

So many meeting their watery grave again!

Journey by launch as hazardous as before

At least 118 people were drowned in a launch capsized on Saturday night in the river Buriganga. The disaster took place after MV Maharaj carrying well over 200 passengers got caught in a nor'wester. However, it has also been reported that another launch had a brush with MV Maharaj precipitating its capsized.

Whatever might have been the precise reason behind the disaster, a closer look into it shows that river journey remains as perilous as it always has been, despite government's commitments on the heels of previous accidents that effective steps would be taken to stop such unfortunate deaths. To begin with, the launch was overloaded, a high risk factor that could not be eliminated even after so much of fuss. Navigational rules seem to exist only in theory.

Then weather forecasting is also quite unsatisfactory. The forecasts have not been fine-tuned by way of an hour-by-hour signalling system. In short, things remain where they were in the past. Only two years ago, the shipping ministry had even imposed a ban on launches leaving terminals in the evening, especially when the nor'wester season approached or got actually underway. The ban has not proved effective, as is evidenced in the latest incident where the weather was murky with drizzles boding ill. We have not learned anything from the major launch mishaps in the past. The river crafts have not been equipped with modern devices to lessen their vulnerability to such sudden changes in weather.

Something has to be said about the rescue operation also. It has been slow, halting and inadequate. The launch was finally salvaged on Monday morning, but such a situation demanded a quicker and more effective response from the rescue operators.

The shipping ministry should make a public statement on the measures so far adopted by it to ward off launch disasters, following the major accidents in the recent years. Clearly, it is not enough to condole the deaths of passengers, constitute a probe committee and hold out assurances afresh that steps would be taken to set things right which are destined to die down after the dusts settled. For God's sake, let there be some tangible difference in terms of practice of safety standards this time around.

Nepal crisis

Human rights situation worrying

OUR last editorial on the crisis in Nepal on February 6 less than a week after King Gyanendra had sacked the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Deuba, seizing control of the administration himself and suspending all fundamental rights, expressed our concern both for the implications for Nepal's fragile democracy and for the human rights situation, which was threatening to spiral out of control.

It is now apparent that our fears for the situation are sadly coming true. The human rights situation in Nepal appears to be going from bad to worse with neither any let up nor any improvement in stability in sight. Fundamental rights and freedoms continue to remain in suspension. Senior leaders of the opposition (and indeed the recently deposed government) continue to remain under house arrest and in some cases have been taken into custody. The right to demonstrate or protest continues to be denied as the new regime tries to consolidate its hold on power. Most ominously, communications between Nepal and the outside world continue to remain cut off.

On Thursday, the head of Amnesty International, citing concern for the deteriorating human rights situation, called on the US, UK, and India to suspend military aid to Kathmandu. The international community is rightly beginning to pay attention to the worsening situation.

It has long been our position at The Daily Star to support democracy and democratic forces unequivocally, whether in Bangladesh or outside. Democracy is the only system of governance that is both sustainable and morally acceptable, and must therefore retain our faith and allegiance even in the most testing of circumstances. As such, we cannot agree with Kathmandu's official spokespersons that the crisis of stability in Nepal justified the take-over. We urge the King to hand power back to a democratically elected government and to restore fundamental rights before the situation deteriorates any further.

The international community must not stand idle. Suspension of military aid is a good idea and all kinds of diplomatic and economic pressure must be brought to bear on the King to reverse his decision. The belief that authoritarian rule or emergency rule is the answer to unrest has always been proved wrong. It can only make things worse, and in fact, in Nepal this is precisely what is transpiring.

Is an American showdown with Iran inevitable?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

the US could take military action against Iran if the country was not forthcoming about its suspected nuclear programme.

On all of these issues what lies at the heart of US policies are, of course, Israeli interests. The Jewish state is Middle East's only nuclear power which has been armed to the teeth by the US -- a position the US is determined to perpetuate. Although with a US backing it repeatedly committed

ruled out the use of force to destroy Tehran's nuclear installation.

This is the scenario at a time when Iran is engaged with the European Union on its nuclearisation. The European troika of Britain, France and Germany already finalised agreement with Iran last November aimed at getting Iran to abandon the manufacture of nuclear fuel that can be further refined to bomb

It is believed that a combination of threats and lucrative offers -- the carrot and stick of sorts -- would deflect Iran from its nuclear path. But that would require a concerted pressure not only from European troika but also from America including Russia and China. If that happens, Iran's nuclear violations can be reported to the UNSC -- paving the way for imposing sanctions in case of non-compliance by Iran. But in an attempt to dilute the

yet that Bush's new foreign policy team will be more proficient at dealing with Iran than with the crisis in Iraq. Iran presents far more complex challenge than what Iraq did. Iran has already mastered key military technologies and has long range missiles that may eventually carry warheads including nuclear ones if it has already developed them.

However, the perception of the US and that of Europe with regards

polity hoping that with the coming up of a younger generation Iran will be an open society. Unlike the Americans they ascribe Iran's nuclear policy to a measure of national pride and certainly not to a hostile action. If the European assessment of Iran is valid -- it is obvious -- the harder the Americans push the Iranians, the defiant will they become.

Not that the Americans do not understand it. But their concern centre round Israel's security. The Israeli Knesset was presented in July last an annual intelligent assessment according to which Iran, after Iraq, was the greatest threat to the Jewish state. Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Simon Peres recently warned that the world must mobilise against Iran's military potentials. The Mossad chief also told the Knesset's foreign affairs and defence committee that Iran was on the brink of uranium enrichment capability end by the year's end and it would be a point of no return.

In view of the above revelations an Israeli factor cannot be ignored in case of Iran. The analysts tend to believe that Tel Aviv may not wait for a US green signal and repeat what it did in 1981 to Iraq's Osirik reactor rear Baghdad. Such action will, of course, be followed by an acceptance of the fait accompli by an ever obliging US when it comes to the question of Israel's security.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

PERSPECTIVES

The perception of the US and that of Europe with regards to Iran situation vary substantially. Washington views Iran as outright enemy as well as hostile and terror-sponsoring state which is meddling in Iraq and on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons with which it could target Israel, Iran's long standing enemy. On the other hand, Europeans view Iran rather charitably. Unlike the Americans they ascribe Iran's nuclear policy to a measure of national pride and certainly not to a hostile action. If the European assessment of Iran is valid -- it is obvious -- the harder the Americans push the Iranians, the defiant will they become.

acts of aggression against all its neighbours, the international community seemed to look the other way. It has also been in illegal occupation of Gaza Strip and West Bank including Al-Quds for 31 years. It also occupied a strip of Lebanon for 22 years and annexed Syria's Golan Heights. Israel grudges Syria's special position in Lebanon from where she was driven out by Hezbollah. Israel has always been looking for an excuse to invade Syria for all those reasons. But for Iran both Tel Aviv and Washington haven't ever

grade. Now at the heart of the dispute are 'objective guarantees' about Iran's nuclear intentions. The Europeans are of the view that once Iran masters making low enriched uranium needed for power reactors it will be in a position to make the highly enriched uranium needed for bomb making. So they want Iran entirely out of nuclear fuel business. In return they would offer Iran attractive trade relations and normalisation of political relationship. Also the Europeans will meet Iran's other nuclear technology needs.

solidarity of powers likely to pressurise Iran the latter already offered gas and oil contracts to Russia, China and others to pursue them to break ranks with the Europeans and Americans.

The danger, however, is that if

Iran blocks the consensus on sanction in the UNSC the Americans may be obliged to debate the option of war. Yet the Iranians emboldened by the high prices of oil and continuing US predilections in Iraq feel confident that they can withstand the US threats. There is no evidence as to Iran situation vary substantially. Washington views Iran as outright enemy as well as hostile and terror-sponsoring state which is meddling in Iraq and on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons with which it could target Israel, Iran's long standing enemy. On the other hand, Europeans view Iran rather charitably. Their perception of Iran is subtle and closer to reality. They have already negotiated a nuclear freeze with Iran. The only hitch that remains is: For how long? The Europeans attach importance to Iran's competitive

A costly tragedy

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

MUCH has been written and said about the sad demise of SAMS Kibria. However, most of the reactions and comments have so far been limited to the incident itself and its immediate aftermath. It appears that we have not been able to take a long hard look at the compounding tragedy that has a crippling effect on the body-politic and is poised to impair our credentials. The World Bank is organising a meeting in Washington on February 23-24 to hammer out what could be done to improve the situation regarding the worsening political and governance scenario in Bangladesh. Authorities here have been asked to improve the situation but no impact could be made. The alleged inaction is leading to a dangerous situation. Our failure and incompetence has assumed a tragic proportion which, if not fully recognised and remedial actions taken immediately, will place the entire nation on a precipice.

Inaction and incapacity

Even before the wailings of the victims of one incident become fade we have to witness another tragedy caused by grenade throwing and bomb blasting. In the wake of these apparently unstoppable violence we are demanding swift and impartial investigation without ascertaining the real impediment to speedy action and impartiality. The public do not know why the trial of some charge-sheeted bomb explosion cases could not be held and how accused persons of such cases were gradually released on bail. It is also not known why fresh investigations are ordered when there is a change of political regime. Similarly, very few are bothered about the stalled investigations of other cases.

The inaction and the resultant incapacity characterising each incident of grenade and bomb explosion hangs heavy on the national scene and is giving rise to mounting international concern. The need, therefore, is to empower the investigators by lawful directives and ensure the growth of a healthy political climate for peaceful resolution.

Damper and despondency

The death of Kibria, without doubt, has ominous portents for budding politicians of the desired breed in the Bangladeshi polity. For Kibria had impeccable credentials in a scenario where politicians do

not care to improve the situation but no impact could be made. The alleged inaction is leading to a dangerous situation. Our failure and incompetence has assumed a tragic proportion which, if not fully recognised and remedial actions taken immediately, will place the entire nation on a precipice.

Inaction and incapacity

Even before the wailings of the victims of one incident become fade we have to witness another tragedy caused by grenade throwing and bomb blasting. In the wake of these apparently unstoppable violence we are demanding swift and impartial investigation without ascertaining the real impediment to speedy action and impartiality. The public do not know why the trial of some charge-sheeted bomb explosion cases could not be held and how accused persons of such cases were gradually released on bail. It is also not known why fresh investigations are ordered when there is a change of political regime. Similarly, very few are bothered about the stalled investigations of other cases.

Inaction and incapacity

figure high on the popularity ratings. He was a soothing presence in a culture of high emotion and over-statement. His cruel annihilation from the political arena sends a disturbing signal to decent folks who are desirous of taking to the public life. The premonition is: Are we not creating a situation where half-educated brats with no commitment and compassion will occupy the centrestage of politics for a painfully long time? Cynical comments like 'Politics is the last refuge of a scoundrel' will gain credence in our parlance if we fail to arrest the rising tide of violence and properly investigate the crime.

Late Kibria's election to parliament was a surprise to those who thought electoral popularity was an exclusive preserve of ill-gotten money and muscle. The well meaning persons who felt

inspired to shake off their ambivalence

restored. All these will augur well for the nation and the polity.

Sermon and sincerity

Till date we are deluged with administration of different dimension following each incidence of grenade and bomb blast. However, substantive progress has not been

achieved because we have not taken a pragmatic and holistic view and have concentrated our efforts primarily on treating the symptoms. We have agreed to let foreign investigation agency conduct their activities on our soil without undertaking serious efforts to brush up our investigator's skills. The investigation of the connected cases has not been

taken in right earnest it deserved because in several instances there have been complaints from foreign and local quarters that the scene of occurrence was not effectively secured and that physi-

cal evidence was tampered with. The field outfits have not acted with desired speed and circumspection. The series of explosion incidents have not alerted the concerned agencies to take adequate preventive steps and progress, if any, have not been made public.

In the above backdrop, the sincerity of the authority comes into question. The required sincerity can only be proved through concrete actions like proper registration of the case, energising the intelligence network for proper apprehension, collection of material, physical and circumstantial evidence, effective laboratory testing and finally expeditious

investigation. All these can be made possible if the political executives show adequate determination and agree to go by the book.

The field executives concerning the criminal investigation have the ability and competence to withstand the pressures of sustained investigation and present a legally tenable charge sheet. The rest would be a matter for the law courts to decide. After all, the booking of perpetrators is possible by working through the existing criminal intelligence network. If in the past we have been able to detect clueless murder cases there is no reason to think that the same cannot be done now.

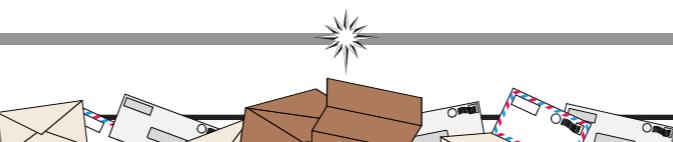
In fact the public functionaries including the investigators must be helped and facilitated to so conduct themselves that the difference between government and state interests are not diluted

thereby upholding the hallowed ethos of our public service. If this can be done at the earliest we may be able to halt the pernicious slide towards an environment of all-pervasive lack of trust and confidence in the ability and impartiality of our investigative apparatus. The politicians have to realise that the series of explosion incidents and the death of Kibria in particular have made an adverse impact on all segments of the state and the outside world has taken a note of that. The situation brooks no further delay because the nation must come out of the saturated pool of pathetic inaction into a pragmatic realisation that political disputes must be settled in a civilized manner and violence cannot be a way of life in a democratic polity.

In pursuance of the government's declaration that all incidents of bomb and grenade explosions would be thoroughly investigated, a high-powered commission may be set up consisting of eminent judicial and investigating experts to oversee the investigation on a regular basis. The commission must work with a definite time frame so that the hopes of early resolution are not frustrated. Kibria's death must compel us to wake up and realise that the interests of different political governments may vary and that power may change hands but the functions of state will not assume a partisan character. Let this tragic incident not foreclose the entry of well-meaning gentle folks in public life. Let gentle voices be heard everywhere in Bangladesh.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Inspector General of Police and Secretary to the Government.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Trip to Cox's Bazar

On January 23, 2005, my better half and I went to Cox's Bazar. The journey from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar was smooth and comfortable. The buses that ply from Dhaka to Chittagong and Chittagong to Cox's Bazar are very good. We stayed in a three star hotel in Cox's Bazar situated beside the beach. The hotel was excellent in terms of atmosphere and service. We could hear the roar of the bay from the hotel. My mind was filled with ecstasy. Most of the time we passed in the beach and enjoyed the sunset. The pleasure we got knew no bounds. The Cox's Bazar sea beach is the longest in the world. Some arrangements are there to have rest and to bask after bathing in the water. Speedboats are also seen in the beach water and are available to the people. Some ornaments made of sea gathered coral substances are

sold at a low price. Burmese made pickles can also be bought for a reasonable price. Many important islands like the Saint Martin's and Moheshkhali are also situated near Cox's Bazar.

Himchari

Himchari is famous for its waterfall. It is only 8km from Cox's Bazar and you have to take the route beside the beach to reach the place. Himchari is also a picnic spot. The distance between the ground to the hilltop is about 220 feet. The ascending to the hilltop is uphill but nobody, not even children, misses it to go up there to see the beach. But the route to Himchari is not as smooth as expected. Some portions of the route have not been developed into a road. This is why tourists elect to hire Moon's Car that ply through the beach slant. The concerned authorities should take immediate steps to carpet the route to attract more tourists.

Ahmed Khaled

Orewa, New Zealand

make the journey comfortable and minimise the time and thus the tourists will rush to see the place with great zeal.

M. Awlad Hossain

Tejgaon, Dhaka-1208

Food prices

It is really sad to see that a democratically elected government miserably failed to control the prices of essential foodstuff in a country like Bangladesh, where more than 35 percent people live under poverty line. We are extremely sorry to see most of the ruling alliance high-ups being insensitive to this issue and even their grassroots level leaders and workers are crying without any help. Some ruling party leaders and their goons are busy making money by taking this opportunity of high food prices.

Rice, milk, wheat, sugar, edible oil, salt, onion are essentials that people cannot do without. The government should develop some sort of mechanism to control the price of these essentials. Most of the people of Bangladesh are extremely poor and their buying capacity is very limited. On the

other hand, most of these poor people are associated with agriculture for their bread and butter.

The government is following a wrong policy and making the poor people's lives miserable. In a free market economy price depends on supply and demand. In developed countries food prices go up and down from time to time, but nobody feels the heat as their income is very high in relation to food prices.

The government should develop a system or mechanism so that poor farmers can get the proper prices of their products when they sell them. But they should also be assured of buying foods at reasonable prices when they are in

need. The government policy is for importers, businessmen, brokers and politicians.

The government should immediately construct warehouses to build buffer stocks of these essentials. When greedy businessmen

will try to increase the price, the government should increase the supply to keep the price stable. At the same time when farmers are about to sell their products, the government should keep buying even at a loss to control the falling prices.

The

government

should

keep

buying

at

loss

to