

Border river problems

Solution should be found in the next JRC meeting

THE recently held Indo-Bangla border river meeting ended inconclusively despite a visit to the erosion sites by the ministers and top officials of the two countries. The visit however helped both sides in acquiring first hand knowledge about the extent of erosion of land that happens on the Bangladesh side, for being at the receiving end of the rush of water from the upper regions.

Though the meeting in Dhaka failed to produce any result, some welcome news managed to filter out from it. It is encouraging to note that the Bangladesh minister for water resources and his Indian counterpart feel that talks will continue as all parties are in discussion mood and that such meetings do help narrow the gaps. It is expected that the ongoing problems concerning erosion of land by the transborder rivers will be addressed in the next JRC (Joint Rivers Commission) meeting.

It is worth mentioning that erosion of land remains a major impediment to alleviation of poverty as it devours large chunks of agricultural land thereby increasing the number of the landless poor in the country. Since Bangladesh is a lower riparian country it is only natural that cascading water from the upper regions would strike our fragile river banks with full force. But there is always the option of implementing effective river training techniques towards protecting the river banks and controlling the flow of water. Many developed countries of the world have benefited immensely through adopting modern scientific river training methods.

We look forward to the next JRC meeting where hopefully a permanent solution to the perennial problem would be found, which will go a long way to forge even better relationship between the peoples of the two neighbouring countries. There are humanitarian, economic, border demarcation and security aspects involved here. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the experts of the two countries explore all the avenues to ensure a win-win situation for both.

Storm in the coastal belt

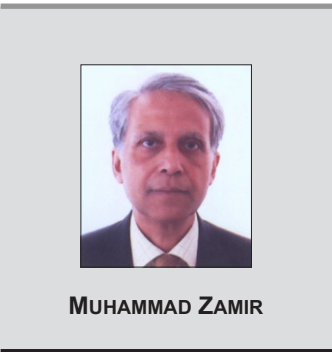
Early warning system should be modernised

OVER five hundred fishing trawlers sank in a sudden storm over Bay of Bengal the other day. As many as 46 dead bodies were recovered till Thursday. In Khulna, a hundred fishing trawlers and a naval ship named Shaheed Farid were caught in the storm. The ship's Commander Firoz Kabir is still missing. We are deeply saddened by the tragedy and our hearts go out in sympathy for the hundreds of families who have lost their near and dear ones.

While the entire media has reported of massive rescue efforts by district and other authorities being in progress, questions remain as to whether or not our weather experts played their part properly which might have helped save lives through early warnings. The raging of sudden storms with extraordinary gale force over Bay of Bengal is nothing new to us. We have seen that soon after the occurrence of such tragic catastrophe our weather experts at the Department of Meteorology come up with the stereotype statement that early warning could not be sounded. We feel that the Department of Meteorology should be provided with all the modern equipment necessary to avoid recurrence of such lapses to the maximum extent possible in future. Meanwhile rescue operations have been impeded by bad weather calling for special efforts.

Traditionally, as we have seen over the past several years, there are two seasons for storms that strike both inland and coastal areas of the country each year, one during April and May and the other during September and October. The weather forecast are good for port users but to ordinary people these are unintelligible. While our disaster preparedness on the ground has been a success to a great extent we must gear up the forecasting system that will enable us to reduce deaths and destruction caused by such storms. The eight-hour gap between weather bulletins will have to be reduced to a maximum of three hours. It is our belief that given the current global awareness on natural disasters following the massive loss of life and widespread destruction caused by Tsunami, international assistance could be easily forthcoming in modernising our weather and storm warning systems.

War on terror-five years later



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WE have just commemorated the fifth anniversary of the despicable events of 11 September, popularly known as 9/11, and the formal start of the 'war on terror'.

Unfortunately, far from being eradicated or banished, terrorism today, has morphed and evolved into a hydra-headed monster. Contrary to the assertion of some within the US and British leadership, it has become a complex phenomenon with a multi-tiered outreach that affects lives all over the world in more ways than one. Violence from terrorism, fundamentalism and extremism continues to cast its shadow on the global social paradigm. Terrorist acts and sectarian violence threaten civilians; maim innocent women and children-all in the name of ideology. Freedom of action and thought continues to be scarred every day.

A critical survey of the world scene five years after events of 2001 leaves one with a bad taste in the month. A world full of hope and promise has not emerged out of the chaos of Afghanistan or Iraq. Al-Qaeda and some other similar terrorist groups have not disappeared but continue to weave their grim legacy. In fact, there has been a spread of terrorist groups and 'home-bred' domestic varieties have surfaced. A classical example has been the growth of terrorist outfits in Indonesia and Bangladesh. Fringe groups like the JMB have made their

Military force, use of controversial armaments like cluster bombs and detailed security checks at airports will not stop terrorist acts. It might reduce the number of incidents but will not contain insurgency and the disaffected home-bred terrorists in general. What is required is meeting of minds and addressing the root causes. We have to ascertain and agree on the factors that are providing the necessary oxygen in these conflicts and then stamp them out.

presence felt openly in different parts of our country.

President Bush, in one of his recent speeches to US army veterans has remarked that the USA will continue its fight against terror and radicals throughout the world. In a manner of speaking he elevated the tenor of the current struggle and compared it to the titanic effort the entire world put in during their fight against Nazism in the Second World War. He declared that victory over terrorists in general, and in Iraq particular, 'is pivotal' for the success of freedom and democracy.

Any sane person will agree with the contention that stability in Iraq and Afghanistan will greatly assist the effort to contain terrorism. However, one must also take one step back and ask why it is not happening? Is it because the direction of the efforts is being perceived as selective, partisan and not even-handed?

There have been regime changes in both these countries. The Taliban as well as Saddam Hussein were tyrannical in the treatment meted out to the respective citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq. Wrong reasons were however found for the war on Iraq. This has in fact led to former US President Jimmy Carter lashing out at the British Prime Minister on 27 August. He has criticised Blair for being 'compliant' and subservient to the Bush Administration in

Washington. He has also gone on to suggest that Bush's decision to invade Iraq in March 2003 had subverted the fight against global terrorism.

Many steps have been taken since then by the occupying powers to put in place a 'functioning democracy' in Iraq. However, it does not seem to be working. It is now being widely acknowledged that sectarian violence is threatening Iraq and there is a better than even chance that it might split apart leading to eventual Balkanisation of that state. 'Time' magazine in its issue of 28 August has a cover story by its Staffer Aparisim Ghosh entitled 'Life in Hell -- a Baghdad diary.' The article is very revealing. He lays bare many strategic mistakes in the joint efforts of the Iraqi Administration and its occupying partners in the handling of the fight against terror. He concludes by observing that sectarian furies unleashed in Iraq might 'drag the country into a final fight to the death.' There is also another ominous comment. He compares the Iraqi leadership with that of underperforming Afghanistan and mentions that 'the beleaguered Afghan President has more credibility with his people than any Iraqi politician can honestly claim.'

If this is the current evaluation, then 'the central front' of the US war on terror is definitely not working. One might be 'strategically optimis-

tic' (in the words of Mr Khalilzad, the US Ambassador to Iraq) but one needs now to be careful.

Recent developments in Afghanistan have also belied earlier hope. 'The Middle East,' an English language British pan-Arab magazine, in its issue of August-September, 2006 has pointed out that according to most observers 'the Iraqi campaign has diverted attention from developments in Afghanistan, which according to them, is the main threat to western liberal values and democracy. The stabilisation and reconstruction efforts undertaken by NATO in that country are stuttering. This has led to frustration. It is also being alleged that the Taliban are regrouping and 'once you leave the town centres, the Taliban still operate with impunity.'

Is this because the NATO and the USA are not being seen as making a longer and more evident commitment to alleviate the Afghans' economic misery? General James Jones, commander of US and NATO forces in Europe might be right when he expresses his frustration with the unwillingness of the European allies to get their hands dirty in Afghanistan. This has also been recently underscored by British Tory MP Tobias Ellwood who came back from a visit to Afghanistan and condemned the lack of commitment by some NATO countries -- saying Ireland's contribution of seven

soldiers and four from Austria are laughable.

The Taliban are testing the resolve of the rest of the world once again and we are being found wanting.

We have to understand that some of the larger terrorist groups, contrary to all that exist in traditional Islam, including tolerance and peaceful co-existence, have succeeded to some degree in dictating the policy of regional and international authorities. It appears however that in the strategy of contemporary Islamic movements, there exist divergence and lack of a common voice with regard to the role of Islam in a conflict. This in turn, has led some observers to discuss the need for more sophisticated security policies than those that are currently in place.

Added to this is the real fear that even if the situation improves and stabilises in Iraq and Afghanistan, this might mean the return to their native lands of large numbers of battle-hardened jihadists intent on spreading their message further afield. This, it is felt, could eventually create a more fluid and decentralised insurgency situation.

In this context it will be difficult to deny that since 9/11, religion has become the next major growth area and a fear-producing element in modern wars and less clearly defined conflicts. Unfortunately, it would also be correct to state that radical Islamist groups are the ones who have most firmly captured the imagination in terms of violence and transnational terrorism.

The net result is greater unease and uncertainty. It has also led to 'profiling' of persons from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This consequent marginalisation has also not helped. It has only led to greater disappointment, frustration and anger.

The classical case is that of Palestine. One hears of democracy and freedom to choose one's repre-

sentative. Yet, after such a process, there has only been chaos in that country. The current crisis arising out of the Gaza kidnapping in Palestine has led to all peace plans being put on ice. This includes the moribund Road Map, the prisoners' document, the Geneva Plan, the Arab League's Saudi plan and even Likud's truncated autonomy proposal as presented by Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Today, as has been understood in the recent fundraising conference in Stockholm, there is only desperation and in the words of the UN representative to the area -- 'a ticking time bomb.'

So what does one do in the meantime?

Military force, use of controversial armaments like cluster bombs and detailed security checks at airports will not stop terrorist acts. It might reduce the number of incidents but will not contain insurgency and the disaffected home-bred terrorists in general. What is required is meeting of minds and addressing the root causes. We have to ascertain and agree on the factors that are providing the necessary oxygen in these conflicts and then stamp them out.

We, particularly, within the developing countries, would like to see an even-handed approach to States conforming to international law and in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions. If this happens, it will take the wind out of the sails of terrorism. There also has to be acceptance that all States have the right to exist within their legitimate borders without its civilians being threatened with attack. The only way to do this is to follow the path of multilateralism and forsake the unilateralist agenda. The United Nations has to be strengthened and common confidence building measures identified.

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Power and price

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

POWER or electricity and price of essentials are the phenomena that impact people well-nigh always. Though the masses have continued to vote for various political parties on the day of national elections, their importance gets reduced to literally nothing once their votes are cast. In the backdrop of such a pitiable status of the masses in the state's functioning, deliberations on the power crisis and price manipulation merit befitting attention as these burning issues are supposed to trigger unfathomable grievances in the minds of teeming millions that have been made to languish in unbearable power shortages as well as relentless price hike of essentials.

Arguably, devastating power crisis has marred the regime of the current government which is about to wind up its tenure. Admittedly, it was an epic of negligence, failure and insatiable corruption which contributed to near zero production of electricity during the whole period thus keeping the countrymen in total darkness for most of the times and also turning the future all the more bleak as this crisis is only to worsen in the days

In 2002, the country generated 3100 MW power and stayed even with the demand of 3100 MW. Now in 2006, the country generates 3300 MW of power even though its number of consumers has nearly doubled. Meanwhile, trade syndicates took absolute control of the country's price mechanism long ago, which are only to become all the more ruthless in Ramadan to make windfall profits. It is a matter of great shame that whereas prices of essentials go down in some Muslim countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, consumers in Bangladesh face stupendous price hike during this month of great restraint in all respects.

to come as the demand is naturally to snowball as against no new production prospect, not to speak of reserve.

How unfortunate the nation is! Yes, it was more than an open secret that many power projects were alleged to be ditched by the real power-house -- many refer to Howa Bhaban -- other than the secretariat owing to non-availability of commission. As 19 power generation units remain shut-down, the country is reeling under perennial power cuts with daily power supply shortfall exceeding 2200 megawatts (MW) resulting in the highest power shortage in the country ever.

According to the data from the Power Development Board (PDB), against the official demand of 4,300 MW as of 17 September, 2006, the country's power plants were pro-

ducing 3,126 MW in the peak hours. But, according to the power demand chart of the Rural Electrification Board (REB), Dhaka Electric Supply Authorities (DESA) and its company Dhaka Electric Supply Company (DESCO) and the PDB, the demand for power was 5,400 MW contributing to a wide demand-supply shortfall.

It is to be mentioned here that the PDB officially shows a lower level of load-shedding to downplay the government's failure in power sector. The picture is, however, bleaker in the rural areas and, to be frank, rural power consumers hardly get a few hours of electric supply a day. Admittedly, the government failed to install any new power project in the last five years except for the 80 MW Tongi power plant which remains shutdown

most of the time due to its sub-standard quality.

In contrast, however, the government in the last five years has doubled the number of power consumers, mostly in the rural areas. Increasing the number of power consumers has given hundreds of crores of taka worth of business allegedly to a number of ruling party men who are involved in construction of power poles. Concurrently, it helped the parliamentarians show off to their constituencies that they have brought power to their areas. And, of late, the Executive Committee on National Economic Council (ECNEC) approved different power distribution projects worth Tk 2000 crore.

More interestingly, however, no project was related to power gener-

ation. Irony as it is, one of these projects specifically target at increasing power consumers by another 10 lakh. The country currently has about 85 lakh power connections covering around five crore consumers. Five years ago, this number was around 50 lakh connections. In 2002, the country generated 3100 MW power and stayed even with the demand of 3100 MW. Now in 2006, the country generates 3300 MW of power even though its number of consumers has nearly doubled.

Meanwhile, trade syndicates took absolute control of the country's price mechanism long ago, which are only to become all the more ruthless in Ramadan to make windfall profits. It is a matter of great shame that whereas prices of essentials go down in some Muslim countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, consumers in Bangladesh face stupendous price hike during this month of great restraint in all respects. Business community leaders have a role to play with support from the government to keep sort of sanity in the market.

Criticising the ethics of businessmen, however, Saifur Rahman said last month that they have to be honest for the sake of welfare of people and that they cannot cause

sufferings to the people through profit mongering. Referring to the social responsibility of Indian businessmen, the minister added in this regard that they are not selfish like the Bangladeshi businessmen. He also opined at that time that it is tough to check the soaring prices of essentials if the business community does not maintain minimum honesty.

However down-to-earth the minister's comments sound, his government can hardly ward off the responsibility of price spiral as the very syndicates are reported to be working under the wings of the ruling party bigwigs. Anyway, however, the bottom line is that no respite seems in sight for the hapless countrymen in that no new power generation is even in embryo. And, does price fall in this country once it goes up even if the government reduces levies? As the state machinery is invariably callous to the stark needs and sufferings of the people, the latter seem to have no option but to pray to almighty for their well-being, more so in the coming month of consummate prayers!

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OPINION

Karnafuly Third Bridge: Likely fallout on Ctg Port

AL-MANSURI

FROM various newspaper reports as well as political programmes, we observe a lot of controversy has surfaced over an important issue. If we deliberate on the issue little impassionately, it will not escape anybody's notice that there is no dispute on the need for the third bridge over the river Karnafuly -- rather there is an urgency for having the same -- nor there are two opinions as to the fact that nothing should be done by any quarter which may impair the growth and operation of Chittagong Port. Controversy mainly arises on account of the extent of sedimentation that is likely to take place if bridge is constructed by adopting the one or the other mode/type. At present, arguments for and against are limited to only two types of bridge viz. hanging one or pillared one depending on the amount of sediment deposit that will likely to accrue on account of the one type or the other.

It may be relevant to state here that sedimentation is more or less a natural phenomenon in all river systems particularly in the lower riparian channel. The river Karnafuly also carries and deposits sediments in its down stream, though luckily for us the quantum of siltation is much less as compared to the rivers forming part of the Gangetic-Brahmaputra system. Karnafuly river mostly flows through hilly region with a strong current and only a small portion passes over the plains before ending up into the Bay

of Bengal. This along with its down stream flow's exposure to high and low tide interactions provide only a limited scope for sedimentation.

It, therefore, appears to be a normal feature of river flow particularly through plain land that sedimentation has been and will be going on. To keep the port channel i.e. down stream of the river Karnafuly free from sediment deposition, at least to a reasonable extent, even now it cannot avoid dredging to secure a minimum draft good enough for the operation of vessels having tonnage up to 15000/16000 which in the present day parlance mostly covers Feeder Vessels. Technically competent persons will be able to clarify the issue all the more about the volume of dredging required to ensure movement of ocean going vessels beyond certain tonnage. What I am trying to drive at is that the dredging of Chittagong Port channel is more or less a routine matter. Of course, effort should always be there to maintain the minimum draft and if, possible to increase the draft by taking to a cost effective dredging only and by avoiding activities -- physical or otherwise -- that are likely to cause more sedimentation necessitating more dredging which is always a costly proposition.

In the backdrop of what has been stated above and coming to the question of suitability of one type of bridge in preference to the other, a number of aspects have to be considered in depth. These are, in my opinion (mind you I am not a technical expert nor anyone near that),

technical feasibility, site location, quantum of sediment deposits, cost effectiveness and of course, as a corollary to these, the requirement of dredging and availability of sufficient ready funds for initiating dredging operations whenever called for, besides other related matters including management ones for sustaining minimum draft in the port channel. But, since presently the controversy has mainly centred on technical viability consistent with the upkeep of the port channel's minimum draft, I am inclined to limit the discussion primarily within this parameter which means Karnafuly Bridge at the proposed site i.e. third Karnafuly Bridge is "Yes". But then what will be the Type? Essentially, this is again a technical issue by and large and calls for the views of technical experts/researchers and experienced civil/mechanical engineers. Representatives of different organisations have already started ventilating preference for the one type or the other. To further elaborate the stand taken by the champions of the two types of bridges can perhaps be expressed as "Pillared Bridge (to be termed more technically as Extra Dozed Cable Stayed Bridge) Vs Suspension Bridge".

It thus means that basically a technical issue has somehow, unfortunately though, assumed a political tinge inasmuch as a government decision in favour of Extra Dozed Cable Stayed Bridge is being questioned by the Mayor of Chittagong who also happens to be a stalwart of Awami League. While doing that Mr Mayor is also advancing

the case of Suspension Bridge with a view to reducing the sedimentation in the river bed of the Karnafuly downstream in the port's jetty area. Not only that, he has by this time organised meetings, processions, etc to drum up the cause of Suspension Bridge. He even has gone to the extent of declaring that he would lay down his life if necessary to uphold the merit of his proposal for the greater interest of the country. No doubt, concern for the Chittagong Port, being the principal port of the country, deserves to draw attention from all of us from the point of view of national interest and accordingly has to be considered in all seriousness.

Let us now see what measures can be initiated to iron out the differences and if possible, to finally solve the issue about the type of the planned third Karnafuly Bridge so that its construction could proceed without any more impediments. Well, from the point of view of an ordinary citizen having marginally acquainted with the physical characteristics of the river Karnafuly and its impact on the Chittagong Port functioning, I would like to say that enough is enough -- no more point-counterpoint, all our energy and expertise may now be geared to find out a quick solution to the disputed issue within the shortest possible time.

After having made a cursory assessment of the various aspects involved including that of the prime necessity of maintaining the minimum draft of port channel and the line-up of fund availability already for

the construction purpose, my own instant feeling is that we should not waste any more time and instead go ahead with the bridge construction as per already approved design if the cost of dredging does not exceed more than 25 per cent of the existing dredging cost assuming that the dredging fleet remains operational up to 75 per cent and at the same time, mandatory rules aimed at preventing all sorts of pollutants and garbages flowing into the river Karnafuly from within Municipal limits and beyond, with provisions for heavy punitive actions are framed by the Chittagong City Corporation with the approval of the government. For this line of thinking, I must confess I have been greatly influenced by the fact that inspite of Howrah Bridge (basically a hanging type) over the river Bhagirathi, in West Bengal, India, the navigability of Calcutta Port could not be retained at a level conforming to the minimum required draft by reducing the volume of sedimentation and eventually main port channel had to be shifted further downstream. We certainly don't wish same fate to befall on Chittagong Port even after construction of a hanging type bridge for which more money and time are unavoidable.

At the same time I could also ascertain that Extra Dozed Cable Stayed Bridge though basically pillared type is not of traditional pillared type in the sense that not only the number of pillars has been reduced, their design also has been re-oriented in the light of technological advancement as far as it could be

made handy with our designers. In fact, as it will be shaping now, it works out to be a sort of compromise between traditional Pillared and Suspension types. However, my idea may not necessarily find favour with technical experts nor shall I claim any extra attention to that.

As regards my views, I have been rather prompted by the country's current and near future interests of transportation without affecting the minimum draft requirement of the Karnafuly downstream and also, at the same time keeping in mind the deplorable conditions of Shah Amanat Bridge and Kalurghat Bridge which may have to be demolished sooner than many of us would like to think. In any case, if most of our technical experts, techno economic researchers and university scholars of the relevant fields strongly feel against the approach I have taken, then I would like to suggest an immediate discussion session to take place with engineers/hydrographers/researchers/experts in the area of bridge construction and siltation and let them come up with appropriate recommendation which may be further grilled in a seminar to be also attended by the financiers/managers/operators of the bridge/port as well, besides the participants of this discussion session. Let the Chittagong Port Authority and Chittagong City Corporation move into the field first to jointly organise a day long discussion session which may be participated by the following: two experienced engineers well-conversant in the related disciplines from the

BUET, one Representative of CUET; one Representative from Ctg University; member (Eng) and Senior Hydrographer of Ctg. Port Authority; chief Engineer of the CCC; two Representatives of River Research Institute; chief Engineer of Roads & Highways Department; representative of the Ministry of Science & Technology/Ministry of Shipping and Ministry of LGRD; representative of IWTA and a Representative of Karnafuly Hydro-electric Project; a technically competent Representative of Port Users.

In addition, some leading techno-economic experts/researchers, besides organisation/enterprise operators from waterways transportation sector or any other researcher/expert/member of the civil society interested in the subject may also be invited. The programme may be spread over two sessions -- morning and evening -- to be presided over by the Chairman, CPA and the Chairman, CCC respectively. However, in case of their non-availability, the Vice-Chancellor of CUET and the President, Institute of Engineers, Chittagong may be approached. The recommendations that will emerge from the deliberations shall be confined only to the type of bridge and its fallout, if any, on the siltation downstream of the Karnafuly river and the suggestions, if any, to have its volume in check.

I believe it will be more fruitful if the Seminar is held in Dhaka under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Shipping and Ministry of Communications. Due to official

reservations, if any if the Ministries do not like to come forward, I for one will, in that case, like to leave the matter to our respected national media to take necessary initiative -- may be through the courtesy of Press Club to hold the proposed Seminar. The invitees, at this stage, may also include one or two international experts on down stream siltation problem and also the Representative of Calcutta Port Trust with a view to enriching our findings with their expertise as well. The Seminar may also like to throw some light about the need and feasibility of Deep Sea Port around the nearby coastline of the Bay to meet the future shipping demand of the region.

The point I would like to emphasise once again is that the issue being of vital national importance calls for urgent action of all concerned so that bridge construction may not suffer any more delay under any pre-text. Maximum one month time will be enough to complete the proposed exercise. I believe that our national media can play a very positive role and accordingly will like to appeal to our national media to do their best in taking the whole exercise into fruition.

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