

NU in trouble

Government intervention may be necessary

THE National University witnessed unprecedented clashes on Wednesday between its employees and students from affiliated colleges who were demonstrating to press home their five-point demands.

The students, some of whom were injured, have alleged that employees of the university pounced on them with the support of student wing activists of the ruling party. The law enforcers are reported to have sided with the employees and some students were detained and released later. On the other hand, the VC of the university has said that the demonstrators went on the rampage and kidnapped some NU officials and released them later.

The truth must lie somewhere in the maze of the accusations and counter accusations. But certain things are pretty clear. First, the demonstration was based on matters purely academic and it is difficult to trace political ramifications in it. Second, the students have been agitating for quite a long time over what appear to be grievances that merited urgent attention of the authorities. They have demanded revision of the syllabus to make it comparable to that of other universities; introduction of the tutorial and assignment system; timely publishing of results; and appointment of qualified teachers for their courses. None of the demands sound unreasonable. Such demands cannot be trifled with by recourse to trading of blames. These should have been addressed well in time by coordinating efficiently with the ministry concerned so that the situation didn't snowball the way it has.

The NU authorities should have looked into some of the anomalies in the system that have had a crippling effect on the academic career of students.

Now, the problem has been dragged too far and it has all the makings of spreading into affiliated colleges, the NU being an umbrella organisation. It has to be resolved through a process of dialogue and consultation between the representatives of the general body of students, teachers and university authorities before it aggravates to a point beyond redemption. At some stage, government might have to step in to set things right at the umbrella university, which is responsible for the planning, management and implementation of education programmes in a large number of affiliated colleges.

Garment factory or death-trap?

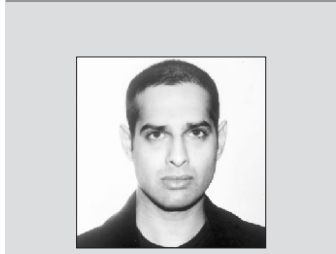
Stricter measures needed to avert tragedies

THE tragic news of seven garment workers being crushed to death when they pressed the panic button after a small fire broke out in their factory in Mirpur poses a few questions -- for how long should we allow such tragedies to take place? For how long should we call them just accidents? For how long do we wash our hands off by just paying some compensation? Such cruel deaths can not be ignored any longer. But has there been even a single example of punitive action taken against those responsible for such untimely and eminently avoidable deaths? None whatsoever.

Every time a fire breaks out in a garment factory, the workers panic from the knowledge of the fatalities occurring to some of their colleagues in similar circumstances. They try to rush out of the building by any means causing a stampede. The narrow staircase winding down to virtually choked emergency exits, locks on the main gates make it almost impossible for them to escape. Not to forget the location of many factories -- most of them are situated in narrow alleyways where fire service vehicles can not enter, any rescue operation is rendered extremely difficult. Though the number of such tragic incidents has somewhat decreased following the authorities' imposition of regulations on factories, it seems that enough thought was not given on checking whether those regulations were being abided by or not on a sufficient scale.

The association of garment exporters has already announced compensations for the bereaved families, but it's high time they realised that life is too precious to let it end in such a cruel manner. First and foremost, the main gates of the factories should not remain locked all the time like a prison. Secondly, the workers should immediately be trained on what to do in such potentially panicky situations; and lastly, the association should contemplate initiating legal actions against owners of those factories which do not abide by the prescribed safety regulations. When would such owners realise that the workers are the lifeline of the factories and that their safety and well-being should be on the top of their agenda?

Highway which way?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE Asian Highway was first conceived of in the late 1950s. The idea behind the highway network was to facilitate commerce and communication throughout the continent by building an international standard road system, and regularising relations between the countries that are part of the network in order to promote trade and strengthen regional cooperation.

Sounds like a pretty good idea, right? But not so attractive, it would seem, that the government would incline itself to actually take the steps necessary to ensure Bangladesh's effective participation in the initiative.

Final plans for the highway network have been under serious negotiation among the countries along the proposed route since the project was brought under the auspices of ESCAP in 1992.

Last week twenty three countries finally signed the landmark

treaty to complete the 140,000 km trans-Asian highway network that will run from Tokyo to St. Petersburg.

Bangladesh, however, was not one of them.

Once again, due to the missteps of the government, Bangladesh finds itself on the outside of a major international initiative.

The communications minister dismissed the idea that there was anything amiss in Bangladesh not being a party to the treaty that was

through Teknaf being considered part of the Asian Highway.

It is true that Myanmar has agreed to a road link from Teknaf into Myanmar, but it is misleading to suggest that this link road will be the solution to our Asian Highway woes.

In the first place, the road needs to be built, which experts say will take a minimum of three years. In the second place, the cost of the construction which Bangladesh has agreed to bear is

link through Teknaf for bilateral trade with Bangladesh, but has not agreed to transnational traffic through that point, and at no time has made any kind of official statement indicating its contemplating permitting the Asian Highway to run through this southern route.

It is interesting that none in the government has been able to quote even a single official from Myanmar to back up the statement that the route from Teknaf to

even raised during the recently concluded talks.

So don't hold your breath waiting for the Asian Highway to run through Teknaf to Myanmar any time soon.

Now, this is regrettable. According to the approved route, the contemplated Bangladeshi gateway to the highway network is through Tamabil in the Northeast and Banglabandha in the Northwest. There is no direct Asian Highway

The public deserves to know the truth about whether the Asian Highway really will run from Myanmar through Teknaf or not.

If the government has evidence to support its confident assertion that it will, then such evidence should be shared with the public.

And if the road from Teknaf to Myanmar is not being contemplated as part of the highway network, then the public should be informed of this fact and not misled into thinking that it is.

This brings us to the second question: if the southern route through Teknaf is so advantageous to us (and it is), then why has the government done such a poor job of ensuring that it will be part of the Asian Highway network?

The proposed route for the highway network has been under intense negotiation since at least the early 1990s. One would have thought that this was sufficient time for Bangladesh to have been able to table its best offer and ensure that the final route met our needs.

This kind of johnny-come-lately negotiation that we are now conducting to have the approved and agreed upon route amended after the fact obviously has little chance of success.

If it was so important to secure the southern route as part of the Asian Highway network, why was the matter left so late?

Zafar Sobhan is an assistant editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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signed with such pomp and fanfare last week.

He pointed out that the agreement can be signed until 2005, and stated that Bangladesh will sign it as soon as our proposal for a route from Teknaf to Myanmar is included in the highway network.

But the problem is that, contrary to the minister's confident assertions, there is very little likelihood of the southern route

estimated to be in the region of Tk 750 crore and there has been no budget allocation made for this.

So who knows when this southern link road will actually be ready.

But the main problem with the minister's statement is that there has been no discussion with Myanmar as to running the Asian Highway from Myanmar to Bangladesh through Teknaf.

Myanmar wants the southern

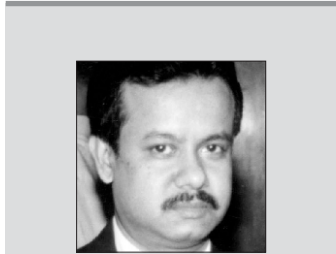
route through Bangladesh to Myanmar, and there is no question that the inclusion of a southern route through Teknaf to Myanmar would be advantageous to us.

So what exactly is going on with respect to the route the Asian Highway will take -- is the Asian Highway set to skirt the route that would be most beneficial to Bangladesh or is it not?

What does it mean to be wise, creative, rich, powerful and dignified? What does it mean to be chaste and honest, if the fire of hunger can singe your conscience? It is said that you cannot be wise with an empty stomach. Can you be anything for that matter, when hunger slowly weak-

forces of life, perhaps the strongest amongst all its forces, which drives much of its activities. You are comparable to an engine that needs fuel to run, but what does it mean? What does it mean to be wise, creative, rich, powerful and dignified? What does it mean to be chaste and honest, if the fire of hunger can singe your conscience? It is said that you cannot be wise with an empty stomach. Can you be anything for that matter, when hunger slowly weak-

Think about your life



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TAKE some time and think about your life, which is woven like a story with the threads of your thoughts, built like a house with the bricks of your breaths, and drawn like a picture with the colors of your dreams. You are born to die, like a bubble is doomed to burst soon after it is formed. You are a blip in the eternity, a flash in the pan. You lose and gain, smile and weep, suffer and enjoy, shrink and swell in the very rush of the journey from womb to tomb that goes in vain. You strut and fret, you fight wars, take challenges, compete and contest, and you rise in pride, lower in shame. Take some time, and think. What does it mean to have a life?

Think about your body and think about your soul, the river of blood that murmurs in the landscape of flesh and bones. And think what it means to think, which is the dialogue you persistently have with your own existence. Think why you struggle, face hardship, make sacrifices and snatch things away from others, the primal passions and cultivated fashions that ruffle the seas of instinct and impulse. Think what is

conscience, which, like a police checkpoint, frisks you if you doubt crosses your mind whether you are right or wrong.

Think what it means to succeed and what it means to fail, the mirage within mirage, the illusions of life, which makes you think that the transient does not end. Think roughly 72 per cent of your body is made of water and you are stuffed with plenty of Rubidium and Silicon, which have no known biological role.

Ask why you need the Nobel Prize, the Oscar, recognition, glamour, glory, wealth, popularity, power, and everything else, if you don't last forever. Ask why you must indulge in the contradiction to seek permanence in evanescence, acquisition in decay and certainty in the uncertain? Think how life is akin to rain. The water in the body dries up when it dies. It then condenses from the aqueous vapor in the atmosphere and falls back to earth in a drop of

Think about lust and love, the same beast, which prowls the precincts of your body. It snarls in the groin and cuddles in the heart, your body switching between heat and warmth as the fire cooks desire at different temperature. You wish to possess and belong, your body turning into vapor in that tussle. One day the water is spent and you are gone, the lump of clay stashed under the ground, all its noise, poise, motions and emotions withdrawn like batteries

form you wear, the power you hold, the wealth you accumulate. Think about your lineage, heritage, fame, comfort, and pleasure, all things that give you the satisfaction of being a cut above the mark.

Think about the ironies of life and how it works through people and their professions. One preaches, one teaches, while another leeches. There are those who speak of god, and there are those who speak like gods. Some are profound, some are profane; some are holy, some are hollow; some are proud, some are modest. Some sell their bodies and some sell their souls. Some beg, some steal, and there are those who do neither but go to the jungles to starve their bodies to feed their souls.

From priest to prostitute, from saint to scoundrel and from wise man to weasel, think of life and its many mysteries. Nothing is absolute, everything is relative; one life means nothing in isolation, unless it is a part of the collective. Keep it in your thoughts while you weave the story, keep it in your breaths, while you build the house, keep it in your dreams while you draw the picture. Life is a gift only when it is given to others.

While you think, breathe and dream, keep that in mind. Your story, your house and your picture must never be soaked in the tears of others. Remember life is 72 per cent water. And every time you hurt someone, it spills that water. Tears deplete life like summer exhausts a river. Take some time, and think of life. Let it run like a river.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

So who are you? Ask yourself. Ask why you need the Nobel Prize, the Oscar, recognition, glamour, glory, wealth, popularity, power, and everything else, if you don't last forever. Ask why you must indulge in the contradiction to seek permanence in evanescence, acquisition in decay and certainty in the uncertain? Think how life is akin to rain. The water in the body dries up when it dies. It then condenses from the aqueous vapor in the atmosphere and falls back to earth in a drop of another life.

If you believe in the Visuddhi-Magga in Buddhism, the body consists of exceedingly fine and impalpable powder. This is prevented from being dispersed and scattered, because it is held together by about half a bushel of water and is preserved by fire and propped up by wind. The fire element digests what is eaten and drunk and thus cooks the body to give its beauty of complexion and to keep it from decay. You walk, run, and stretch your arms, courtesy of the wind.

So who are you? Ask yourself.

another life. This is one way to think how the cycle of life goes on through resurgence and renewal. But religion does not agree; it claims that the dead could only rise again on the Day of Judgement. Think how the meaning of life is never divulged as long as you live, and how the most enlightened ones went through life blind and ignorant without knowing why they lived, their glib tongue silenced in death, while the very essence of what they were, remained shrouded in mystery.

from a mechanical toy. The question is why do you live? Why do you walk the tightrope in the highwire act between temptation and temperance, need and greed, sloth and speed, sense and sanity, fruit and futility, compassion and cruelty, everything and its opposite? Would you start a project, if you knew you could not finish it? Then why do you live, when life walks in lockstep with death, when life is its own killer stalking you night and day?

Hunger is one of the primal

ens your body, and drops like a wilted flower? Think about life, how brittle it is. You develop yourself as an epitome of virtues and qualities, and then drop dead for one of the many reasons why things could go wrong. You could get stabbed by a mugger, shot by an enemy, burned in fire, drowned in water, run over by a car, hit by something sharp or heavy. And when dead you are worse than vegetables because you decompose faster and perish long before potatoes go bad. Think about life, the uni-

Japan faces the problem of waste disposal

MONZURUL HUQ, writes from Tokyo

WASTE is mostly a byproduct of development. More a society becomes developed, more it generates waste that needs to be disposed of carefully so that they might not have harmful impact on the surroundings or on people living in the vicinity. A number of industrialized countries are now trying to find out ways to achieve the goal called as the "zero emission society." The term "zero emission society" was first coined at the United Nations University in 1995 and it calls for creating a society where an industrial chain, in which the waste products from one industry are to be used as the raw materials for another, is to sustain a natural ecosystem that would effectively solve the problem of waste management. But as the concept is yet to find its way in practical application, Japan and other advanced nations are facing the serious question of how to deal with the massive amount of waste, which is being produced regularly in the process of keeping a highly advanced society moving. The total volume of discarded

waste in Japan is continuously on the rise. In fiscal year 2000, households in Japan produced some 52 million tons of waste, or an average of 1132 grams per person per day. In order to cut down this ever-increasing massive amount of household waste, the government first enacted a law promoting recycling of containers and packages, which came into force in 2000. Since then, the scope of recycling has expanded further with the enactment of Household Electric Appliances Recycling law in April 2001, which makes the recycling of household electrical appliances mandatory. Subsequently, a number of other related laws, like the Food Recycling Law of 2001 and the Automobile Recycling Law that came into effect in April this year, are also aiming at curtailing the volume of waste that the country produces every year.

In addition to household waste, Japan also generates approximately 400 million metric tons of solid industrial waste annually, of which close to 80 million metric tons ultimately find their way to landfills. About 80 percent of the industrial waste produced in fiscal

CLOSEUP JAPAN

As both central and local governments in Japan are trying to find out ways to counter this rising trend of illegal dumping of industrial waste, the volume of other waste materials are also on the increase... It has already been mentioned that Japan produces more than 50 million tons of household and general waste every year. Of this, around 20 million tons consists of food waste. This is 6 times the weight of used-newspapers and 4 times that of discarded automobiles.

1996 was sludge, animal waste, and remains of construction sights or demolition materials. Reclaimed land around the sea coasts in different parts of the country has until now provided ideal sights for easy disposal of a large chunk of such industrial waste. But as the country has a small land area, there is little room for disposal sites to handle the growing volume of solid waste.

The current reserve of landfills for industrial waste in Japan is estimated to be around 3 years. As a result, the cost of waste disposal is continuously on the

rise, which on the other hand is crating a new problem in the form of illegal dumping of such waste. The issue has become a matter of serious concern, both for the corporate world of Japan as well as for the society as a whole.

It has been revealed last week by Japan's Environment Ministry that as of April 2003 more than 11 million cubic meters of industrial waste, enough to fill the huge Tokyo Dome baseball stadium for as many as nine times, had illegally been dumped at more than 2,500 sites nationwide. About 80 percent of the total amount is to

stay at sites where they are dumped, as the ministry has no cleanup plans.

This is for the first time that the ministry has conducted a nationwide survey on illegally dumped industrial waste in country's all 47 prefectures. Of the total volume of such waste, almost half comes from construction. Tokyo's adjacent Chiba prefecture heads the list of illegally dumped waste with a combined volume of 3.9 million cubic meters in 877 dumpsites. The amount is almost a third of the national total. Fukui and Mie prefectures of the Kinki

region of central Japan follow Chiba.

Most of the sites where illegal waste is being dumped are relatively smaller in size. As large scale dumping getting harder due to stricter rules and regulations, it is being replaced with smaller-lot, which observers term as guerrilla-like dumping operations. The Ministry of Environment survey cites lax enforcement by local authorities behind the pileup. As both central and local governments in Japan are trying to find out ways to counter this rising trend of illegal dumping of indus-

trial waste, the volume of other waste materials are also on the increase.

It has already been mentioned that Japan produces more than 50 million tons of household and general waste every year. Of this, around 20 million tons consists of food waste. This is 6 times the weight of used-newspapers and 4 times that of discarded automobiles.

Facing with this problem of massive wastage of food items, the government of Japan has enacted the Food Recycling Law in June last year, which aims to reduce the amount of food waste generated by food manufacturers and restaurants. The law also promotes the reuse of food waste such as by turning the waste materials into livestock feed and compost.

With the law in force, food producers and outlets are trying hard to reduce the waste generated at their respective points. While food waste from the processing and manufacturing stage has been partially successful in recycling the waste, the other end of the food sector is yet to make a breakthrough.

While 48 percent of food waste from the processors and manufacturers are now being recycled, most of the waste from the distribution side are still incinerated or sent to landfills. This includes leftovers at numerous restaurants around the country, as well as unsold food at supermarkets and lunch boxes and packed or canned items that have passed the expiration date at convenience stores.

As the society gets affluent, huge amount of food items increasingly find their way to waste disposal sites. The trend is disturbingly marked at the backdrop of food shortages in different parts of the world. And Japan is not alone in this regard, as the trend is also on the rise almost in all advanced societies. But the good thing for Japan is that, policymakers are now realizing the hard fact of the difficulties of waste management. As landfill sites are being threatened to overflow, and as concern about country's self-sufficiency rates for food grows, new legislations keep making their way to control the unchecked growth of sheer wastage of food items.