

Letting UZ parishad work to potential

No spanner on its wheel, please!

THE government is all but decided to reintroduce the UZ Parishad Act 1998, albeit with certain amendments, in place of the Local Government (Upazilla Parishad) Ordinance 2008, promulgated by the erstwhile caretaker government. And in this matter we share some of the concerns expressed by the vast majority of the recently sworn in chairmen and vice-chairmen of UZ parishads.

The 1998 Act accords an advisory role to the MPs of the respective areas although, reportedly, the latest version of the 1998 as amended, doesn't make it mandatory upon the parishads to go by the advice of the MP. This is a very good step, for which we commend the government.

But given the MPs' proximity to power at the centre as well as the territorial levels, it would perhaps take more than a 'non-binding' nature of their advice to ensure that they do not end up meddling in the upazila affairs as far as development projects at the grassroots are concerned. The question is: who is going to oversee how the MPs play out their roles and how the upazila chairmen are holding out their own. In terms of the UZ Parishad Act 1998 whereby the MPs assumed an advisory role vis-à-vis upazila parishads, there were instances of conflictive relations between the MPs and the upazila chairmen.

While implementing the amended act, therefore, it is incumbent upon the government to make sure that the working relations between the two categories of elected public representatives develop in such a manner that both the institutions -- parliament and UZ system -- are not weakened in any way.

The role and function of the parliament members is very clearly defined in the country's Constitution which is to legislate. We understand that the MPs, being elected representatives, must also assist in solving various problems of their constituencies and the only forum for that is the floor of the House. Their getting intensely involved in development works in their constituencies will very likely detract them from their primary function while at the same time denying the upazila parishads their legitimate functions as the nub of all development and service delivery activities at the grassroots. The very concept of devolution of power is the quintessence of participatory democracy and governance.

Remittance slump in offing?

Govt and manpower agencies need to plan for downturn

THAT recruitment agents fear a 50 per cent slump in the demand for migrant workers due to the on-going global economic crisis, which could lead to a corresponding slump in remittance earnings, is worrisome news for the economy.

Last year migrants remitted some \$9 billion, well over 10 per cent of the country's GDP, and remittances have been the backbone of the economy for the past few years, playing the key role in keeping families afloat through the rise in prices of essentials, especially in the rural areas.

Of course, there is, even in these emaciated times, much that can be done to ensure that the inflow of funds remains steady.

The first is to diversify our target markets. Currently, over-reliance on the Middle East as a destination for migrant labour has left us vulnerable to the economic woes of that region. Diversifying destinations for migrant labour will help provide some level of insurance against a slump in any one region.

The second step would be to improve training and to search out greater opportunities for skilled and semi-skilled migrants. This will help diversify and thus protect the sources of remittance income. In addition, skilled and semi-skilled migrants are less vulnerable to economic downturns and also can be expected to remit more money than their non-skilled counterparts.

Finally, the government must take aggressive measures to ensure the welfare of our migrant workers. Especially at a time like this, it is imperative that their interests be safe-guarded, that their contracts are honoured, and that they are protected from any kind of scape-goating or unfair treatment.

Now is the time for the government to step up. The global economic downturn is real; and, for Bangladesh, the impact on our remittance earnings is the single biggest concern. The government and the manpower agencies must work together to ensure the welfare of our migrant work-force and to ensure that remittance earnings do not dry up. The negative consequences of such a slump in remittances would be felt in every district in the country.

The Tipaimukh issue

What can be a better forum than the Indo-Bangla Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) for Bangladesh to raise this issue? Being a co-riparian for many common rivers with India, it has every right to do so.

REAZ AHMAD

INDIA is constructing the Tipaimukh barrage barely one kilometre away from Bangladesh's northeast border, threatening to dry up the flow of the Surma and Kushiara rivers during the lean period. The Daily Star carried this report on February 15 showing the barrage on the Barak River at Churachandpur in Assam will render barren vast arable lands in northeast Bangladesh, and change the ecology and climate in the region.

Before I discuss the technicalities and the rights issues relating to the co-riparian countries, just consider the potential risks that such a barrage can pose to the flows of Surma and Kushiara, the feeders for one of Bangladesh's biggest river system -- Meghna. Shrinkage of water flow in the Meghna will pose a threat to the ecosystem in its basin and allow intrusion of seawater. It will have serious ramifications on river-based human habitation, land cultivation and fish population.

The recent work on the barrage is part of a plan to build the Tipaimukh Multipurpose Hydro-Electric Power Project in Manipur and Mizoram states. The first such initiative in March 2007 was thwarted through protests in and outside India. Participants in a long march from Sylhet to Jakiganj border and environmentalists in India had strongly protested the construction of the barrage.

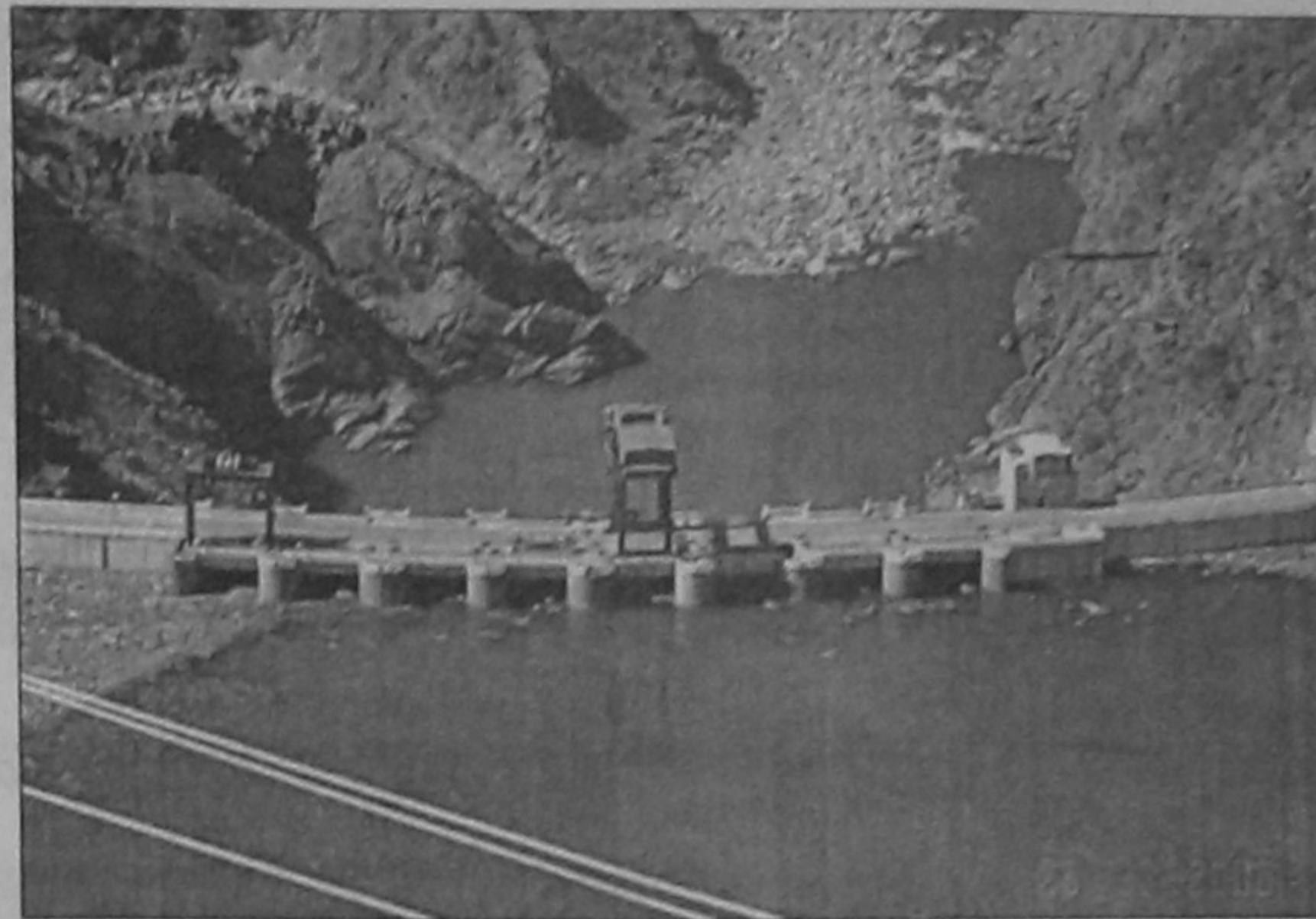
The Tipaimukh Project envisages construction of a 162 metre high rockfill dam about 500 metres downstream of the confluence of the rivers Barak and Tuivai. The

main objective of the project is to generate 1500 MW hydropower and flood control on 2,039 square kilometers. Amidst huge uproar at home and abroad, and its probable adverse effects on both sides of the border, the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests issued environmental clearance to the state-owned North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Ltd. (NEEPCO) on October 24 last year.

In its clearance letter to the Rs. 6,979 crore project, the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests stated: "557 households consisting of 2,027 persons are likely to be affected due to this project in Manipur. In addition to that, 77 villages will be affected due to land acquisition; no villages will be submerged in Mizoram. Only land of 13 villages will be affected in Mizoram."

While India has done its environment impact assessment, it's officially not yet clear whether Bangladesh has or not. Since India envisages implementing the project, it is obvious it would do so. How accurate that assessment is and whether it is acceptable to the people in Manipur, Mizoram and Assam are altogether different questions. But, Bangladesh, which is at the receiving end, can't afford to sit idle as a silent spectator.

What can be a better forum than the Indo-Bangla Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) for Bangladesh to raise this issue? Being a co-riparian for many common rivers with India, it has every right to do so. In fact, it was in this very forum -- when the JRC met in Dhaka in 2005 -- that the then Indian water resources minister and JRC



ING1 TRAVEL-BLOG.ORG

Another river blocked.

co-chairperson Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi had reassured Bangladesh that India would not implement the controversial river-link project (RLP) in Himalayan range rivers, that include Ganges and Brahmaputra, having direct bearings on Bangladesh, and also dispelled Bangladesh's concern about Tipaimukh Project.

Dasmunshi was quoted by the press as saying: "We'll present Tipaimukh's planned design to Bangladesh when it is prepared." The then Bangladesh water resources minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmed told journalists that Bangladesh had fears regarding the Tipaimukh project, but India gave assurance of not building any barrage and not diverting Barak water adversely.

But the ground reality is in sharp contrast to what the leaders had committed then. Though a huge quantum of water and silt has flowed through the Barak, Surma and Kushiara rivers over the last three years, no JRC meeting took place. The JRC,

in operation since 1972, which was mandated to have meetings at least twice a year, failed to hold a single meeting since September 2005.

Though a few water meetings took place at secretary and technocrat levels, nothing significant came up -- not to speak of solutions to Teesta water sharing, Tipaimukh concerns, Ichhamoti dredging and other unresolved common river issues.

After a lapse of almost two years, when Bangladesh is well poised for any water negotiations with a democratically elected government in place, the Indian election is in the horizon. So, good intentions from both sides are crucial now for setting up an emergency JRC meet to iron out all differences, confusions and concerns. Bangladesh has to cry loud before another Farakka hounds us!

Reaz Ahmad writes on water and agricultural issues. E-mail: reazahmad@yahoo.com

Time to let Myanmar in?

If Afghanistan could become a member of Saarc, it is argued, then there can be no objection to Myanmar's entry into Saarc. The geopolitical and strategic factors of Myanmar will promote primary objectives of Saarc, and the organisation will be richer in dimension and importance.

HARUN UR RASHID

IT is reported that Myanmar, now observer in the Saarc has, in May 2008, officially applied to the Saarc Secretariat for full membership. India is believed to be endorsing Myanmar's bid, and that has encouraged the latter. The application could be considered at the 16th Saarc Summit in the Maldives in 2009.

Saarc was constituted in 1985 in December at a summit in Dhaka, which adopted the Charter formally establishing the organisation. It started with seven member-countries, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The 13th Saarc Summit in Dhaka in November 2005 had approved Afghanistan's request for membership and the 14th Summit in New Delhi in 2007 formally inducted Afghanistan as its eighth member and included seven other countries -- China, Japan, Iran, Mauritius, South Korea, European Union and the United States -- as observers.

It is for the first time in its 22-year-old history that the Association has expanded its membership to eight countries. The request for observers at the Saarc Summits from distant countries demonstrates that Saarc has proved its usefulness in the regional political architecture. At the 15th Summit in August 2008 in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Australia were inducted as observers.

The primary objectives of Saarc are self-help and cooperation among the member-countries for acceleration of economic growth and social progress. In other words, the seven member countries should work together towards finding solutions to their common problems in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding, and towards creating an order based on mutual respect, equity and shared benefits.

Bangladesh and India are the only two countries, which have a land border with Myanmar. Myanmar was a part of British India until 1935, when it was separated. India's last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, was buried in Rangoon (Yangon). Mynamar has deep historical and cul-

tural ties with the people of South Asian countries, in particular with Bangladesh and India.

Bangladesh and Myanmar observe New Year on April 14, Bangladesh with music and dance and Myanmar with sprinkling of water on people.

If Afghanistan could become a member of Saarc, it is argued, then there can be no objection to Myanmar's entry into Saarc. The geopolitical and strategic factors of Myanmar will promote primary objectives of Saarc, and the organisation will be richer in dimension and importance.

Myanmar is a member of Asean, and cooperation between Saarc and Asean will be invigorated by its membership.

At present, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sector Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) has five Saarc members -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. If Myanmar, a member of Bimstec, becomes a member of Saarc, the objectives of Bimstec, which are designed to help promote and improve transport infrastructure and logistic among the Bimstec countries, will be further strengthened.

So far, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has already finished a project called Bimstec Transport Infrastructure and Logistic Study (BTILS). The final report of the said study from ADB has already been conveyed to all members, and feedback is awaited. Other fields of cooperation will be designed later on.

Bangladesh has been keen to have a

road connection with Myanmar. The proposed road of 130 kilometres will start from Gundum and end at Bawli Bazar in Myanmar.

Bangladesh has taken an initiative to construct a 43 kilometre road at its own expense, of which 23 kilometres are in Bangladesh and the rest, including a 100-feet long bridge, will be in Myanmar. Bangladesh's communications minister has reportedly given the construction of the road top priority in the matter of inter-connectivity within the neighbours.

Observers say that Asean may support Myanmar's entry into Saarc, considering it in a positive light, as it has itself been keen to expand its economic cooperation with South Asian countries, in particular with India that is emerging as a powerhouse in Asia.

It is not known what the response will be from other member countries to Myanmar's membership to Saarc. Bangladesh may support Myanmar's inclusion in Saarc, because trade and investment are likely to receive a boost from Myanmar's inclusion.

It is suggested that Bangladesh may take diplomatic initiatives to rally support for Myanmar's inclusion in Saarc at the 16th Summit in the Maldives in the second half of 2009. If Myanmar is accepted, it will be Saarc's ninth member.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Single-faith nation an invitation to Taliban

But this area was never a single-faith entity. Hindus and later Sikhs created, along with Muslims, a dynamic shared culture that blossomed through partnership. The presence of the other also became an antidote to puritanism of any hue.

M.J. AKBAR

BREAST-beating has its dangers. You could lacerate yourself while the assassin laughs all the way to the graveyard. The international lamentation over the negotiated surrender of Swat in Pakistan to what might broadly be called the Taliban is high on moaning and low on illumination.

There is a symmetrical irony. Benazir Bhutto handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban. Her husband Asif Zardari might have laid the foundation stone of Talibanistan inside Pakistan by accepting Sufi Mohammad's Tehrik-e-Nifz-e-Shariat Mohammadi as the law for the former princely state of Swat. This demand was first heard in November 1994, the month in which Kandahar fell to the Taliban.

Many questions demand answers. The Pakistani army has an estimated strength of 12,000 in the region of Swat. Why was it

unable, or unwilling, to subdue an insurgent force of some 3,000? The Pakistani army is not a pushover. Why was it pushed over in Swat?

Is the Pakistani soldier increasingly unwilling to confront an ideology he implicitly sympathises with? How much of such sympathy is shared by the middle-ranking officer, who entered the force during the seminal leadership of General Zia ul Haq? To what extent has Ziaism become the secret doctrine of sections of the Pakistani forces?

What price will Pakistan's polity pay as the last civilian hope degenerates into a national heartbreak? The legacy of Benazir, the charismatic romantic, has been usurped by a semi-literate authoritarian who has seized executive power through a virtual coup against his own government.

Zardari was elected to a ceremonial office, not an executive one. His principal achievement so far has been to make the

era of Pervez Musharraf seem like a golden age. If she had been in charge, Benazir may have been able to mobilise her country's youth by lifting the economy and offering a liberal horizon.

Zardari's ineffectual rule, wafting along compromise and mismanagement, can only create the space for a theocratic impulse that has been waiting to find its moment ever since Pakistan was born.

Musharraf doubled the GDP of an insecure economy. Under Zardari, Pakistan is dwindling into a "basket case," a term Henry Kissinger coined for the eastern half of united Pakistan. While Bangladesh is leaving that stigma behind, Pakistan is entering the vortex of the beggaring bowl.

Military chaos opened the door for the Taliban in Kabul. Could economic chaos open the door in Islamabad? Has Pakistan begun to realise that faith-based nationalism is not synonymous with peace?

The Frontier and North Punjab, the principal catchment areas of the Taliban, have had a Muslim majority for perhaps a thousand years. It is not widely known that Mahmud of

Ghazni's territories extended to what is roughly the line of the Indo-Pak border today. (This fact is not lost on terrorists who want to use Pakistan as a base from

which to launch assaults on the heart of India.)

But this area was never a single-faith entity. Hindus and later Sikhs created, along with Muslims, a dynamic shared culture that blossomed through partnership. The presence of the other also became an antidote to puritanism of any hue. Muslims, Sikhs and Christians ruled the region successively. No ruler, not even Ghazni, drove Hindus and Sikhs out. It was only after 1947 that the region became single-faith hegemony, and from that point a breeding ground for theocratic militancy.

Those who seek to turn it into an enemy rarely acknowledge the power of a minority. A minority is the yeast that enables the national flour to rise. Hindus and Sikhs were the yeast of the North West Frontier and Pakistani Punjab just as much as Indian Muslims are the yeast of Hindu-majority India. Their existence was a daily lesson in co-existence. Their absence has shifted the gears of social evolution and driven the people into rancid and arid territory.

Will the answers be more optimistic than the questions? That too remains a question.

M.J. Akbar is Director, Covert Publications.