

Another acid victim

Unpardonable, ghastly crime

THE story of the 14-year old girl from Rugganj is appalling. The girl is struggling to recover from the burn wounds inflicted on her by a neighbour. One more budding life has been shattered by the acid throwers, whose inability to place human life above satisfying their beastly instincts has for a pretty long time been an area of major concern.

What is particularly shocking is that despite the seminars and meetings, which are held to highlight the plight of women in society, and desperate appeals by women's rights activists to put an end to this barbaric practice, acid throwing is still a potent weapon often used to punish girls when they turn down any amorous overture.

There is no social resistance against the elements harassing and oppressing women. And there is no response from the community leaders and law enforcers to such ghoulis activities. The girl has complained that she was being harassed for long two years, yet her helpless parents could not do anything against the criminal who finally threw acid on their daughter. Is this how innocent girls are treated anywhere in the civilised world? Can the law enforcers evade the responsibility of having failed to protect the girl? Obviously, the law enforcers are known for such failures, but that puts society as a whole to shame.

The women's rights activists are doing as much as they can to let us know that women are far from safe in our social context. Some of the acid victims have been rehabilitated, but the highly disquieting question is, will our sisters and daughters remain perpetually exposed to this kind of barbarism? How long shall we have to remain satisfied with what is being said to explain the failures of those that are supposed to protect? Or is it that most of the victims belong to poor families and, as such, the need for enforcing the law strictly is not being felt?

The acid throwers deserve no mercy and no amount of condemnation is enough to describe the enormity of the crime. The culprits must be given exemplary punishment and the law enforcers and local community leaders should be asked to explain why they couldn't do anything to stop acid throwing.

August 4 polls must have full confidence of people

EC's first test

ALREADY we are hearing worrisome noises, some even emanating from the Election Commission itself, as to the resurfacing of criminal elements in the run up to the August 4 polls, and how they might slip through the net to become candidates. And we are also hearing complaints that the EC is lagging behind in providing information on the candidates as required by statute.

The upcoming elections are the first since the reconstitution of the EC under a new chief last year, and as such, are absolutely critical to the commission's credibility. It has been in office over a year, more than enough time to ensure that all that is needed for the upcoming elections to be free and fair should be in place.

If the EC fails to give the people polls that they find acceptable it will call into question its entire work of the past year and possibly throw doubt on the national elections to be held at the end of the year.

The EC has had over a year to fully reorganise itself and to formulate the laws necessary for running clean elections. Now it needs to make sure, quite simply, that the laws are followed. This means following the commission's own directives on submission and publication of candidate information and strictly ensuring that all the other codes of conduct are adhered to. The strong measures that are being promised against violators of the code are salutary.

Given that this is the EC's first election and that the country is in a state of some confusion due to the absence of politics and the state of emergency, it is understandable if there are minor bumps in the road. But the people are expecting this EC to deliver free and fair polls and elected representatives who have complied with all relevant election laws.

Ultimately it will be the people who will decide whether the elections are above board or not. They will not be fooled. The people of this country have waited patiently for over a year to exercise their right to franchise, and it is imperative that their patience be rewarded with good elections. Any failure on this count is unacceptable.

There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

What draws me to the scriptural advice is about choosing when to speak and when not. And a very famous saying of Hazrat Ali cautions us against the dangers of speaking out of turn. Words in your mouth till not spoken, you have control on; words once uttered control you -- meaning that one has to resort to all sorts of implausible explanations to justify things that are uttered without much deliberation.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: ... A time to rend, and a time to sow; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak."

WHAT draws me to the scriptural advice is about choosing when to speak and when not. And a very famous saying of Hazrat Ali cautions us against the dangers of speaking out of turn. Words in your mouth till not spoken, you have control on; words once uttered control you -- meaning that one has to resort to all sorts of implausible explanations to justify things that are uttered without much deliberation.

Unfortunately, this important dictum is not always kept in mind by people holding positions of responsibility in the government, who often face the media to articulate government policy and plans. Sample some of the recent comments (paraphrased) -- the government might set up a constitutional committee to review likely changes -- Art 70 of the

Constitution needs change -- the National Coordination Committee has no locus standi -- price of rice in the West is Tk 70 per kg -- the increase in fuel prices will not affect substantially commodity prices. And to top it all -- do not compare the present prices with the times of Shaista Khan.

These comments have created misgivings not only about matters relating to politics and the political roadmap, they have also raised questions about the government's economic management capability. The latest remark of the finance advisor, related to the price situation, has been the unkindest cut of all.

Many eyebrows were raised at the comments of one of the advisors that a committee to review the constitution might be formed to look into the areas in the constitution that might need changes.

That, coming not very long after one of election commissioner's comments that Art 70 should be revised, was bound to create apprehensions in people's mind. That neither the election commissioner nor the advisor

who told the media about setting up a constitutional committee, was talking for the government, nor did their comments have its blessings was amply demonstrated by the recent tersely worded comments of the CA regarding the issue -- discounting any plans of the current government to tinker with the constitution.

One is entitled to one's opinion, but articulating that view, particularly while holding responsible state posts, not only compounds the situation, given the political milieu of the time -- it is also bound to be appraised in different manner by different groups and political parties -- and all kinds of intentions are likely to be ascribed to the caretaker government as a "part of its roadmap" where the object of the CTG and the political parties are not always seen to be coterminous.

As for the finance advisor's comment, the country could have been spared the reference, in the manner it was made, to Shaista Khan. In fact, this is not the first harsh remark that he has

made.

Only recently did he want mooncalves like us to believe that the more than 30 percent fuel hike would not make much difference to prices of daily necessities. And, of course, he was wrong. Just compare the prices of essentials before and after the increase in fuel prices.

To say the least, the latest comment has been most inappropriate and untimely -- not befitting an advisor whose words can do and undo many things. It has only rubbed salt into the wounds of the vast majority of the people who are barely managing to keep the wolves from their doors. Unsympathetic postures and treating the issue of price hike as a fait accompli, and the suggestion that the government can do very little about it is unacceptable.

His attempt to explain off the matter -- as being the result of the media misreporting -- holds no water either. Were it not for the electronic media he might have gotten away with a mere rejoinder. We heard what was said and what was meant. He said he had

cracked a joke to explain the economic realities.

But contrary to what someone said about rich man's joke being funny, it was anything but. Can a person in his position really "crack a joke" when it has to do with the very survival and sustenance of the majority of the people -- barring of course the lucky few who still manage to maintain their sartorial splendour when a large segment of the people are barely managing to survive?

What one expected was more compassion in addressing the plight of the poor. By displaying none of it he has distanced himself from the woes of the common man because, as one wise man had remarked: "By compassion we make others' misery our own, and so, by relieving them, we relieve ourselves also."

We acknowledge the fact that the country is caught in the vortex of international price spiral. But one is not certain whether the monetary and fiscal measures taken by the government have helped, or will help, in ameliorating the condition of the people. We also understand that price rise in Bangladesh has a ratchet effect, but the situation has been aggravated by the advisor's comment that there is very little chance of prices of essentials coming down.

And when another advisor says that per kg price of rice is equivalent to Tk 70 in the western countries he forgets that the purchasing capacity of the two is not comparable. And when one justifies the recent quantum

jump in fuel prices -- it may not be known to many that we are paying about Tk 10 more per litre of octane than an American whose per capita income is around \$38,000 compared to \$500 in Bangladesh. Comparisons are not only irrelevant they are sometimes odious.

But Shaista Khan is often referred to for good reasons, and not in the sense it was done by the advisor. The famous Subedar of Bengal was known not only for his administrative reforms, but also for dealing with corrupt government officials with a heavy hand, and providing relief to the people by abolishing illegal taxes.

He recouped the administration that had fallen into chaos during the interregnum before he was appointed the Subedar by his nephew, Emperor Aurangzeb. He established discipline in the administration, and sorted out recalcitrant zamindars. Alas! Such administrative efficiency and good governance we always yearn for, but will never again get.

If, as Schopenhauer had said, "compassion is the basis of all morality," lack of it makes a travesty of everything that the rulers want to bestow on the ruled, if not immoral. While the capacity to ameliorate our sufferings may be limited on the part of this government, it is exacerbated by inconsiderate comments of those unable or unwilling to relate to people's distress.

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A carbon-constrained world

Acting together, these energy-producer nations have the financial muscle to make a huge difference -- and can go a long way towards helping the world put together an overall framework to coordinate responses from around the world and allow us to stop thinking in a piecemeal fashion. The threat of climate change can be justified in both a just and effective manner.

CHANDRAN NAIR

MITIGATING climate change will be the most daunting challenge of this century. Fortunately, years of effort and calls to action by environmental experts and other specialists are making an impact on popular attitudes. Less fortunately, most of us still grope in the dark trying to find a credible framework to structure an adequate response.

Much faith has been placed in market-based solutions such as carbon-emissions trading. But while such measures may lead to curbing -- even reducing -- emissions in developed countries, they will almost certainly fall flat in developing countries, especially the fast-growing economies of China and India, where 40% of the global population lives.

The reality of such measures is that the rich nations demand sacrifices of people who are scratching a miserable living. Even in booming China, almost half the population, more than the entire US or European population, still struggles to get by on US\$2 or less a day. No government, democratic or otherwise, will adopt complex global trading schemes run by foreign interests and risk dashing their people's economic aspirations.

But laying blame elsewhere or invoking inequities to defend inaction will not change the fact that relentless consumption -- on the march in every corner of the world -- can only increase the use of fossil fuels. We must look for other answers.

One such area which has received almost no attention to date is the behavior of the world's principal fossil-fuel producers. These can be divided in various ways -- between principal crude-oil producers and exporters including Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, plus Russia, Mexico, Canada and Venezuela, and the principal coal producers and exporters, including China, the United States, India, Russia, Australia and Indonesia.

These can also be divided another way -- between those with high per-capita carbon-dioxide emissions and those with low emissions.

Unsurprisingly, those with high emissions are also rich -- the US, Australia and Canada plus the wealthy states of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait.

Put simply, among the wealthy members of the world's core group of fossil-fuel producers are the world's worst carbon-dioxide producers. Other countries may

be rich, but tend to use far less fossil fuels and energy per capita: Japan, for example, the world's second largest economy, ranks 32nd in terms of per-capita emissions, far below the world's largest economy, while the US, ranks 10th, with the top nine positions dominated by small rich nations.

While the populations of these countries combined amount to less than 10% of the world population, their per-capita carbon-dioxide emissions range from five to 20 times that of the world's poorer countries, including China and India.

These countries have a responsibility -- moral and environmental -- to cut emissions. They should commit to reducing per-capita emissions by half as soon as possible and strive for the current global average, given that some leading scientists predict the world already approaches the safety threshold of CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere.

This is not a pipe dream. Japan's per-capita emissions -- 9.8 tons -- are half those of the US and Canada's total of 20 tons, and a quarter of the UAE and Kuwait's total of 38 tons.

Sadly, we see the opposite behavior, with excesses unfolding in places like the UAE, with extreme urban development embracing indoor ski slopes to

underwater hotels.

And inhabitants of the western Australian city of Perth, on the back of a resources boom, now have the largest "ecological footprint" per capita, 9 hectares per person, of any city in the world. The ecological footprint is defined as the economic, social and environmental costs associated with resource consumption, land use and impacts on the bio-sphere.

Such extravagance is possible only because of super-cheap energy and unrestrained resource exploitation. In Abu Dhabi, electricity costs 3 cents per kilowatt hour -- compared to 40 cents in Europe -- and petrol, at 30 cents a liter, is cheaper than water.

So while it's often said that environmental damage and poor decisions on sustainability are due to the lack of funding as governments make a trade-off with the need for economic growth -- the truth is the exact opposite.

It isn't China or India that should be seen as the worst culprits when it comes to climate change, but some of the world's richest states -- which also happen to be well-endowed with fossil-fuel resources.

We need to remind these energy-producing countries that they have a responsibility to strike a balance between their desire to keep driving economic growth and an awareness that decisions taken today may well compromise the ability of others and future generations to share in the common good.

On a domestic level, these rich energy producers must make dramatic changes in the way they view environmental protection

and sustainable-development initiatives. This means pricing oil and other energy sources properly within their own borders and curbing excessive use.

Limits can be achieved only by tough and even draconian regulatory policies enforced by individual countries. Measures could include the use of creative financial instruments implemented locally to incentivize carbon reduction and thereby also allow for deployment of appropriate technology.

And on an international level, these producers must assume greater responsibility towards the stewardship of their resources. Yes, oil and other fossil fuels have been key to the world's economic growth over the last two centuries, but simultaneously it has taken us to the brink of climatic disaster.

Given that the main producer nations do not need to generate more wealth from energy exports to sustain their populations, a limit on exports would be a prudent way to discourage rampant consumption globally. It would also encourage those that need more energy for economic growth to focus on greater efficiency and developing alternative sources, including nuclear energy.

Taking the "producer responsibility" principle one step further -- especially at a time when oil prices keep hitting new record highs -- we should also require energy producers to put part of their fossil-fuel revenues towards aggressively developing and commercialising technologies to reduce emissions, capture carbon dioxide and even make renewables such as hydro, wind

and solar as well as nuclear energy viable alternatives for global use.

Such initiatives must move beyond embracing the gimmicks around sustainability such as the public-relations blitz surrounding the pursuit of carbon-neutral cities in the Gulf countries or emissions-trading schemes of Europe and the US.

Channeling funds to global-sustainability initiatives could occur by implementing a global tax on key producers, for creating a fund that would support development of cost-effective, efficient, clean forms of energy.

Other uses for the fund could include implementing conservation measures in poor countries or even addressing chronic problems of underdevelopment -- a much better use of excess wealth than building futuristic cities or snow resorts in the desert.

The Gulf nations, the US, Canada and Australia should take the lead in supporting, creating and managing this fund with the help of wealthy nations such as Japan and the EU.

Acting together, these energy-producer nations have the financial muscle to make a huge difference -- and can go a long way towards helping the world put together an overall framework to coordinate responses from around the world and allow us to stop thinking in a piecemeal fashion. The threat of climate change can be justified in both a just and effective manner.

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Right to Information: A few relevant points

The effectiveness of the RTI commission will depend much on the authority of the chief information commissioner and commissioners, and on the way they are selected. Moreover, they need to have the authority to independently place their budget directly to the parliament, and get the approval from there. Moreover, the commission should have the power to implement decisions by imposing punishment for non-compliance. The proposed ordinance needs to look into these points and make suitable provisions accordingly.

SANJIDA SOBHAN

RIGHT to information (RTI) is a widely discussed subject these days. There is a growing sense of awareness about the necessity of RTI throughout the world. RTI is recognised as one of the basic human rights. Many countries today are showing more and more interest for implementation of an act to ensure RTI. This they are doing in order to achieve transparency, accountability and overall good governance for securing human rights.

The same is also applicable to Bangladesh. It is an accepted fact

today that in order to establish good governance and ensure human rights, flow of information and its easy availability needs to be guaranteed.

The council of advisors, in its meeting on June 18, approved in principle the Right to Information Ordinance, 2008 (RTIO, 2008). The same ordinance is now in the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs for scrutiny and finalisation.

So far, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the government in enacting the RTI. This is for the first time in the history of this country that a draft ordinance was prepared with the direct

participation of the people, by disseminating it widely through a website and arranging dialogues with civil society. This reflects the government's commendable intention of making the RTI act more people-oriented.

There is a belief that the right of the people to information cannot be ensured by enacting a law only. That law must not have any ambiguity or loophole. At the same time, it must not be impractical in the context of the country. All the countries that have, or are formulating, this law are giving due consideration to their own situation to make the implementation effective.

Two organisations, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and Article 19, which have been successfully working on RTI for quite some time now, have chalked out certain universal standards to be followed while formulating any law in this respect. Two broad guide-lines to be adhered to are (a) maximum disclosure of the information which is allowed for disclosure, and (b) minimum restriction of the information which is not allowed for disclosure.

As per the international standard, only matters relating to safeguarding security, sovereignty, integrity, internal law order and personal privacy might be kept in the list of restricted topics.

Excluding those, all other matters affecting the personal safety, standard of living, day to day life of the people etc., should be allowed to be provided to whoever wants it. So, in order to avoid the scope of denial of information, the law should very specifically point out in clear

terms what information can be provided and what cannot.

It is also important to locate the type of information that would benefit the people the most. As an example, if the people know how much fund has been allocated for what work, or what relief or social security net program has been taken for them in and around their locality, an environment of accountability will be established, which will definitely add to the improvement of their lives and income. So a standard law should have the provision of proactive disclosure to address those areas that are relevant to their livelihood.

The union is the lowest tier of our administrative unit. A considerable portion of our national development budget is spent at this level. Execution or implementation is done by the central government. So use of fund is taken up at that level.

If the people of the union could get the details about the allocation of funds for development works in their area, they could make the

implementing authority accountable.

By ensuring proper utilisation of the funds they can help reduce corruption. At the same time, by reducing waste in public expenditure and ensuring quality and quantity of work and services they can have positive improvement in their day to day life.

Food security has become one of the top-most priorities and challenge the nation is facing at the moment. It is essential that availability and proper distribution of agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds, pesticides etc. are ensured at the farmers' level even in remote villages. Monitoring of this could be effectively done from the union level.

Accountability of this whole process could be best ensured with the active participation of the stakeholders at the grass-roots level. That would be possible only if people could know the details of government activities in this respect through the use of RTI at the union level.

This year's budget provides a

big amount for creating an extensive social security network for the poor, a major portion of whom live in villages. A unique program for providing jobs for a minimum period of 100 days in a year has been made for 2 million people belonging to the ultra-poor category.

The success of the program depends very much on the selection of the receivers and proper distribution to them. Without proper supervision corruption may crop up, destroying the very purpose of these programs. Monitoring can ensure accountability, and participation of the stakeholders, or others living in those villages, in monitoring could prove useful. This will be possible only if they have easy access to information about the program through RTI.

The proposed ordinance should give particular attention to this issue and make provisions for maintaining of land records and ensuring easy access to the same.

At present, union level offices

are in a position to provide much information to the public, which they are reluctant to do in absence of any law binding them to do so. The RTI ordinance, 2008 can provide that legal basis if specified.

The effectiveness of the RTI commission will depend much on the authority of the chief information commissioner and commissioners, and on the way they are selected. Moreover, they need to have the authority to independently place their budget directly to the parliament, and get the approval from there.

Moreover, the commission should have the power to implement decisions by imposing punishment for non-compliance. The proposed ordinance needs to look into these points and make suitable provisions accordingly.

It is the desire of all concerned that the finalised form of the RTI ordinance, 2008 would cater the above as much possible.

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