

## The dangers in and around skyscrapers

Some immediate corrective steps are called for

A study of six high-rise buildings in the capital by this newspaper has resulted in some disturbing findings. The bottom line is that these buildings (and one can be reasonably sure there are others as well) are dangerously exposed to disasters. These buildings are plagued either by a lack of fire-fighting equipment or trained manpower to operate whatever equipment is there. Friday's fire incident at the Basundhara city complex has only exposed the glaring gaps that characterise safety measures in skyscrapers or buildings that are regularly used by citizens.

In light of what has happened at Basundhara and because of the dreadful possibility of similar disasters cropping up elsewhere, it is our suggestion that a strong committee with clear terms of reference be set up at the earliest to go into the state of high rises not only in Dhaka but also in other metropolitan cities of the country. Those terms of reference, as we see it, ought to be clear and unambiguous. In the first place, the committee should identify those structures which have no fire-fighting equipment or no skilled personnel to operate fire-fighting equipment and ensure that corrective measures are taken by those responsible for the construction of the buildings. In the second, a study must be made of the inadequacy of fire-fighting machinery or an absence of necessary manpower at buildings where a semblance of these might be in existence. That should then lead to steps to bring the buildings up to date in line with acceptable standards. Finally, the committee must focus, without mercy, on buildings where there is a total absence of fire-fighting equipment and personnel. Let it be noted each of these terms of reference should also include penalties for those who have so far failed to conform to safety standards regarding such high rises as shopping malls and apartment complexes.

In addition to all that has been suggested, it is imperative that the management of all high-rise buildings introduce regular drill measures for those responsible for safety. It has been seen over the years that in a very large number of instances the personnel responsible for ensuring such safety measures as putting out fires turn out to be woefully lacking in efficiency. Besides, there have been examples of firefighters going into the business of dousing a fire without oxygen masks. These are dangerous loopholes that need to be filled in through concerted action. Finally, the authorities must now give serious thought to introducing in the various urban areas fire hydrants that citizens can swiftly make use of in times of emergency. Such methods of handling risks are already in operation in many countries around the globe. They might as well be introduced in Bangladesh too.

## Stone extraction from underground

No leniency to the violators of law

WE are concerned at the unabated extraction of underground stones of various sizes with the help of machines despite a government ban. The extraction process has created large holes in some areas of Jafflong and Bholaganj, thereby completely altering the structure of earth below. According to environmentalists, for centuries boulders and small stones coming down with water from hills and mountains have been depositing underneath the top soil in the plain lands and in the riverbeds of Bangladesh. Over time these stones went deeper into the earth and became a part of the earth structure. Therefore, extraction of the stones quickens the process of loosening of the earth deep below. It is therefore not surprising that environmental scientists and activists would express their fear that such distortion of nature might trigger a severe environmental disaster in the near future. We wonder what stops the authorities concerned from taking stern action against the violators of the law.

In February, the Department of Environment (DoE) announced a ban on the use of machines to dig large holes in the ground to dig out stones. This administrative action allegedly came only after a series of demonstrations staged by environmental activists and experts. Reportedly, the ban worked for a while but the corrupt merchants and officials of the departments concerned have come back to the scene and started the extraction work again disregarding the government order.

We understand, the ban is on the use of extraction machines but not on manual collection, which does not destroy the land. On the contrary, machines destroy the land and earth below, therefore, it must not be allowed to be used at any cost. The damage done by the machines can be figured out from the statistics that when 20 people can collect a truck of stone, or 5 tonnes a day, an extractor can collect 500 tonnes. It needs no emphasising that such uncontrolled extraction from riverbeds is causing severe damage to the natural features of the rivers in the area. According to the DoE office in Sylhet, it has already changed the course of the Piyain river to some extent, risking river erosion, flash floods and soil pollution.

We believe it is a matter of immediate and utmost concern and the government should form an expert committee to carry out research on devising safer and environment-friendly forms of stone extraction. This would not only save the rivers and the environment in general but also help the people in the area to earn a living through manual extraction of stones.

## Honeymoon about to be over?

Throughout our existence as a nation, the breathtaking frequency of violence in the country would have us believe that we live on the top of a volcano, without knowing whether it will erupt. Before we can adapt to one sad reality it is overtaken by another.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THREE weeks on, the Pikhana carnage continues to be the staple of discourse in drawing rooms, the city's diplomatic cocktail circuit and across the country's formal or informal gatherings. In the meantime, the nation is suffering from nervousness and unease characterised by paranoid anxiety. Throughout our existence as a nation, the breathtaking frequency of violence in the country would have us believe that we live on the top of a volcano, without knowing whether it will erupt. Before we can adapt to one sad reality it is overtaken by another. Barely out of the horror of the liberation war, we faced the ugly reality of the Bangabandhu's assassination. The wound thus inflicted on the national psyche never healed. It rather festered, as the unfortunate tradition carried on.

Yet, the Pikhana tragedy is a watershed event. Unlike the earlier upheavals, which all took place in a flux amid coups and counter-coups, the BDR revolt came when a heavily-mandated government is in place, and was enacted only a few kilometres away from the seat of the government and the Armed Forces Headquarters -- almost under the noses of the ubiquitous state authorities. Never before had a single event forced so many eyebrows to rise, and so many people to rethink the whole gamut of our security.

Quick on the heels of the Pikhana tragedy, the helicopter crash in which two army

officers died couldn't but jolt the nation afresh. It brought in its wake more mourning, more tears and uneasy caution, which all seem to have combined to make the country look like a state under siege. Added to this are the woes of everyday life -- power shortage, inadequate water supply, chaotic traffic, pollution, to name only a few. The way the tragedies of national proportion -- the latest being the Basundhara fire -- are unfolding in quick succession leaves us baffled and dumbfounded, and raises the inevitable question: Is anyone in charge? The gloom has thickened with the beefing-up of security around the Parliament and the cancellation of the independence day parade. It's almost like the country is at war with itself!

Our problems have been exacerbated by a wobbly economy further enfeebled by global recession, with foreign remittances substantially reduced and the labour and RMG market terribly circumscribed. The return of our labourers in droves from the Arab countries was already dampening the mood. Now the Malaysian government's cancellation of 55,000 work visas has come as a bolt from the blue. With the mainstay of our economy hit hard, our financial planners are contemplating legitimisation of black money once again.

The mess that our economy was dragged into by the past regimes is not going to go so easily, and the newly elected AL government has managed to shoot itself in the foot a couple of times already. As a bailout measure is on the cards, the all-smiles finance



Time to be more serious?

minister has hinted at the utilisation of the undeclared black money -- by legalising it of course. He may be new in this business, but the system he inherited is not. If anybody thought that the inheritance from the past could be done away with, then he certainly lived in a fool's paradise. For an impoverished and internally plundered country there is no better alternative, and the policies adopted earlier will inescapably apply now, whether Sheikh Hasina's Digital Bangladesh or Vision 2021 remain intact or not.

But, at the moment, the most crucial issue she faces is her equation with the military. Even if a relationship was painstakingly crafted between the AL and the military in special circumstances it is obviously under stress following the prime minister's

way of handling the BDR crisis. How she repairs it by addressing the military's grievances while safeguarding her own constitutional authority will be keenly observed. Last but not the least in her garland of albatrosses are the seemingly simple foreign policy issues. The increasingly shrinking labour market does not auger well for the success of our foreign policy, which is a vehicle for promoting our economic interests. Already there are indications that there is an accelerating decline in the protection of our economic interests.

Vital time is ticking away, and the cosy period of post swearing-in honeymoon is fast fading. Is the honeymoon about to be over then?

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## Why Washington worries

The problem with American foreign policy goes beyond George Bush. It includes a Washington establishment that has gotten comfortable with the exercise of American hegemony and treats compromise as treason and negotiations as appeasement.

FAREED ZAKARIA

AS George W. Bush's term ended, he had few defenders left in the world of foreign policy. Mainstream commentators almost unanimously agreed the Bush years had been marked by arrogance and incompetence. "Mr. Bush's characteristic failing was to apply a black-and-white mindset to too many grey areas of national security and foreign affairs," editorialised *The Washington Post*.

Even Richard Perle acknowledged recently that "Bush mostly failed to implement an effective foreign and defence policy." There was hope that President Obama would abandon some of his predecessor's rigid ideological stances. But, the *Post* warned: "It won't be easy to undo what Mr. Bush has done."

In fact, though consumed by economic crisis, the Obama administration has made some striking moves in foreign policy. Obama announced the closure of Guantánamo and the end of any official sanction for torture.

In his first interview as president to an Arab network he spoke of the importance of respect when dealing with the Muslim world -- a gesture that won him rave reviews from

Arab journalists and politicians.

The administration has signalled a willingness to start engaging with troublesome regimes like Syria and Iran. Clinton publicly affirmed that the US would work with China on the economic crisis and energy and environmental issues despite differences on human rights.

She has also offered the prospect of a more constructive relationship with Russia. Obama said he was open to the prospect of talking to some elements of the Taliban in an effort to isolate its hard-core jihadis.

These are initial, small steps but all in the right direction -- deserving of praise, one might think. But no, the Washington establishment is mostly fretting, dismayed in one way or another by most of these moves.

The conservative backlash has been almost comical in its fury. Two weeks into Obama's term, Charles Krauthammer lumped together a bunch of Russian declarations and actions -- many of them long in the making -- and decided that they were all "brazen provocations" that Obama had failed to counter.

Obama's "supine diplomacy," Krauthammer thundered, was setting off a chain of catastrophes across the globe. The Pakistani government, for example, had

obviously sensed weakness in Washington and "capitulated to the Taliban" in the Swat Valley.

Somehow Krauthammer missed the many deals that Pakistan struck over the last three years -- during Bush's reign -- with the Taliban, deals that were more hastily put together, on worse terms, with poorer results.

Many normally intelligent commentators have joined in the worrying. Leslie Gelb, the author of a smart and lively new book, *Power Rules*, says that Hillary's comments about China's human-rights record were correct, but shouldn't have been said publicly. Peter Bergen of CNN says that "doing deals with the Taliban today could further destabilise Afghanistan." "It's change for change's sake," Gelb writes ruefully. Ah, if we just kept in place all those Bush-era policies that were working so well.

Consider the gambit with Russia. The Washington establishment is united in the view that Iran's nuclear program poses the greatest challenge for the new administration. Many were skeptical that Obama would take the problem seriously. But he has done so, maintaining the push for more effective sanctions, seeing if there is anything to be gained by talking to the Iranians, and starting conversations with the Russians.

The only outside power that has any significant leverage over Tehran is Russia, which is building Iran's nuclear reactor and supplying it with uranium. Exploring whether Moscow might press the Iranians

would be useful, right?

Wrong. *The Washington Post* reacted by worrying that Obama might be capitulating to Russian power. His sin was to point out in a letter to the Russian president that were Moscow to help in blunting the threat of missile attacks from Tehran, the US would not feel as pressed to position missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic -- since those defences were meant to protect against Iranian missiles.

This is elementary logic. It also strikes me as a very good trade since right now the technology for an effective missile shield against Iran is, in the words of one expert cited by the *Financial Times's* Gideon Rachman: "a system that won't work, against a threat that doesn't exist, paid for with money that we don't have."

The problem with American foreign policy goes beyond George Bush. It includes a Washington establishment that has gotten comfortable with the exercise of American hegemony and treats compromise as treason and negotiations as appeasement.

Other countries can have no legitimate interests of their own -- Russian demands are by definition unacceptable. The only way to deal with countries is by issuing a series of maximalist demands. This is not foreign policy; it's imperial policy. And it isn't likely to work in today's world.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

## Does the PM deserve uncharitable remarks?

The opposition leadership may have points to keep the government on its toes. But in larger national interest, it had better come forward to help close the tragic episode convincingly. They might begin by responding to the prime minister's open-hearted call to hand over all evidence they reportedly claim they have to the enquiry committees.

MD. ALI AKBAR

THE BDR mutiny caught us unawares. The prime minister led from the front as she was expected to do. Her astute handling of the crisis saved the lives of so many military and civil hostages inside the BDR compound. With that ended the first phase of the crisis.

Enquiries have begun since. Some have made random comments on the PM's approach to the crisis. Perhaps she does not deserve much of it. To realise what is what, why do we not look back into the sequence of developments up to now?

The rebels did not give any inkling of the grisly murders committed. Shrewdly, they suppressed everything all through until arms surrender upon the prime minister's stern warning to lay down arms.

At those critical hours, the prime concern was to secure release of the army officers and their wives and children under custody of the mutineers. That objective must have

impelled her to a political resolution.

The mutineers in statements to TV channels blamed the army officers in command for severe maltreatment towards them. They attributed the act to their pent up resentment for redressing some long pending grievances. It was but natural to think that the rebelling troops might have held the officers captive as bargaining chips for meeting their demands. It occurred to no one that they might have brutally killed so many officers in the meantime. Even the media did not try to elicit information about the officers' fate at that time.

In that stage, the prime minister, after consultation with her cabinet, AL presidium members, *mahajote* leaders, and the armed forces chiefs, decided to neutralise the armed rebels through negotiations rather than armed intervention that many reckon could have certainly caused unimaginable military and civilian casualties both within and outside the compound.

It was not until the 33-hour nightmare

ended and the surviving officers came out that we could learn about the mass killings. The massacre, survivors said, was finished swiftly within 2 hours on the morning of February 25. The rebels ensured that nobody could even guess anything about it from outside. Way too late it became clear that it had been all over before "negotiations" began.

What does it imply? It is clearly understandable that the rebels completed their hellish mission before noon on the day and that an armed attack against the rebelling forces even at the noon would have resulted in a bigger bloodshed. That is what validates the prime minister's way of tackling the crisis. She had no way to know about the horrendous massacre already wrought.

Now about a fortnight into the tragedy, separate army and civil enquiries are underway, and we hope for thorough investigations bringing up everything about the killers and their backers/instigators. All relevant agencies ought to assist in the probe. All quarters, from the media to the political arena, need to show solidarity in facing up to this national crisis.

What is as much important is rock solid national unity rising above partisan thinking. To our utter disappointment, some are raising belated questions about the ways the government dealt with the crisis, albeit people believe PM's patient responses under the circumstances were reasonably appropriate.

For argument's sake, if there were any lapse in the whole process, is it possible to

undo the same now? Why play a divisive, rancorous role that may only confuse people? We understand the critics could have stood beside the government with suggestions, if any. That could be a proactive role at the right time.

But all the post-facto surmises as to what could have been done and what avoided, and what would have yielded what kind of better results are of little value now in terms of helping the government do all it takes to conclude the sad episode. Such wild guessing of possibilities will never end. What use is it all?

Some quarters' demand for the home minister's resignation and prime minister's apology has raised a few eyebrows. It can be pointed out that the opposition leadership while in power did not institute proper investigation and trial of many killings including the August 21, 2004 grenade attack on AL meeting. Now it does not baffle them to raise such demands that might contribute negatively to the ongoing enquiries at this critical time. They ought to refrain from uncharitable comments that would only make matters worse.

However, the opposition leadership may have points to keep the government on its toes. But in larger national interest, it had better come forward to help close the tragic episode convincingly. They might begin by responding to the prime minister's open-hearted call to hand over all evidence they reportedly claim they have to the enquiry committees.

MD. ALI AKBAR is a Deputy Secretary