

Polluted rivers and environmental cost

When will the authorities wake up to the danger?

If a picture expresses thousand words then the one in the front page of The Daily Star yesterday, showing two workers of a chemical plant at Kamarpara in Tongi, washing sacks that had contained toxic chemical in the Turag, little caring for the damage they are doing to the ecosystem, should amply illuminate the multi-frontal threats that our environment is subjected to everyday. This must be a daily chore carried out with impunity, because causing environmental pollution is a punishable offence.

Of the many aspects of our environment like air, land, water, and biodiversity, the one that perhaps has come under the most severe abuse and mistreatment is our rivers and water bodies. And we forget all too often the very important fact that these rivers are not only the main sustainer of life in Bangladesh they are also the prime means of its economic growth and development.

This paper over many years has been consistently exposing through its columns the degradation of the quality of surface water in Bangladesh caused by the unchecked flow of industrial effluence into the rivers. But this is not the only source of pollution. According to experts, to the industrial waste is added municipal waste, runoff pollution from chemical fertilizers and pesticides and oil. And one doesn't need to be an expert to know that the toxic elements are diffused in the foods consumed by us and that are produced using the contaminated water. The ultimate victims are the people.

There are appropriate laws related to the issue, the problem, as usual, is that of implementation. Regrettably, government oversight in this matter has been far from satisfactory, and we know of no instance where a defaulting chemical plant or any other industrial unit has been fined for polluting the system, notwithstanding the existence of relevant laws and regulations. We understand that sometimes, in spite of the best intentions of the department of environment it has been helpless to plug the legal loopholes exploited by defaulters and their use of economic rhetoric.

It was time the administration woke up to the dangers of environmental pollution, which are very real and immediate, particularly contamination of the rivers. We suggest that it form immediately a high powered committee that should include experts in the field and suggest measures that should include the ways and means to make the DOE more effective in implementing the laws. We also feel that there is need to sensitise members of the society on this very important issue.

Urban slum dwellers

Take pragmatic steps to reverse rural-urban migration

WE are alarmed at the study report that by 2020 the slum dwelling population in urban areas of the country will reach the staggering figure of three crore. With Dhaka being the capital city and the hub of all developmental activities, it is most likely to be hit harder when the number of slum dwellers will swell beyond comprehension. Other towns and cities of the country will also have their equal share of slum population. Some of these facts were presented by speakers in a meeting organised by Gazipur Municipality and an international development organisation named Practical Action in the city on Wednesday.

Country's demographic chart shows that already about 30 percent of the total population live in urban areas, of which 33 percent, around 1.6 crore, live in the slums. Dhaka and the peripheries are burdened with most of the slums where living conditions are extremely unhealthy and unsafe. With poverty and unemployment in the rural areas rising in tandem, more and more people are drifting towards the towns and cities in search of work. Once in the urban areas, it is only obvious that these people with marginal income will find cheap living accommodation in the slums.

The research findings that speak of further rise in the slum dwelling population in the urban areas including the capital city and its suburbs, has to be given utmost importance. Dhaka is already faced with numerous problems with a population of over one crore. Further rise in number of people, especially in the slums, will create severe health, water, transportation and law and order situation for the future administrators. Therefore, with only a decade to go, we believe we have got to do something now on an urgent basis so that we may contain the flow and even reverse the trend.

The daunting predicament demands immediate attention of all the stakeholders. One measure that would go a long way in creating jobs and generating income for the rural population is ensuring more public and private investments in the rural areas. The possibilities of extending bank loans for setting up small enterprises, providing training on farming and handicraft etc., might also be explored by the competent authorities. Export diversification and extension of IT network will again create income generating sources for the rural unemployed youths. Side by side, the ongoing population programme has to be revitalised through popularising modern birth control and birth spacing methods to keep the population growth under control.

Pilkhana massacre and shadows of extremism

One has to bear in mind that the terrorists are so motivated that even one of them retains the ability to strike with a deadly impact. Any one individual of such outfit may turn into another Banglabhai. Therefore, the threat and fear of terrorist strike will not disappear if the terror-tree is not completely uprooted.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

RESPONSIBLE figures in the establishment have spoken about the suspected complicity of terror outfits and their mentors in the gruesome murders of military officers on 25th February last at the border guard headquarters. While the full facts establishing the culpability of the murderers may take some time, it appears prima facie from the severity of the vengeful killings that trained and motivated killer cells had played a major part in the macabre transactions.

The question is how suspected criminal and subversive elements could manage to get recruited in the border guard establishment without concerned agencies having any information about such alleged infiltration? Could the denial mode of the establishment in the not-too-distant past about the existence of politically motivated religious extremists have helped and facilitated the growth and nurturing of deadly obscurantist elements in security outfits? Are state agencies reluctant and ambivalent in frontally countering the bigots despite ominous portents?

Under the circumstances, we may have to ask ourselves if a perception had developed among the terrorist groups that the Bangladeshi state is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent. We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various organizations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the regional or international terror network?

Readers may recollect that in the not-too-distant past Bangladeshi polity was in a near euphoric state following the execution of six dreaded so-called religious extremists. At that time it was necessary to ensure that the sense of pragmatism does not take leave of us and we do not revert back to the establishment chosen complacency. We should have been aware of the fact that confronting the extremism of the bigots is an awesome task and that sustained efforts are necessary to tackle the menace root and branch.

The sensational disclosures reportedly made by the then terror supremos and other religious extremists in course of interrogation by the intelligence agencies must have surprised both the non-believers and the naive in our society where until recently not much note was taken of their activities. The fact that there was a temporary discontinuance of the deadly doings of such elements could not have been a comforting scenario because their unhealthy growth and harmful rise in our body-politic too was not known to the general public. Therefore, the concerned citizens may only keep guessing as to the nature and dimension of the diabolical mischief of the bigots in the days to come.

What may or may not be done to counter the malevolence of the extremists concerns every right-thinking Bangladeshi but equally, if not more significant, is what kept the state machinery in a deep slumber while the bigots carried on virtually undisturbed. There is a creeping suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. In other words, was there no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity and by extension to our independent national existence? These questions

should bother us because patriotic citizens of the People's Republic of Bangladesh must know that.

There is a feeling that like the responses to other socio-economic issues of our national life, we have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats of national security. The whole approach appears to be ad-hoc and on a case to case basis. Somehow, the establishment has wished to assure itself by imagining that a hydra-headed monster has surfaced all on a sudden and will wither soon to the relief of a concerned population.

The reasonable suspicion is that while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained indifferent about the programs and designs of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

The constitutional position as against the programme of the extremists leaves no room for any ambiguity. While at the macro-level it may be a matter of political direction to sort out disagreements through dialogue and persuasion, the field-level operatives, both in uniform and plainclothes must have clear directives and plan of action for preventing violent subversive actions. This is all the more significant now because the new enemy has an emotional and religiously sensitive alignment with the common folks of the country. One must not be oblivious of the fact that the enemy combatants are entrenched in places and institutions that are traditionally respected and revered in our society.

One has to bear in mind that the terrorists are so motivated that even one of them retains the ability to strike with a deadly impact. Any one individual of such outfit may turn into another Banglabhai. Therefore, the threat and fear of terrorist strike will not disappear if the terror-tree is not completely uprooted. In such an exercise we need long-term planning, diversified strategy and continuous actions. Unfortunately, however, some quarters are underplaying the power and capability of the terrorists.

Most terrorist activities are encouraged

and sustained by an ideological inspiration. In other words, terrorism is not divorced from ideology. One has to look for the said ideological moorings. In this quest, in Bangladesh, it is strongly likely that there will be some accusatory finger-pointing towards some political parties. In the event of such a possibility turning into reality, the government of the day has to take tough actions without bothering about the political fallout. That would demand political sagacity of a very high order and may be a tall asking in our perilously polarized polity.

The enemy combatants are now known. So, there should not be any hesitation in venturing into sensitive and emotionally aligned places and institutions when reasonable suspicion and information so dictate. This is necessary to effectively shake off the suspected ambivalence of the enforcement personnel. The directives should be very clear and explicit.

The so-called religious extremism has not sprouted with its ugly fangs all on a sudden. So we should not be expecting instant solutions. However, deft political management ensuring pragmatic operational handling on an urgent basis can definitely lessen the harmful impact and energize the mainstream to counter the frontal attack on our democratic polity.

Events of the last few years indicate that an extraordinary situation may require extraordinary response with a view to meeting and checking unusual and unprecedented mishaps. We need to create and provide internal structures to meet the terrorist threat while recognizing that terrorism had increased in its very nature, demanding changes in strategies to confront it.

There is a challenge to our way of life. This must be realized by the mainstream political parties who are pledge-bound to uphold, protect and preserve our constitution. Therefore, the enemy must be caught by the forelock and dealt with under the law. A sovereign Republic born out of a historic struggle entailing epic human sacrifices demands that. We must not fail.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Security concerns in Afghanistan

All partners in the war on terror recognise that the dynamics regarding the war has been affected by the growing civilian casualties in Afghanistan. They are worried that losing the trust of the people might eventually impact on future strategic operations.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE United States, like others within the NATO, is quite clear that 'urgent security needs' exist in Afghanistan despite the presence of a fairly large contingent of foreign troops in that country (nearly 77,000 by last count). It is also evident that despite such an engagement, the Taliban appear to be gaining ground in most areas outside Kabul.

President Barack Obama has now authorised the deployment of up to 17,000 extra troops to Afghanistan. This will include two brigades (one army and one marine) and will be the first major troops deployment, as the Obama administration reviews US policy in Afghanistan. US troop build-up in Afghanistan could in fact reach up to 60,000 troops from current levels of 38,000 in the coming months.

Obama has explained that this increase is necessary "to stabilise a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires." He has also mentioned that he made the deployment decision after a request from Robert Gates, the US Secretary of Defence. This move will ensure that there are sufficient troops on the ground in time for the increase in fighting that usually comes with warmer weather.

The above course of action has been welcomed by those who were losing hope in the 'war on terror.' Certain analysts have however pointed out that policy planners within the Pentagon have expressed wariness about too many soldiers in Afghanistan. They are worried and are warning that Obama will hopefully not go down the same route as former US president Lyndon Johnson did, in the other quagmire known as Vietnam.

In recent weeks, US engagement in Afghanistan has seen dissatisfaction expressed overtly and also covertly about the state of governance in that war-torn country.

It may be recalled that the decline in relations between the leaderships of the two countries started with a visit last year to Kabul by Joe Biden (then a Vice

Presidential candidate).

Media reports at that time highlighted the current Vice President's open exasperation with the Karzai team and his comments that he had not received 'straight answers' on drugs and rampant corruption in Afghanistan from President Karzai. Secretary of State Clinton has also indicated her displeasure with the situation in Afghanistan. In her written statement to Congress, during her confirmation hearing, she referred to Afghanistan as a 'narco-state' that was 'plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption.' This spate of criticism was also evident in recent comments by NATO Secretary General as contained in an opinion piece published in January. He was critical about the lack of leadership in Afghanistan, laying the blame not at the feet of the Taliban but on the lack of good accountable governance.

It has been a snowballing situation. It is apparent that relationship between the Karzai government and the new US administration has worsened since the Obama's inauguration. There have been a series of well-placed leaks, briefs and snubs. It has denoted that USA's support may have moved away from Karzai as far as the forthcoming Afghan presidential election is concerned. This in turn has encouraged a number of challengers to Karzai to openly jostle for American support. The USA appears to have realized that this erosion will not help matters as they stand right now. The recent visit to Kabul by Special Envoy Holbrooke as well as Speaker Pelosi has been attempts to assuage public opinion in Afghanistan and also to find new directions.

These visits have taken place against the backdrop of President Karzai holding a series of confidential meetings with former Mujahideen commanders. There has also been the suggestion that Karzai wants to display some independence from the USA and is making overtures towards greater alignment with Russia. There was the deliberately leaked 'letter of understanding' with Moscow and Karzai's observation that unless America supplied Afghanistan with the military hardware it wanted, Karzai would look to



NATO has been critical of the Afghan leadership.

other countries for support. This was obviously music in the ears of Russian Ambassador Zamir Kabulov, on his second posting to Afghanistan.

In recent months, President Karzai has been trying to assert his role within his country. This has made things that much more sensitive for his partners. He has already sent a document to NATO outlining 'new rules of engagement.' It is generally agreed that if this is implemented, then it 'might substantially alter the mandate for foreign forces in that country.'

At this point of time, there is still not real schism between Kabul and Washington, but both sides are being careful and wary about future steps. NATO Defence Ministers, during their last meeting in Poland have suggested more dialogue given the evolving complexity of the security situation within Afghanistan and in the bordering regions with Pakistan.

The security paradigm has also become a source of domestic debate with the recent announcement by the United Nations that the number of civilians killed in the conflict had risen by 39 per cent last year. Militants were apparently to blame for 55 per cent of the 2,118 civilian deaths, while US, NATO and Afghan forces were responsible for 38 per cent. This number was the highest for year-on-year since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. Quite understandably, such figures are becoming a source of increasing friction and anxiety.

All partners in the war on terror accordingly recognise that the dynamics regarding the war has been affected by the growing civilian casualties in that country. They are worried that losing the trust of the people might eventually

impact on future strategic operations. Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has in fact warned that the United States risks losing its war in Afghanistan because of mounting civilian casualties in operations by US and NATO-led forces. He has also noted that 'until we prove capable, with the help of our allies and Afghan partners, of safeguarding the population, we will never know a peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan.'

The situation is difficult. There are many clouds on the horizon. Nevertheless, Obama appears to have instinctively addressed the core issues within the matrix. He has criticized the Afghan government but has also reiterated that Afghanistan remains 'winnable' despite a rise in deadly attacks by Taliban fighters. I am willing to share his opinion because he understands that force alone with not guarantee victory. Talking to CBC Obama has gone on record that the coalition partners will 'have to use diplomacy' and also the tools of 'development.'

It is this last approach that needs to be undertaken with great seriousness. It is vital that there is decentralization of governance as well as greater scope for economic opportunities (through micro-credit extension) and employment generation outside the closed confine of Kabul. These steps will affect regeneration positively. It will also enhance the stakes for the population in the hinterland and make them more pro-active in the maintenance of security.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net