

Crackdown on unfit river vessels

Seasonal action must translate into sustained vigil

It is the same old story all over again. After Thursday's launch disaster on the Buriganga, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority has decided to go once more into enforcing the rules that should apply to normal movement on the rivers. Any enforcement of rules is certainly to be welcomed. But what becomes rather galling for people is stumbling anew on a determination of the authorities to take launch owners and operators to task only after a fresh accident on the rivers. For a few days, there is much emphasis on such river vessels not being allowed to ply without proper documents and the like, which of course is accompanied by images of launches being subjected to rigorous inspection. Such seasonal activities are normal in this country. What is beyond the normal is that these activities invariably whimper into silence, until a new tragedy occurs.

The BIWTA has tried giving us the impression that it will strictly enforce the rules from here on, meaning that no river vessel will operate unless its papers are in order. In principle, there is hardly any disagreement with the BIWTA here. The question, though, is whether the organisation has the will or the manpower to stick to its position. As matters stand, there is a whole array of agencies now involved in such matters as licensing of river vessels. How they pass the stages like cakewalk is anybody's guess. Obviously, with such a wide range of authorities, it is perfectly understandable that vessel owners can easily slip by and have their vessels ply on the routes without fear of legal action. It is here that a streamlining in river administration becomes necessary. Then again, beyond the issue of proper documents comes the need for a change in behaviour on the part of launch owners and operators. Take, for instance, the abnormal number of passengers who travel on the launches and lack of safety gears to go with it. That is a sheer flouting of rules that has regularly been ignored by the authorities. Again, the sight of dilapidated launches is a fairly common one throughout the country. It is these realities that must be taken care of.

A crackdown on unfit launches is welcome. But whether it is a sustained effort is something we will have to see.

Bogus NGOs' vanishing act

How could they operate at all?

ANOTHER form of organised extortion is increasingly in evidence going by two front-page stories run in a row by our newspaper in the last couple of days.

In villages of Natore and Rajshahi, gullible people were registering with so-called NGOs on payment of money as investment promising weekly dividends. For some time impressive returns were given to members winning their confidence and thereafter the NGOs suddenly disappeared from the scene. Such vanishing acts have been performed by a number of NGOs with catchy high sounding names in Rajshahi and Natore areas cheating unsuspecting rural people of Taka 260 crore in total.

Deeper down, the tales are pathetic and one tends to grit one's teeth in rage when confronted with the full detail. Many sold everything they had or mortgaged their only piece of land or borrowed money from Karitas, Grameen Bank and Padakkhep and deposited it with the NGOs to make quick money. They are now left pauperised.

The sheer amount of the money looted speaks of the duration of the operation as well as the sweep of such NGO networks. How could they dare act so openly, however, resourceful their repertoire of tricks might have been, especially in these days of mobile communication. Gullibility alone couldn't have ensured the thugs good business. There must have been something else which we identified as turning of a blind eye to such NGO operations by the local administration being in cohorts with some influential people and NGO operatives.

Despite allegations being aired by union parishad leaders and media exposé from time to time, the authorities failed to take action against illegal money making projects. The upshot of all this has been commotion and protests by the incensed victims. As far as we understand, such NGOs are required to be registered with a local office under the social welfare ministry. Were they registered?

The district administration has decided to stop activities of such NGOs and is moving with concerned authorities for cancellation of their registration. So far so good, but equally important is the task of bringing the thugs to justice and arranging refund of the victims' money.

Police, rule of law and going beyond clichés

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NUR Mohammad could not have been more frank. As inspector general of the nation's police, he more than anyone else should be knowing of the malaise his force has long been afflicted with. In Kishoreganj last week, he informed us, perhaps without batting an eyelid and with absolute awareness of the ramifications of his remarks, that most criminals in the country commit offences that are well within the knowledge of the police. Now, that, for many of us, may not be a revelation.

Anyone who has had the bad experience of being subjected to criminality, or hearing of it, knows only too well how many times the kind of help expected of the police in handling the sinister elements in our society simply did not happen to be there. That is the truth, an unalloyed one. But when it is the inspector general of the police himself enlightening us on his perception of the force he commands, there is something of stunned silence in which we receive the information. Amazement then gives way to some very hard thinking.

And then comes the question,

By all means, have those reforms gone through, have them put in place. But let a key aspect of the reforms process relate to the psychological training of men and women willing to be part of the police force. It is wonderful speaking of the need for a change in mindsets. Falling back on clichés may be fine for sometime. But clichés, like all those talk shops we are taken through on a near daily basis, eventually lose all meaning because of the hollowness they come couched in. The real, paramount, need today is for a batch of educated, sophisticated men and women, those attuned to the ways of the world, to make it into the police service, indeed into any area of public activity. Let there arise circumstances where the policemen in your neighbourhood and mine will give us little or no reason to gripe about their performance.

obviously from all of us: If that is the way the man at the top of the police administration perceives the working of his organisation, what measures does he plan to undertake in order to reform the system? No, we will not advance the opinion that Nur Mohammad should now transform himself into a reformer and go into a crusade against the many bad apples that have systematically tarnished the image of the police force. And we will not make that suggestion because the job is one that no single individual can handle. It is a malaise that calls for a thorough, across the board reform of the police system, which reform is again associated with the overall need for qualitative change in every area of activity that affects the lives of Bangladesh's citizens.

What the police have been doing, or not been doing at all, is but a mirror image of the realities we in this country have been compelled to observe in the past many years. You can come up with the thought that a goody part of

the trouble with the way the police have functioned has had to do with the repeated bouts of politicisation they have gone through at various stages of the nation's history. We will not dispute your assessment, for we have before us such instances as the police doing next to nothing in the days when fanatics of the Bangla Bhai brand went around widening their network of terror in the northern part of the country. The political classes lording it over the country at the time cheerfully denied that there was at anyone called Bangla Bhai. And the police went along with that, until the state of emergency came in and everyone began falling head over heels in unearthing terrorism and moving on to uproot it lock, stock and barrel. Whether the uprooting process has worked is an entirely different matter altogether.

The question today, in light of the IGP's remarks, is whether or not the department on his watch has undertaken any meaningful action against the policemen who

looked the other way when we asked them to apprehend the terrorists, who indeed joined hands with Bangla Bhai and the likes of him in carrying out the odious job of disposing of people conveniently labelled as extremists. Nur Mohammad, of course, confined his views to the ways in which the police have often known about criminality and yet did little to act against it.

But please allow us to broaden the subject here, for the simple reason that there is a whole big area where the police come in. And everywhere the police step in, there is fear which comes in their wake. That is a point the inspector general has readily acknowledged. Let that be the premise on which any discussion of the police, of its performance in Bangladesh, is based. Fear is supposed to be a deterrent to criminality. But have you noticed that among the criminal classes today there is a distinctive absence of fear, that they operate with impunity and that even the police know of the degree

of impunity on which they work?

That, however, is not to suggest that fear is not part of life any more. It is there in the way citizens still relate to the police. When you and I still feel, despite all those calls for friendship between the police and other citizens, that asking the police for help in tracking down the criminals who we think should be facing justice will only result in bigger worries for us, that is when fear stalks us. When policemen in the thanas, or police stations, decline or plainly refuse to accept complaints from citizens, and only reluctantly agree to people's lodging general diaries, you are made aware of the long road that must still be travelled before we have a police force we can truly look upon as our route out of our zones of fear.

To be sure, the police force has been a constant victim of political buffoonery. Ministers whose respect for the rule of law has been conspicuous by its absence, whose inability to provide strong leadership to the force, and whose sheer ineptitude have been the norm in the last two decades, maybe more, have done grievous damage to the police administration. That said, there are still the many questions about the ferocity with which some policemen have acted on duty and of their own volition. Think back on the officer who knocked a photojournalist to the ground in Chittagong a couple of years ago. Think back too on the carefree use of the baton a policeman made on the lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor at an Awami League-led political rally at the height of the anti-government agitation in the later part of 2006.

Think back on the humiliating spectacle of a young man hung from the ceiling of a police station, a blot on our conscience.

The problem, ladies and gentlemen, is not merely in acknowledging the truth of criminals working with the knowledge of the police. It is something more, something deeper. And it stems from the slow erosion in police efficiency and the gradual infiltration of political influence into the police administration over the decades. There is talk of police reforms. By all means, have those reforms gone through, have them put in place. But let a key aspect of the reforms process relate to the psychological training of men and women willing to be part of the police force.

It is wonderful speaking of the need for a change in mindsets. Falling back on clichés may be fine for sometime. But clichés, like all those talk shops we are taken through on a near daily basis, eventually lose all meaning because of the hollowness they come couched in. The real, paramount, need today is for a batch of educated, sophisticated men and women, those attuned to the ways of the world, to make it into the police service, indeed into any area of public activity. Let there arise circumstances where the policemen in your neighbourhood and mine will give us little or no reason to gripe about their performance.

Briefly, let us have policemen around us able to relate to their counterparts across the globe. If one Bengali policeman can make it to Interpol, why shouldn't others?

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Why does Bush support President Musharraf?

BOTTOM LINE

The Bush administration seeks to expand its influence in the tribal areas through a new economic support initiative that would initially focus on school and road construction projects. Officials recently asked the US Congress for \$453 million dollars to initiate the effort -- the largest request for economic support funds for any country except Afghanistan. This concession to the US by President Musharraf would evolve into a greater role for the US forces in the region over the years in future. Some analysts say that the sharing of intelligence may eventually evolve into a form of military cooperation.



HARUN UR RASHID

THE election on February 18th is being widely seen as a "People's Coup" in Pakistan. In October 1999, President Musharraf, as the army chief, engineered the military coup to replace the constitutionally elected government of Nawaz Sharif.

There are a total of 342 seats in the National Assembly. Of these, 272 are filled by direct elections. In addition, the Pakistani Constitution reserves 10 seats for religious minorities and 60 seats for women, to be filled by proportional representation among parties with more than 5% of the votes.

At the time of writing, the PPP has won 87 seats, PML-N 70, and ANP 10 seats in the election for 268 National Assembly seats. Two-thirds of 268 NA seats come to 179.

However, after adding seats reserved for women and minorities, and winning over some independents, the three-party coalition is expected to get a two-thirds majority in the 342-member house.

President Musharraf has now tasted the bitter fruit of revenge

inflicted by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whose party PML (N) is expected to form a power sharing government with Bhutto's PPP.

His popularity has plunged over the past year because of his attempts to hold on to power, which included purging the judiciary, including the independent-minded chief justice, and imposing six weeks of de-facto martial law under the guise of emergency rule on November 3rd.

Meanwhile, the economy has been suffering from inflation, high prices of basic commodities and power cuts. Ordinary people have lost confidence in Musharraf's administration. The man who came as "the saviour of Pakistan" in 1999 has been perceived as the "destroyer" of Pakistan's stability and integrity.

Last year was the bloodiest year in Pakistan's history. Extremists and militants attacked 60 times in the country, killing scores of people. They were able to hit the army headquarters in Rawalpindi.

The whole tribal area is up in arms, not in the religious sense but out of revenge for casualties inflicted on tribesmen. Pakistani

soldiers were held hostages. The Musharraf government had to arrive at a truce with tribal leaders.

There have been expressions of concern in the United States that Pakistan has not been doing enough to assist in the war on terrorism. US intelligence has found out that the Musharraf government has diverted some of the US funds against India.

What does the US gain by supporting Musharraf?

President Musharraf knows his political life now depends on the US and the Pakistani army. If the US supports him, the Pakistani army would not go against him because there is a close connection between Pakistan army and the US.

Furthermore, if the US exerts political pressure on PPP, it may retain President Musharraf. In this connection, US officials reportedly met three times with PPP's co-chairman Zardari to work with Musharraf and moderate forces, meaning the pro-Musharraf PML (Q).

It is noted that before President Bush leaves the White House in

January 2009, he wants to show to the American people that his administration has captured Osama Bin Laden who is believed to be hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Accordingly, the US wants expansion of its intelligence and covert military activities in the tribal areas in Pakistan. Against this background, President Musharraf, who has long refused to allow US soldiers to operate openly in the Federally Tribal Administered Areas, has reportedly agreed to do so.

With the agreement of President Musharraf, the US will set up its coordination centres on the Afghan side of the border where US, Afghan and Pakistan officials can share intelligence about Al-Qaeda and the Talebans.

A new coordinating centre is being reportedly built on the Afghan side of the border near the Khyber Pass, and a second centre on the north of Torkham. Four more centres are being considered.

According to plans, about 15 Afghan, Pakistani and US officials will meet daily at each centre to

share intelligence about the activities of militants on the both sides of the border.

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This concession to the US by President Musharraf would evolve into a greater role for the US forces in the region over the years in future. Some analysts say that the sharing of intelligence may eventually evolve into a form of military cooperation.

It may be recalled that in August last year, a special meeting between Afghan President Karzai, Tribal leaders and President Musharraf paved the way for better cooperation.

The CIA is reportedly pushing to enhance its surveillance capabilities and intelligence cooperation with the Pakistani counterparts at a covert location in the tribal areas.

For long, US forces have operated Predator drones capable of destroying terrorist targets inside the tribal areas, but complained about the location of wanted targets.

Musharraf in trouble?

A two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament (National Assembly and Senate) would enable the new government to

impeach the president, and to deprive the presidency of its powers to sack a prime minister and dissolve the parliament, by restoring the Constitution to its pre-Oct 12, 1999 position.

Nawaz Sharif obviously takes a hard-line against Musharraf as he called him to quit, while the PPP does not because it was the president who declared amnesty for the corrupt politicians of PPP. If the Supreme Court judges are restored, the law of amnesty might be challenged and found to be untenable in law.

Furthermore, Nawaz Sharif believes that if the dismissed Supreme Court judges are restored, the apex judiciary will decide as to whether President Musharraf could be elected as the president while still in uniform.

If President Musharraf is able to bring discord between PPP and PML (N), he will win the political game in Pakistan and the US will support his strategy.

Conclusion

The question is whether such expanded cooperation with the US in the tribal areas will be palatable to the new power-sharing government of PPP-PML (N) at Islamabad. Furthermore, it is the support of the US for President Musharraf that irritates and rankles the majority of Pakistanis. They deem it as gross interference in domestic politics by the superpower when Musharraf was rejected by the majority of people of Pakistan. They question: Where does the credibility of the US in promoting democracy and freedom lie?

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What the world is hearing



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

Already, the mood is shifting abroad. Listening to the Democrats on trade "is enough to send jitters down the spine of most in India," says the Times Now TV channel in New Delhi. The Canadian press has shared in the global swoon for Obama, but is now beginning to ask questions. "What he is actually saying -- and how it might affect Canada -- may come as a surprise to otherwise devout Barack boosters," writes Greg Weston in the Edmonton Sun. The African press has been reporting on George W. Bush's visit there with affection and, in some cases, by contrasting his views on trade with the Democratic candidates'.

dangerous and ill-informed rhetoric about trade.

For the rest of the world -- particularly poorer countries -- nice speeches about multi-lateralism are well and good. But what they really want is for the United States to continue its historic role in opening up the world economy. For a struggling farmer in Kenya, access to world markets is far more important than foreign aid or U.N. programs. If the candidates think they will charm the world while adopting protection-

ist policies, they are in for a surprise.

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The African press has been reporting on George W. Bush's visit there with affection and, in some cases, by contrasting his views on trade with the Democratic candidates'. The Bangkok Post has compared the Democrats unfavourably with John McCain and his vision of an East Asia bound together, and to the United States, by expanding tradeties.

For Obama, the backlash could be greatest because he's raised the

highest hopes. A senior Latin American diplomat, who asked to remain unnamed because of the sensitivity of the topic, says: "Look, we're all watching Obama with bated breath and hoping (his election) will be a transforming moment for the world. But now that we're listening to him on trade -- the issue that affects us so deeply -- we realise that maybe he doesn't wish us well. In fact, we might find ourselves nostalgic for Bush, who is brave and courageous on trade and immigration."

The facts about trade have been too well rehearsed to go into them in any great detail, but let me point out that Nafta has been pivotal in transforming Mexico into a stable democracy with a growing economy. And, in Lawrence Summers's words: "(It) didn't cost the United States a penny. It contributed to the strength of our economy because of more exports, and because imports helped to reduce inflation." Trade between the

Nafta countries has boomed since 1993, growing by about \$700 billion. There are no serious economists or experts who believe that low wages in Mexico or China or India is the fundamental reason that American factories close down. And labour and environmental standards would do very little to change the reality of huge wage differentials between poor and rich countries' workers.

An argument one often hears from the candidates' supporters is that they don't really mean what they say, that their actual proposals on trade agreements involve only minor tinkering. It is an odd defense of candidates promising change, honesty and a new approach to politics to say that they are being cynical and hypocritical. Besides, both candidates are proposing to renegotiate Nafta, which is a terrible idea. (And one that has prompted the Canadian prime minister to retort that if that happens, his country,

too, would like to get more concessions from the United States.) Hillary Clinton has proposed that free-trade deals be re-evaluated every five years, which is absurd. The benefits of trade deals rest on the fact that they are permanent.

But both candidates surely know that no one is really paying attention to their policy papers on the topic. It is their general attitude and rhetoric that matter. And on this crucial topic they are pandering to the worst instincts of Americans, encouraging a form of xenophobia and chauvinism and validating the utterly self-defeating idea of protectionism.

I know, I know. This is all about the Democratic primaries in states like Ohio and the support of unions. But you can't target these messages so easily anymore. What is said in Ohio is heard in Ghana and Bangladesh and Colombia as well. And isn't the point of leadership to educate and elevate people, not to pander and drag them into the swamp of ignorance and

fear? There is a way to speak about the pain of globalisation -- and about the need for investments in retraining, education, health care and infrastructure -- so that we can both compete but also absorb the shocks of a changing global economy. Unfortunately, that is not what the Democratic candidates are talking about.

I'm not even sure that protectionist rhetoric works that well in a general election. Americans like optimists. They want leaders who look out at the world and see broad, sunlit uplands. Railing against Mexicans, Chinese and Indians for stealing American jobs smacks of anger, paranoia and fear of the future. Americans want hope, as Obama says: "Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope." Where is that courage now?

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

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