

Coping with disaster

There is a need to enforce rules

PROFESSOR Jamilur Reza Chowdhury has been voicing some very common public concerns regarding safety factors in and around buildings. His remarks, coming as they do after the disaster which overtook the BSEC Bhaban in the city on Monday, should serve as a new pointer to what must be done from here on in the construction sector. Monday's fire revealed quite a few upsetting facts. One of them was the absence of a proper exit system inside the BSEC building which, again, was made worse by the stairways being kept under lock and key. Another was the pretty grim reality of the fire services not being equipped to deal with disaster beyond seven floors of a building. When one reflects on such realities, one cannot but be deeply worried, as Professor Chowdhury has been.

There are some necessary steps that must now be taken if building-related disasters are to be avoided in future. A basic point here is that the building code which the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha has outlined for itself has more often than not been followed in the breach than in the observance. Such attitudes have developed partly through the duplicity of property owners, a good number of whom have violated the code with impunity, and partly through corruption at various levels of Rajuk. Now that the caretaker administration has adopted a hard-nosed approach to policy, we expect it to be decisive about ensuring a compliance of rules in the construction sector. That said, there are other areas that call for urgent attention. Owners of apartment complexes and buildings housing offices must be compelled under the law to adopt safety measures of their own. In this regard, provisions for emergency exits and fire-fighting equipment assume unquestioned importance. Unfortunately, not much of education has gone into training people about the use of emergency exits as well as fire-fighting material. Given such lapses, the potential for danger remains. In this respect, one is compelled to raise the question of how well-versed our fire service personnel are about the job they must do as also the training they must impart to people as part of overall disaster preparedness programmes. With fire services abroad conducting drills at least twice a year for people at various levels, it makes sense to ask that similar work be undertaken in Bangladesh.

Indeed, the need for preparedness in some other areas remains paramount for us. This is especially so because of the collective experience we have so far had in the garments sector and, now, in the case of BSEC Bhaban. And let us not forget that Bangladesh happens to straddle the earthquake zone. A small jolt could send buildings crashing down all around. How equipped and prepared are we to deal with the resultant tragedy?

The BSEC fire

We are moved by the fellow feeling

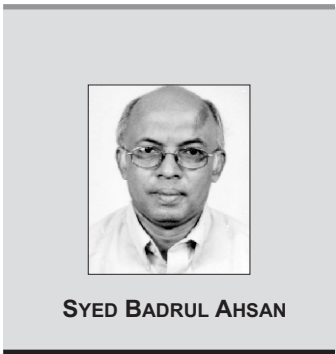
THE sudden fire at BSEC Bhaban has given us a jolt, although the loss of lives due to the incident was by far at its minimum compared to similar incidents in the past. But for the bravado and collective efforts of the public, armed forces men and firemen, more deaths could have taken place and turned the whole incident into a greater tragedy.

We are moved by the compassion, courage and display of brotherhood by members of the public particularly before the arrival of the fire brigade and other official agencies. The sincere efforts of the people of the neighbouring areas in boosting the morale of those trapped and their actual participation in rescue efforts thereafter are also highly commendable. They were even seen carrying the injured to safety and helping the shocked and the dazed down the ladders of the Fire Brigade rescue team. Indeed, the spontaneous services provided by citizens are highly laudable.

We would also like to express our appreciation of the work done by Major Imran and Major Amin in the rescue efforts. At the same time, the courage displayed by Warrant Officers Aziz and Akbar deserve to be mentioned. They rescued many with their helicopter landing on the roof under extremely hazardous conditions, with antennae and aerials standing in the way. They rescued people huddled on the rooftop, traumatised and in a state of panic. This was indeed one of the toughest operations of the day that saved the lives of as many as 12 people.

As much as the collective efforts of the public and official agencies were commendable on the day, it is our feeling that the operations were somewhat marred by the indiscipline and chaos caused by curious onlookers and others who thronged before BSEC Bhaban and in the surrounding lanes. It not only caused frustration for the rescuers but also led to a traffic gridlock on one of the major thoroughfares of the capital for over four hours. Surely all these resilient, worried people could have done better.

Shafiullah, August 1975 and all our questions



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GENERAL K.M. Shafiullah has been reminiscing about the tragedy that overtook Bangladesh in August 1975. There are millions of other Bengalis who have done a similar thing since Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated and his government overthrown in a coup that was to shame all of us and for all time.

And yet there is a difference between how Shafiullah looks at the tragedy and how the rest of us view events as they turned out on the day. Shafiullah was, and remains, a respected freedom fighter. He has served as ambassador and has been a lawmaker.

But what has always rankled is the truth that, as chief of staff of the Bangladesh army in 1975, Shafiullah clearly failed to save Bangabandhu's life and help uphold the constitutional government the Father of the Nation presided over at the time.

Of course, Shafiullah readily acknowledges his failure, and would like us to know how he has agonised over his inability to come to Bangabandhu's aid in the latter's final moments of life. We understand his pain.

The former army chief has placed the blame for Bangabandhu's tragic end on the failure of the national security apparatus to detect the huge conspiracy that was clearly at work against the government and

the state in the weeks and months before the coup came to pass.

He has a point, but he clearly loses points when he speaks of the advice he proffered Bangabandhu even as the assassins got increasingly closer to the president's residence at 32 Dhanmondi. The general informed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that a force was on its way to protect him. Meanwhile, could he try to escape from his residence? There can only be two unequivocal responses to these points.

In the first place, as we knew subsequently, no force undertook the job of proceeding to Dhanmondi to save the founder of the Bengali republic. In the second, Shafiullah's suggestion that Bangabandhu find a way out of his residence clearly took little notice of the Mujib persona.

Never in his life had Mujib dodged his pursuers and, instead, preferred to wait at home to be taken into custody. Besides, assuming that he had taken such advice seriously, did General Shafiullah honestly think that Bangabandhu could run to safety before all those men who had taken upon themselves a dark vow to physically do away with him? Sheikh Kamal was already dead downstairs, and soldiers were swarming up the stairs to the first floor. The president of Bangladesh stood little chance of making himself scarce.

GROUND REALITIES

There are far too many questions than one can possibly answer about the grisly incidents of August and November 1975. You might argue, with good reason, that the full extent of the whole sordid story of how Mujib and his political lieutenants were murdered is yet to be known, indeed might never be known. There is little question that Bangabandhu cared little about his security, despite concerns expressed by such individuals as Indira Gandhi.

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There is little question that Bangabandhu cared little about his security, despite concerns expressed by such individuals as Indira Gandhi. But that does not absolve everyone who was anyone in national security at the time of the blame for the catastrophe which came over the country in that annus horribilis in our history.

Not a single soul knew of the conspiracy that was afoot. When Khondokar Moshtaque, Taheruddin Thakur, Mahbubul Alam Chashi and ABS Safdar disappeared for the three days prior to the coup d'etat and set up base at the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, no one noticed.

But once Bangabandhu had been safely dispatched, all these men were spotted early on the morning of August 15 giving their spin to the bloody order they had just inaugurated. Only then did people notice; and only then did the mystery begin to come to light.

General Shafiullah informs us that when he was told by the coup plotters that Moshtaque had taken over as president, he refused to

recognize him as the nation's new leader. That was a noble act. It proved to be a fleeting one, though, as only a few hours later he and the other forces chiefs collectively swore allegiance to Moshtaque.

Note that Bangabandhu and his family were wiped out in the pre-dawn hours. When the chiefs of the army, navy and air force, as also other forces, switched their loyalty to the leader of the successful coup, in this case Moshtaque, it was around nine in the morning.

The argument which a good number of men in responsible positions at the time advanced, that with Bangabandhu already dead there was hardly anything else that could be done, has never been convincing.

The majors, colonels and general soldiers taking part in the killings were, in relative terms, a handful. A bigger, more disciplined force determined to restore constitutional order could have been deployed in tracking down the killers and so enabling Vice President Syed Nazrul Islam to take charge as the nation's new leader.

In the event, no such action was taken. The vice president and three other senior political figures, the core of the 1971 Mujibnagar government, were placed under house arrest. Later in the month, they would be transferred to Dhaka central jail, never to re-

emerge alive from its darkness.

All these long years after 1975, the questions keep piling up one upon the other. General M.A.G. Osmany, a revered national figure, disappointed many of us when he agreed to be Khondokar Moshtaque's defence advisor.

For a man who had bravely forfeited his seat in parliament when Baksal came into shape, the reality of his being beside Moshtaque in that despicable hour has not gone down well for the people of this country. And then there are the doubts about the role, on the sidelines, General Ziaur Rahman may have had in the coup.

On August 15, the brave men of the elite Rakshī Bahini watched sheepishly as the tanks moved through Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and towards Dhanmondi. No senior officer of the force was around to inquire into such movements.

Worse was perhaps the way the assassins guided the tanks out of the cantonment and into the city without, in all these years, anyone in any command position in the cantonment being able to explain how an act of such manifest indiscipline could occur. A group of junior officers and enlisted men in tanks was out to murder the president of the republic -- and no one knew anything about the conspiracy.

In essence, it is a sense of collective national guilt that we, as a people, have suffered from over our failure to save the life of a man who gave us new life as citizens of a free country in 1971.

Only one man, the repatriated Bengali army officer from Pakistan, Colonel Jamil Ahmed, went forth to try to save the man whose security he had been entrusted with. He was shot down as he attempted to enter 32 Dhanmondi. Try naming any other man who rose in Bangabandhu's defence that day.

You will draw a blank. Move on to November of the year, when some of us thought that the darkness we had fallen under was about to lift through the Khaled Musharraf coup.

There is little question that Musharraf, Huda, Haider and Shafaat Jamil did a good job of engineering Moshtaque's deserved ouster from the office of president. And yet it appears inconceivable that they were not aware of the counter-coup that was already underway against them on November 6.

When you move back a little, to November 3 when Khaled Musharraf went into action against Moshtaque and the assassin-officers, you will be appalled at how the soon to be chief of staff (albeit a short-lived one) and his fellow officers remained in the dark about the killings inside Dhaka central jail.

More pertinently, when Musharraf agreed to have the majors and colonels go into exile as the Moshtaque regime collapsed, did he know about the fresh murders these men had committed? If he did, why did he let them go?

The mystery will not likely be unravelled, despite General Shafiullah's expression of contrition. By the way, did you notice that when charges were formally filed against Bangabandhu's killers in 1996, no reference was made to the role played by Khondokar Moshtaque in the making of the disaster falling on us in a heap twenty one years previously? Ah, do not forget the Kissinger factor. Go to Christopher Hitchens, to his little book The Trial of Henry Kissinger.

We rest our case.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Power saving in Bangladesh: A short-term solution

There will be other problems, too. Most generators are gas driven, although quite a few are diesel driven. Running all these gas generators will overload the gas supply system. But this must be solved even if we build new power stations. As regards diesel generators, the cost of generation will be high. But PDB will have to buy the electricity at the higher rate, just as they do with diesel power stations in the western part of Bangladesh.

A HASANAT KHAN

I have read with a great deal of interest the report on the roundtable discussion, regarding the power shortage in Bangladesh, held by The Daily Star on February 17. Although the discussions were excellent, it seems to me that one or two short-term solutions were not discussed at all, or not discussed in great depth.

I wish to humbly add a few suggestions which I feel can be carried out immediately, in a few months if not weeks. This is, of course, in addition to the long-term solutions suggested in the discussions.

My first suggestion is to replace all the normal (incandescent) bulbs in use throughout Bangladesh by the energy-saving lamps now available. This will

reduce the power consumption by some 80%.

How much power will be saved if we can do this? I do not have access to REB or PDB data on the power consumed for lighting throughout Bangladesh, but let me make a guess. There are 65,000 villages in Bangladesh. Assuming 10 houses in each village with electric lights, and two bulbs in each house with a power of 60 watts each, the total power consumed by the villages alone will be 78 MW.

I can only guess the amount of power consumed in the towns of Bangladesh, and in the large cities. Let's say another 78 MW. The total comes to a whopping 156 MW. If we can replace all the bulbs with energy-saving lamps we have this power as surplus, without building a single power station.

But how can it be done? The

energy-saving lamps are expensive, some 10 times as much as a normal bulb, but will last 10 times as long. Because of the higher capital cost of the lamps, poor people will not be able to afford them.

I would like to suggest that the government asks the donor agencies for loans to import a large number of these bulbs, and distributes them to all the villages at a subsidized rate so that they can be sold at the same rate as normal bulbs.

From my calculation, the subsidy comes to only about \$7 million. Thus, we can get a 156MW power plant for only \$7M. I am suggesting energy-saving lamps, because there is a revolution going on in the world to replace normal bulbs with those.

Only yesterday, the Australian government decided to ban all

incandescent bulbs in the country. This is a drastic action, but most other Western countries are encouraging people to change. It requires only a little bit of research to find out what other countries are doing.

Some will say that energy-saving lamps will be smuggled to other countries. Yes they will be, but that has to be resisted in the same way that we resist smuggling of petrol, which is cheaper in Bangladesh than in other countries.

Some will ask, what will happen to all the bulb manufacturers in the country? I would like to suggest that they be encouraged to retool their plants in order to manufacture energy-saving lamps instead.

Some will say this is fine, but how long will the government subsidize the energy-saving lamps. I am suggesting that the subsidy need not continue for a long time. The consumers will immediately benefit from the much lower electricity bills they will receive and, over the lifetime of the energy-saving lamps, they will have saved enough to pay the full price of the next energy-saving lamp they buy.

How can we ensure that people will replace their existing normal

bulbs with energy-saving lamps? Perhaps, once these lamps are available, people could be asked to bring their existing bulbs and have them replaced by energy-saving lamps, one for one. There will be problems, but they need to be solved for the greater good.

My next suggestion is to utilize the large number of generators available in the private sector for the running of mills and factories, which are not fully utilized, or idle, because of plant shutdowns or whatever.

Most factories that I visited had these generators, and they are mostly only partially loaded. I would like to hazard a guess as to how much surplus capacity may be available from the private sector.

Let us assume that there are 1000 generators in the country with an average capacity of 500 KW. Let us also assume that these generators are 50% loaded. Thus, the capacity available to feed into the grid will be a very large 250 MW. Thus, we get a 500MW power plant for almost nothing.

There are problems with this. Synchronizing grid will have to be imported and installed. PDB will have to agree to buy the power at a reasonable rate, which must

exceed the cost of generation, otherwise why will the private sector sell the power?

There will be other problems, too. Most generators are gas driven, although quite a few are diesel driven. Running all these gas generators will overload the gas supply system. But this must be solved even if we build new power stations.

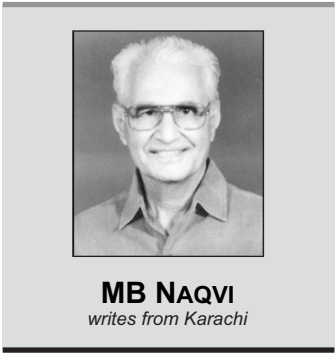
As regards diesel generators, the cost of generation will be high. But PDB will have to buy the electricity at the higher rate, just as they do with diesel power stations in the western part of Bangladesh.

Consumption of diesel will go up, and fuel will have to be imported in larger quantities. But these are problems which can be solved in a shorter time than it would take to construct a new power station.

I hope that The Daily Star will include the above suggestions in their recommendations to the government. I also hope that these suggestions will be explored thoroughly.

The author is the former MD of BOC Bangladesh Ltd and former President, Foreign Investors Chamber.

Middle East: Questions without answers



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

JUST what is the US after in the Middle East is the question that occurs and reoccurs. It invaded Iraq against international public opinion. The proffered causus belli was a fabrication that Saddam's Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that could be used in 45 minutes.

The US alleged that Saddam had links with al-Qaeda. That was a lie. True, he was a murderer and a tyrant. But so are other Arab monarchs and Gulf sheikhs. Aren't they all murderers and tyrants, whose opponents disappear and die in obscurity?

They are all friends of America, and Americans are anxious to recruit them as allies against Iran, knowing

PLAIN WORDS

This particular course would be uncharacteristic of the present regime in Tehran and, on the whole, is unlikely. But the dynamics of the Iraqi civil war, and the interplay of Iranian policies with the likely Arab support for American actions, is likely to promote and exacerbate a general conflagration in the region.

the potential of that move.

As for Iraq, its occupation by America is four years old. What is the net result of the American invasion, beyond the overthrow of Saddam Hussein? How was he a pain in the neck? No one has explained that.

There are theories that he was potentially too powerful for the good of Israel, and that he had ideas about selling his oil in euros, which infuriated the Americans. He was also helpful to the Palestinians who were struggling against Israel.

The theory that commands most respect is that the aim was the destruction of Iraq to free Israel from a serious threat from a notable opponent so close by, and to control its oil directly through companies favoured by the US.

The Americans need to show

what have they achieved. Can the government situated in the Green Zone of Baghdad make its writ run on the rest of the country, despite the surged help from America to the Iraqi Army and police?

It is a fact that an incipient civil war between the Shias and the Sunnis has started. Now, there is an involvement of al-Qaeda in Iraq that was not there before. How do the Americans explain this?

Iraq was a modern and secular state before the Americans entered. It is now threatened with disintegration into three smaller states, and the ever-increasing possibility of Shia-Sunni civil war getting out of hand to engulf other countries of the region.

None thought that it was likely before the Americans invaded. And finally, is the government that is being advised and run by the

American ambassador Zalmie Khalilzad in the Green Zone a model of democracy? Can it hold the country together? Can it reconcile the Sunnis?

There is also the age-old Palestine problem. The Americans have, from time to time, shown interest in resolving it, while the people of the region know that it was the Anglo-American combination that made the UN create Israel and impose on the region.

What the Israelis are doing in what remains of Palestine in the 40th year of occupation looks uncommonly like a more murderous apartheid regime of South Africa, or what the Serbian dictator in the former Yugoslavia did in the 1990s. It is regularly stealing, in fact robbing, the Palestinians of their land, and freely murdering all those whom it

dubs militants and suicide bombers.

The net result of American policy is non-stop strengthening of Israel militarily and economically. It demands that the Palestinians recognize Israel and abide by unequal agreements before the world will give survival money to them.

There are no demands on Israel. It is feared that if things continue like this, and not enough international help -- political, economic and financial -- is forthcoming for the Palestinians, they would eventually be eliminated. The Israelis are committing actual genocide, if also slowly.

American conduct in the July 2006 war in Lebanon poses a question mark. What did they try to do during that war? Was it not because of them that the war was stretched out, with no ceasefire?

The whole world knows that it was the American administration that chose to give as much time as possible to Israel to take out Hezbollah altogether, if possible. What was it for, if not for the security of Israel?

Arab rights did not matter at all. Do they have any message to the Lebanese, particularly the Shia

majority, that can enthrone them to Pax Americana. Their designs on the state of Lebanon, and on the Lebanese, need an explanation.

Now there is the would-be WMD in Iran. Without any proof, the US accuses that Iranians would have WMDs some time later. Therefore, they want to punish Iran now, and everyone agrees with Dick Cheney, the vice president of America, that America refuses to withdraw any of the options it has vis-à-vis Iran.

It is, thus, clear that the military option stays, while other indications suggest that the Americans or Israelis, or both, are going to attack Iran. It is, therefore, necessary to see what the end result of an American attack will be.

Many think that even President George Bush will not dare to mount a ground invasion of Iran; the country is too large, and the people are likely to resist. If the Americans have been unable to wrap up their invasion of Iraq after four full years, and have been unable to achieve much in Afghanistan in nearly six years, what chance would they have of imposing a regime of their choice on Iran? Would they get away with it?

Most observers think that the Americans (or Israelis) will restrict

themselves to an aerial attack on selected nuclear targets. If one were to suppose -- and it is natural to do so -- that the Iranians would, from the very first hit onward, retaliate with all the means at their disposal, military and non-military.

Unless the American attacks are so massive and so sudden, in terms of minutes, that they give Iran no time to react, and that they achieve the decapitation of Iran's military capability altogether in the very first attack, it is hard to see how this can be done without using something like a thousand aircraft attacking simultaneously. Even a thousand might not suffice for a total decapitation of Iranian military capabilities, whatever its quantum.

The Iranians appear to have various options that one had listed a while ago. They will be quite painful for most in the west. Not all friends and allies of America favour America's military strike(s).

Pakistan, which will be adversely affected, is one of them, and wants only diplomacy to be used. So would India; so would, perhaps, Karzai, if he is allowed to express his personal views. True, the EU and Nato have progressively become levers in the hands of the US, and seem to have lost the status of an autonomous

force on the world stage.

The Iranians can, in the opinion of many, cause a lot of damage to American designs in the Middle East. At the very least, they can strengthen Hezbollah and Hamas, can help beef up the defences of Syria, and can, perhaps, try and tilt the balance in Iraq's civil war.

This particular course would be uncharacteristic of the present regime in Tehran and, on the whole, is unlikely. But the dynamics of the Iraqi civil war, and the interplay of Iranian policies with the likely Arab support for American actions, is likely to promote and exacerbate a general conflagration in the region.

There would be much disorder under the Middle East heavens. What others would do is hard to say. But can future American governments, with the help of major powers, clean up the mess that Mr. Bush would leave? It is also an open question whether future US administrations can give up the neo-con doctrines of unilateralism and pre-emption based on the assumption of being God's own people.

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