

Water-logging crisis

A single authority needed to resolve it

ONCE again the monsoon is here and Dhaka is water-logged. With the rainy season just getting underway, it can be anticipated that the water-logging problem will only deepen. The problems this disgraceful state of affairs cause for the denizens of our capital city need scarcely be enumerated, so obvious are they to even the casual observer.

The water-logging brings the city's traffic, and thus, the city itself to a standstill. Worst hit are the poorest who have no option but to wade through knee- and thigh-high water to get anywhere. That this should be the situation in the nation's capital city is indeed deplorable. The loss in terms of man-hours and efficiency is immense. In addition, the over-flowing of the drains means that much of the water cascading through the streets is foul, leading to all kinds of health concerns for those who have to navigate it.

The causes of such water-logging are, by and large, twofold. The first culprit is the fact that the waterways of the city have become clogged up due to encroachment. Adequate steps have not been taken to augment the natural drainage system that has thus been destroyed. The second problem is that the storm sewers and drains are in terrible condition and are thoroughly unfit for the task in a city of well over one crore.

And let us not forget the havoc that is caused by poor and sub-standard road works and especially by the inexplicable practice of doing road work including excavation to lay utility networks during the monsoon season, both of which only contribute further to the mess.

Part of the trouble lies in the fact that the surface drains comes under the DCC's purview while storm sewers are the responsibility of Wasa. Small wonder that there is no co-ordinated action. As far as the road-digging is concerned, the utility organisations do it for their own purposes but the dug out earth is for the DCC to put back in place with the money paid in advance to the city corporation by former. The earth filling work is done very shoddily. What is needed is a unitary authority that is tasked with ensuring that the city does not flood or become water-logged, and that has the power to take whatever steps are necessary to accomplish this urgent goal.

That year after year the problem has been allowed to get worse is unacceptable. It is shameful that a capital city could be reduced to such a state every year. Ensuring that Dhaka does not get water-logged in the monsoons must be a priority for any government, and the sooner we have a single authority tasked with ensuring this, the better.

Errors in textbooks

Take corrective action as early as possible

THE issue of school textbooks being full of factual, grammatical and spelling errors is serious enough to have drawn the attention of all concerned long ago. Unfortunately, the books are being published year after year with the same glaring mistakes that can only misinform, mislead and confuse the young learners. The reports carried by the daily Prothom Alo have shed light on this very important issue.

The mistakes and errors are appalling in some cases. It is universally accepted that the knowledge of history helps the learners to understand contemporary issues, but how will they equip themselves with such knowledge when the textbooks contain unpardonable and explicable errors in the biographies of eminent writers of the past?

It is often said that the students don't show much enthusiasm about our history and politics. There may be truth in it, but whatever interest they have in all such subjects is likely to be dampened by the misleading information supplied by the textbooks. Moreover, there are spelling mistakes and grammatically inaccurate sentences which can cause much consternation to those who still care about proper learning.

If it is surprising that textbooks prepared by the NCTB under the supervision of a panel of experts could be fraught with errors and inaccuracies, what is even more surprising is that those mistakes have never been detected, let alone eliminated. Obviously, the experts never bothered to check whether the textbooks were written correctly. And it is the students who suffered for their callousness and insensitivity.

Some academicians have expressed their concern over the poorly written and edited textbooks. We cannot but agree with their general observation that the nation will have to pay a high price for such lapses. It is indeed a matter of shame that our school textbooks are of very low quality which calls into question the efficiency of not only the NCTB but also the efficacy of the education system as a whole.

The Chief Adviser is reported to have asked for an explanation from the NCTB as to how the textbooks could contain such gross mistakes and inaccuracies. The government, we believe, should delve deep into the matter and adopt such measures as will eliminate the mistakes from the school textbooks. Meanwhile replace the flawed texts because it is not too late into the academic session. We have to realise that here we are dealing with a matter having a direct bearing on the future of education in the country.

A self-inflicted wound

Instead, US high-skilled immigration policies have in recent years become tangibly more restrictive -- waylaid by wider congressional gridlock on immigration and political emphasis on indiscriminate enforcement. This restrictiveness is relative to earlier periods in US history and other industrialised countries today. In April 2008, about half of 163,000 US businesses wishing to hire a foreign high-skilled worker were denied this opportunity by the annual quota of 85,000 - 65,000 plus 20,000 available to foreign graduates with advanced degrees from US universities -- available visas.

JACOB F. KIRKEGAARD

AMERICA rose to global economic prominence, superpower status and victory in the Cold War on the shoulders of the most highly skilled workforce in the world. However, America's global "skills leadership" is now under challenge.

An increasingly vicious combination of long-term trends in the form of retiring baby boomers and stagnating US educational attainment, combined with increasingly restrictive laws on high-skilled immigration increasingly undermines US position. This will seriously jeopardise

long-term economic growth opportunities, especially for US high-tech sectors.

Aging US baby boomers were the best-educated workers in the world when they entered the workforce 30-some years ago. Building on visionary policies like the GI Bill of 1944, college-level graduation rates for US baby boomers reached almost 40 percent during this period, far exceeding graduation rates of 20 to 25 percent enjoyed by contemporary British, French, German or Japanese baby boom generations in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The year 2008 is the first in which Americans born after World War II can retire with public pensions -- hence, the loss of large numbers of well-educated baby boomers will be more severely felt in the United States.

Another worry is the stagnation seen in the average educational attainment of Americans. Almost uniquely in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the tertiary-level graduation rates among present-day US labour market entrants is the same as that of their baby boomer parents -- stuck below 40 percent.

Hence, there's a risk in coming years that as many high-skilled Americans will retire as will the enter the workforce.

Moreover, while America failed to improve broad educational standards, the rest of the world has not stood still. Today, over 50 percent of young Canadians, Japanese and Koreans obtain tertiary education representing a vast educational advancement relative to their parents' generation.

American labour market entrants today barely make the global skills top-10 list. As a direct result, for the first time in generations, the US risks becoming less skill-abundant than an increasing number of its global economic competitors.

US and Canadian baby boomers, aged 55 to 64, were indeed the "brightest kids on the global trading block," when they entered the workforce and rapidly globalising marketplace.

Thus baby boomers were ready to take advantage of trade liberalisation and the opening of

global markets during the last part of the 20th century, far less true for today's American youth.

Policymakers cannot stop the graying of the US population or the imminent retirement of baby boomers. Similarly, successful overhaul of the US education sector could only begin to reverse more than 30 years of educational stagnation over the long term.

Improving the education system is hardly a realistic or quick solution to forestalling broad skill shortages in the US economy over the next decade.

US policymakers can only hope to counter these long-term phenomena by reforming high-skilled immigration policies and facilitating the continued and increasingly economically necessary inflow of high-skilled workers from abroad.

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The immigration policy undermines the economic characteristics -- entrepreneurial vitality and mastery of new advanced technologies -- that make the US the envy of the world.

Just like Google, eBay and Yahoo, more than half of engineering and technology companies founded in Silicon Valley from 1995 to 2005 had at least one foreign-born founder, more than a third of US venture capital-backed technology firms report shifting investments and jobs outside the country due to restrictive regulation and America's largest, most competitive companies cannot get visas for foreign high-

skilled workers they want to hire. Meanwhile, contours of the global battlefield for talent are rapidly changing. The recent proposal for an EU "Blue Card" would allow high-skilled workers from outside the EU to work in multiple EU countries, just one example of a new trend across the OECD. Affected by more rapid population aging than the US, other OECD countries aggressively work to liberalize their high-skilled immigration laws, while simultaneously tightening regulation of low-skilled and humanitarian-based immigration. Ironically, the other nations frequently copy US policies, particularly those that attract and retain foreign students.

Equally worrisome for the US, the top countries of origin for high-skilled migrants -- fast-growing China and India -- offer incentives for skilled workers to return home. In 2007, China launched its "green passage" initiative, aimed at luring back tens of thousands of acclaimed overseas Chinese scientists, engineers and executives with promises

of guaranteed university places for their children, exemption from household-residence registration -- or hukou -- requirements and tax benefits.

The US -- historically the world's country of choice for foreign high-skilled workers -- has the most to lose from any change in these human-capital flows. While the rest of the rich world has caught up in welcoming high-skilled foreigners, the US could soon struggle to attract global talent.

With the skill-base of the US workforce declining at an accelerating pace relative to the rest of the world, America in the 21st century will need foreign high-skilled workers more than ever. At stake is the ability of the US economy to thrive in the global marketplace.

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Constitutional reforms: CA has hit the nail on the head

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

In the midst of remarks of persons in positions of responsibility, the CA's assertion that the caretaker government (CTG) is not contemplating amending the Constitution is a sagacious comment. He has hit the nail on the head by articulating the very important fact that it is not even his government's job to do so. The clarification is very welcome, since it has assuaged many misgivings in people's mind.



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IN the midst of remarks of persons in positions of responsibility, the CA's assertion that the caretaker government (CTG) is not contemplating amending the Constitution is a sagacious comment. He has hit the nail on the head by articulating the very important fact that it is not even his government's job to do so. The clarification is very welcome, since it has assuaged many misgivings in people's mind.

Indeed, it is not the mandate of the current government to tinker with the Constitution. His comments, one is certain, shall allay fears of many, who were led to believe, from the out of turn comments made by some of his advisors and indeed by one of the election commissioners, that the government may have its eyes on amending the Constitution.

In as much as it is felt that there are articles in the Constitution that need a fresh look, nobody can take issue with the view of the CA that it was time that thought was given to constitutional reform. And nobody

will contest the fact that the Constitution, while it is sacrosanct in so far as its basic structure is concerned, may be suitably amended to accommodate the changes dictated by the need of the time.

However, our experience with constitutional reforms is not a very pleasant one. None of the 14 amendments, with the exception of one perhaps, reflected the will of the people, since none of those were debated at any length on the floor of the parliament. Except for the amendment dealing with the shift from the presidential to the cabinet form of government, in 1991, all the others were either pushed down the throat of a hapless opposition, where there was one, or romped home by the force of the brute majority. Tinkering with the constitution without extensive public debate may benefit only a particular party or group.

It will be well for all those who are given to rushing into things -- albeit with honest intention to do public good, to remember the very important but often overlooked fact that there are always the right

forum and the right people to do it, and of course the appropriate environment. And neither is now the time, nor is there the right forum at the moment, nor are the council of advisors the right people -- to think of constitutional reform.

As it is, the CTG has already taken too many things on its plate, many of which were not within its mandate. But if the people have not demurred to those, it is perhaps because there was a popular assertion that obligated the caretaker government to take up those matters in hand. But one is not certain that there is a demand from the people in general for the CTG to involve itself in constitutional amendment exercise -- being fully aware that it is not its job.

But why has the idea of constitutional amendment been banded about in the first place? In fact, it is one of the two issues -- the other being the electoral college of the president -- that are being discussed among a particular quarter, and it may be worthwhile to dwell on the first that has to do with the future tenor of our politics.

The discussion on constitu-

tional reforms originated from views amongst a few, on the need to balance power between the prime minister and the president, and which cannot be implemented without bringing in the necessary changes to the Constitution.

Admittedly, the executive branch had indeed assumed a very powerful position, during the last government in particular. The protagonists of the idea of power balance reinforce their suggestion by the argument that the prime ministers, particularly the immediate past, had assumed an authoritarian stature, and ran the show very much as dictators.

I wonder whether one should even think of balancing power -- when the power of the president under a parliamentary form of government run by a cabinet headed by a prime minister, is very limited. Of course there was a government inside the government, which made the cabinet dysfunctional. But it has nothing to do with the system so much as with the people who ran it. If the ministers lacked the nerve to stand up to

the prime minister, it is they that are responsible for allowing the PM to become what she did. Also, if the past prime ministers went about imperiously, it was not because of the flaws in the Constitution but in the performance of the two other organs of the state -- the legislature and the judiciary.

In a parliamentary democracy, it is the parliament that must exercise checks and balance on the government. The power that the PM derives is accorded by the parliament -- and one finds it rather strange that one should be talking about the powers of the PM -- when it is really the powers of the parliament, and how that is exercised, that one should emphasise upon.

Regrettably, the legislature had become dysfunctional. First, the opposition was stifled by the force of the brute parliamentary majority, made so much easier by the blatantly partisan role of the speaker -- who became oblivious of the fact that once on the hallowed chair, he/she should purge all thoughts of party affiliation. The situation was compounded equally by the opposition which abdicated its bounden duty -- of representing those that elected them -- choosing to boycott the parliament and finding the streets more suitable to ventilate their views rather than the floor of the parliament. The role of the standing committees was equally pathetic, losing sight of the substantive issues, and most often hamstrung by the unhelpful atti-

tude of the ministries.

As for the judiciary, while its primary task is to adjudicate, and for the higher judiciary to interpret the constitution as well, one would have liked to see it take suo moto cognisance of the government's acts of commission -- particularly of those that might have had to do with the violation of the Constitution.

In suggesting a balance of power between the prime minister and the president one is actually suggesting that the president, elected by an electoral college (MPs) should work as a check and balance to the PM elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. The danger of such an arrangement is that there will be two centers of power, with the prospect of more turmoil than resolution of issues. And while there is the parliament that the PM and the cabinet are answerable to, who will the president be accountable to for his acts -- of commission or omission?

The president has certain powers like nominating judges to the higher courts. These must be strengthened and broadened. And instead of going for an arrangement that is most likely to create two power blocks, the existing parliamentary institutions and practices must be strengthened so that the prime minister can be made more accountable to the people -- through the parliament.

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Saarc gender database and the way ahead

This database will not only disseminate gender data but also will play a much greater role in policy advocacy on vital gender issues. Data has to be tabulated, analysed, addressed for policy advocacy, and be monitored on a continuous basis. Analysis of the datasets of the proposed gender database should also be able to produce a comprehensive report on the Progress of South Asian Women, tabulation of existing empowerment strategies along with their impact for determination of future strategies more effectively, and analysis of good practices to empower women and end gender discrimination.

SHAMIMA NASREEN

THE history of collection and accessibility of population data by gender dates back to 1881, when the first regular decennial population census was conducted in the South Asian sub-continent. The wishes and tasks of a man and a woman may not be the same or may be the same, so it is very important to identify sex-disaggregated data where every data is cross-classified by sex, presenting information separately for women and men, boys and girls.

Without sex-disaggregated data it will be difficult for a country to identify the real and potential contributions of both sexes separately and, thus, it could obstruct the formulation of effective policies.

After a great deal of discussion and planning, a widespread gender database with sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive data analysis is about to become a reality in South Asia.

The Islamabad Declaration of the Fifth South Asia Ministerial Conference, held in Islamabad in May 2005, called for the establishment of a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Gender Database at the Saarc Secretariat -- a database that would address the complete range of challenges based on sex-

disaggregated data.

The Saarc gender database is meant to be a tool to share best practices from across the region on gender equality. Now the question is, can the South Asian governments identify appropriate indicators to prepare the gender database, and can the implementation of policy advocacy on gender equity be performed on a regular basis?

The general approach of the indicators should be as simple as possible so that users unfamiliar with statistics could easily judge the level of equality between women and men.

United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has been involved in consultation with all seven Saarc member countries, and supported an expert group meeting in Kathmandu in December 2005 to discuss the modalities of setting up the database.

A core committee to administer the project was established, and a prototype is currently under development. At present, all Saarc countries except Afghanistan have identified a national agency, a focal point, and set up a national committee to take forward the initiative in their respective countries.

The joint secretary of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, is the national focal point

in Bangladesh. The senior assistant secretary of the ministry said that the UNIFEM program office in Bangladesh was sponsoring the preparatory work on Bangladesh's part. A group of technical consultants from UNIFEM regional office is also overseeing the preparation process.

The national committee of Bangladesh is headed by the advisor for the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and is comprised of 10 members. In Bangladesh, a national research organisation dealing with the formulation of gender database is yet to be formed. The present aim of the project in Bangladesh is to accomplish national adaptation of the draft regional indicators for the gender database.

The Saarc gender database was launched on January 17 as a collective initiative of the seven member countries. It will not only consider statistical database based on traditional indicators but also include both tangible and intangible primary indicators identified after careful study.

Based on regional practices, new indicators also need to be identified according to the mandate of the Bhutan Forward Moving Strategy, 2003. This database will not only disseminate gender data but also will play a much greater role in policy advocacy on vital gender issues.

Data has to be tabulated, analysed, addressed for policy advocacy, and be monitored on a continuous basis. Analysis of the datasets of the proposed gender database should also be able to produce a comprehensive report on the Progress of South Asian Women, tabulation of existing empowerment strategies along with their impact for determination of future strategies more effectively, and analysis of good practices to empower women and end gender discrimination.

On the website of the Saarc secretariat, after the launching of the Saarc gender database, an application form has been uploaded for the selection process of Saarc chair, Fellowship and scholarship programs. In that application form there is space to write father's name but not mother's name.

As the database has been launched, it is assumed that Saarc has an ambition to work for gender equity in the region, but it has become farcical because of the deliberate omission of the option for mother's name.

People are hopeful that a fair Saarc gender database will be based on appropriate gender indicators, and research and advocacy on gender sensitive issues will be conducted.

So, planning should pursue implementation. Keeping the option of father's name only does not reflect gender equity at the regional organisational level.

It is known that the Bangladesh government has made it compulsory to mention mother's name in any application form at the national level. That is why, at the secretariat meeting of Saarc regarding formatting the application form, Bangladesh should

have raised its voice for mentioning mother's name in the application form before giving consent. People should not be given any chance to raise questions about gender equity -- at least at the organisational level.

Some people may think that it is not an important issue to be concerned about, but women also want recognition. Persons involved with the process of formatting the application form were all male.

So, there is a possibility that they followed the stereotypical structure by incorporating father's name only, or maybe they did not even realise the necessity of recognising the applicants with their mothers' names.

Everyone knows the active role of mothers in bringing up their children, so if social identifications need to be provided then in all types of forms mother's name must be incorporated along with that of the father.

Recognition is an important phenomenon. A mother of a scholar, even if she is a housewife, definitely wants recognition with her child, but it seems that some men think that mothers do not have any expectations of their own.

In the old days, women were not much educated, but day-by-day they are becoming educated, which helps them to express their own feelings and needs as dignified human beings. Moreover, education helps women to gain confidence and awareness.

The developed countries do not bother mentioning the names of fathers/mothers in National ID or in most application forms because people are considered as adults after eighteen years of age, and they usually give priority to their

own biological identity rather than the social one. On the contrary, in South Asian culture a person's identity is inextricably linked with that of his/her parents'.

Some significant layouts of gender databases of developed countries can be followed in South Asia. Gender focal points should be appointed soon in all central government ministries and committees of Saarc members. Following the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), a "Women in Development" (WID) focal points network, headed by a national focal point, has to be established.

Even though their mandate is largely understood, focal points may lack formal terms of reference (TORs) for their task, which links their activities with the National Policy for the Advancement of Women, the National Action Programme (NAP) as well as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in this region.

As it is an initiative of developing countries the members may not be provided with sufficient resources for implementation. Furthermore, regular and proper training of focal points is the key to ensuring that the network will be able to contribute efficiently to improve gender mainstreaming at the national and regional levels, and help statisticians identify the most important data gaps in the gender statistics field.

Afghanistan has become a member of Saarc, so the structural process to initiate its national gender database needs to start as early as possible, otherwise Saarc as a whole will not be able to succeed in constructing a suitable gender database.

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