

The looming spectre of waterwars



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assume a strategic dimension and the threats are traded between the adversaries to deny water to the opponent. The acute water shortage in the region makes water a key issue in the Middle East politics. The leaders of the region often spoke of war over water. Late King Hussein of Jordan declared in 1990 that water was the only issue that could take him to war with Israel. Jordan, Israel and occupied West Bank share the water of Jordan river. A hostile Israel already interfered with the river's water supply to the Palestinians in

research on 'Environment and Conflict' indicates that the cause of future conflict between nations will tend to centre on water availability. The situation is likely to exacerbate with the global warming which with rising sea level will pollute the river waters with salinity. The repeated draughts across the vast swathe of Africa, Central Asia and part of South Asia continue to take their tolls. At this time, globally 1.4 billion people do not have enough drinking water. The phenomenal rise in the population has not seen, in

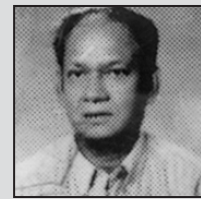
million cubic kilometers is fresh water, most of which is locked up in glaciers or deep ground water aquifer. The usable portion of it is only 200,000 cubic kilometers. This is less than one percent of all fresh water and 0.01 percent of all water on earth. This starkly brings forth our predicament and a scramble for water that may ensue at a point of future time.

The fight for water is already on between not only the states but also between provinces as well as upper and lower riparians. Multinationals are rushing to appropriate ground water resources and are meeting resistance from civil society. But the major global companies are determined to overcome those challenges and control water resources. They already constructed large scale water projects in key consumption centres in the cities such as Paris, Marseilles, Athens, Helsinki, Tokyo, New York and Los Angeles by moving huge quantities of water from basins elsewhere, leaving those basins perhaps dry.

This is a kind of conflict where no ethics or moralities are likely to be adhered to. As the resource of water is key to physical survival there exists no scope for bringing in ethics or moralities by the parties concerned. Only a collective endeavour at global level can save the humanity from the looming catastrophe through a planned conservation of this bounty of the nature with a sense of selflessness.

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Russia back on centrestage in Palestine



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

SINCE the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has not been conspicuous on ME theatre. No it seems she has resumed her place in the Middle East. The Russian President Vladimir Putin has returned to the area with a bang.

For the first time the Russian leader has visited Israel followed by a visit to Palestine. Thus Russia re-establishes herself as a major player in the Middle East. The United States of America, who had an open field all to herself has missed the bus. From all accounts President Putin had a very successful visit to the area. He offered President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine technical help and deliveries of military equipment and training stating "if we expect Mahmoud Abbas fight effectively against terrorism, we cannot expect him to do this with stones". President Putin offered to hold a Middle East

Peace Conference which was welcomed by Abbas and elicited cool response from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel and President George Bush of the USA. Thus after a long period of hibernation Russia has reclaimed her place in the Middle East.

This falls in line with the project of the quartet which includes Russia,

and murderous suicide bombing of Israeli targets and Israel seems determined to pull out of Gaza. The question of dismantling of Israeli settlements from the fertile West Bank remains a tricky one. By all accounts Sharon seems to push for settlements near Jerusalem, which is the heart of the conflict between the Arabs and the

special relations between two countries it is between the US and Israel and more so between Bush and Sharon. It is hard to imagine Bush not bending to the wishes of Sharon.

In the old days -- the Palestine-Israel dispute is more than half a century old -- the US used to side with Israel and the USSR used to side with the Arabs. That situation changed dramatically during the Presidency of Bill Clinton, the immediate predecessor of President Bush. President Clinton, operating alone without any other country playing any effective part, played a brilliant even handed role between the Palestinians and the Israelis. He came within a whisker of a settlement but failed on the rock of Jerusalem. President Bush has been an open advocate of Israel and refused to meet the elected Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

The Palestine-Israel conflict has entered a new ball game. Gone are the days when Russia would automatically side with the Arabs, although they would wish to continue their old links. Gone are the days when Russia would shun Israel for Putin has just concluded a historical visit to Israel. The Palestine-Israel conflict is no longer the private preserve of the US but has resumed its international status. The world will eagerly watch the denouement.

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PERSPECTIVES

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the occupied area. Moreover, an increasing demand on the water of Jordan river basin has led to a heightened tension in the region.

The Nile, the world's longest river, is shared by as many as nine countries. Egypt is last in the line. In 1989, the then Egyptian minister of state for foreign affairs famously said: "The national security of Egypt is in the hands of eight other African countries in the Nile basin." The current

tandem, an equally high rise in the quantity of water. Yet the consumption of fresh water is multiplying on an unequal basis. While this multiplication of consumption keeps rising the world's water reserve cannot but deplete only.

As revealed in the UN's Environment Outlook 3, 2002, the total volume of water on the earth is about 1400 million cubic kilometers of which only 2.5 percent or about 35

SAVAR BUILDING COLLAPSE

A tragedy caused by human negligence



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

enquiry committee constituted by the government recently, the factory building at Palashbari had encroached upon a part of the canal flowing over the government khas land. The approved design by the Cantonment Board was for a 4-storey building which was later raised to 9-storey without further approval. Experts believe that it was faulty design and use of poor quality construction materials that triggered this collapse. That is the real tragedy -- the devastation and death were avoidable if only guidelines for building construction had been followed. The greatest fear even after this accident is that there are about seven more buildings as newspaper reports suggest, at Savar that face such risk of collapse. If not anything else an earthquake of minor intensity in this area, experts fear, could be a calamity of extensive dimensions.

It was not an earthquake that could have caused such fatal collapse of the nine storied Spectrum sweater factory building at Savar on the workers numbering about 350 at different floors during the night shift of April 10 last. As newspaper reports suggest, based on the findings of an

One can't miss the traditional scenario that goes on after any such accident: the government machinery goes into a flurry of activities. High-powered committees are set up, recommendations are made and grim warnings and punitive measures against the violators are also announced but after some days all these recommendations lie buried in the dark corners of the ministry concerned.

Shockingly, in this country people have become so prone to disasters and deaths that they only wake up after a disaster has hit. Some ad hoc measures like constituting committees are then taken to appease public rage and then life goes on as usual. As reports from workers engaged in night shift duty on that fateful night indicate out of some 350 working that night some 150 remain untraced and feared to be buried alive under the debris. It was a terrible incident. It seemed to

touch a chord in all citizenry because garments industry employing the largest labour force in the country is a part of our national pride and existence. Ironically true, these factories are very poorly managed. More shocking, the very work place where our young men and women go to earn a living has the shadow of death over it.

Systematic flouting of safety norms and have turned the country's garment factories into veritable death traps. Reports published in the newspaper and other sources indicate that only fires in city's garment factories have claimed so far 322 lives. Inquiries are invariably instituted as a routine matter but the guilty even if identified are rarely punished. The irony in the latest building collapse incident at Savar is such that because of powerful lobby no formal diary in the local thana could be filed by any party. Most shockingly, an industry that employs more than ten lakh workers in the city and its outskirts and now ranks as the biggest foreign exchange earner has given little attention towards ensuring safety and security of its workers. No sensible citizen can compromise the idea of allowing such a vital industry to operate with so little accountability.

While the long term measure of relocating these industries to the outskirts of the city as suggested by the ministerial committee is a long way off, short term measures such as installation of fire fighting implements in the buildings, creation of exit routes and most importantly approval of the building plan by RAJUK must be taken up before a factory starts functioning. It's reportedly learnt that in the case of Spectrum sweater factory approval of the 9-storey building plan from the Cantonment Board was taken in 2004 whereas the factory started operation from 2001.

In most cases building laws are violated with impunity. Most of the factories have exit routes or stairs throttled with waste clothes and baskets full of waste. Most shockingly in most cases the main entrance gate has been found locked without the guard being available there. Think of the colossal problem that is likely to create when some 500 to 600 workers, mostly untrained women from the rural areas, want to evacuate through such a narrow three foot staircase after hearing an alarm bell false or real.

Besides these, electric lines in most cases are very fragile and a little spark or a short circuit can spread the fire through the whole installation in the twinkling of an eye. Despite the fact that a series of accidents have taken place in quick succession, the licensing authorities or the administration have never showed up or visited the factories to see if these units met the safety regulations and norms. Many of these factories situated in the narrow by-lanes and densely packed residential areas in high rise buildings are almost inaccessible to fire fighters.

The ministerial committee constituted by the government made some recommendations that the garment owners must follow. Sadly true, these laws were already there but management were reluctant to invest the extra money needed. Rather they lived with the risk and their workers were exposed to frequent hazards. No one would believe that garments industries are losing concerns and that as such any additional investment would render the business unprofitable.

In recent years there has been an unusual boom in building construction, mostly high rise apartment blocks by real estate developers as well as private individuals in the city and its outskirts far up to Gazipur on one side and Savar on the other. The stark reality

is: this construction business is also corruption ridden and this endemic nature of corruption has bred problems and set off risk situation in the building sector as well. But the fact is: until an accident occurs every building is supposed to be safe. Moreover poor supervision by novice engineer employed at a cheap salary often leads to disastrous situation.

People might recall the chilling experience of Shakharbazar building collapse in the wake of the building being raised to three more floors over a weak foundation. The incidence of building collapse in other areas of Dhaka namely Mohammadpur, Rampura and Narayanganj are tell-tale evidences of the havoc that it can wreak if we fail to look at the weaknesses. As our experiences of building collapse in the city and its suburbs, due mainly to structural defects and design flaws are very bitter, RAJUK and PWD should make coordinated efforts through media publicity to create public awareness about the safety norms to be adhered to in building construction, because public awareness is essential for their enforcement.

Sadly true, it is only because of lax enforcement that disasters one after another have gripped us. Ironically true, four out of five Bangladeshi homes are designed by the owners themselves, and most do not realise that their homes may become their tombs. Regulating engineers is also the need of the time. Because engineers have no licensing system, so even a novice engineer can legally certify that a building has been suitably built.

So how can buildings be made resistant to collapse -- in either earthquake or cyclone? Two essential factors are -- good design and good construction. The idea is to build structures in a way that can absorb maximum force and still remain stable. So says a leading structural engineer in the country, "If the beams and columns of the building are properly joined, 50 per cent of collapse resistant design is taken care of." This means if a builder has a tendency to save on concrete or steel, the sturdiness of the building will be at stake.

Pure geometric shapes like squares, rectangles and triangles disperse the seismic or torsional forces equally in all directions, so are safer. For similar reasons, a cantilever or irregular shape results in uneven distribution of forces causing such buildings to collapse. Uneven structures can be safe, stresses an expert, but they have to be appropriately reinforced to resist such forces. Steel cross beams in high rises are latest techniques. A solid concrete core -- such as the lift-shaft in the centre -- and sheer concrete walls, along with cross beams, are extremely quake resistant. Building materials are crucial too. The safest building would be all steel as it is an extremely good shock absorber.

After the Savar building collapse, the image is fast turning out to be administrative failings in terms of salvage operation. The collapse and debilitation of the 9-storey building that led to more than 100 deaths at Savar Spectrum sweater factory weren't due only to faulty design and shoddy construction. In popular perception, however, this disaster is being blamed on the government's indulgence in the unscrupulous builders. Understandably other than the tendency to reduce the cost of construction, use of cheap quality cement and absence of routine check on the sand-cement mix ratio and the sub-standard size of rods used and non-performance of soil test that would have given indication of the soil condition at the foundation base exacerbated the fatal fall. To contain such damage and disaster in future

USA, European Union (EU) and the UN. They have together sponsored the Roadmap whereby two states -- Palestine and Israel -- will live as independent, sovereign states side by side. Putin concluded his visit by placing a wreath at the grave of the icon of the Palestinian people -- Yasser Arafat.

The Middle East Peace Process has been progressing haltingly since the assumption of power by Mahmoud Abbas following the death of Yasser Arafat. Abbas has eschewed violence

Jews. Ariel Sharon has made a trip to the Texas ranch of President Bush but reports seem to suggest that he failed to persuade his friend Bush that he had to expand settlements in the West Bank. President Mahmoud Abbas is reported to have been invited to the US by President Bush in the summer. What can President Bush offer Abbas? Abbas has successfully pressurised his militants from attacks on Israeli targets although Abbas's security forces are still weak. If there is

such a major collapse. Think of our primitive style of disaster fighting effort when much of the world is talking of using industrial robots for such a role.

To offer another example, industrial thermal imaging equipment saved lives after the Turkish earthquake of 1999. Saving time is most critical in such a disaster situation and speed is of great essence in any rescue operation. During Gujarat quake on January 27, 2001 the Swiss rescue team reached Ahmedabad in just about 14 hours after the Indian government's request for help reached the Swiss embassy in Delhi. The Swiss rescue team comprised doctors, telecom specialists, paramedics, logisticians and nine dogs carrying 16 tonnes of equipment including sonar vibration equipment, cameras to look through crevices, shafts and holes, devices to detect heart beat, drillers and slings to lift concrete. The whole salvage operation in Ahmedabad lasted for only four days. The team especially trained to combat such disaster saved many lives from the debris and extricated countless bodies.

Bangladesh, a disaster-ridden country is yet to develop such a trained manpower. People wonder

why the offer of help by Action Aid with their branch office in Dubai was not taken too seriously by the government at such a critical time. It's a well established fact that the first 48 hours after any collapse are critical in saving lives. One can't miss the traditional scenario that goes on after any such accident: the government machinery goes into a flurry of activities. High-powered committees are set up, recommendations are made and grim warnings and punitive measures against the violators are also announced but after some days all these recommendations lie buried in the dark corners of the ministry concerned. The saddest part of this tragic incident is that even after passage of so many days the relatives of the victims are perhaps yet to get any help or compensation either from the owner or the government other than some verbal assurance of monetary help from the BGMEA.

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