

Water crisis in the city

Serious handling of the situation is called for

A severe water crisis has made things go from bad to worse for people in Dhaka. With all the frequent power outages, horrendous traffic jams and the like already complicating life in the city, the shortage of water promises to create new nightmares for everyone. In very large areas of the city, notably Rampura, Kalyanpur, Shekher Tek and Mohammadpur, citizens have been suffering from lack of water for the last four or five days. There are areas where water supply has been in a state of suspension for as many as four days.

There are some very disquieting reasons behind the crisis. The Sayedabad water treatment plant, which in normal circumstances produces 22 crore 50 lakh litres of water has now been reduced to a state where there is a shortfall in the supply of water by as much as 6 crore litres. Earlier this month, the shortage was projected at 3 crore litres. Obviously, there has been a worsening of the situation. Unfortunately, however, no clear steps appear to be in sight for addressing the problem. WASA officials have acknowledged the crisis, but have pointed fingers at the severe power outages as well as low voltage of electricity as being responsible for it. There may be a point here about the state of electricity supply. Only a few days ago, the adviser in charge of power wondered why power outages occurred in the middle of the night when there was hardly any reason for it. But while outages can be cited as a reason for the shortfall in water supply, the fact remains that even without such outages there is always a shortage in water supply by as much as 50 crore litres. Add to that the sizzling weather and the shortfall shoots up to 70 crore litres. This is indication enough that water has been a problem for city dwellers even in normal times and that corrective efforts need to be taken to deal with it.

What confounds the situation at present is that the water crisis has hit people in the Ramadan season. There are some very legitimate fears that the crisis will only acquire darker proportions as Eid approaches. At the same time, there are complaints that personnel responsible for operating WASA water pumps are often found derelict in carrying out their duties. WASA has at present 467 deep tubewells but compared with that figure there are only 263 generators. As for mobile generators, there are only 31 of them. The demand for water in the city is 210 crore litres, which goes up to an additional 30 crore litres when the weather heats up. These are facts that need the serious attention of the authorities. With half the city gasping for water, a sense of urgency must be brought into handling the crisis, especially in this season of Ramadan and Eid.

Our expatriate workers' plight

Handling of the issue leaves much to be desired

Today the problems of expatriate Bangladeshi workers have not been handled well is an understatement. Their woes have been splashed very poignantly in the media continually, without any improvement in the situation. It seems that very little time is being given to ensure the entire process of workers' employment abroad that occupies several stages is foolproof and hassle free.

Over the last several weeks in particular the travails of a large number of workers in Malaysia left in limbo due to documental lacunae was heartrending. Some of them have returned home but many are awaiting repatriation and due remuneration. In the meantime one of them has died in Malaysia while waiting to get home.

Only the other day 82 Bangladeshi workers were returned from Dubai for possessing fake travel visas. And equally disturbing is the recent news of seven Bangladeshi workers of a furniture factory in Saudi Arabia, being burnt to death.

The relevant authorities perhaps need to be kept reminded that our workers abroad earn the largest foreign exchange for the country. It is a thankless administration that fails to ensure that these persons get the deal that they are promised.

Regrettably, they get the raw deal in most cases, starting from the very first phase, that is the actions of the relevant agencies at home, to the time they are absorbed in the receiving country by their employers. The fact that 82 were sent home for possessing fake visas demonstrates the sloppy oversight exercised by the authorities, whose one fundamental job is to ensure that all the travel documents are in order.

The less said of the local employers not living up to the bargain both in terms of work conditions as well as workers' remuneration, the better. The squalor and the decrepit conditions they have to live in and the hazardous conditions they have to work in are alien to the relevant agencies in Bangladesh.

In seeking greener pastures abroad Bangladeshis do not forfeit the right to the minimum dignity of human beings or their basic right as a human. Regrettably, neither the employing agencies in Bangladesh nor the foreign employers care to keep this in mind.

Asia's poverty permutations



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

While poverty is predominantly rural, urban dwellers have higher food energy deficiency than rural dwellers. Again, the prevalence of hunger is higher among urban poor living on less than a dollar per day. This may sound surprising, as the poor mostly throng to cities in the hope of tackling hunger. But a close scrutiny of the budget shows that the urban poor may face sharper trade-offs among competing needs for their meager incomes than do the rural poor.

THE continent of Asia claims to have achieved remarkable progress in terms of poverty reduction in the past decade. The claim is apparently appealing but, down to earth, disheartening when pitted against the prevailing pervasiveness of poverty in the region.

Reportedly, the specter of hunger still haunts millions in the continent everyday. In poverty discourse, lifting a certain portion of the people out of poverty may sound soothing but, in acute situations, the comfort could wither away in the face of the nature of the movement in and out of poverty.

Akther U Ahmed of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) recently delved deep into the dynamics of changing poverty in this region. He argues that -- as far as poverty reduction in Asia is

concerned -- what appears to glitter for the whole region may not be gold for its every part.

It is true that the number of poor people fell during this fourteen-year period but, equally true is that the regional composition of Asia's poor has also changed dramatically. For example, in 1990, about half of Asia's poor lived in South Asia but, today, it is three-quarters of 614 million Asian poor.

As compared to this, East and Southeast Asia almost halved the rate of poverty during the same period of time. Rapid growth, good governance and openness could be the cause for the seeming comfort. In another attempt, Martin Ravallion and others have shown that poverty measured at a dollar per day is basically rural in East Asia, with 93 percent of the poor living in rural areas, whereas the same is relatively

more urban in South Asia where three-fourths of the poor live in rural areas.

For many countries in Asia, those living on below a dollar a day are already the poorest of the poor. However, in some cases, large sections of the population live on below a dollar a day -- India 34 percent and Bangladesh 33 percent -- and the poorest are those who live far away from the \$1 a day line. It is being argued that those who benefited from the recent growth in the region were already staying close to the line. Fortune did not favour those far off from the povertyline.

Whether we consider the extreme poor (between \$1 and 0.60/day), hardcore poor (between \$0.60-.50/day) or ultra poor (living on less than \$0.50/day), South Asia's share in each of these three was lower in 1990 compared to 2004. Again, in

all parts of the region, the prevalence of ultra poor fell by a smaller margin than extreme and hardcore poor, while it is the hardcore poor in South Asia who witnessed a remarkable wan.

In rural India, poverty reduction has benefited those well below the poverty line more than those close to it.

Akther Ahmed also uses IFPRI's Global Hunger Index (GHI) to locate the hot spots of hunger in Asia to look at trends of hunger in Asia. It may be mentioned here that IFPRI's index is considered a powerful tool to help mobilise political will and promote good policies by ranking countries, and illustrating trends in terms of hunger and malnutrition.

In general, values greater than 10 indicate serious problems in terms of food availability, shortfalls in nutritional status of children and child mortality.

ger incomes than do the rural poor.

They may only be able to cut their food consumption after meeting the bare minimum expenses for housing, health, transport etc. This means that if the policy intention is to address both poverty and hunger in urban areas, then it will be necessary to have dual objectives, requiring different stages.

The improvement in South Asia's GHI came about largely as a result of a reduction of the prevalence of underweight children in this region. However, in South Asia, relatively high food energy deficiency prevalence (below the 2,200 kilocalorie cut-off) ranges from 51 percent in Pakistan to 61 percent in Bangladesh. Interestingly, the deficiency occurs in spite of satisfactory food grain output, implying that not food shortage but the lack of the exchange entitlements invites hunger in the region.

One might expect that those living close to the poverty line would go up -- even for a transient period -- but those far below will continue to lag behind. Policy makers, therefore, should tinker less with the arithmetic of poverty reduction, rather, they should deal more with its dynamics. Policy prescriptions need to emphasise education, credit and organisations for those trapped permanently in poverty.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Political endgame in Pakistan

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

As this column has argued, India has a long-term stake in a democratic, stable Pakistan which reins in the military. A democratic Pakistan is indispensable to South Asia's future as a peaceful, prosperous, and harmonious region. Democratisation will help India and Pakistan demilitarise mutual relations and contain communal and sectarian forces in both countries. The Benazir-Musharraf deal may have set back that prospect at least for some time.

MS. Benazir Bhutto has reportedly struck a deal with President Pervez Musharraf, under which corruption cases filed against her between 1985 and 1999 will be dropped, and she will tacitly support his election as Pakistan's president.

Although details aren't available at the time of writing, the understanding has all the markings of a collusive agreement which promotes the narrow self-interest of two individuals, but does nothing to limit the role of the military in public life, or restrain the president from sacking elected governments and even parliament.

Nothing now stands between Gen. Musharraf and the presidency (which he can win only by violating democracy's spirit) barring Pakistan's Supreme Court, which is hearing petitions challenging his candidature.

If the court acts like it did on September 28 by dismissing similar petitions, it will let down many democratically-minded Pakistanis who came to trust it

after it reinstated Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and affirmed the right of exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to return. Yet, its verdict can go either way.

The court's earlier judgment upheld the Election Commission's flagrant manipulation of rules which forbid anyone who holds an office of profit from contesting elections for two years. This was manifestly bad in law.

Evidently, the All Parties' Democratic Movement (APDM), led by the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), put all its eggs in the court's basket. It should have understood that its Chaudhry case judgment was driven less by respect for democracy than a concern to defuse the lawyers' agitation for his reinstatement.

The court failed to give effect to its own judgment on Mr. Sharif's right to return, avoiding a confrontation with the army.

It may not be unfair to conclude that Pakistan's democratic institutions are too compromised by prolonged military interference to be relied upon to uphold constitutional principle. Its main-

stream parties aren't strong or willing to complete the process of full democratisation.

This raises what might be called a "chicken-and-egg" problem. How can Pakistan make a much-needed transition to full democracy while its political and juridical institutions are weak?

And yet, how can its institutions facilitate (or at least not obstruct) that transition in the face of authoritarian pressures to compromise themselves -- just to survive?

The moral-political pressure of a mass mobilisation for democracy alone can cut this Gordian knot.

But the APDM hasn't generated such pressure. Had the PML(N) sustained its mass campaign in support of Sharif's right to return after he was deported to Saudi Arabia, things would have evolved differently. But this didn't happen.

At any rate, another round in the fight for democracy has been lost. But this isn't the last round. A new one may have begun with the Benazir-Musharraf deal and the

announcement that Gen. Ashfaq Pervaiz Kiyani will succeed Gen. Musharraf as army chief.

How the fight for democracy is played out will be decided by four factors: the political parties' tactics, the higher judiciary's role, the masses' mood, and the United States' calculations.

Among Pakistan's parties, the APDM alone seems determined to try to discredit the presidential election by getting its lawmakers to resign. It wants to dissolve the NWFP Assembly. However, the PML(Q) has moved a no-confidence motion against the government to prevent this before October 6. How this plays out remains to be seen at the time of writing.

A potential spoiler is the Jamiat-ul-Ulema's Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who plays both sides of the street. Perhaps an even greater negative may be Ms. Bhutto.

Pakistan's higher judiciary, its image tarnished, can assert greater independence. But this, as of now, is an open question.

Pakistani public opinion has

decisively turned against the army. Recent surveys say Gen. Musharraf's approval ratings have dipped to just 34 percent from 60 percent in mid-2006. Fifty-eight percent of respondents give his government "poor" or "very poor" marks; 56 percent say they feel less safe than a year ago.

The US role could become overwhelmingly important. Washington favours the Pakistan army strongly over civilian leaders. The presence in Islamabad of senior State Department officials as Mr. Sharif was being deported showed their approval of Gen. Musharraf.

Gen. Musharraf's latest overtures to the US, and Gen. Kiyani's appointment, will strengthen this relationship. Newsweek says Gen. Kiyani is "smart, tough, talented, and pro-Western" -- the preferred choice of "Western military officials."

Ms. Bhutto too has been wooing Washington with offers of allowing international agencies to interrogate Dr. A.Q. Khan and letting US troops conduct an attack within Pakistan targeting Osama bin Laden.

By making a shady, US-brokered deal with Gen. Musharraf, Ms. Bhutto would violate the Charter of Democracy she recently signed with Mr. Sharif: "We shall not join the military regime or any military-sponsored government. No party shall solicit the support of the military to come into power."

If the PPP cuts such a dishon-

orable deal, as seems to be happening, it could split. Worse, that would help the army entrench itself aggressively in public life just as it's losing its credibility. This would weaken the pro-democracy momentum.

Regrettably, no external agencies or forces appear willing to restrain Gen. Musharraf. The three nations that matter the most to Pakistan -- the US, China, and India -- seem resigned to supporting a dominant role for the Pakistan army.

This remains true of India after National Security Adviser M. K. Narayanan certified that that "the worst is over" for Gen. Musharraf: there's "no major dent" in his influence after his "graceful" acceptance of the chief justice's reinstatement.

This tails the US view of Gen. Musharraf's indispensability, and the Pakistani public's democratic aspirations.

As this column has argued, India has a long-term stake in a democratic, stable Pakistan which reins in the military. A democratic Pakistan is indispensable to South Asia's future as a peaceful, prosperous, and harmonious region. Democratisation will help India and Pakistan demilitarise mutual relations and contain communal and sectarian forces in both countries.

The Benazir-Musharraf deal may have set back that prospect at least for some time.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

The Burma equation

Holding a candlelight vigil in front of the Burmese embassy in any city of the world is symbolic and necessary, so that ordinary citizens can express revulsion. Such protests publicly humiliate Burma's diplomats in the cities where they like to shop and be seen as part of the smart set. Picketing in front of gas stations is another story; the fuel at the gas station may actually have come from Nigeria or Texas, even if the gas station's logo is that of a French company doing business in Burma.

SALIL TRIPATHI

THE world is appalled by images and accounts of brutality in Burmese cities and is looking for ways to pressure the military regime. But one point is clear: The standard tools of Western liberals and NGOs are not likely to be effective in our multipolar world, and in Burma specifically.

In the 1970s and 1980s, activists shamed Western companies doing business in apartheid-era South Africa by boycotting products or calling for divestment. Corporations doing business in Burma are beyond the reach of the activists. So activists should target the governments backing the junta rather than the companies active in Burma.

For some time now, activists have targeted two oil companies, Total of France and Unocal, a

regime like Burma's is a complex issue, and the extent to which the regime in Rangoon can survive because of contributions foreign firms make through taxes and other payments, is unknown, given the opaque nature of the country and its finances, including other sources of revenue, not all of them legal.

The underlying assumption behind campaigns and lawsuits is that Western firms have leverage to influence intransigent regimes. That assumption ignores how globalisation has reshaped our world.

The biggest investors in Burma are companies from China, Thailand, Singapore, and India, as a Human Rights Watch press release notes. As globalisation shifts centers of production, logistics and marketing from traditional centers to new locations, the decision-makers also change.

A Western company is susceptible to pressure because it operates in a competitive marketplace and must respond to a range of stakeholders. Part of a free society, the company must deal with activists chaining themselves to its facilities, seeking newspaper photographs, and expecting no worse punishment than warnings

from local police.

Firms from China and Singapore don't face such scrutiny; firms from Thailand and India, while investing abroad, have not yet aroused the attention of local activists to their activities overseas.

This allows Chinese firms, often state-owned entities, to act exactly the way their owners want. Such investments prop up unrepresentative regimes. Last year, a senior executive of the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg lamented that its standards on environmental and social issues were so high that it regularly loses business to Chinese lenders, often in the least-developed countries. Western firms and governments are powerless in this regard.

Burma's leaders know this. They can live with Heineken or Carlsberg leaving Burma, because they know Asian breweries will take over those projects, as indeed they did in the mid-1990s.

Many Western activists haven't grasped this concept, that substitutes are readily available in a globalised world, although Western governments have factored it in, and lean on China to influence Burma. At first glance, asking China to do something

seems bizarre. In 1989, China used the People's Liberation Army against its own non-violent students. Why would China care about monks in Burma?

The answer may lie in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Many in the West realise that China's coming-out party is the one great opportunity to push China to change the way it does business worldwide, particularly if it wants to be taken seriously as a world power. Hence, the pressure on China over the conduct of the Sudanese-supported militia in Darfur, and now Burma, two states regarded as China's responsibility. The world expects China to rein in these governments.

Activists predictably focus on US companies like Coca Cola and Western artists like Steven Spielberg to influence China. Spielberg has said he may quit his position as artistic director for the Olympic Games over Darfur. Chinese leaders resent foreign lectures about how they should manage their internal affairs, and it's debatable if such campaigns can bring substantial change in China.