

Motor launches: Veritable death-traps

CAPT HUSAIN IMAM

ON May 15, MV Prince of Patuakhali was caught in a Nor'wester and capsized near Galachipa with nearly 200 passengers on board. At least half of them are reportedly missing or dead. On May 17, MV Raipura sank in the river Jamuna near Aricha with more than 300 passengers on board. Again, caught in a storm, the launch instantly capsized, and at least 150 passengers are feared dead. On May 19, one trawler with more than 100 passengers on her way to char Jahiruddin from Borhanuddin upazila of Bhola was caught in a storm and sank. The casualty figure is not yet known. At least 20 passengers are reported missing. In less than one week, there have been three launch disasters, one after another, and more than 300 passengers are believed to have lost their lives.

What a human tragedy! What a country we live in! People are not safe here -- at home, on the street, in the river, nowhere. Worldwide, river transport is considered to be the safest mode of transport. We find the reverse scenario here. Is it because we are not moving forward? Is it that the politics of development and production -- as practiced by our politicians -- are nothing but rhetoric and bluff?

Launch disaster is not a new phenomena for us. It has become almost a regular feature over the years. Every time such an incident occurs, the television crews and media get busy with their coverage. People witness the incidents with shock and horror. Some of us, as I am doing now, write articles expressing our anguish, sorrow, and sympathy. The minister in charge rushes to the spot and consoles the bereaved family members saying: "It is the will of God. We can only pray for eternal peace of the departed souls." The department concerned orders inquiry, often by those officials who are directly or indirectly responsible for the incidents. Gets a report, as usual shifting the responsibility onto others, and shelves it. Nothing happens. With the passage of time, the public forgets the incident until the next one occurs, and the authorities also get away from public accountability for their responsi-

bilities, if any. This is how we dealt with MV Rajhonshi, which went on a head-on collision with another vessel in the Meghna in the winter night of December 28, 2000, and sank instantly, leaving more than 200 passengers dead, another 100 or more missing. This is how we have dealt with MV Mitali and MV

these unending killings. I am not talking about the "roaring forties" of the southern oceans. I am not talking about the mighty seas of the Indian ocean caught in a tropical storm. I am talking about the Meghna or the Jamuna caught in a Nor'wester. If our river transport system cannot ride over the ripples of the Meghna or the

different quarters, these include: faulty design, structural weakness, lack of adequate safety measures, absence of qualified crew, weakness in inspection procedures, obtaining of fitness certificate through unfair means, overloading, disregard for weather forecast. If I am asked to identify one single reason, I shall

life and property are: (a) faulty design and construction, (b) overloading, (c) unqualified serang or crew, (d) indifference of launch owners towards safety requirements, and (e) corruption at every level.

following immediate action/short-term suggestions are put forward for all concerned:

1. Immediate measures: Excessive overloading must be stopped at any cost. Totally unfit vessels should be immediately withdrawn from operation.

2. Short-term measures: Vessels with proven designs, like those of Sandra, Sela, Lali, Mekla (belonging to BIWTC), can be built at local shipyards, replacing the condemned launches.

3. Long-term measures: As for long-term steps, it has to be an overall improvement over the existing designs of the vessels operating in our rivers. Free-style designs, as are the cases with launches playing in the river routes and which are veritable death-traps, cannot be allowed no matter how serious is the pressure from vested interests. The idea of forming a local 'classification team' seems to be a step in the right direction provided it is done in its true spirit and concept." (New Age, August 20, 2003: What ails our water transport?)

The same observations hold good even today.

I would like to conclude this article repeating a paragraph from the article "Launch disasters: Looking into the causes" (mentioned earlier) which reads: "It should be a matter of great shame and disgrace on our part to have to admit that accidents and casualties in our river transport system have shot up astronomically compared to that of colonial days. Despite the establishment of IWTA as a regulatory body and promulgation of many statutory rules and regulation for the construction and operation of the mechanised rivercraft, the almost unsafe and un-sea/river worthy vessels continue to ply and incidents involving loss of lives in hundreds continue to multiply because of gross negligence or indifference to public safety by the profit mongering launch owners on one side and the corrupt regulatory bodies on the other."

The author is a Master Mariner (UK) and ex-Marine Superintendent, BIWTC.

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River journeys on over-crowded launches are a disaster waiting to happen.

Majlish which were caught in Nor'westers and capsized -- one in the river Buriganga near Pagla and the other in the Meghna near Bhairab on April 21, 2003, with 400 passengers and a bridal party of 100 respectively. This is how we dealt with MV Nasrin and MV Maharaj. The list can go on and on. The story is the same. The invisible serial killer is undaunted. Its thirst for dead bodies seems endless. The state machinery which is supposed to protect the life of its citizen, be it in the land, air, or water, seems to have utterly failed to do so. Is it because, it itself, in a manner of speaking, is the serial killer we are talking about? It is high time somebody did something to put a halt to

Jamuna in the age of 21st century technology, we had better not talk about the politics of millennium development.

This is probably the 6th article I am writing on launch disasters in the last 5 years. Published in the national dailies, in those articles, some of them jointly written by me and my senior colleague Zahidur Rahman, former Lloyds surveyor and one of the seniormost Chief Engineers (Marine) of the country, we tried to identify the causes of launch disasters and find remedies. Let me quote a few paragraphs from these articles to highlight the issue once again.

"Causes of recurring launch disasters in the country are many. As have been highlighted by

without any hesitation mention that it is the inherent fault in the design and construction of these motor launches." (The Daily Star, April 29, 2003: Launch disasters: Where lies the remedy?)

"Presently there is a dual control in the inland maritime administration. If these functions could be co-ordinated by a single organisation like say a classification society for inland vessels, then these calamities which are primarily the result of faulty design could be reduced to a tolerable level." (The Daily Star, January 24, 2001: Launch disasters: Looking into the causes)

"It is now well-known that the main causes of launch disasters leading to such colossal loss of

Chirac, Europe's weakest link

If the French vote "non" on May 29, it will add another failure to Chirac's ledger. Will he then follow the example of de Gaulle, who resigned in 1969 when he lost a referendum? Unlikely. Yet France aches for new leadership. Perhaps he'll soon be fetching his own beer and sandwiches.

DENIS MACSHANE

THE scene: one of those interminable wrangles in the cold, bunker-like building in Brussels where Europe's leaders meet to advance by inches the construction of the old continent. As Britain's Europe minister, I am helping myself to a ham sandwich and chatting to Germany's foreign minister, Joschka Fischer. Suddenly a tall, slightly stooped figure

formed France by quitting Algeria, building nuclear weapons and forging a strong statist economy. It worked under Giscard d'Estaing, in the 1970s, who liberalized France by allowing abortion and built a network of nuclear power plants that freed France from Middle East oil dependency. It worked under Mitterrand, in the 1980s, who pursued a ruthless (if well disguised) policy of modernizing French industry and expanding its

hoped to win a strong rightist majority. Instead, he ended up with a socialist government which shackled France with a limit on working hours that has added to unemployment.

Or consider Chirac's handling of the Iraq War. Tony Blair threw him a lifeline in 1998 when (against the advice of the pro-American establishment in London) he endorsed Chirac's call for the creation of a common European foreign and defense policy. Saddam Hussein put that to the test. As late as February 2003, when Chirac met with Blair in Le Touquet on the Normandy coast, top French officials assured me he would not leave America and Britain to go it alone. Yet within weeks during a routine television interview, no less surprised us all by declaring that he would unilaterally veto any French or U.N. involvement in the Iraq War.

Certainly, he was in step with French public opinion. But did his handling of the crisis advance his cherished cause of a united Europe? Au contraire.

Chirac has managed Europe and its future no less maladroitly. Publicly, he plays the role of EU champion. Privately, he has never been anything but ambivalent. When his Foreign Minister Michel Barnier voted in favor of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty -- one of the few rightist parliamentarians to do so -- Chirac told him, "Your career is over." Unlike Mitterrand or Giscard, Chirac blows hot and cold on Europe. He has patronized new EU member states like Poland and Hungary, pompously cautioning them to follow the lead of their "elders" on matters ranging from relations with America to revolutions in Ukraine -- alienating the very people who traditionally have most looked to Paris for leadership. Most recently, we have seen his moves to gut European fiscal policy and kill in utero Brussels' plan to open competition in professional services.

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rushes up. "Quick, quick, I need something to eat and a drink."

It is Jacques Chirac. He looks eagerly at the well-filled ham baguettes on the German's plate. But Fischer says: "You're not having mine." I step forward and say he can have my untouched food. "Merci, merci, l'Angleterre," he says, and grabs a glass of beer to loop back into the meeting.

Anyone who sits in on the talks-fests that keep Europe moving knows the French president loves to eat. Yet there is not a spare pound on his rangy frame, with its long arms and mobile, expressive hands always ready to grasp an arm or shake any proffered hand. European version of Lyndon Johnson in his need for physical contact and his passion for politics, politics, politics.

Chirac is the fifth president of France under its Fifth Republic, whose constitution endows immense powers upon its president. It presumes that France needs one single executive leader a democratic Bonaparte. The system worked under de Gaulle, in the 1960s, who trans-

export capabilities, even while strengthening the European Union through the single market and laying the base for its single currency, the euro.

Then, in May 1995, came Chirac, a man who was already prime minister when Tony Blair fronted an Oxford student rock band. Now, after a decade as president, all of France and all of Europe ask one question: what has he achieved? France has had its worst decade of economic growth since World War II. Poverty is increasing. Tourists still flock to Paris, Avignon and Cannes, but they don't visit the districts where France's 5 million Muslims live in underclass conditions. And Chirac has weakened France on the world stage, in contrast to all his predecessors.

Every French friend I talk to sounds such criticism. Yes, Chirac is a consummate glad-hander. But in terms of political judgment, his record is of one debacle after another. Chirac's own loyalists recall with horror his decision to dissolve Parliament in 1997. He

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Don't push Myanmar into a corner

VERGESE MATHEWS

THE ongoing debate and speculation as to whether Myanmar would, or should, assume the chairmanship of Asean next year has, in a way, served to highlight again the rich and sometimes threatening diversity of the regional grouping and its unique style of arriving at consensus.

In this context, there have been ad nauseam commentaries, since Asean's membership increased to 10, that it had become a two-tiered grouping of the "more developed" original six (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) and the newer "struggling" countries Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam -- often known as the CLMV nations.

The message here was that the divide would contribute to greater administrative difficulties, including hammering out consensus.

The "two-tier" description is fair comment and remains a challenge that is being tackled by the grouping on the basis that the divide cannot and should not be a permanent feature.

To this end, Asean leaders adopted then-Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's proposal in November 2000 of the Initiative for Asean Integration (IAI) -- a package of practical ways and means to close the development gap.

Singapore, for example, opened training centres in the four CLMV countries in 2001 and has been providing tailored empowerment courses identified by the respective host countries. The other older members likewise have their own programmes.

While much of the reward accruing from the IAI programmes will be seen only in the long term, it is being accelerated by the great enthusiasm and demand for education and training in the CLMV countries, which are themselves as development-oriented as the older six countries.

However, what is sometimes missed out is that the Asean divide is more than merely economic or developmental. The Myanmar controversy has highlighted a difference in the mindset within the grouping, leading

maybe even to a thin fissure line, with Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam demonstrating a greater empathy for Myanmar than the other member countries.

Here again, this is neither surprising nor can be wished away quickly given the historical baggage of the four countries and the difficulties they have individually encountered in warding off what they perceive to be foreign interference in their internal

CLMV countries are particularly outraged by external pressure (read Western governments) now disingenuously using the back door of Asean's rotating chairmanship to pursue an objective in Myanmar.

What hitherto could not be achieved by external pressure against an individual member country would now appear possible because of a weak spot in Asean's organisational structure.

issues.

Has Asean cohesiveness weakened? Can a member country under external pressure depend on Asean support if it is its turn to chair the regional grouping? Is Asean membership still premium? More importantly, which country will be next?

These are valid questions if you are weak and dependent on foreign direct investment and donor assistance for survival.

threats in the first place. In fact, the fear is that Myanmar may be driven backwards.

This school bemoans that Western powers and liberal bleeding-hearts do not understand regional dynamics, and while all the grandstanding and loud threats may serve to placate some constituencies at home, it is counter-productive to encouraging reform in the target country.

They point out that in the present instance, Myanmar can, for example, take a rain check on the chairmanship and then proceed at a pace the junta is comfortable with in the constitutional process.

Here, members of this school of thought point to China with its quiet diplomacy playing a cleverer regional game than Western countries -- supporting the theory that there are times when it is best that less is said.

Myanmar bears a heavy burden and increasingly, the indications are it is waiting for an appropriate time and forum to pass up its turn at chairmanship.

Apparently, it has privately dropped encouraging hints to individual member countries of its intention to sacrifice national pride and be helpful to the region. Should this happen, it would demonstrate a definite shift in the attitude of this proud country.

While waiting for the next move, possibly at the Asean Ministerial Meeting in July, here is something to ponder.

There was a time not too long ago when a Myanmar that had come under the kind of pressure of the past months would have just walked out of Asean.

No doubt it is a somewhat different Myanmar now -- perhaps less confident and arguably less united. Nevertheless, the possibility cannot be dismissed that it can still walk out of the regional organisation.

In such a situation, Myanmar would have calculated it need not fear isolation -- it can move closer to China and to India while continuing to maintain bilateral relations with its erstwhile Asean partners.

Such a move would neither be good for the region nor for the people of Myanmar.

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Leader of Myanmar opposition Aung San Su Kyi.

affairs.

No doubt, like the rest of Asean, the CLMV countries recognise the dilemma faced by Myanmar assumes the chairmanship next year: It will not be helpful for Asean.

At the same time, if Myanmar is forced out of the chairmanship against its will, it would also not be a desired outcome and would be a bad precedent.

However, despite these practical regional considerations, the

It was, therefore, not at all surprising that the well-honed survival instincts of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos immediately detected areas of concern and threats for themselves in what was happening to Myanmar.

Many questions rushed to the fore as these countries themselves had nagging internal problems which have been externalised -- treatment of minority ethnic groups, human rights violations, or broad governance

Meanwhile, there is a school of thought -- not just in the CLMV countries but in Asean as a whole -- that seriously doubts whether the present "take it or leave it" Western approach can achieve its objectives in Myanmar.

This school believes the strong-arm methods at most bruise the ego of the ruling junta in Yangon without directly benefiting or furthering the cause of Myanmar's people -- the very purpose for the sanctions and

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The truth about the truth

At some level the public recognizes the importance of decent, robust journalism, even if there is currently a drifting away from large swathes of the mainstream media. It's probably also true that most of the public are a bit more sophisticated than we are in understanding the limits of what we do.

ALAN RUSBRIDGER

ALL editors know this: it's usually the small things that get us. We sit for hours with eye-wateringly expensive lawyers combing through every particle in the front-page investigation into iniquity at the highest levels of government. And when the writ arrives it's from someone aggrieved at the 15th paragraph of an unrelated piece on page 37. Blink and you'd have missed it. You did blink. You did miss it.

Journalists make mistakes. We all make them. Every single edition of every single newspaper or magazine contains errors. On good days (read, lucky days) they may only be minor slips of spelling or trifling fact. On less good days they may include significant mistakes of interpretation which cause no real harm.

And then there are the pit-of-the-stomach moments -- hopelessly rare -- when things go badly wrong and you're confronted with a sharp, unpleasant reminder of the troubling power we journalists wield. In my wallet I carry around with me the best description of journalism I know. It was part of a speech by David Broder in 1978, when the wise old bird of The Washington Post was collecting a Pulitzer Prize:

"I would like to see us say over and over until the point has been made that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we heard about in the past 24 hours distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to read it in about an hour. If we labeled the paper accurately then we would immediately add: But it's the best we could do under the

circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow with a corrected updated version."

Whenever I quote that passage to an audience of journalists there is always a smile of recognition. "That," they nod -- sometimes with a degree of relief at finding it articulated at last -- "that is what we do." But, of course, it's not the story we tell. In our dealings with the world at large we profess to tell the unvarnished truth, and nothing but.

For as long as we were in control there was small chance of being found out in our slips, and an even smaller question of being required to do anything about it. But -- as has begun to dawn on even the most technophobic journalists -- we're no longer in control. At least 10 million people a month now read The Guardian. That's 10 million fact checkers, every one of them with the potential to broadcast our failings as broadly as they like.

And they do. Our response has been to set up an independent readers' editor with his own space to clarify, correct -- and comment on -- things we get wrong. It's not perfect. It is a start. My sense is we're going to have to go much further in opening up our processes if we're to retain the trust of present readers and to win the trust of future generations. The dismaying thing is the timing of all this. The crisis in trust has coincided -- with a great many newspaper and media companies -- with troubled times in revenue, circulation, and audience. And it is also happening at a time when good, reliable, serious, challenging journalism is needed as rarely before.

A few months ago I attended a select off-the-record gathering of MPs, judges, spies, and civil servants to discuss the lessons of the Iraq War. Actually, the meeting was more narrowly focused on the Hutton report into the BBC's

infamous coverage of one aspect of the war. The distinguished participants around the table owned up to failure a failure to hold the executive accountable, to operate as proper checks and balances. The only people who had done their duty (said the spooks and the judges and the mandarins) were the media. They had made mistakes, certainly, but they had got something out into open which deserved to be.

What was true then has been as true since. It wasn't Parliament that flushed out the hurried and mysterious changes in the British Attorney General's advice on the legality of war: it was the media. The prime minister struggled to the bitter end to keep it all secret. Since the formal end of the war there have been numerous journalistic postmortems on both sides of the Atlantic. Editors have been fired, errant reporters have resigned, or been publicly criticized. The BBC was unceremoniously decapitated. The politicians and their unselected helpers remain serenely in place.

At some level the public recognizes the importance of decent, robust journalism, even if there is currently a drifting away from large swathes of the mainstream media. It's probably also true that most of the public are a bit more sophisticated than we are in understanding the limits of what we do. Maybe it's time we took Broder's advice. Let's advertise the fact that journalism is a partial, hasty, incomplete, and flawed business. The readers know it. They might trust us more, not less, if we owned up.

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