LATE S. M. ALI

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The sad plight of Bangladesh railways

Priority should be modernisation of train services

EWS from the railways sector, as a front-page report in yesterday's issue of this newspaper makes clear, is not encouraging. More than 2,000 kilometres of the 2,835 km railways network are in a dilapidated shape. Add to that the 675 level crossings which have increased the risks to railway travel in the country. And then come the poor and often inefficient handling of the signalling system that only add to the sense of gloom about the railways in Bangladesh. Besides, there are the reports of the casualties arising out of railway accidents or plainly hazardous use of railway tracks by individuals.

The picture which thus emerges of Bangladesh Railway is of an organisation that has atrophied over the years. And yet it is also true that of late certain measures aimed at a modernisation of the railway have been taken, even if on a limited or tentative scale. Online ticketing, though it is yet to be applied to the whole railway system, is one such measure. Apart from that, the introduction of new trains on specific routes has added to the comfort of passengers. It all goes to show that the railway, despite the plight it is in, yet has the capacity to be transformed into a modern mode of travel in the country. One must not ignore the fact that for all its problems, the railway continues to be the most important means of travel for citizens. There may have been improvements in road and riverine communications, but the railways which are potentially a dominant mode of nationwide communications remain neglected. Which of course is the reason why a definitive approach needs to be taken to bring the railway at par with popular expectations. The job can begin with an improvement in carriage conditions on all the routes. At the same time, maintenance of schedules, always a weak spot, must be strictly ensured. All of this presupposes the existence of proper, strong tracks and safeguards against pilferage of track materials.

A disquieting feature of Bangladesh Railway is the innumerable tracks that pass through urban areas, a feature generally absent in other countries. That not only adds to noise pollution and traffic congestion but is also a cause of accidents. It is therefore time for some serious rethinking in the railway administration about relocating tracks away from urban areas and in a loop around the towns and cities. That said, there is the matter of the financial losses BR has suffered in the past. Administrative dynamism can deal with the problem. There must be a perspective plan for modernisation of the railways based on advanced technologies.

Disgraceful!

How can students beat to death a fellow student?

HE incident in which a private medical college student was beaten fatally by some students at SM Hall to which the former succumbed has been both disgraceful and appalling. It speaks of the moral degradation of a section of students who lose their calm at the slightest pretext and take the law in their own hands. We are not ready to hear whether the young student of Bangladesh Medical College was guilty of stealing a cell phone from the room where he was staying overnight as the guest of a friend. All we want to know is what right the students of that particular dormitory had to beat the life out of that young man. Moreover, different reports point at elements of mystery in the way the young man was accused and how the execution took place. What was expected of the hall students was to hand over the alleged offender to the police with evidence, if any. But instead of doing that, they acted on their own and brutally like no one with student identity is expected to do. The tragedy makes us wonder whether the price of a cell phone is more than that of a human life!

Dhaka University is one of the highest seats of learning in the country with many glorious chapters to its history. The students of this institution gave bold and timely leadership in all the noteworthy student movements during the preliberation days that ultimately culminated in the final war for the liberation of Bangladesh. SM Hall has a long and splendid past with enviable records of its residents excelling in academic results, competitive examinations, outdoor and indoor sports and cultural activities. But the deplorable incident of killing a student on Friday on suspicion of theft

has tarnished the reputation of both DU and SM Hall. We find the incident totally unacceptable and demand a thorough investigation by a neutral body to identify the culprits. Dhaka University has no place for cold-blooded murderers and the sooner they are brought to book the better for the country. We believe the hall authorities should also be more proactive in keeping records of the outside guests who come to stay overnight with friends. Such regulatory measures would ensure the safety of students and their guests in future.

Relative calm



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THEN a piece of good news is yearned for in V the nation, at the time of difficult economic and political situation, the news that Bangladesh ranks first among the states in the region in the ranking of peaceful nations in 2008, bears a special significance for all of us.

The Global Peace Index (GPI), which is drawn up by the Institute for Economics and Peace, an independent think-tank, along with the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit, placed Bangladesh in the 86th position among 140 countries, which is ahead of India (107), Sri Lanka (125), Myanmar (126), Pakistan (127) and Afghanistan (137).

Bangladesh was also 86th among 121 countries in the GPI-2007 with a score of 2.219, and improved this year with a score of 2.118. The GPI, for the first time in 2007, rated 121 countries from Algeria to Zimbabwe on some 24

BY THE NUMBERS

The nation that has been caught in the mousetrap of divisive politics indubitably needs a qualitative change in its leadership. The failed leadership, and their vying for power, have frustrated the nation too much. There are reasons to believe that the country, which has performed better in the GPI rating compared to its all other neighbours, will also transit to durable democracy through a meaningful election.

lence, conflict with neighbours, foreign troop deployment, potential for terrorism within its borders, and military expenditure.

The GPI-2007 placed Norway (1.357) at the top of the list as the world and Iraq (3.437), which has been gripped by growing violence since the US-led invasion in 2003,

Iceland (1.176) at the top of the list Sudan and Russia. and again Iraq (3.514) at the bottom of the list as the least peaceful country. The most striking feature poorly in the GPI rating. USA has been placed in 97th position while Russia is in 131st place.

In Europe, countries such as UK (49), Greece (54), Cyprus (52) and France (36) have failed to perform better due to their rising militarisation. On the other hand, 16 of

factors including levels of vio- the 20 most peaceful countries are European democracies most of them members of the European

The top 10 peace leaders in GPI-2008 (in descending order) are Iceland, Denmark, Norway, New most peaceful country in the Zealand, Japan, Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Luxembourg and Austria. On the other hand, the bottom 10 countries (in ascending order) are was placed at the bottom of the Iraq, Somalia, North Korea, Central African Republic, Chad, The GPI-2008 has placed Lebanon, Israel, Afghanistan,

The Adviser for Foreign Affairs, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, has acclaimed this global recognition of the GPI-2008 is that the world's and termed Bangladesh as an leading powers, including USA oasis of calm in an otherwise and Russia, have performed turbulent region. He has also expressed his hope that the country will soon emerge as yet another Asian Tiger.

The Happy Planet Index, prepared by the UK-based New Economics Foundation in 2006, rated Bangladesh as the happiest nation in the world. The study,

based on the link between personal spending power and perceived quality of life, concluded that money could buy everything but happiness.

The sensational finding of the survey was that people in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, derive far more happiness from their small income than people in most rich countries, including UK, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan and Canada.

Bangladesh was ranked 137th among the world's medium development countries in the UNDP human development index (HDI) 2006, covering 177 countries. The HDI developed by the UNDP, India, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and pushed Bangladesh two steps up Uzbekistan, due to the global food from its ranking in the previous year. The HRD argues that development is ultimately a process of enlarging people's choices, not just raising national incomes.

country (LDC) in the economic mitment to peace beyond its parameter, Bangladesh has

steadily improved life expectancy, and civil wars have made the education and standard of living, situation volatile. The country and had moved into the category now has the second largest continof medium developed countries in gent of peacekeepers from the UN the HDI from 2003. Bangladesh member states deployed in the was one of the lowest in the world trouble spots of 15 countries in terms of access to proper sanitation in its rural areas some 10 years ago, and now has targeted to achieve nationwide sanitation coverage by 2010.

Bangladesh is a country globally known for poverty, corruption, violence and natural calamities. But these are not the only thing about the country. There are some positives that discerning eyes cannot fail to see. Bangladesh has made positive strides in education, life expectancy, and rural development. Literacy rates have increased remarkably, though the quality of education is yet to be improved.

Food riots have already erupted in many countries, including Egypt, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Mozambique Yemen, Mexico, Mauritania, Indonesia, Bolivia, Philippines, crisis. But Bangladesh, despite having so much food crisis, is an exception.

Bangladesh is not only striving for peace within its borders but Despite being a least developed has also demonstrated its comborders, where internal conflicts Star.

across the world.

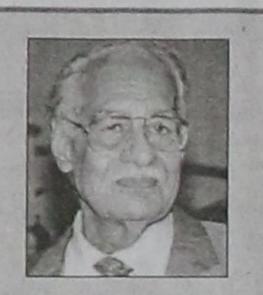
Bangladesh's position, ahead of all other countries in the region, as a nation of peace is no surprise, given that it has no stakes and involvement in activities like arms sales, conflict with neighbours, and foreign troop deployment, that have rendered many powerful countries less peaceful. Yet, we need to do a lot more with a view to contributing to global peace more meaningfully.

The nation that has been caught in the mousetrap of divisive politics indubitably needs a qualitative change in its leadership. The failed leadership, and their vying for power, have frustrated the nation too much. There are reasons to believe that the country, which has performed better in the GPI rating compared to its all other neighbours, will also transit to durable democracy through a meaningful election.

Let us hope that the country will soon overcome all the odds and adversities and will shine in greater glory under new, dynamic leadership as an oasis of peace.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily

Whither secularism?



KULDIP NAYAR writes from New Delhi

do not want to belittle the Bhartiya Janata Party's vic-L tory in the Karnataka state election, which has given it a foothold in the South for the first time since independence. My contention is that every such success lessens the space for secularism in India. When the chips are down, the BJP represents Hindutva and all that goes with it. in outlook, dynastic in attitude and authoritarian in approach, its ethos is secular. It represents pluralism, which was also the characteristic of the freedom struggle.

The BJP has, over the past few years, hewn a path which circumvents the Muslim community. The party did not field a single Muslim candidate in Karnataka, Gujarat, or a couple of other states where it fought elections in the last one and a half years. This seems to be the party's new policy. Muslims are roughly 15 percent in the country. Still the BJP has preferred to ignore them. They do not fit into the scheme of the India the party

BETWEEN THE LINES

India is proud of democracy. The system is based on the participation of all, equally and unequivocally. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Parsis are limbs which provide nourishment to the body politic. How, and for how long, can it stay healthy if some limbs are discarded or considered inferior for use? Pluralism and democracy are two sides of the same coin. When separated, religion with all its exclusiveness and bias takes over.

I am not suggesting that the BJP does not have Muslims as members. A couple of them are even office-bearers at its central organisational setup. Yet, the image of the BJP is that of a party which is anything but secular. Its constant, close links with the RSS makes the BJP still more suspect, because the Hindustan.

This is not a healthy development in a society which is constitutionally pluralistic, and which is vehemently opposed to the twonation theory. No doubt, the Congress is the most to blame because communal forces over the years have thrived at its expense. The party leaders, if they have the courage to speak out, must analyse why the Congress has lost its secular credentials.

When a leader of the Nationalist Congress party, the Congress ally, proposes a joint government with the BJP at the centre and when RSS chief Sudarshan endorses the

wake up to the general perception that it is not very different from the

The larger question which the country must face is why secularism is shrinking in the country. That the obsession of caste considerations is driving out the interest of community is largely true. Elections are fought primar-The Congress may be opportunist Sangh dictum is: Hindi-Hindu- ily on the caste basis. But why has the Congress never projected class, an economic conglomeration, to defeat the caste? It looks as if the party's own commitment to socialism and pluralism has got eroded. In a way, this is natural in a party where the decision-making process is confined to a few, and when the upper middle class frames the policy. History is replete with examples where a top person has changed the thinking of people, with disastrous results.

What about the other non-BJP parties? The Congress is not the country. All secular forces, big or small, have to think how to refurbish the value of pluralism, which suggestion, the Congress must is losing its appeal. Getting

together of pluralistic parties is worthwhile in political terms, so that the secular votes don't split.

However, the challenge is moral. A nation traversing the path of constructing a secular polity is being pushed towards a direction which is divisive, destructive and communal. It is not the structure that faces the danger. It is the very existence of the polity which has come to have a question mark against it. Why has the country, even after 60 years of independence, failed to implant pluralism firmly, which has the topmost priority?

India is proud of democracy. The system is based on the participation of all, equally and unequivocally. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Parsis are limbs which provide nourishment to the body politic. How, and for how long, can it stay healthy if some limbs are discarded or considered inferior for use? Pluralism 'and democracy are two sides of the same coin. When separated,

and bias takes over.

Hindutava is creeping in slowly and relentlessly. That may well lawyers not to defend them. have been the reason why the BJP did not communalise the election campaign in Karnataka, and had no hesitation in getting Narendera Modi, of Gujarat carnage fame, electioneering for more than a week. The party had kept him away in some earlier elections. Modi represents the anti-thesis of pluralism. After all, he is the successor to LK Advani, the BJP's candidate for the post of prime minister, as the latter has publicly

Sometimes I wonder whether

vate the situation because they strengthen the BJP and its type of telephones after the blasts at Jaipur was: Muslims are not terrorists but terrorists are Muslims. This went to the houses of Hindu middle class people.

Some Muslims organisations are doing a commendable job in holding public meetings and seminars denouncing terrorism. But extolling the virtues of Islam from the same platform does not mix well. They are confusing the public. Terrorism per se is reprehensible. On the other hand, the harassment of Muslim youth in the name of fighting terrorism is instilling fear and a sense of insecurity into the community. religion with all its exclusiveness Muslim lawyer had a tough time at Kuldip Nayaris an eminent Indian columnist.

Faizabad court in UP the other day when he appeared for terrorist suspects. The bar had asked all

Yet, the basic question that Karnataka has thrown up remains unanswered. Is the Congress saleable as an alternative in the country? It has lost six states in a row in the last eighteen months. Party president Sonia Gandhi is a crowd puller. But the crowd does not seem to be getting translated into votes. Can the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) be projected with different constitu-

At present, the Left is part of the Muslim extremists only aggra- UPA. Understandably, the Left wants to contest on its own. What about other non-BJP parties? thinking when they indulge in Some of them have joined hands bomb blasts, or help outsiders to with the BJP in forming governdo so, and provide them with ments both at the centre and in shelter. An SMS sent on mobile the states. A few are still members of a coalition they jointly run.

> The Lok Sabha elections are only eleven months away. Some combinations are being discussed behind the scenes. Let the example of former prime minister Deve Gowda be not repeated. He first cheated the Congress, then the BJP, and is now available to the highest bidder. This is the time for the parties to show their commitment. They may have to retrieve the Congress. A country which is proud to call itself secular cannot be left at the mercy of one party which is committed more to power and less to pluralism.

Pollution free growth

Policy-makers and environmentalists must initiate all necessary measures to reverse the water pollution already consummated and halt further degradation to the environment. Reducing toxic emissions requires eliminating toxic ingredients, recycling or reusing chemicals to keep them out of the waste stream, and using a wide range of alternative materials to replace polluting ones.

ABDULLAH DEWAN and ALBELEE

THE Daily Star's May 24 editorial on "Water pollution" came as a delightful coincidence right when the authors of this article were sharing ideas about the dyspeptic river pollution, public health, and economic well being of the people of Bangladesh.

Monetary and fiscal authorities in advanced countries strive to realise inflation-tamed growth with least damage to environmental resources (lakes, rivers, air, forest, public parks etc). But if inflation tamed output growth is realized at the expense of water and air pollution, long-term health hazards and afflictions will make that growth a misery growthand for sure, an unsustain-

able growth. Unsustainable because among the factors that contribute to economic growth, worker produc(GDP = hours of work X output per worker) stands alone, and health NPSP. of workers and their living environment becomes paramount in

Industrial workers and their family members in Bangladesh work and live in the most hazardous health risk surroundingsand the same is true of people living in ment plants (ETP) by October or cities. Don't forget that last year's face electricity, gas and water ranking of Dhaka city as the second dirtiest in the world is a no nonsense ranking.

grouped into "point source" pollution (PSP) and non-point source Pollution (NPSP). PSP include discharges from a wastewater treatment plant, outfalls from a factory, leaking underground tanks, etc. NPSP include nutrient flow over an agricultural field, or metals and hydrocarbons from an area with high impervious sur-

tivity, that is, output per worker faces and vehicular traffic. Rapid urbanising also contributes to

According to the editorial, Dhaka WASA in 2003 had listed 36 polluters of the Balu River and the oxygen depleted anoxic or "dead ancillary canals. In April 2007, the zone" all over Buriganga Rivera relevant ministries threatened the polluters to install effluent treatsupplies cut off.

mere lip service. Polluters were Water pollution has been apparently shielded from any such ultimatumshutting down factories would make workers jobless, culminating in industrial unresta politically unsettling predicament for the party in power. Today, non ETP equipped industries have multiplied in runoff in stormwater from sheet numbersnearly 150 in Tejgaon industrial area alone.

These industries discard human waste and industrial efflu-

ent in Begunbari canal, polluting Balu River in the processone that provides water for Saidabad Water Treatment Plant, the principal source of treated, supposedly safe, water for Dhaka city.

Human waste is biodegradableso, that's a minor problembut the discarded effluents deplete oxygen content one million ton (MT) capacity in the water bodies, threatening the life cycle of fish population and their healthy regenerations.

hapless spectacle for people of skimpy livelihood and subsis-

from toxic dumping, sludge, and The threat went unheeded as a sewage discharge by creating riparian buffer areas. These buffers protect coastal rivers, and ponds from excess nitrogen runoff responsible for causing hypoxia (low oxygen), anoxia (no oxygen) or the so-called "dead zone."

> A study by the Center for Watershed Protection (Ellicott more than 14,000 people daily but City, Maryland) found that riparian forest buffers reduce an estimated 21 lbs of Nitrogen per tive that the public be told of the acre/yr for \$0.30/lb compared to pros and cons of building all \$3-5 for Washington DC area industrial projects prior to their

wastewater treatment facility. In Atlanta, Georgia, officials estimated that a 20% loss in trees/vegetation in metropolitan region caused 4.4 billion cft increases in stormwater runoff.

The Tata Group's 2005 proposal and recent bid for building 1,000 MW power plants, steel mill, and fertiliser factory in Bangladesh are certainly much desirable projects, yet they raise serious concerns. There are compelling evidence For example, do these projects growth from public health and through dietary consumption of environmental consequences perspectives?

In US and other western economies, prior to any threshold envi-Coastal waters can be protected ronmental policy reviews at national level the project proponent obtains approval from local authority after a due public disquisition of the process.

The ordinary citizens of Bangladesh are unlikely to know that water pollution is the leading worldwide cause of deaths and diseasesaccounts for the deaths of the investors and government knowand, therefore, it is impera-

One contentious aspect of the Tata's project is the proposed mining of 3 MT of coal a year. Coal is the dirtiest of all fossil fuels and mercury (Hg) emission from mining or coal burning in a power plant poisons surface and groundwater through seepage since the network of rivers, lakes, and ponds are hydraulically connected.

Mercury bio-accumulates in the form of toxic methyl mercury (MeHg) in fish tissues. Primary fish (examples: Minamata disease first recognized around Minamata bay in 1956 and again in Agano River basin in Japan in 1965). Mercury poisoning is also known to adversely affect the development of nervous systems of unborn and growing children. Add to these the green house gas (CO2) emissions.

In the US, the power plants in upwind Midwestern states trig-

blowing from coal burning power plants in Midwest.

Given the overwhelming and irrefutable health risk of coal burning energy, the government should insist that Tata or other investors' use "ultra-clean coal" for the proposed 1000 MW power generation.

West Virginia-based CENfuel FPU Ltd. has developed commercial availability of a process for ultra-cleaning coal prior to combustion. It's a low cost process that industrial plants as the main of the presence of patches of look promising for sustainable human exposure to MeHg occurs removes 99.5% of toxic ash and can reduce emissions up to 50%.

The process, proven in 25 years in laboratory and pilot plant testing of more than 100,000 tons in Europe, Asia and the US, is the only method for cleaning coal precombustion. Since 1981, CENfuel™ has been tested successfully at generators abroad such as Japan's Hitachi Zosen, and Switzerland's Brown Boveri.

Policy-makers and environmentalists must initiate all necesgered widespread edible fish sary measures to reverse the water mercury advisory in lakes and pollution already consummated rivers in Boston area and other and halt further degradation to New England (NE) states in the the environment. Reducing toxic northeast region. Majority of emissions requires eliminating mercury pollution in the six NE toxic ingredients, recycling or states and New York waters come reusing chemicals to keep them from air deposition of mercury out of the waste stream, and using Boston, Massachusetts.

a wide range of alternative materials to replace polluting ones.

The authorities must prosecute the polluters much the same way they are locking up the corrupt politicians and public servants. Polluters are also political contributorsthat's how they got away from past violations and that's how they'll continue polluting the environment in the future.

Creation of a single powerful pollution watchdog headed by an environmental scientist accountable to a parliamentary committee may expedite actions previously hamstrung by procedural intricacies. The multiplicities of agencies that exist now pass up responsibilities; create openings for reciprocal aggrandisement leading to delays and inaction while letting the country's water and air degrade.

Pollution-free growth entails a burden of cost now, but the longterm economic and social cost of not protecting water and air from pollution will be much more burdensome and irreversible.

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