

Corruption eats away forests to oblivion

An investigation committee immediately needed

WE are staring at a fast dwindling forest spaces due to corruption, negligence and disregard for environmental values. It still has not been understood by the authorities that managing forest cover is not a luxury but an essential necessity for survival. Amidst this comes the news of major corruption cover-ups. Worse, media reports that a syndicate is operating within the Ministry itself to ensure that this goes on and on.

The matter has received public attention because of a letter issued by the Ministry itself asking why certain officials who were transferred continued to hold the key posts even after that order was passed. The fact that the Ministry had to move to get some answers explains the kind of clout this ring has and the helplessness of the public representative authorities.

Forest cover has been depleted severely in the last few years and in many areas has disappeared completely. Chakoria in the coastal area has been a very well documented case where nothing was done although all knew what was going on.

It seems that looting forest resources is considered a privilege that the rich and the powerful feel they have a right to. We have known for long that Madhupur, CHT and other virgin forest areas have been destroyed by direct collusion of the government itself. International lending agencies through their policies have also supported in some cases but the overriding impulse has come from this group that gains from looting forest reserves.

Apart from learning that polite enquires are made about the state of the forests and the overall cover is about two third less than needed we know little. The corruption and mismanagement have been documented and reviewed in many documents but little action has been taken. Now, we demand that the Government immediately form a Special Committee to look into the corruption and management aspects of the forest sector.

While one appreciates the tree plantation activities, it makes little sense if it turns out that most are looted later and nothing is done to stop this.

An immediate committee headed by senior people with power, willingness and ability to repair a sector on which all our lives depend is a priority now. Otherwise there isn't much a future left to protect.

Restore Uttarbanga's declaration immediately

Is there a political motive behind banning the paper?

THE declaration of daily *Uttarbanga* of Natore has been cancelled because of a printing error. Granted that the mistake -- referring to Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Sheikh Hasina as President and Prime Minister respectively on March 26, 2002 -- can't be ignored but in no way does it tantamount to an act worth cancelling a newspaper declaration. The fact that the newspaper had apologised from its faux pas but wasn't considered enough is disturbing. In the final analysis the ban comes due to a printing error which is an alarming trend.

But politics has already been read in the decision. It so happens that the Editor of the paper Hanif Ali Shaikh is the General Secretary of the District Awami League and this cancellation is being seen as a punishment for his political activities. To make the matter more murky, the Editor has said that local BNP leader and Deputy Minister Ruhul Quddus Dulu engineered the cancellation as he is planning to bring out a daily himself.

We would like to go on record that cancelling declaration because of a printing error however grave is unheard of in the annals of journalism of this country. The punishment is absurd and sets a deadly precedence to be used as a whip against the press whenever needed in the future. This makes the entire industry easy game for the political censorship. This is a gross misuse of law. One doesn't see how the authorities can explain this act when they claim to be upholding the right to press freedom.

We unequivocally protest this decision and consider it an act of violation of our rights. Printing error is an everyday affair in journalism. There are established methods of correcting them and of dealing with problems that arise out of such errors. The punishment for committing a mistake can be many but not silencing the voice of the press. This is an act committed against the entire industry and not just this paper from Natore.

We demand the withdrawal of the order cancelling the declaration of the paper immediately.

From Chittagong to Chiang Mai and Dubai



M ANWARUL HAQ

WHEN foreign dignitaries visit Bangladesh, it is always Dhaka that gets the focus. But during the forthcoming trip of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Chittagong will steal some of the limelight.

Thaksin with his large entourage of Thai officials and businessmen will follow an unusual route. He is due to arrive at Zia International Airport on Monday afternoon. But he and his entire entourage will depart Bangladesh on Wednesday from Chittagong's Shah Amanat airport, back to Bangkok via Chiang Mai, a tourism and a growing aviation hub of Thailand.

Thaksin is considered one of the most dynamic and visionary Asian leaders that heads a government now. Before becoming Prime Minister he was a successful businessman. He is learnt to have been among the hundred richest businessmen in the world. In 1992, he was named ASEAN businessman of the year.

He switched from business to politics and proved he is a great organiser. Having floated the Rath Thai Party only about three and half years back, he shot to political fame by becoming prime minister of his country.

At his urgings, Thailand, ten ASEAN countries, with Bangladesh as one of the prime movers, launched the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) on June 17. This, as written earlier, is a new Asian initiative for turning the continent's diversity into opportunity. It was launched at Cha-Am Petchburi, a sea-side town close to Bangkok on June 19. The new initiative hopes to establish the missing links between the major Asian organisations the ASEAN,

the SAARC and the GCC. Establishing communication linkages criss-crossing Asia is one of the aims of the ACD.

Thaksin's visit is not an ordinary trip by a neighbouring Prime Minister. He will come to discuss with our government, among other issues, ways and means to establish more close communication links with Bangkok in conjunction with the neighbouring region.

The trip could lead to putting

Now why is Thaksin going to Chittagong from where he intends to fly out to Chiang Mai?

Although we may not have realized, but the Thai Prime Minister has realized that Chittagong has all the potentials of being developed both into a tourism and an aviation hub.

Prime Minister Thaksin will, schedule remaining unchanged and weather permitting, fly straight from Chittagong to Chiang Mai. He wants to develop

development and should be a matter that needs to be addressed immediately by policy planners.

The BNP during its previous stint in government declared that it would develop Chittagong as the commercial capital of the country. But, eight months in its current term in office, it is yet to embark on translating that rhetoric into reality. And there are no signs that any beginning has been made regarding uplifting the

ern airport after it was completed with substantial Japanese assistance. It has of course potential for further expansion just with a renovation programme as has been taken for ZIA.

However, to be fair, it goes to the credit of central authorities in Dhaka that Chittagong airport has already opened its runway to both national and foreign airlines.

Biman, the national carrier, responding to the traffic demands of our passengers has

officials have told me that east bound flights are not viable and may take traffic away from our national carrier, the operation of Silkair and such a huge passenger component originating from Middle-east to Chittagong should encourage us to look into prospects of opening in future not only west bound flights but also east bound flights.

The most important aspect to consider in turning Chittagong into a regional aviation hub is that it could cater to several airlines operating in the region and earn valuable foreign exchange for the country.

The Chittagong airport already allows wide-body aircraft like DC-10 and Airbus to operate smoothly. Airlines seeking to fly regional routes could touch Chittagong both for traffic and refuelling while connecting or flying to or from Yangon or Mandalay, Kolkata, Mumbai, Kunming, Hanoi, Chiang Mai, Kuala Lumpur, Colombo besides a host of other airports.

Chittagong could also act as a feeder airport for other regional or international carriers and who knows could woo away traffic from Kolkata or Bangkok in the distant future.

The marketing and packaging of Chittagong airport as a regional airlines hub could net in not only more business for the country but also tourists. More road and more airconnections in conjunction with infra-structure development of Cox's Bazar could make Chittagong a gateway to tourist traffic and investment for the country. Travellers from Tokyo to Dubai could make a stopover in Chittagong and this would gradually open up Bangladesh as a business and tourist destination.

Like Thaksin and the Thais we may have done our homework. But either our policy planners, politicians, bureaucrats and academics are perhaps doing too less or too much, or seeing too many resource constraints and so called 'practical' impediments.

Let our minds soar and let not the poverty of our thoughts limit our potentials. If Thailand can do it, we too can. Let us join forces.

M Anwarul Haq is Diplomatic and Defence Correspondent of The Daily Star

ACCORD AND DISCORD

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into place the facilitation requirements for starting the alternative Asian Highway that now proposes to connect Dhaka with Bangkok via Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and neighbouring Myanmar. The idea for the Dhaka-Bangkok road link was pushed through by the Thai prime minister not because he loves Bangladesh, although he esteems Dhaka's foreign policy position highly, but because he sees immense prospects of opening up movement of goods and people through this route. And with movement of people, entrepreneurs will move too, seeking business, entering joint sector investments and of course trading. Opening up that land route is expected to be more beneficial for Bangladesh than for Thailand since we could seize that opportunity to reduce the trade gap with the latter which has a ratio of four to one, with us on the flipside.

But why is Bangkok interested to encourage Dhaka and also Yangon to start the Dhaka-Bangkok highway? It knows that in the long run while both Bangladesh and Myanmar will stand to gain business and investment, Thailand will also gain even more. So starting the Dhaka-Bangkok road would be a win-win situation for all the three neighbours.

Chiang Mai, already a popular tourist hub, into a new aviation hub.

It feels that Chiang Mai could be turned into a regional aviation centre to serve Thai and foreign tourists travelling between the northern resort province and such other tourist destinations as Kunming in southern China, Hanoi in Vietnam, Mandalay in Myanmar and Chittagong in Bangladesh.

Thaksin has done his homework while we need to do ours.

Although the economic condition of Dhaka has improved over the years that of Chittagong has seemingly deteriorated. There was a time when many business houses and business operations were headquartered in Chittagong. But over the recent years, both businessmen and major business houses are migrating to Dhaka. Many major trading and business concerns have either closed their shutters in Chittagong or forced to open a major outlet in Dhaka while many have moved their corporate offices to Dhaka. Multi-nationals with head offices in Chittagong have shifted to Dhaka. It is perhaps not only a matter of bureaucratic centralization but also of political and economic centralization. That Bangladesh over the years is becoming Dhaka-centric is going against all the norms of

future of Chittagong as a regional hub. This is happening, despite the fact that a chunk of the members of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's cabinet are from Chittagong. In fact some of the most important portfolios are being held by BNP ministers from Chittagong. They include the foreign minister, the commerce minister, the food minister, the state minister for civil aviation, the state minister for environment and forests and the adviser to the Prime Minister on Parliamentary Affairs who holds the full rank of a minister. There are others in the greater Chittagong district.

The lack of visible thrust to promote Chittagong reflects also on those honourable ministers who are not just plain MPs. Members of parliament concentrate on their constituencies while ministers are expected to develop their own district headquarters, particularly when it is Chittagong which has all the built-in potentials for being made a first class city with an international airport servicing the region.

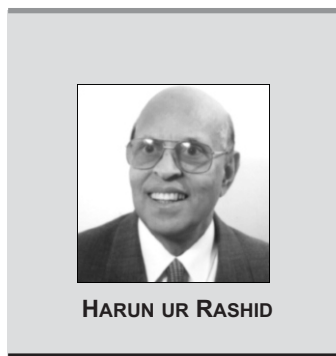
The Chittagong airport has much of the infra-structure already in place. Civil aviation officials say Chittagong is not only one of the finest airports made to international standard but it is the country's most mod-

ern airport after it was completed with substantial Japanese assistance. It has of course potential for further expansion just with a renovation programme as has been taken for ZIA.

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President Musharraf outwits his political opponents



HARUN UR RASHID

RESIDENT General Pervez Musharraf wears three hats. First is the Presidential hat, second one is that of the Prime Minister and the third one is that of the Chief of the Armed Forces in Pakistan. It appears that he has been enjoying all his positions. Furthermore in recent days he was able to ease the war-like situation with India through the Western diplomatic moves.

Like General Zia ul Haq's regime in Pakistan (1977-88), the US has been the life-line of President Musharraf's government. He seized the opportunity at a time when the US was vulnerable and obtained, in return of the support he provided to the US, huge financial and military assistance to strengthen his grip in the country. He must be given credit to dump the Taliban in Afghanistan for his sense of pragmatism and timely appreciation of global politics. He remains politically "ten feet taller" to the Western countries,

although Pakistan has been suspended by the Commonwealth for being an undemocratic regime.

President Musharraf has been a good military strategist and he does not reveal everything in one go. He slowly does it at an opportune time. When he took power in 1999 through a military coup, observers knew that if the conduct of earlier military Presidents was a guide, General Musharraf was not going

Musharraf does. He consolidated his Presidency through the referendum in recent months and gained legitimacy for the office. Now his master plan has been revealed. In recent days he announced plans to take on sweeping new powers by suggesting 28 amendments to Pakistan's Constitution of 1973. These amendments were reportedly presented to the Cabinet on 26 June and would be open to public

armed forces would be created with overriding powers over the elected Parliament. The President planned to continue as Army's Chief. He also wants to shorten the term of the Parliament from five to four years and lower the voting age to 18.

The last two amendments, viz, shorten the tenure of Parliament and lower the voting age appears to be sensible. However political observers believe that the lowering

This latest move from the President reportedly united liberal and right-wing Islamic parties in their opposition to his plan. A 15-party alliance for Restoration of Democracy said that it would decide a plan to launch a nationwide anti-government protest.

President Musharraf's announcement of political plans coincided with an advertisement in newspapers for a "most wanted" list

continue to be well disposed towards President Musharraf. If the US is pleased, Musharraf's government needs not to be too concerned with the political protests against the Constitutional amendments.

Political observers believe that the timing of advertisement is impeccable. They were aimed at averting attention away from the Western donors of his power push through the amendments of the Constitution. If the money continues to flow to Pakistan, the national economy remains strong and the protests will be of no avail. Furthermore the people have little respect for the traditional political leaders because they broke promises, made money and left them in the lurch.

It appears that President Musharraf has finally outwitted the traditional politicians in the country. As a military strategist he has played the political game very adroitly. During the military confrontation with India on Kashmir in recent days, President Musharraf said to the media: "I have always said that our strategy is not only defensive; it is defensive-offensive." It seems that the strategy has been adopted in political warfare in Pakistan. The politicians in Pakistan need to realise that in politics success matters and for success anything goes.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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soon from political power. However when he gracefully accepted the decision of the Supreme Court to hold the election this October, there was a bit of surprise for every one. They thought that power would be transferred to an elected Prime Minister and either he would disappear from the political scene or would become a ceremonial President.

Not many leaders have the luxury to be able to do whatever they want regardless of what other people might think. But President

debate for a month before being finalised by the Cabinet and the existing National Security Council. He said democracy could only be restored after changes in the Constitution were made.

The amendments would allow the President to sack an elected Prime Minister, his Cabinet and the elected Parliament. Further he did not seem to be satisfied with these powers and would have the authority to name his own Prime Minister. Under his proposal a National Security Council dominated by the

of voting age has been prompted by the fact that the President has been advised that he is popular with young people in the country. Both the former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif who are living abroad will be affected by a new law that bars anyone facing corruption charges (not conviction) from contesting elections.

Most political parties have been suddenly awakened by the President's plans to become an all-powerful leader, preventing the return of the country to a genuine democracy.

of 10 suspected Islamic extremists, offering big rewards of two crores (Pakistani Rupees) (about US\$586,350), for their capture in connection with the killing of a US reporter Daniel Pearl and bombing of Western targets in Pakistan. It is reported that another advertisement went for the capture of Osama Bin Laden and it is believed that it is for the first time that Osama's name was specifically mentioned in such advertisement. These advertisements are music to the ears of the Bush administration which will

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Bangladesh

There is a total breakdown of law and order. The press is muzzled and journalists are arrested, beaten and even murdered.

The economy is in freefall and poverty rising. The hard earned savings and businesses of people being wracked by extortion and random street violence. Prices of essentials are rising while what little resources there are left is being thrown down the drain to satisfy various special interests. The military with the senior officers beholden or loyal to the despotic regime are quiescent. The civil service and judiciary corrupt, brow-beaten or demoralised. Zimbabwe today, Bangladesh soon.

T. Ali Dhaka

No nod for structures in 'illegal Ashuliya'

Following up on the recent Ashuliya project I was thrilled to learn that our governing body is taking a keen interest in the development of that land. However, reading Mirza Abbas'

(Minister of Housing and Public Works) comment "...those who would buy plots from unauthorised projects ... in Ashuliya would never be given permission for construction". I cannot help but wonder why it is not the other way round where the Minister can help safeguard the people's investment and warn the "seller of the property" and threaten them with heavy fines? Why make the investors lose their hard-earned money in the first place? Is the Minister waiting for RAJUK to receive all the fees before letting the investors find out that they will not be allowed to pursue their development dreams?

A citizen Dhaka

AIDS

For the past few years every UN report on the AIDS issue cites Uganda and Thailand as the success cases and Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa as the failures in controlling this epidemic. In Bangladesh, considering the fate of other Catholic and Muslim countries, contraceptives seem to have been received very well and without much controversy. But if you look at

sex education in general the onus still seems to be on discouraging pre-marital sex and leaving it at that. At first sight it does appear to me that pre-marital sex is far more common among younger people today than ever before. Yet our embarrassment to talk about these issues will probably help spread the AIDS epidemic in Bangladesh. We often hear of prostitutes being given advice on safer sex but what about homosexuals? Correct me if I am wrong but isn't homosexuality still illegal in our country? That law should be abolished. AIDS originally spread in the USA from the gays to the heterosexual population, as is likely since many gays in Bangladesh are in the closet so to speak. There are transvestite and male prostitutes every evening walking in front of Ramna Park. Do you really think all the men visiting these sex workers are single, abstinent and using safe sex? Unless we get over our bourgeois reticence to talking freely about pre-marital sex, condoms, homosexuality and other facts of life AIDS will strike us as well.

Tintin

Dhaka

Death threat

I have gone through the news "Death threat" (July 3). The Executive Engineer of Rajuk has been given death threat unless he withdraw a case he had filed against a real estate developer (Jamuna Group) in Ashuliya. The Executive Engineer filled the case after a report published in *The Daily Star* on June 27 titled "Stare of ecocide". Previously, the Chairman of Jamuna Group Nurul Islam Babul verbally abused State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar and threatened to kill him after Babar opposed issuance of the liquor manufacturing licence to Jamuna Group and mobilised opinion in the cabinet to cancel it (June 23, "Death threat" on Babar). I am deeply shocked to learn about this strange audacity of Jamuna Group. I urge the Government to take exemplary measures if allegations are true.

M. S. Uddin Nagoya, Japan

Bangon

This is in regards to Mr

Nizamuddin's letter "A journey by boat, sorry Biman" (July 3) commenting on the behaviour of Biman cabin staff. I stopped taking Biman on long haul flights almost ten years ago after being stuck on the tarmac of Manchester airport for ten hours due to fog at Heathrow. The only reason we couldn't disembark was due to the arguments with the US bound passengers who were missing their connections at Heathrow. But I did have a very pleasant time chatting with the friendly air hostesses.

These days I only fly Biman when going to Kathmandu and Calcutta. In the case of the former, I am usually one of the few *deshis* in the plane with most of the other seats being taken up by the backpackers from Europe. Flying Biman to Kathmandu is apparently the cheapest way to get there from Europe. Anyway, by and large I always found the cabin crew well behaved, polite and friendly. In flights from Calcutta, I must admit the cabin crew are less attentive. But can you blame them? Most of the passengers are shopkeepers carrying gargantuan plastic bags of saris, shouting at the top of their

lungs, generally making a nuisance of themselves. Any person would be harried and short tempered in such circumstances.

If you want ill manners take an Emirates flight. The cabin crew practically ignores you throughout up to Dubai. From there onwards the next lot is usually better. Don't bother with Business Class either. The manners of most of the Emirates cabin crew improve with the colour of your skin, not the class of your seat. The only problem with Biman is the government. The pilots, cabin crew and ground staff who keep these planes flying with such an excellent safety record, are probably one of those few things we can be proud of.

TAI Dhaka

Tax on knowledge

I am quite amazed. I picked up my paper this morning expecting to see a contrite official bemoaning a bureaucratic mix up and apologising for that silly report about obscene taxes on magazines and imposition of PSI.

Nothing of the sort.

BNP along with their fundamentalist allies are intent on shutting us off from the rest of the world. There was a great hue and cry about the channel ban fiasco. Then came the palace coup by Hawa Bhaban and the replacement of our President by a puppet. Now our journals and magazines are being restricted and repressed.

It was a few months ago that Mr Shamsheer Chowdhury wrote the letter "Should our sons come home". I was one of the few who vociferously argued for their homecoming, irritating a lot of my friends in the US. At this rate I am soon going to change my mind. BNP and their fundamentalist allies are intent on setting up a country ruled and owned by the new dynasty, with freedom of speech, expression and learning consigned to the rubbish tip.

MA Dhaka

On Budget

I'm an ordinary citizen of this country who has already been perplexed

with the anticipated future monthly expenses as against my unchanged income following the "historic" budget speech of our Finance Minister.

The chairman of NBR in his pre-budget briefing and later on in your June 11 issue through a paid advertisement claimed that the proposed tax free income level and tax rate are still much higher and lower respectively than India and Pakistan in comparison to per capita income in US dollar in three countries.

May I know from the learned Minister and Secretary that while giving this example did they or their advisors consider the exchange rate between Taka with Indian and Pakistani Rupee? Did they consider difference in cost of living? Do other countries have similar number of slabs and tax structure? Do their lower-income people suffer more than high income class due to a ridiculous tax structure?

Kabial James Dhaka