

## Tremors and tottering buildings

Are rules of construction being followed?

A five-storied building in Rajshahi has moved sideways and leaned on to another building. There was, of course, a mild earth tremor that caused such a condition. And as earthquakes go, the possibility of disasters is always there. But what is of greater significance in the present circumstances is the question of why a mild tremor should leave a building in precarious conditions. Over the last many years, the media have consistently drawn the attention of the authorities to the poor and sloppy manner in which buildings, especially high rise ones, are being constructed in the nation's urban areas. In the capital itself, there have been instances of buildings developing cracks not long after they have been constructed, with residents moving out in panic.

There are quite a few crucial points that must be addressed insofar as the construction of buildings is concerned. And these questions are there because in a very large number of cases it is such areas as water bodies or places where the earth is soft that plans for residential buildings have been put in place. One of the questions, therefore, is to what extent such soil has been examined for content and to what degree it has been flattened and hardened in order to withstand the pressure of new construction. There are already projections that in Dhaka itself, a relatively serious earthquake could result in as much as 80 per cent of high rises collapsing all around us. That may sound apocalyptic, but it cannot be dismissed out of hand. The frenzy with which old homes are being demolished and apartment complexes are rising in their place is quite naturally worrying for everyone. The nature of the soil aside, there comes the question of the fraudulent means employed in the supply and use of construction materials. Allegations have been rife about spurious cement, meaning a mixture of simple soil and actual cement, as well as steel of poor quality being used to construct buildings. The impunity with which such grossly questionable activities have gone on has never been challenged or checked.

Which is why it now becomes a matter of vital concern that the regulatory bodies, responsible for overseeing building construction across the country, take a little more interest in the matter. Of course, there are also the corrupt elements within such bodies; and as long as they are safely ensconced in their jobs, nothing worthwhile can be expected from their organisations. The job of handling the issue must begin, therefore, through making these regulatory bodies corruption-free. Only then can they morally be serious about upholding the existing building code for citizens.

## Coaching centres

Education going the wrong way

An eminent educationist has held private coaching centres responsible for the deterioration of the quality of education in the country. He has further observed that the coaching centres are involved in all sorts of unethical activities, including leakage of question papers.

Now, the proliferation of coaching centres, which has rendered many schools and colleges almost redundant, is a long identified problem. But no worthwhile measures have been adopted so far to contain it for the benefit of all concerned. Obviously, the problem originates from the unmistakable truth that most of the schools or colleges, even in the cities, do not impart the kind of education that students need for doing well in exams. The teachers themselves are found to be involved in the business of setting up coaching centres and compelling their students to attend it. The poor guardians find themselves in a very awkward position, as they know that good results are as important as acquiring knowledge in today's context. And they do not want their wards to develop any kind of antagonism with their teachers. Only that can explain the mushroom growth of coaching centres at the cost of education based on moral and ethical values.

Coaching centres favour the affluent, as money becomes the sole determinant factor in the development of a student's academic career. The honest and the less affluent suffer as they can neither pay the hefty amounts charged by such centres, nor can they send their children to the best schools where tuition fees are too high.

The education system based on coaching centres has certainly led to crass commercialisation of education, with all its concomitant ills. Is this a problem that we will have to live with perpetually? A plethora of suggestions and recommendations have come our way insofar as lessening the influence of such parallel educational institutions is concerned. Obviously, the rot set in long ago and it might just not be easy to set things right quickly. Most of the schools do not have good teachers, and the situation is critical in rural areas. This is the crux of the problem which has to be addressed in right earnest. Teaching has to be turned into an acceptable, if not lucrative, profession. The education authorities must be aware of the acute shortage of qualified teachers, but they have not yet succeeded in creating the conditions where we will have qualified and capable school and college teachers. A breakthrough in this respect is the crying need of the hour.

## Political tide bringing in a lot of debris



SHAHNOOR WAHID

LIKE the unpredictable rivers of Bengal, the political tide is changing course erratically too, causing erosion on one side and churning (land) to come up on the other. In between the two it is the common people who get caught and get carried away to the void of uncertainty.

So, we can see that the tide is changing fast for BNP leaders like Maj. (Retd) Hafiz, Maj. Gen. (Retd) Mahbubur Rahman and Maj. Gen. (Retd) Z.A. Khan, who had come forward to initiate reforms in the party. In the beginning, if we may remember, some second ranking leaders and a handful of workers rallied behind them and encouraged them to carry on.

But lately it seems their balloon has lost steam and is now plummeting to the ground quite fast. The ground reality, that is, they are now looking for ways to swim back to the other side where new land has appeared. They do not want to remain on the side where erosion is beginning to look frightening.

It was around that time that,

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Talking about Awami League reminds us of one thing. It might make some people uncomfortable but we have to come out in the open about it. Why there is no one talking about the AL leader Mohammad Nasim who is seriously ill, needing special health care? We must not forget that he is the son of one of the architects of Bangladesh, Captain (Retd) Mansoor Ali who was brutally killed by some cowardly people in a cell inside the Central Jail.

from nowhere, had popped up the self-declared BNP messiah, Brig. Gen. (Retd) Hannan. He talked the way he had never talked before. He fumed and he swore, he lashed out and he cursed. Finally, he waded into knee-high water to play the voice of the supreme leader before a group of flood-affected, hungry people. But, it did not earn him what he had been aiming for. Today he clings on to exposed tree roots to save himself from the rushing water of the river.

Time and tide waited for none and kept on changing course in this land of erratic rivers. At one point, thanks to the politics of Bangladesh, it was a nondescript BNP leader named Delwar who was pulled out from the backbench to carry the party's hand.

Immediately, the limelight and TV cameras were turned on him. It was all because of the diktat of the supreme leader of the party. But he was given only a one-line dialogue to repeat every time he was asked a question. To be truthful, he has been doing it ever so diligently.

On the other side of the divide, the Awami League reform team could not find eleven players to make a full team. The mission fizzled out, members dispersed, and quietly joined the A team. Meanwhile, the AL supreme leader now looks haggard and weary, travelling all over the northern hemisphere of the globe, attending family gatherings and lending her "ear" to all sorts of gossips and rumours.

Interestingly enough, when some of the old guns of AL continue to churn out confusing statements about municipal, upazila and national elections at home, some new guns fail to get an appointment or even a nod from the supreme leader on foreign soil. Why she should do it is a mystery, but don't such behavioural quirks give birth to rumours? If new leaders get such unbecoming treatment from the supreme leader, how will new blood be infused into the party?

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but we have to come out in the open about it. Why there is no one talking about the AL leader Mohammad Nasim who is seriously ill, needing special health care? We must not forget that he is the son of one of the architects of Bangladesh, Captain (Retd) Mansoor Ali who was brutally killed by some cowardly people in a cell inside the Central Jail.

And we must not also forget that Nasim himself was a freedom fighter and organiser during our Liberation War. He also worked hard for the last thirty plus years to keep AL in one piece. Unfortunately, we heard no statement for his release or better treatment by the supreme leader of the party. By the way, where are those sidekicks who used to sit on the road with him during every hartal and made sure they were caught by the TV camera? Shouldn't they be shouting slogans for his release if the sidekicks of Tarique Rahman can do the same thing?

The old saying goes like this, while Rome burnt Nero played on his fiddle. Well, the kitchen market



Mohammad Nasim

and the energy market are on fire in this country. There may be no Nero around, but some comments of some responsible people in the government hurt as much. We do not want such off the cuff comments from the high and mighty on matters of life and death. Yes sir, feeding a family of four today is a matter of life and death for a person of fixed income group. It is not fair to say things sitting on the other side of the fence. Compassion is a virtue that requires no great effort to exercise. Let us all learn to be compassionate in such difficult times.

As all sorts of incredible things are going on in the country, the unpredictable tide meanwhile is bringing in all sorts of political debris from the hinterland. Like hyenas, thugs and crooks are smelling blood and sending signals for the pack to arrive. They are

sensing weakness, limitation and flaws in the system. The time to kill is almost here. They are now hoping to take part in the upcoming elections.

So, close the chapter on clean, dedicated, honest candidates. Close the chapter on transparency and accountability. Close the chapter on intra-party democracy and participatory parliamentary democracy. It would be impossible to expect those with the kind of politics we have had in the past and what we are going to have in the near future. Nothing has changed in the two years. Nothing will change in the coming days. The question that looms large is: Are we going back to where we began?

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## Towards a single Asian currency?



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM  
writes from Madrid

A few weeks ago, the Asian Development Bank, a Manila-based international financial institution, held its annual meeting in Madrid. The Bangladeshi delegation to the meeting was headed by Dr. Mirza Azizul Islam, the finance adviser, who is also an eminent economist and an international banker.

The principal objectives of the bank are to "help its 67 member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people." Since the very poor people in the Asia-Pacific area spend 60% of their income on food and an additional 15% on fuel, items which are lately being subjected to relentless price increases, it was not surprising that the members spent a lot of their time discussing how to tackle the situation.

They were concerned that it could undo "the gains in poverty reduction achieved in the past decade of growth," which could, in turn, trigger widespread social and political unrest in the region. However, what did surprise me somewhat was a proposal to introduce an Asian euro, which was discussed at length.

The European Central Bank has just celebrated its 10th anniversary, and the euro will be ten years old in

## LETTER FROM EUROPE

Do the Asians, or at least some Asian countries, have the political will to set aside their national concerns for the sake of a common currency? Do they have the discipline required to put their own houses in order, despite their heterogeneous economies, as preliminary work before the introduction of a common currency? Will their political systems allow them to establish a truly independent central bank and will they submit to its dictums with rigour?

January 2009. So it is an appropriate moment to examine its successes and failures in order to assess whether it is worth pursuing a similar project in Asia.

A bit of history will help us to understand that it has taken a lot of drive, planning, negotiation and hard work to create the euro. There were many obstacles to overcome and many frustrations to endure.

The single-minded pursuit of this objective for nearly fifty years by a number of visionary leaders finally produced this result. In order to avoid another war between Germany and France, two Frenchmen, Jean Monet and Robert Schuman, first put forward the idea in May 1950 of a single economic framework for Europe to cover coal and steel, two essential commodities needed for fighting wars.

It had taken the Europeans 43 years to set the dates for the establishment of an independent central bank and the introduction of a common European currency when, on November 1, 1993, the Treaty of Maastricht was signed.

Besides being a common denominator of over three hundred million Europeans, and a symbol of Europe's shared values, the euro was expected to achieve several economic goals, such as low inflation, eradication of exchange rate

volatility, market transparency, and facilitation of commerce inside and outside Europe by being an alternative reserve currency.

Now, almost ten years after the introduction of the euro, the question is: Has it achieved its goals?

It is true that, because of perhaps the worst global economic crisis since the '70s and the skyrocketing food and oil prices, the current economic situation in the EU is not good. It has created political tensions between the governments of member countries and the ECB. President Sarkozy, went so far as to issue a warning to the ECB: "The ECB must ask itself about economic growth not just about inflation."

Despite this warning, the ECB has just raised its benchmark rate from 4% to 4.25% because inflationary pressure weighs more heavily on Trichet's mind than economic growth.

Of course, it does not make Trichet's life easier when the Federal Reserve insists on maintaining the benchmark rate at 2% while, according to the Reuters/University of Michigan Survey of Consumers, one year inflation in the US will rise to 5.2%.

Luckily for Trichet, the Bank of England is maintaining its benchmark rate at 5%. The situation has been further complicated by a

widening divergence in the economies of the euro zone countries.

The ever-strengthening euro is also having a negative impact on the area's export efforts. But looking at the performance of the European economy over a longer period (last ten years), and the role played by the ECB in it, I feel that on the whole the euro, besides giving much-needed financial stability, has also achieved most of its objectives.

In the EU, exchange rate volatility has been eradicated, and the euro has established itself as an alternative reserve currency (more than 25% of the world's foreign exchange reserves are now kept in euros). Until very recently, inflation in the euro area was under control.

Unfortunately, because of soaring food and oil prices, it rose to 3.7% in May this year (well above 2.1% in May, 2007), and it seems it will keep on rising. Market transparency has largely been achieved and Inter-European commerce has grown significantly.

Over the last ten years, average economic growth has been slow but steady. Trichet feels that higher economic growth can only be achieved through structural changes in the member countries, which falls outside his mandate. Unfortunately, because of the deteriorating global economic situation,

growth in the euro area will be only 1.7% in 2008, well below 2.6% of last year.

Now that we have seen that the euro has, on the whole, been beneficial to the member countries the question is: Is it a viable proposition to pursue a similar project in Asia?

Speaking about the enormous difficulties encountered by the European leaders in creating the euro, Lamfalussy, who was the president of the European Monetary Institute, the forerunner of the ECB, stated recently that the leaders were able to overcome those difficulties because of their determination to set aside their national concerns for the ultimate goal of achieving a common currency.

Do the Asians, or at least some Asian countries, have the political will to set aside their national concerns for the sake of a common currency? Do they have the discipline required to put their own houses in order, despite their heterogeneous economies, as preliminary

work before the introduction of a common currency? Will their political systems allow them to establish a truly independent central bank and will they submit to its dictums with rigour?

Actually, Japan, China, South Korea and the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations have already taken timid steps towards the creation of a common economic club. In a recently issued joint communiqué, they expressed their agreement to transform the bilateral currency swap arrangement with a pool of at least \$80 billion, called the Chiang Mai Initiative, "into a self-managed reserve pooling mechanism governed by a legally binding single contract."

This is a good start. If the political will persists, I do not see why, with patience and hard work, the goal of a common Asian currency cannot be achieved in the not too distant future.

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An Asian euro -- is it a viable proposition?

## G8 expansion dialogue worries the host



MONZURUL HUQ

### CLOSEUP JAPAN

Japanese officials are concerned that the expansion of G8 could undermine not only the diplomatic advantage the country is enjoying as the only Asian representative, but also that it might jeopardise Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It should be noted that four of the five permanent seats at the Council are held by G8 members.

the economic standpoint.

The alliance was seen to be maintaining a dual structure for a certain period of time over the last decade, as economic issues were discussed within the framework of G7 that excluded Russia, while on political matters Russia's presence was obvious and welcomed.

With the passage of time, this gradually gave way to the realities of the world situation, and Russia, too, is now recognised as an active participant in the economic dialogues of the alliance, though some in the Western media still adamantly use the term G7 while focusing on economic matters of the group.

The rapidly changing world

situation is now once again compelling the leaders of the G8 to rethink their strategy on the membership of what is seen as the exclusive club of the rich and powerful.

Newly rich countries like China and India are already knocking at the door. The G8 has coined a new term for the five aspiring nations that some within the group feel are ready to be accommodated as full members.

Known as "G8 outreach countries," the five -- China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa -- have registered tremendous economic advancement that allowed them to break away from the ranks they formerly belonged to.

All five now rank high in the

world in economic ranking. China's GDP is now the 5th largest in the world, bigger than that of Canada, France, Italy, Russia and the United Kingdom. India and Brazil rank 11th and 12th respectively in terms of GDP, and the robust growth rate the two countries are enjoying gives a clear idea that they are not very far from overtaking some conventional G8 members who are struggling with a stagnant economy and sluggish growth.

As for political influence, the position of Brazil, China and India, along with South Africa and Mexico, can easily be matched with those of less influential actors of the G8.

A number of G8 leaders are becoming increasingly vocal in favour of another expansion of the group, which would make room for the outreach nations to become full members. According to these leaders, the expansion would not only broaden the concept of the alliance, but would also embrace two-thirds of the world population within a new framework of G13.

Two of the most vocal proponents of the idea are French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. But not all the leaders of the G8 are as enthusiastic as the two, and some, including the leader of the host nation Japan, are rather openly hostile to the idea of making room for the emerging nations.

President Sarkozy told Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda early in June, when the two met in Rome, that the G8 needed to increase the number of members if the alliance was to respond to changes going on around the world. Sarkozy has been advocating a G13 framework since taking office in May 2007, and Japanese officials are concerned that he will repeat his appeal when the leaders meet at Lake Toya in

Hokkaido on Monday.

Some in the West consider his initiative timely, as the G8 is struggling to show meaningful leadership on climate change and soaring energy and food prices. Gordon Brown backed the idea when he commented in New Delhi early this year that the G8, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should be restructured to reflect the growing influence of India and other Asian countries.

On the other hand, as the United States continues to maintain a cautious standing on this important issue by not making any open comment, Japan seems to be leading the small pack determined to block the entry of any newcomer to the exclusive club of the rich.

Some analysts believe that Japan's concern has more to do with the apparent fear that inclusion of China and India in the G8 framework would rob the country of the special privilege it has been enjoying as the sole member from Asia.

The Japanese prime minister was rather blunt in replying to Sarkozy in June, when he made it clear that he did not agree with the

French president, and that Japan would continue supporting the present setup.

His answer carried a rather racial tone as he had been quoted to have said that the summit offered valuable and meaningful opportunity for a limited number of leaders who assume great responsibilities for international society to frankly exchange opinions.

No elaboration of that "great responsibility for international society" has been given, neither by the prime minister, nor by any official of the Japanese government.

Japanese officials are concerned that the expansion of G8 could undermine not only the diplomatic advantage the country is enjoying as the only Asian representative, but also that it might jeopardise Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It should be noted that four of the five permanent seats at the Council are held by G8 members.

In addition, three G8 members representing two different geographic blocks are now vying for

permanent seats at the Security Council. Moreover, of the five outreach nations, one is already holding a permanent seat and three others are potential candidates in case the membership of the council is expanded.

It is imperative, therefore, for the Japanese government to try hard to find a logical position to justify country's stand on blocking the enlargement of the exclusive club. The Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, commenting on the possible expansion of the G8, said at a press conference in late June that the summit started as a gathering of mature, advanced democracies and it was upon the members to decide which countries would qualify through a process that would take into account their origin and background.

So, some observers believe that due to the reluctance of the host the outreach countries once again would be joining the process, not as partners but as guests whose views would not be reflected in the joint communiqué to be released at the end of the three-day discussions.

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