the month of Ramadan, with the employees, even the management, loosening grip on their work on an accelerated basis. That loss of man-hour we should have had the scruples to avoid in view of the upcoming longish Eid vacation, which obviously was not to be.

Given our work ethics and culture, if the authorities in the state and private sectors let go of the temptations to laze about in their offices even after Eid holidays there is no telling the regression we shall suffer in every sphere. But, of course, the best results are obtained from involuntary responses rooted in an appropriate sense of responsibility and commitment to society. Let us pull up our socks, take up the challenge of making good on the lost man-hours, regain our full work rhythm and forge right ahead.

To the Editor ...

Beware of babytaxis

Sir. One female student was returning home from Uttara. The babytaxi driver deliberately stopped his taxi near the Dhaka gate (it's a rather lonely spot on the New Airport road). The muggers appeared and not only tore off her gold chain but also tried to drag her out of the taxi. As she held on to its rod tightly, they stabbed her on the arm - a big blood vessel got cut and blood gushed out. The sight of it made the muggers run.

Therefore babytaxis not only injure people by polluting but also by assisting in crime.

Why always blame police?

Sir. There is a growing tendency to blame the police for all sorts of inefficiency, corruption and dereliction. But how far this tendency is justified?

There are demands for cleansing police department of some unscrupulous elements. While we support the demand we also strongly feel the necessity of same action for many government offices, public sector corporations and autonomous bodies etc other than the police department involved in the maintenance of

A Citizen Dhaka

The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil Ralph Waldo Emerson.'

RESPECTING the pupil is essentially caring and catering to his basic needs, creating a congenial atmosphere and providing adequate back-up support so as to help him prosecute his studies undisturbed and without any hassle. Everything can wait, but the needs and requirement of a pupil cannot. For him there is no tomorrow. The basic law of the country clearly and explicitly states, *inter alia*, 'The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of... (b) relating education to the needs of the society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs.' But if the pupils are denied timely delivery of their textbooks, which is the prerogative of the government and if the parents and guardians are to run from pillar to post and are to pay an abnormal and inflated price under duress to procure the same, then how does it relate to meeting his needs or in any way producing trained and motivated citizens to help build future leadership of the country to face the challenges of the new millennium?

Not one or two or a few hundred, but a staggering number of twenty-five million pupils in the country would have to face such a disastrous situation in the next education year commencing January 7, 2001 when schools will reopen and new classes will start. According to reports carried by *The Daily Star* and the vernacular dailies like the *Prothom Alo*, the *Janakantha* and the *Ittefaq*.

Education is the single most catalytic factor in this knowledge-based age to help us to be prepared to meet the challenges of globalisation. Indifference to the plight of twenty-five million school pupils who will be deprived of their textbooks within the stipulated time is an unpardonable crime which no society and no government worth their names can afford to condone and keep their eyes closed to. All and sundry now agree that neglecting education is akin to harakiri.

printing of not even nineteen per cent of the textbooks could be completed despite extension of the deadline twice and nobody can say when the printing and distribution work will be completed and when the pupils at the primary and secondary levels throughout the nook and cranny of the country are likely to get their prescribed books. It is a veritable fiasco and in the words of the *Weekly 2000*, will jeopardise and hamper the future of a large number of school pupils throughout the country. The weekly blamed the Education Ministry, the Directorate of Primary Education and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) as well as the organisations entrusted to do the printing and distribution work of textbooks for the continuing stalemate. In its issue of December 16 the weekly made in-depth reporting on how the underhand and shady dealings by corrupt elements in the Education Ministry and NCTB were at the root of the current imbroglio. It even boldly named names among whom is purportedly a close relation of the Education Minister himself and said the entire episode is a conspiracy to belittle the efficiency and thereby tarnish the image of the government in an election year. It also questioned the veracity of NCTB in giving the award to an organisation with the stigma

of bank default writ large on its principal.

The question that can therefore be put is that why such concerns were given the job of printing and distribution of school textbooks breaking all set norms and regulations. It has been

argued that the work was given to the lowest bidder. But a thorough examination revealed that though the three concerns quoted the lowest price, they cleverly and deftly raised the cost of transportation so as to 'take with the left hand what they

none reportedly paid heed to the impending alarming situation. The officials concerned in the Education Ministry and NCTB avoided it by saying that they were monitoring the progress. And the progress so far (December 23) is only nineteen per cent of the work (some 70,000,000 copies of textbooks so far out of a total of 8.12 crore). Independent sources said the progress of work is rather too slow and as soon as the schools reopen there will be acute shortage of textbooks resulting in their skyrocketing prices. Apart from this, not even NCTB knows for sure when the textbooks will reach the target groups.

Now the people are apprehensively asking and they very much right to do so whether the entire thing is a conspiracy to grab and siphon off huge profit by creating artificial crisis in the textbook market. Setting up of a probe body was demanded to go deep down into the matter. But in Bangladesh any such commission ultimately boils down to omission! The general impression and experience are nothing comes out of such probe bodies. If the past be any guide it can be safely deduced that the persons to be blamed for the entire thing are adherents of the latest 'adage' that public memory is proverbially short and people, by and large, accept all wrongdoing by

helplessly lying down.

This is an issue that deserved to have been taken up with all seriousness by the country's opposition parties as well as by the civil society. But, unfortunately there is only slight murmur. This shows how seemingly unconcerned we have grown about our state of education. Otherwise after the mass copying in public examinations there would not have surfaced such denial of textbooks to the students which is as well a violation of the fundamental right of access to education as enshrined in the country's constitution. When other countries across us have accorded topmost priority to their educational needs we, by and large, lackadaisical in this regard. The result is that education from the primary to the university levels is the most mismanaged sector in Bangladesh. So long such a sorry state of affairs in education persists there is little hope for Bangladesh to prosper and progress and extricate itself from the vicious cycle of poverty and backwardness.

Because education is the single most catalytic factor in this knowledge-based age to help us to be prepared to meet the challenges of globalisation. Indifference to the plight of twenty-five million school pupils who will be deprived of their textbooks within the stipulated time is an unpardonable crime which no society and no government worth their names can afford to condone and keep their eyes closed to. All and sundry now agree that neglecting education is akin to harakiri (suicide).

HEART OF THE MATTER

Mansoor Mamoon

Vajpayee's Birthday: Tough Time Ahead

Only time can say whether Vajpayee has profited from his recent remarks. These have certainly tarnished his image as a statesman to an extent. As he begins a new year in his life, he is not facing any unchallenged challenges problems but has stepped into a year that may see more troubles surrounding his government.

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has just turned 76. He celebrated his birthday on December 25 last. The veteran politician, who has been adorned the premiership of the country three times, can look at the past and present with a great degree of satisfaction. But political analysts feel that he is likely to face tough time ahead. His political career, spanning nearly six decades, is full of both difficulties and triumphs but an ageing Vajpayee certainly looks forward to a comfortable innings, as there is no potentially dangerous bowlers in the form of a strong opposition to cut his innings short. His multiparty National Democratic Alliance (NDA) enjoys a satisfactory majority in the *Lok Sabha* and it is only more than a year that the government has been in the office. The opposition is not in disarray but definitely also not in a position to pose a threat to the government. As such it should be almost a trouble-free political grapevine for the Indian prime minister, who also has practically no challenger within the party or in the ruling coalition.

Vajpayee, more known as 'Atalji' to his people, might have celebrated his birthday in relatively relaxed mood barring his physical condition. But he as a matured politician and statesman cannot be oblivious of the fact there are quite a few thorns in apparently looking bed of roses. And this situation largely stems from his own making rather than from the opposition parties which have been clamouring against the government as 'inept and incapable' in running the country. Needless to say, such attitude of the opposition is expected and realistic regardless of the fact

Sonia Gandhi being a federal minister whereas she failed to turn up at party hosted by the prime minister earlier. Although Manmohan Singh sought to play down her

was noticeable when the Jansangh merged with Janata Party in the wake of Indira Gandhi's controversial emergency which led to the defeat of Con-

MATTERS AROUND US

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

absence from the prime minister's gathering saying that she was away from the capital, analysts did not lose sight of the fact that the absence could have been a logical corollary to certain developments centring prime minister's remarks. True, if recalcitrant Manmohan Singh may choose to part ways with the government, it would not threaten the NDA rule because it would still have majority in the *Lok Sabha*. But this will certainly be a setback and if some other constituents follow the suit, the developments may matter a lot.

Vajpayee's comments on the Babri Masjid-Ram temple issue have taken many by surprise as he is seen as a moderate leader in a party which is seen by many as 'communal'. His image as a liberal is often seen as the 'right person in the wrong party'. Although he began as an RSS worker - before India's independence and developed himself into a popular 'Jansangh' leader at later stage, his transformation

in 1977 elections paving the way for Janata Party government came in. But the government collapsed 'midway' through the full term due to internal conflicts and Mrs. Gandhi staged a comeback to power.

Janata Party split with a faction showing allegiance to the RSS - the fountainhead of Hindu communalism. Vajpayee chose to distance himself from the hardliners in the BJP and came to be known as a moderate. When Hindu zealots razed the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, he was not gleeful like many other senior BJP leaders. But his remarks some time ago about the construction of a Ram temple in the site of the demolished mosque gave rise to a new controversy about the moderate image of the prime minister. His comments a few months ago at New York at a gathering by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that he was proud of his links with the RSS fall in the same line. However, the prime minister clarified his statement

this time as some of the partners from the government expressed serious reservations about the remarks, as they believe in secularism. He sought to allay fears that the government was drifting away from the NDA agenda but a few took this seriously. Some allies asked whether the BJP is following its 'hidden agenda' which is replete with communal sentiments.

It is possible that Vajpayee is thinking to play the communal card as some component states are going to elections within next few months. It is also possible that he is coming under serious pressures from the hard-liners including RSS leader K. Sudarshan without whose support probably the BJP will find things going tough. Siv Sena leader Bal Thackarey in Maharashtra has even demanded that the Muslims be robbed off their franchise rights. Opposition parties - Congress, Leftists, CPM, CPI and others - have disrupted business in both houses of parliament for several days on these issues and particularly on prime minister's remarks. The government survived a censure motion in the Lower House on the issue but lost in the Rajya Sabha, which, however, has no bearing in ruling the country. It is understandable that Vajpayee or for that matter no government would easily accept the opposition demand that three ministers L.K. Advani, Dr. M.M.Joshi and Uma Bharti be dismissed for their alleged links in demolishing of the Babri mosque.

A Difficult Road Ahead

If there is any real failing of this military regime, it is in the choosing of "foreign" civilian technocrats for day-to-day governance. The civilian cabinet should have comprised entrepreneurs and politicians.

(into history) holding the constitution aloft, that would be very moral but very stupid. The integrity and sovereignty of the nation must always come first in this Hobson's Choice. Those who have taken an oath to defend the country even to the peril of their lives can have only one clear mission, the country above anything else, including the Constitution if it comes to that. And why should any soldier need to turn to legal counsel to seek legal cover before he leaves power for his actions while in power? Contriving a patchwork of legal niceties to legitimise martial law has no morality, no law officer can justify the abrogation or suspension of the Constitution. Soldiers who turn to 'the doctrine of necessity' will be protected by the sincerity of their actions while in power, no court in the land can ever convict them. They will be protected by the final arbiters of the destiny of any country, the will of the people.

Oct 12, 1999 was such a watershed in the life of Pakistan. The threat of civil war loomed very high, one shot could have ignited a conflagration. With the economy in a shambles, the rule of law being flouted at will in the name of the Constitution by those elected under the Constitution, and conditions of anarchy ripe in the body politic, the Army had no choice, once thrust by Mian Nawaz Sharif into power, but to seek redress of the grievances of the people. The legality of any

prime threat to the country's existence justified its actions and 2) the manner of governance whilst in power. Starting virtually ab initio, the military regime has been quite successful in conducting accountability. They have, for the first time in this country, brought people to justice, fully 82 per cent of them being other politicians or bureaucrats, only about 18 per cent businessmen and others. This accountability has been somewhat compromised, however, there is no morality in accepting the concept of plea-

the co-op pyramid scheme 2) taking huge commissions on defence deals in foreign exchange and not declaring them and 3) not paying due taxes on the amounts secreted abroad, should be prosecuted. On the contrary, they have been protected. By compromising morality for the sake of a few individuals the military regime's credibility has taken a hit. Everyone must be governed under the same standards, for friend and/or foe alike, the application of laws should not be 'enemy-specific'. The various Task Forces for reforms have

power of life and death of every citizen in the 'fiefdoms' where they have 'ruled' illegitimately for countless years. Give power at the grassroots but deny feudal supremacy by maintaining homogeneity. It is vital to re-think governance below the Province, initially at the Divisional level rather than go lower down to the District. If there is any real failing of this military regime, it is in the choosing of 'foreign' civilian technocrats for day-to-day governance. The civilian cabinet should have comprised entrepreneurs and politicians. Those who never risk their careers for what they believe in should never be allowed near the portals of government. Some in the civilian cabinet are in outright violation of their oaths as cabinet ministers and the military regime is well aware of it. Entrepreneurs are risk-takers as well as competent managers. They are able to evaluate the real implications of policy initiatives and make pragmatic changes as necessary. Politicians not only get a correct feedback from the people but also get the message of the regime across to the people in the language they understand. Gen. Pervez Musharraf at the beginning he would not stand on his ego if he made mistake. He should sack this bunch of classified pen pushers, more interested in their own personal agendas than in the country.

With less than two years to go the regime has to get back to the basics of mission orientation, change to a positive system of governance in keeping with the genius of the people while ensuring a strict stem of accountability. Instead of putting serving professional soldiers into every walk of life, it would have been better to draw into the vast reservoir of ex-servicemen and ex-bureaucrats and place composite Task Forces

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

bargaining to get off scot-free. Anyone guilty of fraud, bribery etc., must get all his/her assets frozen. Why should the guilty be allowed to buy their way out of jail by using the very same money they have robbed in the first place? Setting the guilty free has done incalculable damage to the fabric of our society, the mass psyche is beginning to accept illegality has only a monetary price tag as punishment, i.e., if caught. One can understand however, when friendly states get involved, the 'doctrine of necessity' takes over e.g. the Sharif family exile. Also the Army must cleanse itself! While agreeing with the contention of confidentiality partly, because of national security reasons and the morale factor every incident cannot be made public, viz. 1) looting money from retired ex-servicemen under the acid test, viz. 1) whether the

headed by serving major generals in every Ministry as a Monitoring Team, particularly the Ministries of Finance and Commerce, to monitor day-to-day routine and public grievances thereof, rather than run the Ministries. In the face of chronic shortages of revenues, it is mind-boggling why no soldier for ex-soldier has ever darkened the doorstep of the Ministries of Commerce and Finance (or the Central Board of Revenue) in any of the four martial laws. The CEC has got his heart in the right place, he has now to apply himself in exclusion of everything else to accountability and reform. He does not have to venture on journeys anywhere, attend any receptions, cut any ribbons or give out any degrees and diplomas, etc. He is not running for office, his primary *raison d'être* is to make the system efficient and public-friendly in the short time available to him. He should move lock, stock and barrel into the CEC's Secretariat, journeying maybe only two days a week outside Islamabad and that too only to the Provincial capitals. Same should apply to his Provincial set ups, go only one down unless absolutely necessary.

For the sake of this country he has to put body, mind and soul to the many problems be-devilling the country, and stay focussed on the primary aim by remaining static in one place to give decisions in supercession of everything else, including his personal life.

People expect the military regime to perform miracles, that may be expecting too much but miracles are likely to be achieved if there is absolute commitment to the mission statement in word as well as in deed. In the road ahead in the new millennium, which really starts on Jan 1, 2001, of prime importance is the maintenance of the aim selected by the military regime, in exclusion of all the other distractions of office.