

## Water supply crunch

*Going deeper underground could spell disaster*

**T**HE WASA, in its bid to collect ground water, seems set to install a large number of tubewells with a depth of 1000 feet in the city. The existing 600 feet deep tubewells are not considered adequate to extract water due to a significant lowering of the ground water table.

The experts have said in very clear terms that excessive dependence on ground water can invite environmental hazards of various kinds. Experience shows that over-extraction of ground water can cause land subsidence and lead to creation of underground vacuums which make us all the more vulnerable to earthquake. Ground water is not being recharged at the same rate as it is depleted. In effect, the process of digging deeper and deeper will have to be continued endlessly. Clearly, the tubewell-based water supply has already been stretched to its limits.

The answer to the problem lies in having surface water treatment plants and going for conservation of rainwater for lean-time use. Only the first phase of the Sayedabad water treatment plant, which was conceived donkey years back, has been completed. Fund constraints are said to be the biggest inhibiting factor as far as completion of the second and third phases of the plant is concerned. But the question is when funds are available for so many other projects, why the same could not be arranged for an undertaking of such importance as the Sayedabad water plant? However, the silver-lining around the cloud is the prospect for Danida and Sida finances to complete the projects. The job is cut out for the government to try and expedite the process of fund-raising.

WASA's policy is dangerously short-sighted. Ironically, it is the outcome of successive governments' failure to adopt a long term water extraction policy based on surface sources, but given the dreadful consequences of going deeper with tubewells we must abandon the course.

A time-bound plan to harness surface water that can obviate further tapping of ground water has to be adopted sooner than later.

## Inaction on narcotics

*No wonder the problem is getting worse*

**W**E are shocked to learn that the National Narcotics Control Board (NNCB) the apex body which is supposed to provide policy direction to the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) has not even convened in the past two years. This low priority given to fighting drug addiction and drug-related crime is reflected in the scant progress made by the authorities in their quest to stamp out the scourge of drugs.

The NNCB is a high-powered group, comprising, among others, eleven cabinet ministers and a secretary to the government, but it is clear that drug interdiction has not been a top concern of theirs of late. This inaction on the part of the NNCB has led to problems in the DNC itself which is both undermanned and under-funded.

The DNC has only 600 employees all over the country, of whom roughly 90 per cent do not have any specific training or background in the field. DNC officials also complain that they are denied much needed equipment, specially arms, needed to aggressively pursue drug traders, many of whom are extremely dangerous and well-armed themselves. In addition, in the absence of any kind of guideline or direction set forth by the NNCB, the DNC suffers from corruption, incompetence, and inefficiency.

Drugs are a serious problem in this country. A significant number of murders, assaults, and robberies are linked to the clandestine drug trade. It is estimated that there are over two million addicts in the country and the annual amount of narcotics seized is less than the amount consumed in Dhaka city in one day. The DNC has made some headway in programmes designed to create awareness of the problem, but this is not nearly enough.

It is clear that direction and commitment from the top is what is needed. The NNCB must meet as soon as practicable to send the message that it takes its duties seriously, and it must take the lead in providing direction and ensure that the necessary funding and personnel are available so that the DNC is able to do its job properly.

## It's all in the fraternity!



M ABDUL HAFIZ

**I**N the middle of the last month Europe witnessed the biggest ever Nazi demonstration in decades marching through the city of Dresden to observe the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their second world war destruction. With a measure of trepidation and embarrassment, right wing parties with openly racist and xenophobic views are appearing also in other European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands. The Europeans with that experience of second world war cannot but see any sign of Nazi resurrection as a huge threat. Worried EU policy makers are already considering a ban on Nazi symbols when Prince Harry of England caused a pan-European furor over his choice of Swastika as a part of his dress. While the rise of neo-Nazis is already causing concerns for the Europeans, in another German city, Munich, the world's top military and foreign policy experts drawn from Europe and the United States gathered to reflect on what the both view as an ever more dangerous phenomenon: The

threat to global security and western civilization posed by Muslim extremists especially after nine-eleven.

Interestingly only years before, the US and Europe whose representatives have now assembled in Munich fell apart over Iraq war. The Pentagon Chief, Donald Rumsfeld famously derided the 'old Europeans', France and Germany, for opposing US' Iraq invasion. There prevailed a 'Cold War' of sorts between the US and so called old Europeans for a while. Some old

on the part of any of its constituents is alright within the fraternity so long those are directed against an outsider -- whether ideological enemy or antithetical by faith. Inspite of polarised positions held by them they can immediately close their ranks with extraordinary resilience.

It was therefore nothing unusual in Munich that once feuding members of transatlantic fraternity are now united in new global security challenge which, they consider, could be combated through joint

military action Rumsfeld added. "The military can only be the part of solution and it is always the last resort".

Yet there was no murmur or clarification sought for earlier US action -- the war and its concomitant deaths and destructions. All seemed to have acquiesced all what already happened. There was no nagging prolongation of the acrimonies of the past when Europeans were cajoled and ridiculed by the US.

US Secretary of State Ms Condoleezza Rice also was in the town to woo the EU officials and experts with her mealy-mouthed talk of America's admiration for a strong and united Europe and promises of joint EU-US action in the Middle East. Ms Rice's message was that America and Europe must put their Iraq war acrimony behind and look to the future which may as well be holding prospect for EU's share in Iraq reconstruction. Also otherwise the EU policy makers seem to be

The chancellor stressed that Iran would abandon her uranium enrichment programme if its economy can be backed up from outside and her legitimate security interests are safeguarded.

Germany, France and Britain -- the so called European Union Three -- are currently working to hammer out a diplomatic deal in which Tehran would hopefully renounce her uranium enrichment in return for trade and aid. On the contrary US President Bush has said that he does not rule out using military force against Iranian nuclear facilities. Irrespective of whichever side is able to push through its agenda it will hardly matter. After all it is all in the fraternity. France together with Britain drew the politico-strategic map of the Middle East at the dawn of last century. This century even at its outset seems to be belonging to the Americans.

The US was the first to invent and explode her nuclear bomb. It took little time to proliferate among her war time allies. The US took it easy but there was paranoid anxiety when an outsider -- China -- exploded her bomb in 1964. There was a grand bargain at the behest of Europeans and Americans with the prospective proliferators. This resulted in the signing of NPT in 1970. At no cost the white men's monopoly of the genie could be diluted by letting it go outside the fraternity.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS

## PERSPECTIVES

**The US was the first to invent and explode her nuclear bomb. It took little time to proliferate among her war time allies. The US took it easy but there was paranoid anxiety when an outsider -- China -- exploded her bomb in 1964. There was a grand bargain at the behest of Europeans and Americans with the prospective proliferators. This resulted in the signing of NPT in 1970. At no cost the white men's monopoly of the genie could be diluted by letting it go outside the fraternity.**

Europeans who already obtained lucrative oil contracts from Saddam Hussain stubbornly fought to stop the war. But the Americans lured by an oil bonanza were rather intoxicated to have their first foray in the Middle East.

But then such feuding among the Europeans and their offspring in North America is nothing new. They fought among themselves and were at each other's neck whenever there was a clash of their capitalistic interests. But to face any one or anything from outside their white race fraternity they have a rock-solid unity. Any omission or commission

transatlantic action. Talking of Europe's and America's "Common values, shared histories and abiding faith in democracy", Donald Rumsfeld said, a coordination of 'legal, diplomatic and intelligence' was crucial for their safeguards. Known for his preference for the unilateral US action, Rumsfeld made a complete U-turn at the Munich conclave by telling his European counterparts: "By now it must be clear that one nation cannot defeat the extremists alone". In another sweetener to Europeans who have long hailed the importance of 'soft' diplomacy over 'hard'

In the meantime, old Europeans struck an unmistakable chord with the thinkings across the Atlantic when German Foreign Minister Josehka Fischer identified the extremists' abhorrence of Western society as a global security threat. It was not just the US that the Islamic radicals hate, it was the entire West, he said. While determination to fight religious extremism was pulling together the EU governments and policymakers in newly rejigged US administration they went out of their way in recent days to ensure that Bush's much heralded visit to Europe was trouble-free.

tired of permanently feuding with Washington. That the Europeans no more harbour any rancour over Iraq war can be understood from the fact that all 25 EU governments now agree to undertake the training of Iraqi police and judges.

However, the divisions over what is to be done to defuse Iran tensions is one of the last few differences still prevalent in transatlantic solidarity. Schroeder's message to Washington at Munich was that the US must back EU diplomatic efforts to convince Iran to abandon its suspected development of nuclear weapon.

## Enhancing powers of parliamentary standing committees

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

**T**RANSPARENCY International Bangladesh (TIB) presented its report titled Parliament Watch at a press conference at the National Press Club, Dhaka on March 1, 2005. The report "is based on proceedings of the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th sessions of the 8th Parliament held last year, i.e. in 2004."

The important findings of the report, as reported in the media, are: (1) parliament failed to ensure accountability of the government; (2) parliamentary standing committees on different ministries could not play an effective role in investigating corruption and irregularities in different organisations under the ministries concerned; (3) the lawmakers of the main opposition party Awami League were absent from parliament for 48 out of 83 days last year; (4) the lawmakers raised irrelevant issues including raising their own party leaders and criticising the opponents 1565 times in four parliament sessions; (5) none of the 491 adjournment motions moved in parliament saw the light of discussion; (6) the four sessions witnessed severe quorum crisis almost every day; (7) of the Tk 22.11 crore spent to run the four sessions of House last year, more than Tk 5 crore had been wasted due to quorum crises alone; (8) Prime Minister's question-answer session, boycotted by the main opposition, was not held on 32 per cent of the scheduled days or questions were just tabled. Ninety per cent of the questions were from Treasury Bench lawmakers.

In another development on the same day, the chairmen of the parliamentary standing committees in a discussion on Promotion of Better Understanding and Collaboration amongst the Parliamentary Standing Committees and Ministries of the Government in Dhaka on March 1 accused the ministries of non-cooperation with the parlia-

mentary standing committees and non-implementation of their recommendations. They also accused some senior ministers for their alleged attempt to convince the Prime Minister that the existing provision should be changed to enable the ministers to head the ministerial standing committees. The chairmen of the standing committees univocally demanded formulation of clear rules of procedure giving due authority to them to execute the decisions. The discussion in this article, has, therefore, been limited to enhancing the powers of the parliamentary standing committees in parliament.

Article 76 of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides that parliament shall appoint from among its

members the following standing

committees. The parliamentary standing committees that are of greater importance to general public are ministerial committees, and finance and audit committees. According to rules of procedure, the functions of a standing committee on a ministry are to examine any bill or other matter referred to it by Parliament, to review the works relating to a ministry which falls within its jurisdiction, to enquire into any activity or irregularity and serious complaint in respect of the ministry and to examine, if it deems fit, any such other matter as may fall within its jurisdiction and to make recommendations. Finance and audit committees namely, Committee on Public Accounts, Committee on Estimates

ing entities. This prompted some chairmen of the standing committees to observe that the inability of the committees to implement the decisions simply made the committees "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Now let us see the powers of the standing committees in some other countries having presidential or parliamentary system of government.

In the United States of America, all the legislative powers are vested in a Congress consisting of a Senate and House of Representatives. In Congress, all bills are referred to committees before there is any discussion on their principles. In the great majority of cases the bill goes to an appropriate standing commit-

tee of the House into which it is introduced automatically. The title of the bill indicates which particular standing committee should receive it. Under the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 there are 19 standing committees in the House of Representatives and 15 in the Senate. A standing committee exercises great powers as (1) it may recommend the bill back to the Chamber concerned with a recommendation that it be passed; (2) it may amend the bill and recommend that it be passed as amended; (3) it may entirely change the original bill except its title and report a new one in its place; (4) it may report the bill unfavourably and recommend that it need not be passed; (5) it may "pigeon-hole" the bill, that is, to take no action on the bill at all or report it so late in the session that it may not find an opportunity for consideration.

In the British Parliament, every bill, except a money bill, automatically goes to one of the standing committees after the second read-

ing, unless the House resolves that it should go either to the Committee of the Whole House or to a Select Committee. In the British Parliament, the standing committees are less powerful in the sense that a committee finds out the omissions and commissions of the bill and then submits it to the House which is the final authority. But in the US Congress, only the bill that has been favourably reported by the committee has the chance of being passed.

It appears from the above that the standing committees in the US Congress and the British Parliament are basically meant for examining bills and making appropriate recommendations. A great similarity exists between

**Now the question arises as to whether enhancement of powers of our parliamentary committees, particularly of ministerial committees, should receive favourable consideration. We have to be watchful that no imbalance is created between the executive and legislature, the two of the three organs of the state.**

members the following standing

committees: (a) a public accounts committee; (b) committee of privileges; and (c) such other standing committees as the rules of procedure of Parliament require.

The rules of procedure framed and adopted by Parliament guide and regulate functional details, overall operation and terms of reference of the parliamentary committees. The parliamentary standing committees are generally grouped into such categories as ministerial committees, for example, Committee on Ministry of Commerce, Committee on Ministry of Industries, Committee on Ministry of Foreign Affairs etc.; finance and audit committees; and a number of other committees of standing nature, for instance, Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions, Committee of Privileges, Committee on Government Assurances, Committee on Rules of Procedure etc. The above groupings exclude select or special

and Committee on Public Undertakings "are considered as special mechanisms of the Sangsad (Parliament) to perform its supervisory role over the government expenditures. The Public Accounts Committee scrutinises annual financial accounts and appropriations as approved, and pinpoints the irregularities of the government bodies with necessary recommendations and remedial measures. The Committee on Estimates examines estimates throughout the financial year and gives suggestions for ensuring economy and efficiency in governance process. Accounts and reports of public institutions are reviewed by the Public Undertakings Committee, which points out the gap between the affairs of public offices and the on-going government policies."

The above standing committees submit their reports with findings and recommendations within the fixed or extended period of time for presentation to the House. The committees are thus recommend-

tee of the House into which it is introduced automatically. The title of the bill indicates which particular standing committee should receive it. Under the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 there are 19 standing committees in the House of Representatives and 15 in the Senate. A standing committee exercises great powers as (1) it may recommend the bill back to the Chamber concerned with a recommendation that it be passed; (2) it may amend the bill and recommend that it be passed as amended; (3) it may entirely change the original bill except its title and report a new one in its place; (4) it may report the bill unfavourably and recommend that it need not be passed; (5) it may "pigeon-hole" the bill, that is, to take no action on the bill at all or report it so late in the session that it may not find an opportunity for consideration.

In the British Parliament, every bill, except a money bill, automatically goes to one of the standing committees after the second read-

the standing committees of the Lok Sabha (House of People) of India and those of the Bangladesh Parliament in respect of their powers, functions and conduct of business. The standing committees of the Lok Sabha are generally grouped into such categories as parliamentary committees, for instance, Business Advisory Committee, House Committee, Committee on Petitions; departmentally related committees, for example, Committee on Agriculture, Committee on Defence, Committee on External Affairs; and Ad-hoc Committees, namely Committee on Ethics, Joint Committee on Installation of Portraits/Statutes of National Leaders and Parliamentarians in Parliament Complex. The above committees are basically recommending bodies.

Now the question arises as to whether enhancement of powers of our parliamentary committees, particularly of ministerial committees, should receive favourable consideration. We have to be watchful that no imbalance is cre-

ated between the executive and legislature, the two of the three organs of the state. The other organ is judiciary. As we have seen above, the role of the standing committees in the US Congress and the British Parliament is limited to the legislative business. In our neighbouring countries also, the standing committees on ministries act as the recommending bodies and the authority for taking decisions on the reports and recommendations of the committees rests with the House.

It would, therefore, be advisable that the Prime Minister's office asks the ministries to render all cooperation and assistance in the discharge of the functions and responsibilities of the ministerial committees. The Daily Star's editorial of March 3 rightly noted: "This sort of foot-dragging on the part of the ministries must end. The ministries must be directed to comply and cooperate fully with the standing committees and to take their own role more seriously."

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former 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.

### Weekly holiday

I fully endorse the letter from Khondoker Ali Imam and his views on weekly holiday published on February 5.

Imagine the coming day long hartal on 27 March. There will be three consecutive no-work days since we will celebrate the Independence Day on March 26. I wish the government realise the gravity of the situation and take further steps to declare Sunday a weekly holiday.

Lets us all hope for a positive decision.  
Jamshed  
Banani

### Crime and appeasement

If your staff correspondent's front-page report (DS: 06 March) is to be believed, it beggars the imagination. While we hound corruption here and there at the lower level of government and other agencies; the citadel of power like the proverbial "Caesar's wife" remains above

suspicion. Is this democracy or out and out autocracy of the highest order?

What an excellent way of building our image, when the centre of power houses the ravaging cancer of corruption! What more to say about white washing our image. Physician, heal thyself!

A citizen  
Dhaka

### Launch disasters and the ministry

The recent news in the national dailies regarding bribery in the shipping department has pushed us one step to find out one of the root causes of launch disasters in Bangladesh. In the last incident, as we have seen, the minister and the relevant officials made a formal visit to the site and tried to defend the government on river transport management. This is not acceptable to the general people and the family members of the victims. It does not reflect the sincerity and honest intention of the ministry to

resolve the problem. It is useless if we do not find any effective action plan to identify the causes behind launch disasters.

According to the report, there are many reasons for these disasters. Firstly, the designs of some motor launches are not technically flawless, but some corrupt architects in the shipping department certify these vessels.

Secondly, the launch owners are not showing any commitment to go by the rules and safety regulations due to lack of control of the concerned government authorities.

Thirdly, the "Sareng" of these launches are sometimes reluctant to work long hours and forget about their duties and responsibilities. As a result the helpers of the motor launches take charge.

Fourthly, the existing launch fleet is not adequate to meet the demand of passengers, especially during festivals, holidays and weekends.

So, it is the time to reorganise the whole structure of the shipping department. The ministry has to be

### Educated, yet prejudiced

In an ordinary morning I was rushing to my college at Karotia. But unexpectedly I got a nasty feeling on the day. A tempo passenger, who was just behind me, uttered the word 'unholy'. Then I paid my heed and could understand his speech. It was about women. He was telling others not to vote for women as they are unholy (!). I could not stay silent and reminded him of his mother, wife and daughters. He became speechless.

The man was not a religious fellow and apparently was educated. Then, how did he get such a messy conception about women? There is not the shadow of a doubt in my mind that lack of proper education along with lack of respect for women are responsible for this. No one can deny women have been neglected and persecuted in our

society. Certainly, demand of rights is not a sin. So we cannot stop or blame our women for being out of home and engaged in all sorts of constructive activities. What the men do unquestionably.

We have to be accountable to our conscience. I believe, no lame excuse should be allowed in this age of individualism. Everyone has to be liberal to reduce all discrepancies between men and women.

Only then, can we expect an enlightened society.  
Biddut Khoshobish  
Tangail

### Islamic militants

When the law-enforcers arrested Dr. Asadullah Al Galib and his associates, the image of Bangladesh had already suffered a big blow for the existence of Islamic militant groups on Bangladeshi soil. Recent bomb-attacks in many of the cultural programmes and threats to bomb NGOs helping women to be self-assertive have left nothing for us to deny that Islamic militant organisations do exist in Bangladesh.

Islamic militant organisations are undoubtedly an emergence of a new evil power. In the recent years, some mullahs have spawned a plethora of new Islamic militant organisations. With formation of Islamic militant organisations thus going on, the day is not far when Bangladesh will be called a terrorist-infested country like Afghanistan.

So the government must be strict not to free any Islamic militants without due punishment in order to prevent our country from becoming a safe haven for such elements.  
Fahim Wasef  
New Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

### "When can their glory fade?"

The day was again 25th and this time the month was February. The nation was just catching its breath after the mourning on 21st. The news of the deaths of nine Bangladeshi soldiers came absolutely from the blue. We were not just ready to take anything like that.

To many of us it came like a surprise...since we knew our troops were engaged in peace keeping missions. What we didn't know... it was a peace-enforcing mission in a region where scattered fighting is still on. To every single citizen of this poor country, this news was heart breaking.

Whenever the nation needed the brave soldiers, they responded and salvaged the countrymen from natural calamities, civil disorders and epidemics in flood or cyclone hit areas. In the general elections, recovery of illegal arms, construction of roads in hilly terrain, construction of shelter for the poor in the villages, establishing universities, medical colleges... everywhere they have proved their worth. Our Armed Forces have undoubtedly made a huge contribution to the development of the country. To be fair there is no other organisation, which can match the Armed Forces in discipline, loyalty, integrity and dedication.

Thousands of miles from their home even in the continent of Africa,

our soldiers performed with the same oath and same dedication. They assured the people of the crisis prone Congo to dream again about a peaceful life. Our soldiers constructed houses for them, made schools for their children, gave them much needed medication to keep them alive. They became so popular that the people of Congo started learning to speak Bangla and started singing Bangla songs. It was unbelievable when we saw an African crowd singing a Bangla folk song in a documentary made by a Bangladeshi TV channel. My heart was filled with respect and gratitude for those soldiers in Congo and thousands in many parts of the world.

But the news of their unfortunate deaths has shattered our joy. They were the soldiers of peace, messengers of a new sunrise. They were our brothers, our friends. They were the greatest sons of our motherland.  
Md Bashar Farhad  
Mipur-11, Dhaka