

The train-bus tragedy in Kalihati

Level crossings must be better guarded

WE are deeply saddened at the tragedy at a level crossing in Kalihati upazila of Tangail. The death of as many as seventeen people, with fears that the number may rise, as well as injuries suffered by scores of others, should now lead to serious thinking on railway track management. The dead and the injured were all on a bus which was hit by a speeding train in the late hours of the night. The accident, as has since been made clear, occurred because the guard on duty at the crossing simply went off to sleep. That only intensifies our sense of sorrow, for it was plain human error or irresponsibility that caused the misery.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, it becomes necessary to ask a few questions of the Bangladesh Railway authorities. Has there at all been a survey of the number of railway level crossings country-wide and of the way they are manned? The Kalihati accident was the result of a guard dropping off to sleep. But could such a situation not be true, now or earlier, at other level crossings as well? And have the railway authorities ever considered, in light of each new tragedy, the corrective measures which needed to be taken? It becomes necessary for Bangladesh Railway to rethink its entire infrastructure regarding the number of its employees, especially at level crossings, and the training and skills imparted to them before they take up their jobs. At the end of the day, it must be remembered, it is the guard at a level crossing on whom depends the ultimate safety of people both on trains and on vehicles nearby. How satisfying are their job conditions? We would like to know what system there is for guards at one crossing to relay information about an oncoming train to those at the next. Experience shows that our railway still depends on a rather archaic signalling system and is therefore yet to embrace the automated system in vogue nearly everywhere else in the world.

Our sympathies go out to the families of those killed in the tragedy, and our prayers are there for the salvation of the souls of those who have died. The unexpected nature of the accident raises the important question of what happened to earlier probes relating to railway accidents and whether any lessons have been learnt. Obviously, our experience here has not been encouraging. At this point, we suggest that adequate compensation be given to the families of those who have died as also those who have been injured. Besides, the BR authorities should from a moral sense come forward to bear the treatment costs of the injured on the ill-fated bus. Finally, it will not be too much to ask if anyone at the highest levels of authority is ready to take responsibility for the tragedy and do what good men always do.

Building code violations with impunity

It is time these are treated as criminal offences

THE National Building Code, 2006 is perhaps the least complied with set of rules in the country. Its multifaceted violations range from breaching the mandatory features of the approved plans like leaving space between two buildings, leeway to the road and lack of parking space through use of poor quality construction materials to complete indifference to workers' safety during the building construction phase.

Needless to say, such breach of law is hardly proceeded against. By one reckoning, both in terms of residential construction as well as raising of commercial or industrial buildings, the building code has been so violated that if an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale should hit Dhaka 90 percent of the buildings would be razed to the ground.

This is a horrendous prospect that we must bear in mind and take precautions against with earthquake-resistant reinforcement of the buildings.

Then let's remind ourselves of the jarring news items we have often read of inclined or partially sinking buildings, cracks in high-rise buildings and collapsing building floors. These kill people, let alone an earthquake which can take a toll of lives that could be avoided with proper engineering. So, the sloppy construction could even portend mass killing.

But one of the least addressed subject is perhaps the fatality among construction workers themselves. At least 107 construction workers died in 2007 while working. Most of these deaths were caused by electrocution, falls from heights, building or wall collapses and subsidence of trenches.

We appreciate the efforts of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), the Labourer's Safety Forum and the Occupational Safety and Health Environment (OSHE) Foundation to bring the workers' safety issue into focus. The seminar they held yielded three important recommendations: one, violation of building code be considered a criminal offence; two, handing down punishment and fining to building code violators; and three, compensation to the victims. We endorse the proposed measures wholeheartedly.

We note, however, that the court ruling issued two months ago asking the government to explain why the court should not order it to establish an authority to enforce the Bangladesh National Building Code, 2006 has yet to be responded to. Let an authority be set up to be exclusively tasked with implementation of the building code.

Deal with the frankenstein



Brig Gen
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IT was a pathetic sight. It was a despicable display of use of a religious and venerated place by the so-called protagonists of Islam, to vent their anger at the government.

What we witnessed last Friday, inexplicable acts of violence and vandalism, by people believing that whatever they were doing was to safeguard the interest of Islam. Their protest was against what they believed to be certain provisions of the recently declared women's policy being inconsistent with the provisions of Islam related to the issue.

What they failed to realise was that their violent behaviour was itself inconsistent with the teachings of the religion whose interest they were claiming to protect. Little did they realise that their vandalism had done little to enhance the image of Islam, if anything, their actions, beamed worldwide on the electronic media, have helped reinforce the misperception of those that are disposed to see Islam as an intemperate religion where violence happens to be the only expression of dissent and

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

There may be genuine reservations about the policy. And many that have doubts about it are not all radicals. If there are suspicions about the provisions than there is a more Islamic way, a more civilised way of addressing it -- and that is through dialogue. And the government must initiate a discussion on the issue without delay or make public the proposed policy in its entirety. But for the government it is important, too, to remove the public perception about its being tough on some political parties while softening its attitude towards others.

no room is ever given to those perceived as opposed to their views. Mosques become bastions of protests -- a result of malicious thoughts demonstrated through depraved actions.

Their actions have served Islam very badly and must have made those that are prone to paint Bangladesh as a country going down the road to radicalism very happy indeed. Ignorance and wrong political motivation have much to do with all that transpired on the Friday afternoon, which witnessed pitched confrontation against the law enforcing agency directed by alleged supporters of some Islamic parties, although I am loathe to believe that those we saw on the street wielding bamboo staffs and throwing brickbats at the police, are actually what they claim to be, and I am even less convinced that the party that they claim to belong to really believes in the tenets of Islam and the teachings of the Holy Prophet.

One is at a loss to reason what their protest was about. If

it was against the said policy, which its opponents believe proposed equal share in the inheritance rights of both men and women, then there is enough ground to believe that it is either ignorance or some other ulterior motives that have motivated these people to resort to violence.

On both counts there are reasons to be concerned. There is nothing worse than actions, particularly destructive ones, initiated on the basis of wrong premise or ignorance of facts. The situation is more compounded when the issue is one that has to do with the deep-seated belief and practice of the majority people of the country.

If there are other compulsions stemming from ulterior motives that led to them resorting to the hostile acts, merely legal actions against the perpetrators of the violence is not enough. What is it that they want to achieve and what is the benefit that they would want to derive from an already unstable situation caused by a degree of political

uncertainty and spiralling prices in the country?

But if these radical elements are responsible for the violence that we saw, the government must also shoulder its share of responsibility for allowing the situation to develop in the way it has in the first place, and then to see it pass last Friday.

Since the policy was declared -- a policy that is not this government's brainchild, but an inheritance from the past regimes, expressions of dissent were heard from the religious parties in the country. And to my mind these were based on misperception of the provisions that they believed were in contravention of certain Islamic decrees. And in this regard I have no reason not to take the advisor for religious affairs at her words when she said in unequivocal terms that the proposed policy does not have anything that is anti-Sharia. And it is only a policy and not a proposed ordinance. However, one must admit that reports, appearing

in certain newspapers the day after the announcement regarding the proposed policy was made, did convey the impression that there were indeed certain provisions that were inconsistent with the existing Islamic law. But that was clarified subsequently by the relevant advisor.

And that is what begs the question. Why did the government fail to convince those that were apprehensive about the proposed policy? And why is it that it did not take adequate measures to dissuade or prevent these parties from taking precipitate action that they were threatening they would take, following the announcement of the proposed policy?

The handling of two matters has raised questions about the government capability to address serious issues.

The undue haste with which the government constituted a committee formed of religious scholars gave one the impression that it was not sure about the substance of the policy. That it did not anticipate the reactions that it might generate suggests that adequate time was not given to study the issue. One wonders whether it was for this government to announce a policy that required to be studied in details before it was finally formulated. And if inputs of the Alems are being sought now why were they not sought during its formulation and before it was announced?

Its handling of the religious parties has raised the question whether the government is not too soft on them. While holding of public demonstration under the EPR is prohibited, these parties seem to do it without any hindrance. Not only in the recent instance, on a few previous occasions too, demonstrations organised by some religious parties were allowed to traverse many kilometers of the road despite police presence. One would like to ask why these elements were allowed to stage demonstrations last Friday outside Bait-ul-Mukarram in the first place. And it is from these demonstrators that the attack on the police was launched initially, before the mayhem started, lasting almost 3 hours.

There may be genuine reservations about the policy. And many that have doubts about it are not all radicals. If there are suspicions about the provisions than there is a more Islamic way, a more civilised way of addressing it -- and that is through dialogue. And the government must initiate a discussion on the issue without delay or make public the proposed policy in its entirety.

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Why does history repeat itself?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SYRIAN writer and painter Kahlil Gibran famously said that an exaggeration was a truth that had lost its temper. If truth is often stretched too far, it is also as frequently squeezed because conniving people fabricate lies through suppression of facts. That makes truth a binary determination. The account is either more or less than what actually happens. Truth is hardly revealed in its exact strength.

Robert Stinnett brings us that chilling prospect with a jolt. In his book "Day of Deceit: The Truth about Roosevelt and Pearl Harbour," he claims that President Roosevelt and his top advisors knew about a planned Japanese attack, but kept the military in the dark. Economic sanctions were used against Japan to provoke the country to make this attack, which created public outrage in the United States, bringing support for Roosevelt to enter the war.

French poet Georges Braque as if knew that secret when he quipped that truth existed, while lies were invented. Truth is used to create lie, just like face is used to create mask. Truth is hidden in lies like the sun is hidden in solar eclipse, the luster of a jewel buried in gunk. So, there is always an element of indecent exposure when truth is spoken, written or expressed in any other form. Put your fingers in your ears, because truth is when facts are caught with pants down.

In the real world, credible facts follow certain dress codes. If George Bush lied about Saddam Hussein's connection with Al Qaeda, and his weapons of mass destruction, it's because he wanted to justify the theatrics of an invasion through these false facts, dressed like actors in their deceptive costumes. And it isn't the first time that truth has been camouflaged. Even in the Roman days, understated or overstated scenarios were manu-

factured to turn people against their enemies and win over their opinion.

History is rife with examples when lies were masqueraded as truths to alter perception. It's commonly believed that Hitler was the madman intent on ruling the world. If you read his Mein Kampf, it appears that his main aim was to unite all Germans in a single state against the growing Bolshevik Russian threat from the east, and to recover territories severed from Germany by the Versailles Treaty of 1919.

More surprises, if you have time. Hitler initially hoped that France and England could be persuaded to join Germany against Russia, which had annexed Finland and effectively taken military control of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and parts of Eastern Europe. It was only after Britain was the first combatant to violate Norwegian neutrality, and hinted that Belgium might

be used as a base for an attack on Germany, that Hitler ordered German forces to enter Norway and launch blitzkrieg to knock out England and France.

Even then, Hitler is said to have exercised restraint. He refrained from ordering his Panzer divisions to destroy the British army in Dunkirk, because he still believed that Britain could be wooed for an honourable peace. The final attempt by Germany to make peace with Britain was the secret flight to Scotland by Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess. He was arrested and confined in Berlin's Spandau jail for more than 40 years after World War II, and not once allowed to make public appearance.

There are many instances when truth immersed in history and displaced facts. What it means is that history is not always based on infallible accounts, because facts, tampered by victors and conquest-

dors, are shaped by historians appointed by them. One example is the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust. The total count of 6 million was based on the number given by the Russians who took control of Auschwitz. By 1989, this number was reduced to approximately 1 million, and since then the plaque claiming 4 million deaths has been removed from the remains of that concentration camp.

In so much as truth is the recipe for lies, Joseph Goebbels has told us how to cook. When a lie is repeated, he concluded, it becomes an accepted truth. Human civilisation is based on that repetition where truth is denied again and again until it is rational, eternal by ephemeral, real by imaginary and face by mask.

If civilisations have risen and fallen, it has changed nothing but new denial of new truth, lies varying not so much in substance but in style. From primates to toolmakers to hunters and then from quest for fire to origin of language to clothes making, the human race evolved until consciousness came much later. At some point, man also learned how to bury his dead. Perhaps that is when it occurred to him that what was hidden ceased to exist.

How much remains intact in history after all that truth has

been hidden? Civilisation diminishes humanity in that hiding as lie corrodes truth, and guilt erodes innocence. The idiot believes what he is told. The wise man tells others what they should believe. History repeats itself, which repeats lies sufficient number of times so that truth will be reasonably erased.

A British essayist writes that believing truth is like staring at the sun. It destroys the power of perception. And that destruction happens in the full glare of intellect, when brilliant minds butcher truth, because they know more than others where to look for the best parts.

Hypocrisy is a disjointed beast born out of that perversion. It has the face of truth and body of lie when words and actions walk apart. Charles Higham claims that during WWII, US firms collaborated with their German sister companies in full knowledge of the British and American governments. Standard Oil of New Jersey shipped fuel to the enemy and Ford trucks were built for use in France by the occupying German army, amongst many other things.

History repeats itself. Why? It's the specter of truths slaughtered in the past. It can frighten us, but why should it enlighten us? We can correct it more than it can correct us.

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Feeding the hungry first



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

WORLD Bank President Robert Zoellick held up a loaf of bread as he spoke during a news conference in Washington on April 10. He said: "In Bangladesh, a two-kilogram bag of rice now consumes about half of the daily income of a poor family. The price of a loaf of bread has more than doubled. Poor people in Yemen are now spending more than a quarter of their incomes just on bread."

Right when the global economy is fraught with the US subprime mortgage crisis, plummeting dollar, and crude oil prices hovering over \$100 a barrel, Josette Sheeran of the World Food Program (WFP) forewarned about the need to start food rationing.

We have already seen that in

NO NONSENSE

We have already seen that in Pakistan, Egypt, and Haiti soaring food prices have caused unrest. Soaring food prices are already having adverse political ramifications around the world. For example, Pakistan, Egypt, and Bangladesh have introduced food ration cards, a desperate and crisis-driven move to circumvent the hunger and famine like scenario. The Indian government is sticking to maintaining its food price subsidy program as prices soar. China and Russia are resorting to price controls, and Argentina and Vietnam are restricting food exports to the world market through rationing and imposing higher export taxes.

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The problem has been brewing for some time now. Conversion of food grains to the production of biofuels as a way of achieving energy independence by US and EU countries is the leading cause.

In the US, last year's wheat harvest was 10.5 billion bushels, the third-largest crop ever. Unfortunately, instead of feeding cattle or people, an increasing slice of that bumper crop is being transformed into fuel for cars.

"The roughly 5 billion gallons of ethanol made in 2006 by 112 U.S. plants consumed nearly one-fifth of the corn crop. If all the scores of factories under construction or planned go into operation, fuel will

gobble up no less than half of the entire corn harvest by 2008." (BusinessWeek).

Corn is caught in a tug-of-war between ethanol plants and food. Massive expansion of biofuels is supported by both sides of the political aisle in the US Congress.

In his January 23, 2007 State of the Union address, President George Bush called for 35 billion gallons of renewable fuels per year within 10 years enough to replace 15% of gasoline burned in American cars and trucks. Congress is considering measures that would require 60 billion gallons by 2030. This isn't just a U.S. phenomenon. Europe is requiring that 5.75% of diesel fuel

come from plants by 2010, while Japan and other nations have lined up contracts to buy biofuels to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

Nestle, the world's biggest food and beverage company, warned on March 23 that increased production of biofuels from wheat and corn is putting world food supplies in peril.

A confluence of many other factors has also worsened the situation:

- Worldwide population increase;
- Rising energy prices;
- Emergent economies like India and China are stepping up the ladder of prosperity and consuming more meat protein, which takes eight times as much land to produce as vegetable protein;
- Short-sighted government subsidies for biofuels are depleting the amount of crops available for feeding humans;
- Prolonged drought in Australia shrinking supply;
- Market speculation and hoarding for higher profits;
- Government manipulation of policies and prices and (for example, US subsidies for biofuels, EU's restrictions on production of genetically modified organisms etc.);
- Globalisation and increasing economic integration. This,

according to UNDP, has led to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

Depletion of food stocks. Joseph Glauber of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) noted in February that world grain reserves were at their lowest levels since 1960.

The impacts of these factors have translated into mounting food prices everywhere. Some developing countries are seeing food prices increase by as much as 80 percent. These abnormally high prices caused WFP's budget to increase by millions of dollars a week, and a steep decline in food procurement and contribution.

Princeton economist Paul Krugman in The New York Times (April 11) suggested that the first thing was getting aid to "people in distress." The second was halting the push for biofuel "subsidised conversion of crops into fuel was supposed to promote energy independence and help limit global warming," but this was clearly a big mistake. "You might put it this way: people are starving in Africa so that American politicians can court votes in farm states."

Other suggestions include:

- Increase contribution to WFP funds to procure enough food to save the world's poor from

- dying of hunger;
- Augment production by bringing more acreage under the plough in countries like Brazil;
- Genetically modified organisms, which can survive drought and saltwater flooding, and need less fertiliser, can be tailored to grow on marginal land. EU countries should lift restrictions on genetically modified crops;
- Cutting waste: A November 2004 study by the University of Arizona in Tucson revealed that 40 to 50 percent of all food ready for harvest in the US find their way to waste. The assessment is that the staggering loss, in addition to feeding the poor, could save US consumers and manufacturers tens of billions of dollars each year.
- Letting the free market adjust to the supply-demand imbalances.

Improving market regulations by combating market manipulation by hoarders and speculators for higher profits is of paramount importance. The market would then adjust, spurring more planting and more production in response to higher prices.

In fact, in February, USDA reported that U.S. farmers were scaling back their cotton and sugar production in response to higher

prices for wheat, corn and soy. Based on farmers' expansion of planting by 6 percent, wheat production has been projected to soar 13 percent to 2.33 billion bushels.

Canadian Renewable Fuels Association assures that extensive production of ethanol from grain will not detract from Canada's ability to feed its own citizens and supply large quantities of high-quality grains to export markets.

With crude oil prices soaring, the world has no choice but to move smoothly to biofuels through increased farm acreage, higher yields, and new crops and technologies. US farmers have already planned to seed 10 million more acres of corn this spring. Some even worry about overshooting demand. "There's an old saying that goes: 'Farmers will see a hole in supply and put a pile on top of it,'" jokes Illinois farmer Steve Pitstick, who's shifting most of his soybean field to corn (BusinessWeek).

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