

Inquest into Ctg landslides

Legal and preventive actions should go hand in hand

THE enquiry committee on the recent Chittagong landslides, which claimed 123 lives, has held six government organisations responsible for the disaster. It is evident now that the government organisations, which were supposed to work towards protecting the hills, have not only committed lapses of their own but have also abetted in the commission of hill cutting crimes. In other words, organisations like department of environment, Chittagong City Corporation, Chittagong Development Authority, Railways, forest department and police have been found to be negligent of their duties. The members of the civil administration, to our mind, cannot also evade responsibility.

The report has laid bare the fact that there was no enforcement of the law and this only brought up the bigger question of lack of a policy framework with regard to hill management to prevent predatory activities on the hills that caused environmental degradation of an unprecedented nature, apart from risking lives.

The report has blamed the government agencies wholesale for what we would call their collective failure. The problem with this kind of generalisation is that no individual or agency can be pinpointed -- something that is needed for initiating punitive action against the responsible. At the same time, passing the buck cannot be helpful in taking appropriate preventive action, far less punishing the offenders.

So, while the experts work on formulating a hill management policy, in immediate terms, legal process against the offenders should be initiated as the government set up a coordinating body to ensure that the agencies concerned do not fail to discharge their duties in conserving the hill resources.

There has been a plethora of recommendations made by the committee to set things right. Obviously, the issue has been examined in all its ramifications. But what we feel is that the focus must be on important areas like enforcement of law and coordination of all governmental activities to prevent razing of hills.

Plight of hawkers

They need rehabilitation, and quickly

THE tragic death of two hawkers as they slept on a pavement in Gulistan a few days ago has brought to the fore the unsettled conditions in which hawkers in general have been trying to survive since their eviction from roadside pavements a few months ago. The authorities relocated some of them through setting up what have euphemistically been called holiday markets at five different locations in the capital. Additionally, the hawkers were given assurances that they would be fully rehabilitated in order for them to go on with their trade.

The eviction of the hawkers from the many pavements in the city was undertaken without prior thought being given to their rehabilitation. With a long period having elapsed already with precious few signs of the hawkers being rehabilitated fully any time soon, it makes sense to argue that their welfare now needs serious looking into. There is, first, the humanitarian aspect of the issue. These hawkers, with their families, live a precarious existence. That implies that having them do business at the designated holiday markets, which again cannot accommodate all of them, only means adding to the pressure they constantly live under. There is then the very glaring fact that hawkers form the lowest tier in the overall supply and distribution chain and as such numerous people at the lower middle class level are the prime beneficiaries of their trade. When such a tier is dispersed, it is not just the hawkers themselves but their buyers as well who run into difficulties. What the hawkers have traditionally done is engage in informal trade which constitutes a goodly portion of monetary transactions and which trade has now been disrupted.

It is, therefore, time for the authorities to take a long and purposeful look at the plight of the hawkers. Caring for them, through giving them secure places where they can ply their trade, ought to be a priority. Any form of tokenism cannot be of any help to them. We therefore urge the authorities that they take measures without delay for the early rehabilitation of the hawkers.



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

Amartya Sen measures a country's wealth by what its citizens are capable of being and doing. This is called "capability theory." The question to ask is: what are people actually able to do, and to be? The theory avoids traditional pitfalls because it insists that quality of life must take into factors such as access to education, quality of personal relationships, the opportunities available to the people, and political and economic freedom.

PEOPLE gasped in utter frustration and disgust to learn from the media that a former state minister of home affairs allegedly took Tk 20 crore to hush up a murder case. This is unbelievable, because the law and order of the country was vested in him. During Hamlet's time the state of Denmark was rotten according to Shakespeare, but Bangladesh has surpassed the state of Denmark in decay.

Politics will never be the same again in Bangladesh. Party leaders had played their game under the name of "democracy" very badly during the last 16 years. No tolerance for each other, lack of mutual respect, unaccountability to people, violation of their election manifestoes, and their

authoritarianism, were the hallmarks of their rule since 1991. They had thought that the country and its wealth was their "family property." The necessity and relevance of morality in their actions were put in the dustbin.

People knew that corruption was rampant in the country and that, at the fag end of AL rule, Bangladesh was on top of the list of corrupt countries. The then finance minister tried to argue against Transparency International's assessment, but to no avail. The BNP kept up the tradition in successive years, as if to show that AL's corruption was "peanuts." And they actually did.

The revelations by former ministers, MPs and political leaders, of the extent of corruption and looting of national wealth are staggering and beyond belief. What would they do with crores of takas?

When greed becomes obsession, money loses its relevance.

Possession of crores of takas is not a means any more, but becomes the end and gives satisfaction to them, not for using but for mere possession. One cannot ride in two cars at the same time, and one cannot sleep at night in two expensive houses at the same time, then the question is why do they accumulate/steal/loot so much money?

Some psychologists say that such looting of national wealth is a perversion. Ordinary people ask: are they sick? Money is a basic need, but when accumulation of money is itself the purpose, does it not speak of a sick mind?

On the other hand, there is a rewarding picture of Bangladesh. The country can be proud of the activities of Brac and Grameen Bank, because they have shown others how to help poor people in their day-to-day struggle for survival. Our business people have boosted exports by 15 percent every year, and our overseas labourers have sent nearly Tk 5 billion back home last year.

Democracy does require a whole complex of state institutions. But elected governments in the past did not strengthen them, they, instead, weakened them and moulded them according to their party affiliations. This is a great tragedy that, as the chief justice reportedly said sometime ago, people would have to suffer for another 25

years.

It seems that there are four forces working in the political processes in the country:

- The CTG's stated goal of holding free and credible election after creating a level playing field for all parties.
- The civil society's proposals on how to make politics healthy and accountable.
- The initiative for reforms of political parties themselves.
- The people's hopes and their demands.

How these forces play out in the end is anybody's guess, but it is certain that a new broom is being used by all these forces to cleanse the rot.

Ordinary people are hopeful that, at the end of the day, something good will come out for them, like a liberal democracy where the elected representatives would exercise their decision-making powers according to the rule of law. Liberal democracy is also characterised by tolerance and pluralism, in which differing social and political views are tolerated.

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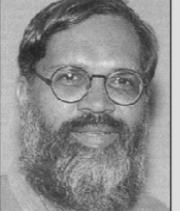
theory." The question to ask is: what are people actually able to do, and to be? The theory avoids traditional pitfalls because it insists that quality of life must take into factors such as access to education, quality of personal relationships, the opportunities available to the people, and political and economic freedom.

Against the backdrop of the grim stories of corruption and looting, the public want the constitutionally constituted CTG to clean the decks and bring in a new Bangladesh. The men and women deserve it because they are hardworking, decent, innovative and imaginative.

Bangladesh people want to ensure that, in the new political climate, political parties do take notice of the essence of the "capability theory" of development. Ordinary people do not wish to see the return of the tyranny and oppression of political parties. They wish that the CTG succeeds in attaining its goal, and are pleased to see that the army is helping and assisting the CTG in creating a new environment in politics in the country.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Race for Rashtrapati Bhawan

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

EVER since Indira Gandhi outmanoeuvred her Congress rivals in 1969, and put up Vara hagiri Venkatagiri against the official candidate, the election of India's president has acquired disproportionate importance.

Giri's victory marked the triumph of Gandhi's "Left turn," symbolised by the abolition of former maharajahs' privy purses and bank nationalisation. It also vested excessive significance in a top-heavy, indirect selection process devoid of mass campaigning. The president's office is largely ornamental, like constitutional monarchy. It is not the court of last resort.

The president's discretion is limited to appointing a prime minister in a hung Parliament, and certain other matters like asking the government to reconsider bills, or granting clemency or pardon. Even here, the president is bound by conventions and norms. As a rule, the president only acts on the cabinet's "advice."

Within this limitation, s/he is

No political observer in Maharashtra remembers Ms Patil for anything that she has done or said. Recently, however, she committed a faux pas by saying that the purdah (veil) was introduced in India to "save women from Mughal invaders." This is both historically wrong and politically deplorable. Historians say that the purdah predates the Mughals' 16th century arrival. Many communities -- regardless of religion or caste -- practised gender discrimination during the early medieval period.

expected to play a dignified role above party agendas. His/her election should also reflect dignity. It is, thus, regrettable that the current presidential election has become a bitter contention, in which parties are scoring brownie points and playing for minuscule, temporary advantages.

The Congress vacillated over deciding its nominee. Its choice, the non-descript Pratibha Patil, has left many United Progressive Alliance supporters disappointed, although quite a few were glad it didn't nominate Mr. Shivraj Patil who has badly under-performed as home minister.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance thwarted consensus on the presidential nominee. Last November, it started pleading with President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam to seek a second term.

This flies in the face of a well-settled convention. Various parties have repeatedly cited this convention since 1962. That's why the highly regarded Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was denied a second term.

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The BJP invoked that very convention in May 2002, when it told K.R. Narayanan that he should not seek re-election. So it was utterly hypocritical for the BJP to campaign for Mr. Kalam's second term. It nominated vice-president and BJP leader Bhairao Singh Shekhawat as the NDA's candidate -- only after Mr. Kalam refused to enter the contest.

However, the BJP still speaks in multiple voices. Confronted by the announcement of the eight regional parties like the SP, AIADMK and Telugu Desam -- now called the United National Progressive Alliance -- that they would "persuade" Mr. Kalam to seek a second term, the BJP said that it supported Mr. Kalam as a consensus candidate. But Mr. Kalam isn't a consensus candidate. The UPA isn't about to reconsider Ms Patil's nomination.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kalam has muddied the waters by declaring, in an unprecedented statement, that he "can accept a second term of presidency provided there is certainty." This "certainty" isn't "consensus." The announcement

brings Mr. Kalam no credit. However, the BJP is trying to turn the tables on the Congress by saying it must explain why it doesn't back Mr. Kalam. This is preposterous, but typical of the BJP's intimidatory tactics.

In reality, the BJP's election plans have gone awry, and the NDA is divided. The Shiv Sena and the Trinamool Congress have spoken out against nominating Mr. Shekhawat. The Sena chief even opposes Mr. Kalam, and will probably back Ms Patil. Trinamool leader Mamata Banerjee says Mr. Kalam is still her first choice. Even Bihar Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, opposes Mr. Shekhawat's nomination.

The BJP was hoping to cut a deal with some members of the UNPA, under which their second-preference votes would go to Mr. Shekhawat. That would enable the NDA to avert an embarrassing loss of face.

However, after its latest decision, the UNPA may abstain from voting. This is widely expected of the SP and TDP, with 80,000 of the UNPA's 105,000 votes. In that case, Mr. Shekhawat could suffer a crushing defeat.

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saying that the purdah (veil) was introduced in India to "save women from Mughal invaders."

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The numbers favour Ms Patil, with the UPA's and the Left and Bahujan Samaj Party's votes exceeding the half-way mark in the 10.99 lakh-strong electoral college. It would be a huge surprise if Ms Patil didn't win a thumping majority. Her victory would be welcome, primarily because she's a woman with long experience of portfolios like culture, health and education.

That said, Ms Patil is a singularly undistinguished leader. She comes from North Maharashtra's prosperous Levai Patil community, which migrated from Rajasthan four centuries ago. She married Devisingh Shekhawat from Vidarbha. She was brought into politics by Y.B. Chavan, primarily because she was a woman and represented two distinct regions.

All we need is a relatively sober, prudent and dignified individual. We needn't despair about Ms Patil, even if we don't feel elated.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Clearly, the BJP severely underestimated his lack of acceptability. The UNPA was reluctant to back him, and toyed with all kinds of substitutes, including Mr. Farooq Abdullah, former Supreme Court judge Fatima Beevi, and agronomist M.S. Swaminathan.

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The president, Indians know from experience, need not be, and usually isn't, a fountain of wisdom/sagacity. Barring Radhakrishnan and Narayanan, most presidents have been neither erudite nor wise. A majority were over-ambitious.

Gen. Moeen U Ahmed, goes: "Democracy itself requires a secure environment for it to thrive and spread its roots. Both democracy and security are complementary features of the system now being put in place by correct initiatives."

Definitely, we want a secure democracy which must not be tainted and made insecure by the touch of dishonest, corrupt and inefficient politicians, and our armed forces, working with the government of Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed, will help establish that democracy.

After doing this work successfully, the armed forces will go back to the barracks and salute the democracy of the nation. They are not going to taint the prestige of the nation, which had been liberated at the cost of supreme sacrifice of millions. They are not an entity which will kill democracy and the democratic spirit, like the army did in Pakistan.

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A response to Kuldip Nayar



The joint effort of the caretaker government and the armed forces has made it possible for the nation to learn about the unbridled corruption of these powerful individuals. Without army intervention, this corruption would have continued unabated, and the people would have remained in the dark about the leaders who claimed themselves to be patriots who worked for the people of this country. Now, people will start to see fresh, comparatively honest, talented and efficient people in politics, which had so long been dominated by inefficient and seriously dishonest people and muscle men.

MASUM BILLAH

I have gone through the article under the above caption by the eminent Indian columnist Kuldip Nayar in The Daily Star on June 21. The writer has revealed the present political scenario, its background, and the blending of army and neutral administration of Bangladesh. At the end of his article he expressed his apprehension about whether the army, which is now backing the caretaker government, will go back to the barracks or take over the civil administration, like in Pakistan. But the chief advisor has said that the army was working under the caretaker government.

Really, the people now feel relieved, not fully but mostly. The role of the army in this present situation is somewhat different. It is the necessity of the time. The service sectors of the state had turned into dens of the most corrupt people and muscle men. Look at Rajuk Bhaban, which had turned into hell for the people

and guides the deputy commissioners in administration. From the point of view of civilization, it looks a little bit odd. Even then, the people of Bangladesh accept it as a welcome move, remembering the serious political turmoil the country witnessed just after the tenure of the previous government ended.

Police stations were hell, and the people had forgotten that help could be obtained from a policeman or a police station, because they belonged to the group of angels of hell, they were not human beings. Actually this has been the situation for many years. Because of some steps taken by this government, and definitely with the active help of the army, the people have stated thinking that they could get help from the police.

Many state owned industries and enterprises suffered a colossal amount of loss, at the cost of the poor taxpayer's money and foreign donations. There was no point nor reason for running these losing concerns, but the ugly intentions and inefficiency of the politicians kept the dacoits and looters in these organizations in the name of so-called democracy.

Here, the intervention of some force which stood beyond politics, and was a symbol of unity of the state, was needed, and the army is doing that very job. Only the honest intentions of the caretaker government would not have been enough to carry out this gigantic task, as the law enforcing agencies were also seriously corrupt. So, army intervention was a necessity of the time.

Now one thing comes to my mind again and again. Some politicians use religion as a means of fulfilling their interests. In the same way, some corrupt people use the theory of democracy to hoodwink the people, and to gain benefits. They hardly, or probably never, tilt towards public welfare. We experience such kind of democracy in almost all the developing countries.

If we look back, we can easily see what degree of development took place during the tenures of the so-called democratic governments, and how much they are actually answerable to the people. The party in power always does what it wants, and never pays attention to the opposition, let alone the people.

As a result, the opposition violently opposes every step of the party in power, to gain their own ends. And the by-products of this movement and actions are violence, hartal, siege, price hike, injury and death, corruption, and downward trend of development works. Even, the private sectors are not allowed to go an inch forward by the government corrupt officials. By dint of nasty politics, everybody remains busy in making their fortunes. The ugly claws of politicians engulf the whole state

machinery, slowing down or stopping the pace of development. Though the