

Amateurish rescue operations

The victims deserve better

THE recent launch disasters have brought home two distressing facts about the state of governance in the country. We have been shocked that despite so many accidents in the recent past, there are still so many launches operating that are dangerous and unfit for use.

But it is not only prevention that we seek. It has become distressingly clear over the last week that the rescue operations that have taken place in the aftermath of the disasters have been marked by delay, confusion, and lack of necessary equipment. Frankly, the pace of rescue efforts has been so slow and ineffective that they scarcely deserve the name. The blame for this must lie at the door of the government authorities. It is up to the government in power to institute procedures for rescue operations and make sure that they are adequately staffed, equipped, and funded. It is bad enough that so little has been done to ensure that such accidents don't happen. At the very least there should be efficient rescue operations in place.

The irony is that when it comes to cyclones and floods and other far bigger natural disasters, we have decent man-made and workable systems in place.

One would have thought that man-made disasters such as launch capsizes and building collapses would create even greater an obligation on the part of the culpable government to fix, and that the relatively small scale of the incidents would make this easier to do than with the nation-wide emergencies the country must grapple with from time to time.

The two rescue ships are in disgraceful shape. It has been learned that the government plans to buy two more. This begs the question as to why the need for more rescue ships could not have been anticipated earlier. In addition, the current ships are hopelessly dilapidated. The divers, though they have laboured mightily, need training and equipment. It is clear that the authorities have taken a very ad hoc approach to preventing and dealing with disasters, and this must change before more lives are lost unnecessarily.

We cannot help but note with regret that we are still waiting to hear from the shipping minister. His silence at such a time speaks volumes for his unfitness for the job. He should be explaining how such a tragedy occurred and what is being done to prevent its repetition, and giving hope, sympathy, and courage to the families of the dead and missing. Has the honourable minister simply given up?

Gender gap reduction brings hearty news

Let's build on the success

AT a time when the country is caught in a whirlpool of negative imaging, there is good news that no less a prestigious organisation than the Switzerland-based World Economic Forum has ranked Bangladesh ahead of all Muslim countries in terms of removing gender disparity. Bangladesh is doing even better than India and Pakistan, according to the survey conducted on 54 countries.

The parameters for measuring women's progress include education, medicare facilities and opportunities for career advancement. These are areas where the rights of women have to be established to integrate them into the development process. Women in Bangladesh are playing an important role in a wide range of economic activities. They have also made steady progress in articulating their demands and influencing decision making through various organisations. Women in villages have succeeded in improving their economic condition through micro-credit programmes, though in general village women are lagging behind their urban counterparts.

Urban women, are competing vigorously for their share of jobs in both the public and private sectors. They are performing well as entrepreneurs and have now a very powerful presence in the electronic media, NGOs, teaching and the legal professions. Moreover, poor urban women are contributing tremendously to the garments sector.

Political empowerment, however, is an area where women have not achieved much. They have not yet been given their due role and functions in local bodies. The seats reserved for women in parliament point to the fact that their involvement in law making is ensured through some special measure, which is not a sign of equality.

Then there is the perennial problem of repression. A large chunk of women are exposed to dowry-related crimes and their social security is still far from adequate. Elimination of gender discrimination will remain an elusive goal if repression on women is not stopped.

The report of the World Economic Forum is a sort of recognition of the good work done by both the government and private organisations to establish the rights of women. It should encourage us to remove all other forms of discrimination against women that still exist in society.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IN the olden days of the Cold War reminiscent of Nikita Khrushchev's shoe thumping on the table of the United Nations it would have been inconceivable for the American leaders to lecture the Russians on the efficacy of democracy. But this is precisely what President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did during their most recent visits to Moscow. Discussing freedom and democracy in Latvia President Bush told his enthralled audience that all states bordering Russia would benefit from the spread of democratic values as would Russia itself. He, however, acknowledged Putin's resistance to American diktat by admitting that "Russia's democratic future will not be determined by outsiders... that nation will follow its own course, according to its own history". But he could not resist the temptation of stressing the inevitability of the spread of democracy throughout the world after the demise of communism which "began to collapse under external pressure and under the weight of its own contradiction".

End of the Cold War, he said, was part of an even broader movement in the world. "From Germany and Japan after World War II, to Latin America to Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, and now to broader Middle East, the advance of freedom is the great story of our age" and the important lessons learned from the titanic shift from totalitarianism to democracy include "that free nations grow with time because of free people's creativity and enterprise, governments accountable to the people are peaceful while dictators stir resentment and hatred".

President Bush reminded his audience that sovereignty, majority rule and elections ushered only the dawn of democracy which could be clouded unless adorned with minority rights, rule of law, and inclusive society devoid of "identity politics" where political community is fragmented on religious, ethnic, racial and other considerations resulting in societal anarchy and bringing about Stalinist "agents of repression" in the name of establishing law

and order. A few days before Bush's visit to Moscow Condoleezza Rice reportedly told President Putin of US interest that Russia's democratisation was "extremely important not just to US-Russia relations but for Russia's own progress" because having a free society "would facilitate Russia's integration into Europe and into Euro-Atlantic structures".

Russian affairs specialist Nikolai Zlobin warns that while the US might have initially regarded childhood illness of Russia's fledgling democracy as a kind of "political mumps", during the passage of the year 2004 three fundamental changes have emerged in the US perception of Russia: (a) the US no longer

have hurt Russia's interests".

But President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski sees Putin Presidency as the "final gasp of the Soviet era (of an elite which) is increasingly fading from the scene" and Russia as being totally unable to wage either a hot or a cold war against the West. Brzezinski, a supporter of the US efforts to promote geopolitical pluralism in the space left vacant by the former Soviet Union, is unwilling to provide Russia with a "sphere of influence" without the voluntary consent of the adjoining countries. But given the recent events in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and the ongoing unrest in Uzbekistan it

global dominance because, as he argues, if the US were to retreat from its hegemonic role the vacuum would not be supplanted by Europe, China, or the Islamic world but by apolarity which could turn out "to mean an anarchic Dark Age; an era of waning empires and religious fanaticism; of endemic plunder and pillage; and civilization's retreat into a few fortified enclaves". But the problem would not be solved by the global acquiescence of US hegemony, if that were to happen at all, because as Professor Joseph Nye Jr tells us that throughout the history of the world coalition of countries has arisen to balance the dominant power and any focus on unipolarity,

out that the US has never endorsed the policy of "no first use" of nuclear weapons against either a nuclear or a non-nuclear enemy. McNamara paints the horrific scenario that while to declare war requires an act of the Congress but to launch a nuclear holocaust requires 20 minutes of deliberations by the President and his advisors. McNamara finds it shocking that today, more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, the basic US nuclear policy has remained unchanged and has not been adapted to the new situation emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union. "The indefinite combination of human fallibility" writes

self-defeating if only because of fire power packed by the erstwhile adversaries. If today the US has deployed 4500 strategic offensive nuclear war heads Russia has roughly about four thousand, many on hair-trigger alert ready to be launched at 15 minutes warning. Robert Kagan would claim that multipolarity cannot be decreed; it must be created. Europe, he thinks, lacks the will to establish itself as a second "pole" capable of balancing American power. Others would lay the responsibility at the door of the emergence of unique configuration of global power resultant of the disappearance of the Soviet empire which pitched the global colossus -- the US -- which again in the words of Francis Fukuyama "tend not to see any source of democratic legitimacy higher than the nation state" vis-à-vis the rest of the world which would like to see legitimacy flow from international law and institutional multipolarity invested in the UN Security Council.

In the case under consideration insensitivity towards Russian efforts to grapple with relatively new institutions of democracy coupled with NATO's expansion to Russia's backyard -- an alliance founded for military and political containment of the USSR -- without due consideration of Russia's security concerns can only inflame the "restorationists" in Moscow who want to resurrect the old glory of the Soviet empire. Bush administration would do well to proceed in concert with Russia and other powers to bring about democracy and freedom at a pace suitable for each aspirant. Unnecessary haste can only help defeat the very purpose of the US mission of establishing successful democracies "based on shared principles, shared responsibilities, and respect for all".

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

insensitivity towards Russian efforts to grapple with relatively new institutions of democracy coupled with NATO's expansion to Russia's backyard -- an alliance founded for military and political containment of the USSR -- without due consideration of Russia's security concerns can only inflame the "restorationists" in Moscow who want to resurrect the old glory of the Soviet empire.

regards Russia as a democratic country, (b) Vladimir Putin is no longer regarded as a democrat in the western sense of the term, and (c) the key players of the US establishment are convinced that Moscow harbours imperial ambition, at the very least in the region of the former Soviet Union. Such an assessment puts US-Russia relations at crossroads because democracy and human rights are not an expendable part of the Euro-US political agenda which they intend to use to evaluate other countries.

Indeed, suggests Mark Brzezinski, an official of Clinton administration National Security Council, that consistent with Joe Lieberman and John McCain sponsored Senate resolution the US should support Russian membership of G-8 as long as Russia's policy reflects the principle of democracy, freedom and the rule of law. He further suggests that the US policy should not revolve around Putin's personality who "believes the loss of pervasive state control over politics and economy and the diminution of Moscow's influence in the former Soviet states

is unlikely that Russia's neighbouring countries would be willing to bind themselves in solidaristic ties with Russia.

Some Russians, however, see the emergence of "anti-Russian campaign" in the US responsible for the transformation of US-Russia relations into smoldering crisis and the "inspirators" of the campaign goading President Bush to address Russia critically and chastise Vladimir Putin for straying from the democratic path. But Nikolai Zlobin feels that democracy is not the issue. Of far greater importance are "conflict-ridden internal developments, the people's palpable discontent, the government's unbelievable incompetence, foreign policy blunders, the crawling economy and failure to modernise" which Putin would do well to address instead of brushing aside Bush as another victim of "anti-Russian campaign".

The diminution of Russia has been made possible because of the abject defeat of communism and consequent disappearance of the Soviet empire and the rise of unipolar world. Professor Niall Ferguson feels quite comfortable with the US

hegemony, sovereignty, and unilateralism will fail to provide the right outcome.

Besides, conflicts, if not military, is inevitable, as Professor John Mearsheimer theorizes, great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest great power, their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon -- the only great power in the system. But it is almost impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony in the modern world because it is hard to project and sustain power globally. Nor should any country, however powerful, try to do so. The argument for such self-denial is not hard to find. Zbigniew Brzezinski points out that we live in a world far different from the one in which hegemonic powers could go to war without erasing each other's society from the face of the earth. The nuclear age has altered the power politics from the one it had been since the dawn of history.

In a deeply moving article (Apocalypse soon/May/June 2005) former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara describes how close the world had come to extinction during the Cuban missile crisis. He points

McNamara "and nuclear weapons carries a very high risk of nuclear catastrophe... I know from direct experience that the US nuclear policy today creates unacceptable risk to other nations and to our own".

The world today faces far greater danger from non-state actors than it did before the Bush administration's pyrrhic victories over Afghan nomads (though the destruction of the Taliban was totally justifiable) and Saddam Hussein -- both having the possibility of sowing seeds of civilizational chasm between two great religions of the world. The enemy of yesteryears was identifiable. The enemies of today are shadowy characters, veiled behind exclusionary and rejectionist interpretation of a so-called purist version of a great religion which itself is having a constant struggle between saner devotees and demented strayers for the soul of Islam. In this context Bush administration's advocacy of freedom and democracy though incontestable in principle should be conveyed in tandem with other powers to alleviate the concerns of the global community.

Diminution of Russia would be

Should India do more business than politics with Bangladesh?

FARID BAKHT

INDIAN Big Business may be at odds with the traditional approach of its political leaders towards Bangladesh. Could this herald a sea change in the way the two countries' foreign establishments interact? Or is this merely a temporary smokescreen, a phony "entente cordiale," to sign some deals before reverting to the "normal" adversarial state of affairs?

As it is, border clashes and the erection of a fence are raising the temperature. This ham-fisted policy may be populist, but will be ineffective. It provides yet another exploitable issue. Against this background, is Big Business telling the External Affairs Ministry to "cool it" and smooth the ruffled feathers of its neighbour? Is that one reason why India is suddenly so keen to come to the Saarc summit?

The conventional view holds that relations were somehow better under the current opposition, rather than the present governing regime. If one ignores the posturing, it can be argued that it is actually the other way round. After all, the big industrial and energy deals are closer to fruition under the present government.

There may have been more

"Big Business" India operates under its own steam and may not always work in tandem with its foreign ministry. Can this dichotomy continue? Given the controversy over gas, the Bangladeshi government has been able to agree in principle with the Indian and Myanmar governments to a pipeline to transport gas from Myanmar to India, via Bangladesh territory. Tata Steel has just completed its feasibility study on setting up a 2.4 million ton steel plant, and power and fertilizer complex in North-West Bangladesh. It will be fascinating to see whether "Political-India" or "Big-Business-India" prevails in setting the parameters.

empathy with the previous government, for historical reasons, but hard business negotiations are more likely to lead to actual signatures on agreements under this administration. Almost immediately after getting into power, senior figures publicly advocated the export of gas to India. If the previous regime had done that, it would have led to pandemonium amid accusations of selling off the nation's precious resources.

In other words, is it possible that, politically, relations are at an all-time low but that, in terms of business, relations are the warmest for a generation? "Big Business" India operates under its own steam and may not always work in tandem with its foreign ministry. Can this dichotomy continue?

Friends again, for now?

Somewhat surprisingly, given the controversy over gas, the Bangladeshi government has been able to agree in principle with the Indian and Myanmar governments to a pipeline to transport gas from Myanmar to India, via Bangladesh territory. The agreement has not been signed yet and border casualties and perceived sleight, on both sides, can still scupper the deal.

Moreover, Tata Steel has just completed its feasibility study on setting up a 2.4 million ton steel plant, and power and fertilizer complex in North-West Bangladesh. This 100-year-old company is taking a \$2 billion gamble that it will be able to utilise Bangladesh's gas or coal for over a decade to produce low cost steel flat slabs. Tata will not be making this decision lightly and

must have made a long-term forecast. It no doubt expects stability in fuel supply and an export exit for its steel products for years to come.

Indian Big Business therefore will have two enormous stakes in seeing a stable relationship between India and Bangladesh. The resurgent economy of West Bengal will be the prime beneficiary of the gas pipeline and will not want any disruption to supply.

Thus, one could say, India's politicians are temporarily being forced to look for a more amicable state of affairs to ensure that its economy can move forward.

One-off or more to come?

At present, no further Indian investment proposals are officially in the pipeline. Tata Steel is aiming to be a 15 million ton pro-

ducer by 2010 and planning a 6 million ton project in iron-ore-rich Orissa. The Bangladesh project may be the biggest industrial venture of all time in Dhaka, but is dwarfed in comparison. Since steel production is an energy intensive operation, cynics may see this as merely a clever way of sidestepping the issue of gas export from Bangladesh. If the gas won't come to us, we will come over instead. Perhaps.

So what will it take for India's major conglomerates to take a different slant on the investment climate in Bangladesh?

Apparently, Reliance has seriously considered entering the booming telecom market in Bangladesh. Is it inconceivable that it, or its competitors, might follow Egypt's Orascom Telecom in buying into this

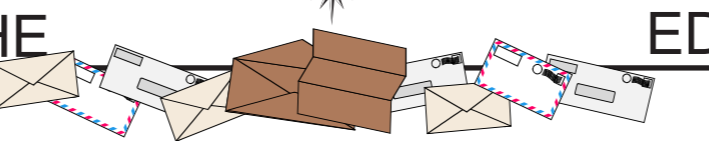
sector? A clutch of private fixed line licenses has been dished out. Hardware equipment supply agreements were signed with the Chinese during Prime Minister Wen Jinbao's recent visit. Is it impossible that some experienced Indian telecom operators would be invited to transform Bangladesh's expensive call market into the low cost mass-market Indian equivalent?

Agro-processing is another potential sector. The abundance of sugar, jute, rice, and vegetables might suggest a ready supply in the minds of some entrepreneurs. Finally, there is the issue of "transshipment," i.e. using Bangladesh's road and rail infrastructure to move goods and services to the almost land-locked North-Eastern states. Would India merely utilise the dilapidated infrastructure, weakening it further? Or would it be prepared to invest in the highways and rail-track needed to handle such volumes of traffic?

It will be fascinating to see whether "Political-India" or "Big-Business-India" prevails in setting the parameters.

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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.

Caretaker government issue

Millions of citizens reading newspapers are aware that a move in the formation of public opinion is crystallising on immediate review of the caretaker government concept introduced in Bangladesh in the 1990s, as the political parties had lost faith in one another.

There are two areas of review of improvement: a) the core concepts; and b) marginal improvements. But the regime is concentrating on predilection goodies, including the coming budget in June. There are many public issues which are being sidetracked by the regime, such as terrorism, corruption, degradation of moral values, and defiance of authority and existing rules and regulations (not to speak of nepotism and politicisation).

The politicians do not talk specifically on these issues involving insecurity in the daily lives of 130 million citizens. This is one example of non-transparency. The coalition should not feel smug in enjoying

two-thirds majority in the JS. Here is a poser: suppose the next interim government is usurped by non-political groups? No regime can be said to be prepared for such eventualities, as revealed by local and global examples.

Now the judiciary is being involved indirectly in politics, with the precondition that the top post is open to only one category of candidate, namely, the retired CJ. The structure of the CEC's establishment has also to be reviewed (reviewing is not a political commitment). Why the government is chary of facing such probes? What is the regime's role in reviving the dormant parliament?

Change brings changes. No man-made law is timeless. Bangladesh society is passing through a critical moral test, hence the political masters have to contribute in a positive manner, and not simply divert the accusations towards the opposition. Statesmanship is missing in our leadership, controlled by the sycophants. The MPs in power are said to be putting pressure on the Finance Minister to draft a pre-election bud-

get. This rise cannot be supported.

Returning to power is not the issue but how to improve the budding nation wallowing at the feet of selfish politicians. What is the effect of bad politics on the society? It is a loaded question.

Ahu Abd,
Dhaka

Our neighbour

India is a very important neighbouring country and potential partner of Bangladesh. We are grateful to Indians for their help in our liberation war. At the beginning of our friendship, we enjoyed mutual passion and love, though attitudes were different.

But it's not good to see a stalemate, after thirty-four years of our interaction. Considering the latest debate and present phenomena it seems that only love is not enough to enjoy a global partnership in future.

expertise, good governance, well-equipped armed forces and above all holding a market authority by more production and target oriented policy implementation.

Sarwar Kamal
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Small private power plants

Your staff correspondent's report on the subject (DS: April 24) raises a few issues which needs clarification. These can be briefly stated as follows:

Will the Energy Regulatory Commission introduce and enforce power quality standards, which is totally absent in our public power supply scenario? If this is not done, private power producers when coupled to the utility grid will have to make unnecessary capital expenses for extra protection of their units, apart from its effect on their operation.

The desired power tariff is indicated at 2.73 US cent. Does it mean that the payment, which possibly will

be made in equivalent taka, will change according to the US dollar vis-à-vis Bangladesh taka conversion rate? This needs to be clarified.

What are the boundary condition of the statement "The developers must install in their plants a system of supplying power to the national grid". This needs technical specifications and boundary parameters. Will the Energy Regulatory Commission set these?

Duty exemption for import of petroleum alone has been considered for oil-fired plants.

Logically this should have been allowed also for import of coal for coal based power plants which is more logical for western part of Bangladesh located fairly near to Indian coal sources. Later these units can switch over to coal from northern Bangladesh.

Otherwise, we are unfairly penalising the north and western part which even today is more power starved than the eastern part of Bangladesh.

Regarding gas tariff, if it will be at

par with PDB gas tariff, then what about running gas power plants installed earlier in the private sector which are paying higher gas tariff compared to PDB? These units in all fairness should enjoy PDB gas tariff.

Will some extra benefits be considered for small units, say, maximum up to rated capacity of 5MW? If this is done there will be promising opportunity for investment for recovering power from gas pressure reducing stations which is a very cost effective but totally unexploited source of power without fuel. These are some of the important issues that need to be clearly defined in the interest of encouraging quick investment in private power sector.

S. A. Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka

"Don't forget Bangladesh"

This is in response to Mr. Ubaidullah Awal's letter requesting all the skilled people living abroad not to forget Bangladesh. I'm glad that I've decided to do the

same as your father did. I'm going to resign from my highly paid position of Sr. Software Engineer about the middle of June and going back to Bangladesh for the love of my country and for the love of my family/relatives. I've decided to start my own software business in Bangladesh creating employment opportunity for intelligent and skilled people in the country and also to help Bangladesh to enter into the global race of technology/e Business. I've earned valuable experience working in the largest mortgage insurance company in the world as a Sr. Software Engineer and this is my chance to pay back to my country which helped me grow up to what I'm today. Therefore, I voice together with Mr. Ubaidullah Awal and request every skilled Bangladeshi living abroad to contribute to Bangladesh in any possible way. Let's create a chain of Bangladeshi professionals around the world with the ultimate goal of helping Bangladesh. We need to do a better job in the area

of co-operation for other Bangladeshis.

I created a yahoo group for Bangladeshi professionals around the world with a view to helping each other and to providing opportunity to other Bangladeshis.

Delwar Hossain
San Francisco, US

No unemployment!

If I can recollect correctly, the Hon'ble Finance Minister in his speech at the conference of the Statistical Association of Bangladesh a few months back informed us that the official statistics in the country were not credible. He was also critical about the statistics collected by the BBS. May I humbly ask how credible is his recent statement about unemployment in Bangladesh? Or has he joined the club of so-called incredible statistics makers?

Dr. K. Maudood Elahi
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