

KL's move is worrisome

Government must find alternative market

THE Malaysian government's decision to cancel visas already granted to Bangladeshi workers is a serious blow not only for the workers but for the nation as a whole. At a time when Bangladesh has been exploring various avenues, especially through its manpower sector, to solidify its economic base, the move by Kuala Lumpur can only pour cold water on our collective aspirations. We of course realise that the Malaysian authorities have their own economic compulsions in view of the on-going global recession. At the same time, we fail to accept the argument that those already granted visas to travel to Malaysia and work there can be dealt with in such cavalier fashion. The difficulty for us, though, is that it is a decision made by a country in its national interest, which means that Bangladesh does not have much of a say here.

That does not, however, minimise our sense of economic loss. Making matters worse is the fact that 532 of our workers already in Malaysia have been denied entry into Kuala Lumpur from the airport. That and the 55,000 whose visas have been cancelled now face a bleak future because of the financial as well as emotional involvement they have already gone through in preparing for the journey to Malaysia. Given that the calamity is already upon us and given little likelihood of the Kuala Lumpur authorities reversing their decision, we feel that the Bangladesh government as well as our many manpower agencies should consider the happening as an early warning of the turmoil that could yet be up ahead. The manpower export, being the biggest in the growth sector, cannot be allowed to collapse. One wishes one could take some comfort from the response of the minister for labour, expatriates' welfare and overseas employment regarding the crisis. Unfortunately, one cannot. Minister Khondokar Mosharraf Hossain has said that "if necessary" he and the foreign minister will travel to Kuala Lumpur to speak to the Malaysian authorities. What more remains for our minister to be convinced that the necessity is already in hand, and the time is well past for him to take any action?

The need today is for some very serious stock taking where Bangladesh's manpower export industry is concerned. That must include a review of existing conditions with a view to exploring new markets for manpower export across the globe. Too excessive a dependence on such regions as Malaysia and the Middle East has in a way stultified the industry. With Malaysia as good as gone for our manpower business, the government should set up specialised teams which will immediately get down to the job of identifying new countries or regions which can benefit from Bangladeshi cheap labour and vice versa. There is no time to lose. Meanwhile, swift and effective steps must be taken to have the manpower agencies refund the money deposited by the 55,000 visa holders as well as those stranded at Kuala Lumpur airport.

Acute water shortage in the capital

Permanent as well as immediate measures needed

IT seems that the people living in the capital are destined to suffer from the lack of some essential basic facilities forever. Coupled with the severe shortage of electricity, life has become even more unbearable with lack of adequate water supply. Some specific areas of the city, particularly the old Dhaka area, are suffering more than others. And the members of parliament of the affected areas rightly fear that there might be, as a manifestation of the people's resentment, a general display of public anger against the government for its failure to ameliorate their sufferings.

Wasa as always is putting the blame squarely at the door of Desa. But for the load shedding, according to Wasa managing director, it would have been able to fully meet the city dwellers' need for water.

While power outage has a lot to do with water shortage, it is well known that Wasa's current capacity of providing potable water to the residents of the capital is considerably below the demand, and the actual demand is perhaps more than what is stated by Wasa, the entire shortfall is not totally duty to power cuts -- a good deal of it is the water supply authority's inadequate production capacity.

The ever-growing population of Dhaka is putting severe strain on the utility services. And there is a need to look at the long term and short-term solutions to the problem. We have an unparalleled quality of sitting on a problem before it turns into a crisis, and only then do we act. Thus the statement of the Wasa managing director that it might be four years before the problem is solved sounds rather distressing. Surely, he cannot be unaware of the fact that the crisis cannot wait that long.

While sinking newer pumps may appear a likely solution, the reality is that the water table is constantly going down, making subsurface extraction costlier. There must surely be other avenues open to us to exploit. In this regard there is merit in considering harvesting rainwater -- of which we have plenty during the monsoon.

But while it might take some time to put in place the long term solutions, Wasa must address the issue of wastage of water through leakage, clogged pipelines and idle water pumps at various locations due to lack of fuel as well as repairing of out of order pumps, with more urgency.

Q & A

This time we need to get to the bottom of things. The stakes could not be higher. The anger in the army needs to be assuaged. Nor can we permit those behind the massacre to continue to run amok without consequence.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

IT has been a full two weeks since the Pikhana massacre, but the intervening time has done little to defuse tensions or bring about any kind of resolution to the issue.

Of course, we Bangladeshis have a long history of leaving things undone and questions unanswered. Our history is littered with incidents, from assassinations to terrorist attacks to arms hauls, that we have never truly gotten to the bottom of and that raise all sorts of troubling questions that have never adequately been answered.

Even where investigations have been conducted and guilt nominally assigned, there always remain crucial unanswered questions as to who might have been pulling the strings behind the scenes and whether we have learned the entire story or not.

As a result of all these unanswered questions, the nation is never short of conspiracy theories as to what the real story might be. I don't think we are necessarily conspiracy-minded per se, it is just the unfortunate natural response to the secrets and lies that permeate public life.

When it comes to this latest tragedy, one enterprising on-line commentator has catalogued 20 different conspiracy theories making the rounds, each seemingly more fantastic than the last.

However, just because at least 19 of those conspiracy theories, by definition, must be incorrect, and a good number of

them are utterly beyond the realm of any kind of plausibility, does not mean that we need to take the cover story for what happened at face value.

Indeed, if anyone still believes that the mutiny and massacre was about pay, privileges, and service conditions, then I have some prime real estate in the middle of the Buriganga that I would like to sell you.

As the investigation proceeds, there is now evidence that the mutiny had been planned at least two months in advance and that the date had been carefully chosen so that the maximum number of officers would be vulnerable.

So what could the motive possibly have been? Well, one way of analysing the situation is to see who has lost the most in the aftermath of the mutiny and to work backwards from there.

The past two years have seen a tangible shift in the relationship between the army and the political parties. Until the massacre, for the first time in the past 35 years, the army and the AL had entered into a kind of uneasy truce, if not partnership, and this represented a tectonic shift in the balance of power in the country.

Now, with immense anger simmering within army ranks against the government, the relationship between the ruling AL and the army hangs by a thread.

Not only must the AL now reckon with an army, significant pockets of which are resentful to it for what they perceive as the



Searching for answers, not just comfort.

government's mishandling of the siege, but it is now also, as a result, on the back-foot when it comes to its policy agenda.

Now is no longer the time to introduce any kind of controversial or bold new measure, and, indeed, such is the tenseness of the national mood that the entire AL policy agenda now stands compromised.

However, paradoxically, it is the gravity of the situation that may turn out to be the nation's best friend.

In the past, as I have written, we have never gotten to the bottom of these kinds of incidents. But this time we may not have the luxury of sweeping everything down the memory hole.

In the first place, the army remains incandescent with rage, and will demand answers and accountability.

In the second, the prime minister seems to have come to the realisation that if she

doesn't move against the responsible parties with all her might that they will only be emboldened to try their luck again in the future.

Investigation is underway to look into answering the many unanswered questions, from militant links to the make-up of BDR troops to who was responsible for allowing almost all the mutineers to flee the scene.

This time we need to get to the bottom of things. The stakes could not be higher. The anger in the army needs to be assuaged. Nor can we permit those behind the massacre to continue to run amok without consequence.

If we don't hunt down and root out those who were responsible, they will just reappear down the road, as has happened so many times in the past. We cannot let this happen again.

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Random rigmarole

Have you been to a hospital lately? How did it go? Did the doctors give you hard time? Did those white coats stonewall you every time you asked what was wrong with your patient? Did you find the doctor flirting with the nurse or both talking on mobile phones while the patient screamed for attention?

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HOW are you? Yes sir, I am talking to you. Sorry, if I gave you a start, but I am not a finicky foreigner, or a wonky World Banker. Neither am I an elf from the IMF. I am sir, one of your very own, your fellow countryman, another victim who suffers with you. Don't get me wrong. I am not curious to find if your misfortune surpasses mine. I know you suffer no less than I do.

Are you asking me, how? God be my witness, you have forced me to open my mouth. You drink discoloured stinky water, don't you sir? You also take shower and perform ablution with the same yucky stuff, am I right? I do the same thing, nothing to hide.

You smother in blistering heat when load shedding is as assuredly regular as bodily functions. Same for me, never mind. You eat adulterated food that fills your tummy with more wind than blows in a

squall. And then you breathe pollution sir, your lungs choking on dust and fumes. I bet you have to tell me the same sad story that I have to tell you.

Have you been to a hospital lately? How did it go? Feel free to tell me, sir. If victims hide from each other, their silence only perpetuates their condition. Honestly, what kind of treatment did you get? Did the doctors give you hard time? Did those white coats stonewall you every time you asked what was wrong with your patient? Did you find the doctor flirting with the nurse or both talking on mobile phones while the patient screamed for attention?

I tell you sir, police station is a spooky place; stay out if you can. It's a place where man and money play hide and seek in the forest of law. They don't take your case if you aren't connected. If you are connected, they hesitate to take money from you. Here is the ultimate catch. No money, no honey. Your wife or daughter may go missing without a trace, but short of incentive the

enforcers of law will sit on their hands.

Government offices are equally bleak. Go to any desk, you have to pay before you greet. If you don't, feel free to run around until mother's milk leaks out of your bones. You can go to his boss, boss's boss and notches above them. The brotherhood of crooks work in cahoots, hyenas waiting for their shares of the lion's kill.

Have you heard this gut-churning news? There is a mishap in the underground; broken sewerage pipes are contaminating the water coming to our homes. It's like a circle that doesn't close. What goes out comes back. The pure is confluent with the impure. That means we clean with unclean, wash with dirty. Ugh thoo!

It's the same story also on the ground. In our abject adulteration, we are using squalor to scrape off scum. We are honestly dishonest, unpretentiously pretentious, scrupulously unscrupulous, and worldly out of this world. Do you feel the same way, sir? We need to have an agreement on this. Good is good and evil is evil. A nation can't last long on the unwholesome diet of contradictions.

Contradictions are contagious like a disease, which destroy the immune system of reasoning. It creates ambivalence, as filters of logic are rendered invalid. Faculties wobble, minds grow feeble, while hypocrisy predates upon perspicacity. There is a terrible leak at our subconscious

level where the subliminal instincts spew filth into the running streams of conscience. Did you just sweep the air with your hand? I know what that means. Yes, yes, what I said went over your head.

You see sir we suffer in difference and differ in suffering. Neither is logical because we can resolve them in unity. We don't need foreigners, the World Bank or the IMF. We only need to talk amongst ourselves, one to one, one to many. Why not start with the two of us. Tell me, sir, are you ready?

That's correct, you and I need to talk. The country should come before us, and we should come before the party. You know what I mean. We are nothing without the country; the party is nothing without us. Yet our politics, with or without foreign interference, thrives on the contrary, party before people, people before country.

Partisanship divides us; we divide the country. Believe me sir there are two different countries inside two of us. A hospital is ME country for the doctors, YOU country for the rest of us. The same thing is true for police in police stations, lawyers in courts, teachers in schools and the government servants at their desks.

This country is in a state of war between YOU and ME. WE must talk.

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A turning tide?

Obama may be mistaking motion for progress, calling signals for a game plan. A busy, industrious overachiever, he likes to check off boxes on a long to-do list. A genial, amenable guy, he likes to appeal to every constituency, or at least not write off any. A beau ideal of Harvard Law, he can't wait to tackle extra-credit answers on the exam.

HOWARD FINEMAN

SURFER that he is, President Obama should know a rip tide when he's in one. The centre usually is the safest, most productive place in politics, but perhaps not now, not in a once-in-a-century economic crisis.

Swimming in the middle, he's denounced as a socialist by conservatives, criticised as a polite accommodationist by government-is-the-answer liberals, and increasingly, dismissed as being in over his head by technocrats.

Luckily for Obama, the public still likes and trusts him, at least judging by the latest polls, including Newsweek's. But, in ways both large and small, what's left of the American establishment is taking his measure and, with surprising swiftness, they are finding him lacking.

They have some reasons to be concerned. I trace them to a central trait of the president's character: he's not really an in-your-face guy. By recent standards -- and that includes Bill Clinton as well as George

Bush -- Obama for the most part is seeking to govern from the left, looking to solidify and rely on his own party more than woo Republicans. And yet he is by temperament judicious, even judicial. He'd have made a fine judge. But we don't need a judge. We need a blunt-spoken coach.

Obama may be mistaking motion for progress, calling signals for a game plan. A busy, industrious overachiever, he likes to check off boxes on a long to-do list. A genial, amenable guy, he likes to appeal to every constituency, or at least not write off any. A beau ideal of Harvard Law, he can't wait to tackle extra-credit answers on the exam.

But there is only one question on this great test of American fate: can he lead us away from plunging into another Depression?

If the establishment still has power, it is a three-sided force, churning from inside the Beltway, from Manhattan-based media and from what remains of corporate America. Much of what they are saying is contradictory, but all of it is focused on the

president:

- The \$787 billion stimulus, gargantuan as it was, was in fact too small and not aimed clearly enough at only immediate job-creation.
- The \$275 billion home-mortgage-refinancing plan, assembled by Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, is too complex and indirect.
- The president gave up the moral high ground on spending not so much with the "stim" but with the \$400 billion supplemental spending bill, larded as it was with 9,000 earmarks.
- The administration is throwing good money after bad in at least two cases -- the sinkhole that is Citigroup and General Motors.
- The failure to call for genuine sacrifice on the part of all Americans, despite the rhetorical claim that everyone would have to "give up" something.
- A willingness to give too much leeway to Congress to handle crucial details, from the stim to the vague promise to "reform" medical care without stating what costs could be cut.
- A 2010 budget that tries to do far too much, with way too rosy predictions on future revenues and growth of the economy. This led those who fear we are about to go over Niagara Falls to deride Obama as a paddler who'd rather redesign the canoe.
- A treasury secretary who has been ridiculed on "Saturday Night Live" and compared to Doogie Howser, Barney Fife and

Macaulay Culkin in "Home Alone" -- and those are the nice ones.

- A seeming paralysis in the face of the banking crisis: unwilling to nationalise banks, yet unable to figure out how to handle toxic assets in another way -- by, say, setting up a "bad bank" catch basin.
 - A seeming reluctance to seek punishing prosecutions of the malefactors of the last 15 years -- and even considering a plea bargain for Bernie Madoff, the poster thief who stole from charities and Nobel laureates and all the grandpresents of Boca. Yes, prosecutors are in charge, but the president is entitled -- some would say required -- to demand harsh justice.
 - The president, known for his eloquence and attention to detail, seemingly unwilling or unable to patiently, carefully explain how the world works -- or more important, how it failed. Using FDR's fireside chats as a model, Obama needs to explain the banking system in laymen's terms. An ongoing seminar would be great.
 - Obama is no socialist, but critics argue that now is not the time for costly, upfront spending on social engineering in health care, energy or education.
- Other than all that, in the eyes of the big shots, he is doing fine. The American people remain on his side, but he has to be careful that the gathering judgment of the Bigs doesn't trickle down to the rest of us.

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